



**LEADER**  
Andrew Maus

**BUDGET**  
\$1M — \$4,999,999

**GEOGRAPHY**  
North Dakota,  
Native Nations

**YEARS ACTIVE**  
Founded in 1975

INNOVATION STORY **No 5**

# PLAINS ART MUSEUM

## THE ART OF ENGAGING COMMUNITY

Plains Art Museum is an arts and arts education hub for North Dakota and northern Minnesota. Plains values engaging communities in the creative process, and has become a regional leader in their approach to engaging traditional and contemporary Native art forms.

**“WE’RE NOT JUST A PLACE THAT HAS THINGS, WE’RE PRIMARILY A PLACE THAT DOES THINGS.”**

— ANDY MAUS, PLAINS ART MUSEUM

STORY BY MORGAN MERCER

# INNOVATION

## PLAINS ART MUSEUM

PLAINS ART MUSEUM STRIVES TO BE A WELCOME MAT FOR AN INCREASINGLY DIVERSE REGION, AND WORKS DILIGENTLY TO ENSURE ALL COMMUNITIES SEE PLAINS AS A PLACE FOR THEMSELVES—AND FOR THEIR ART

### BREAKTHROUGH



Plains Art Museum isn't satisfied with being a "container for art." Their staff of 30 work together to curate both art and a community dialogue. The resulting mix of perspectives helps Plains connect its many programs to the diverse communities they aim to serve.



### Your Opinions, Please

Plains Art Museum encourages its employees to think beyond their job titles. Their curatorial team is made up of staff from a range of departments, and the result is a more inclusive collection of pieces and shows, and a more inclusive museum community.



### A Radical Invitation

As the Fargo community continued its rapid diversification, Plains shifted its strategy. They invested in building relationships with other community organizations, and emphasized listening as their main objective. The improved dialogue helps Plains better understand and be more responsive to community needs.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF INNOVATION



BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS



COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY



INCLUSIVE

## INNOVATION STORY NO. 5

### PLAINS ART MUSEUM



They're loud. They sit on the floor. They hide behind chairs and romp around the room. It's a fifth-grade takeover at the first-floor gallery of the Plains Art Museum.

They may not act like traditional gallery-goers, but the 7,000 students who walk through the Plains' doors each year are exactly the kind of visitors the museum wants to see.

The kids look at artwork by Andy Warhol, talk about how to make a lithograph and spend the second half of the tour sinking their hands into squishy gray clay. Their task? To construct a ceramic hamburger complete with as many toppings—cheese, pickles, french fries, olives and bacon—as they can pile onto their patties. The moment the

teacher sets a wedge of clay in front of each student, the fifth graders pick it up and start smacking it between their palms to form a dome-shaped bun.

"We're transforming what a museum can be," says Andy Maus, the director and CEO at Plains. "We still have collections work, but we've opened up avenues to be a making space, a looking space and a learning space."

In 2012, the museum built the Katherine Kilbourne Burgum Center for Creativity and established a relationship with Fargo Public Schools to use the center as a way to supplement the district's elementary arts education program. Before the partnership, students used an old art center in the basement of one of the schools. The space was small and uninspiring, better suited for storage than creative thought. While the

schools had a strong arts curriculum, they needed an extra boost when it came to resources and space. With kilns, temporary exhibitions, a permanent collection and teaching artists, the Plains fit the bill.

**“WE CAN DO IT BIGGER AND BETTER IF WE DO IT TOGETHER.”**

— ANDY MAUS, PLAINS ART MUSEUM

Doing it together allowed the school district and museum to work around the limitations each faced in trying to provide the full elementary arts curriculum on their own.

Plains Art Museum is more than a white-walled container for art; it's a platform that cultivates artistic spaces for North Dakotans within and outside its walls. Through the Center for Creativity and public art projects like Defiant Gardens—artist-designed green spaces—the Plains practices a culture of radical welcoming that connects the community to a collection of resources and proves creativity isn't just for some, but for all.

## Your Opinions, Please

As Plains employees filed into the room for one of the first all-staff monthly meetings, Andy noticed a peculiar trend. While most of his team sat at chairs around the table, the teaching artists and visitor services staff picked up their chairs and moved to a corner away from the group.



PLAINS ART MUSEUM STAFF

## INNOVATION STORY NO. 5

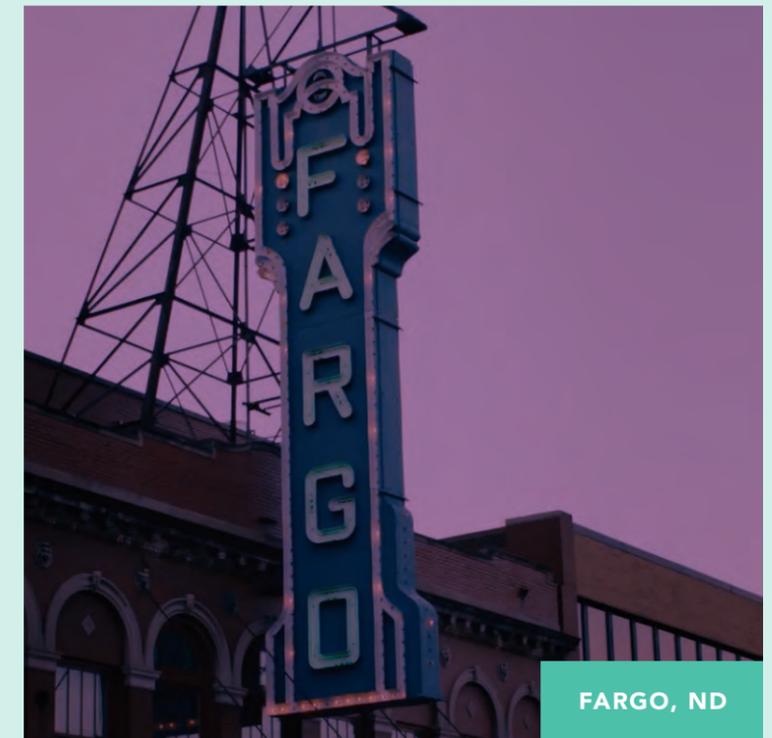
### PLAINS ART MUSEUM

#### INNOVATION No 1



#### BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

To cultivate relationships with a broad range of communities, the Plains cut technology out of the equation. “There is something innately lost in digital communication,” says Andy, who knew sending an email to members of the Kurdish American community couldn't replace carving out time to sit down in person. “Do you feel welcome with someone or engaged with someone before you meet them? Most people would say no. There's something about human interaction that is completely necessary to earn trust and comfort.” For Netha Cloeter, the director of education and social engagement at the Plains, that meant having the museum understand some of her most important work wasn't done in the office, but outside of it. “You have to step outside your comfort zone,” says Netha, who has left work midday to attend pop-up fundraisers to support partner organizations. “If there is a celebration in one of these communities, you have to show up and eat the baklava.”



FARGO, ND

“They physically put themselves in a different spot in the room like they weren't supposed to be here,” says Andy. What he saw were two groups of people who felt disengaged, disempowered and unwelcome. He wanted the opposite. So at the end of each meeting, the director started to make a habit of going around the room and asking each person by name if they wanted to add anything to the meeting before it ended.

“Those little things make you feel included,” says Katherine Rieck, the assistant director of education. “When you're given the freedom to have an opinion and respected for that opinion, it allows you to feel vested in the institution.”

No one sits in the corner anymore. Instead, the Plains capitalizes on one of their most invaluable resources to guide their direction forward: employees eager to participate in meaningful work. The museum routinely asks staff to weigh in on matters within and outside of



**INCLUSIVE**

To engage new communities in creativity, the Plains tears down traditional barriers to the arts. Without a car, getting around in a rural area can be tough. Limited mobility often dissuaded refugee or new-American students from applying to the museum’s popular summer internship program, Buzz Lab. To prevent that from happening, staff agreed to drive students to and from the program during its nine-day run each summer so any student could apply. The Plains ran into a similar transportation challenge when they asked the local Somali community to plan an art exhibit in conjunction with a museum that featured work from a Somali American photographer. To ensure the entire community had a ride to opening night—and felt welcome at the museum—the Plains organized a bus that shuttled museum-goers between the mosque and the photography show for the whole evening.



**YOUTH ENGAGEMENT**

their job descriptions, departments or expertise. “It’s important people have the power not just to express themselves, but to influence their work,” says Andy.

**“EVERYONE HAS TO HAVE A VOICE AT THE PLAINS, REGARDLESS OF THE POSITION THAT THEY’RE IN.”**

— **ANDY MAUS, PLAINS ART MUSEUM**

While other museums rely on a single curator or team of curators to organize exhibitions, the Plains depends on a curatorial team made up of staff from a range of departments including education, visitor services, Native American programming and studio management. This untraditional lineup leads to more



**PLAINS ART MUSEUM BUILDING**

thoughtful shows that not only give audiences something to look at, but also provides the Plains something to program around. “In some museums, there is still an old guard of curators who don’t engage the community. They just want to put art up and make it look good,” says Andy. “What we like to do is create dialogue between different things that are happening in the museum at the same time.” Thanks to a mix of perspectives on the curatorial team, the Plains is able to prevent silos in its work and find ways to connect its programs across departments and to the wider community.

**“TO HAVE ALL OF THOSE DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES RECOGNIZED AND VALIDATED MAKES US SO MUCH MORE EFFECTIVE.”**

— **LAURA YOUNGBIRD, PLAINS ART MUSEUM**

“Different people see different things. The person sitting at the front desk sees the people coming in. We don’t always see that,” says Laura Youngbird, a member of the curatorial team who also serves as the director of Native American programs. “Good ideas don’t flourish in spaces where people are fighting for power,” she says.



## A Radical Invitation

From her office window, Netha Cloeter, the director of education and social engagement at the Plains, can see the steeple on the building where the First Sudanese Lutheran Church congregates.

# AS FARGO'S POPULATION RAPIDLY DIVERSIFIES, THE MUSEUM REALIZED IT NEEDED TO REEXAMINE HOW MUCH IT UNDERSTOOD ABOUT ITS COMMUNITY.

To get to know the city's newest residents, the Plains embraced a shift in strategy—instead of focusing on partnerships that resulted in products, they wanted to invest in partnerships that centered on relationships.

With no preconceived agenda or project in mind, the Plains struck up a monthly meeting in 2015 with leaders from three other organizations in town: the Kurdish

Community of America, the First Sudanese Lutheran Church and the Fargo-Moorhead Coalition for Homeless Persons.

At a minimum, each partner wanted the other collaborators to feel welcome at their organizations. The idea was that regular and ongoing communication between community groups could spur possibilities for unexpected programs and partnerships that would be responsive to community needs.

However, asking small nonprofits that have few, if any, paid staff to dedicate additional time to a partnership without a tangible goal wasn't easy. "We didn't have an idea of where we were going," says Netha. "It's hard to have meetings around a really open agenda." As a show of faith, the Plains applied for a grant to compensate each organization for their time and leadership. That took off some of the buy-in pressure.

To avoid any one organization taking the lead over the others, the cohort has hired a community liaison to guide meetings. This person helps create the agenda, steer the direction of the group and present questions to encourage discussion. Monthly gatherings start with an update from each organization about what they've learned and the progress they've made over the last month. After that, the group shifts to talking about public art projects and socially engaged art ideas they could work on together. "If you're working with communities of color that are not your own, you have to monitor your air time," says Netha, who lets partner organizations share before the Plains does, even if that means the group runs out of time to hear updates from the museum. "There has to be more time to listen than for talking."

## INNOVATION STORY NO. 5

### PLAINS ART MUSEUM

## INNOVATION No 3



### COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY

When the four community partners first came together, they asked a crucial question: Why aren't we more invested in one another's work? The Plains learned its admission fees presented a major roadblock. Community members couldn't afford to visit the museum whenever they wanted. Instead of viewing the Plains as a welcoming space, some Fargo residents only saw the museum as a place they visited on special occasions. In response, staff slashed ticket prices and made the museum free to attend. "That's what it takes to build strong community ownership," says Andy. "We see the opportunity to be a drop-in community space." Three months after the rollout, exhibition audiences have more than doubled. In the coming months, the Plains will also introduce a new scholarship fund allowing students who are eligible for free or reduced lunch to take community art classes at the Center for Creativity at no cost.



LAURA YOUNGBIRD

# THE COHORT IS JUST ANOTHER WAY THE PLAINS SHAPES PROJECTS WITH THE COMMUNITY, NOT FOR IT.

When the museum first started meeting with the First Sudanese Lutheran Church, they learned members could barely afford to make rent on their building each month and that the church's students struggled in school. "It's a much bigger [challenge] than putting art on the walls can solve," says Netha.

However that kind of open dialogue keeps local partners in tune with one another to explore the unique ways they can leverage creativity—and the museum’s resources—to meet the larger needs of the community. The Plains connected the Sudanese church to grant writing support, helped members navigate funding sources and even brought the museum to the students through pop-up workshops at the church’s Saturday tutoring sessions.

## ART ACTIVITIES GOT THE KIDS FIRED UP TO COME IN AND GET HOMEWORK HELP.

The activities also allowed Sudanese youth to tap into a new avenue of cultural and creative expression without ever leaving their home turf.

That’s exactly the kind of outcome Plains hopes to create through their programs. As Andy puts it: when you have a diversity of perspectives, “You get a better result in the end.”



### INNOVATION STORY NO. 5 PLAINS ART MUSEUM



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT



INTERIOR WORKSPACE