

# GUILD NOTES

ISSUE 3, 2018



## CHANGE FOR THE PEOPLE BY THE PEOPLE: AN INTERVIEW WITH CARLTON TURNER

Carlton Turner learned his first lessons in leadership not from executive directors or CEOs, but from organizers. From men and women like Bob Moses, June Johnson, and Hollis Watkins — civil rights activists in Mississippi who built grassroots campaigns for fundamental change. As he himself stepped in as executive director of Alternate ROOTS — a service organization that supports Southern artists working at the nexus of creativity and social justice — he carried with him the philosophies, tactics, and values that informed organizers in the South, including distributing leadership to all members of the movement, operating from a place of consensus rather than individual authority, and centering the experience of those who are being served in all decision-making. Turner now argues that all leaders, in particular those working in the community arts education space, need to better understand these principles in order to move forward on issues of anti-racism, trauma, and healing. Ultimately, the challenges we face cannot be addressed within a leadership model that reserves power for the privileged, typically white few. We need a more radical vision for what it means to lead; Carlton Turner is interested in how we get there.

Carlton Turner will present a keynote speech during the Friday Morning Plenary at this year's Conference for Community Arts Education in Baltimore, MD, November 14-17. You can learn more about his keynote and all conference programming at: [www.communityartsed.org](http://www.communityartsed.org). Below, we speak with Turner about his own leadership journey as well as his advice for community arts educators seeking new paradigms for leadership. (continued on page 9)

### IN THIS ISSUE

- 1 **Change for the People by the People:** An Interview with Carlton Turner
- 2 **Guild News**
- 6 **Member News**
- 8 **New Members**
- 11 **Critical Perspectives:** Uprooting Ageism: Shifting Our Thinking to Serve Older Adults
- 14 **Leadership InSight:** Youth Leading Movements for Change





Carlton Turner

(continued from front cover)

## CHANGE FOR THE PEOPLE BY THE PEOPLE: AN INTERVIEW WITH CARLTON TURNER

**Can you speak briefly to your own journey and how you came to this point in your career?**

I think I'll start to answer that by telling a story. I've been doing arts work since I left college in 1996, but I didn't get exposed to Alternate ROOTS — where I ultimately served as executive director — until 2001. Back then it was structured such that the organization was composed of representatives from particular regions. Each region got a chance to elect its own leadership that would then work as part of the executive committee for the next year. I knew that this regional meeting was happening but, as I was preparing, it was clear that there wasn't an organized group in my area who knew a meeting was taking place. So I went and spoke with local community members involved with ROOTS — woke them up in the middle of the day — and brought them to a gathering to choose leadership for the next year. When it came time to choose leadership, the guys that I had woken up said, "Hey, we want this guy to be the leader of the region...If he cares enough to wake all of us up to be here, then he's probably gonna have some energy to do the work!" So, clearly, while this wasn't something I was necessarily looking for, that began my journey with Alternate ROOTS.

My first event with the organization was one that has been taking place every year for 43 years. It was a retreat for ROOTS members interested in learning more and showcasing how their work becomes embedded in community practice. These showcases are done for about 200 artists in the South working on projects related to social justice. The first year that I went I had no idea what I was walking into. I had been introduced only to a handful of ROOTS members in New Orleans. They were amazing people, but I didn't have a full understanding of what the larger body of ROOTS members looked like. When I got there, I felt engulfed in a community that I didn't quite understand, but I knew that I felt energized by.

I immediately became a member of the executive committee in 2001, joined the staff three years later, and five years after that I became the executive director, where I remained for the next nine years.

**How did your experience at Alternate ROOTS shape your understanding of what it means to lead?**

In Alternate ROOTS, I saw this whole other world that was, in the true sense of the word, accessible. There were people who saw my eagerness to learn and who supported me. I found myself coming into an organization where the mantra, day in and day out, was making sure that the *people* were the ones who were leading. The idea was that the people who the organization is designed to support are the ones who are making the decisions about its resources, its stewardship, and its direction. Coming into leadership in that type of organization is very different than coming into leadership in an organization that is a meritocracy or one that is based on your educational attainment. ROOTS is a space where if you show an interest, the door will open for you to learn as much as you would like to learn, and go as deep as you would like to go. The opportunities were there! I saw that the leadership structures and policies had been designed from the ground up to promote access and support, and that was vital to orienting myself within the organization and feeling welcomed.

As I started there, I knew I could be comfortable investing myself in the organization because, at the end of the day, the organization was invested in me. That is a core issue that many young people, artists, and particularly artists of color experience when they start at a new organization. They don't have a feeling that the organization is actually making an investment in them. In fact, the organization is more interested in excavating their resources and once they are depleted, casting them aside. My experience at ROOTS was at times difficult — because of the difficult topics that we addressed through our work addressing social inequity — but, crucially, it is an organization that tries to put back as much as it takes from you. That is a different type

of framework for organizational structure, and it is one that all nonprofit leaders need to take seriously.

Ultimately, my experience at ROOTS changed my understanding of what it means for an institution to lead, as well as what leadership means for me personally. At the institutional level, the organization has been designed to be member-led since its inception. So, in the early years, when you became a member of the organization, it also meant that you took on the responsibility of the organization as a board member. Membership and board membership were synonymous. This meant that you had to be invested in the organization, you had to be invested in understanding the strategic plan, understanding the finances, the programs. Remember that this has always been a group composed of artists; so it was conceived as a network of artists for artists. The people at the center of the decision making are the same people being served by the programs and services. That mantra — that value — is the same one that drives the organization's approach to community change. That is to say, the people who are most impacted by a given issue are the ones who have the greatest insight around how to make decisions about that issue.

For me personally, my work as an artist in education started at Lanier High School working on a project called My Mississippi Eyes. This project was a reading literacy program started by Jolivette Anderson where we used poetry and literary devices to have open and accessible conversations about contemporary culture with African American students in the oldest Black high school in Jackson, Mississippi. My colleagues had come from working with The Algebra Project and Bob Moses, who was the architect of Freedom Summer and a vital part of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi. So those lessons about organizing were a fundamental way that I was brought into the work of being an artist working in schools. Then coming into Alternate ROOTS, which was founded at the Highlander Research and Education Center — a cultural center that has been the foundation for vital social justice movements for over 86 years — it felt completely natural to root my understanding of leadership in models taken from decades of organizing in the South. And those models started with the idea that those most affected by an issue should be leading the decision making.

So how does that look in an organizational structure? Early on, there was a very clear identity of the organization that was pushing back against the hierarchical structures of nonprofits. ROOTS was trying to create alternative structures to show that there is more than one way to develop effective leadership, to develop effective networks, to support artists, and to support community development and social change. A typical nonprofit operates, in many ways, no different than a corporate structure, where those doing the grunt work have no say in decision making about the direction of the organization. In my time at ROOTS, that was never the case. There was always a sense that whoever was in the space had a voice and had the ability to ask questions or insert an opinion. Or, because we operated with a consensus model, any one individual could stop the decision making process if it was going to harm the community.

My leadership at ROOTS was really about making sure that I was not ever the only voice in the room. It was about staying true to the things that I've been taught and making sure that everyone had the opportunity to shape the direction of the organization because, ultimately, everyone was going to be impacted by what that direction was.

**Given your experience, what would you offer to other leaders who are hoping to align organizational practices with a deeper commitment to equity and collective leadership?**

I would start with an understanding of what it means to organize. If you are trying to advance change at your organization — whether that is advocating for anti-racism or rethinking the power of young people within the institutional structure — you are up against a body that does not want to change, and might not seek change. However, there are individual elements of that body that do want change to happen. How do you organize those elements? You have to figure out a way to align those elements with a common vision and pull together the type of constructive resources that can help to move a larger body. Ultimately, that is the work that we're doing.

This work is not simple. It's not as if you can put one piece of the puzzle into place and see immediate change. And, unfortunately, that is how much of the discussion and training around leadership is framed in our sector. This idea that if you just do three or four things then you'll be successful. But the reality is that the strategy for change has to be multifaceted and at many levels, especially if you are looking to have an impact on an institution. You have to be doing work at the board level, the staff level, the membership/constituency level, and, most importantly, at the personal level. That is where so much of the work loses steam. But, crucially, the majority of the problem lies in our individual perceptions of what "the work" means, how we've been impacted by a racialized, inequitable society that favors abundance, affluence, and pedigree. So that is all butting up against any efforts to make substantial change within a given body. That body doesn't want to change, it doesn't want to shift, and your job is to do the personal development while also seeking — and modeling — the type of change that we want to happen within our institutions.

**The organizational leadership you are talking about involves, in many ways, having a radical vision for change while also maintaining sustainability. Some might see those as working in opposition to one another. Do you think they are opposing ideas or that they can work in harmony?**

One of the challenges of growing up American is that we often think in these binaries. It has to be this or that. This line of thinking is to our detriment, because nothing in the world is this or that. It is all a spectrum and it is all both this and that — always. In many ways, the work can only be humane if it is both working to make sure that the daily needs are met while maintaining a radical vision for the future. You have to eat every day; you can't just dream about one day having a meal. You need to have meals that sustain you until you have the meal that you want. We get caught up in dichotomous conversations that force people into one corner or another — "Oh, they're only about social justice, they can't be about anything else...or, they're more traditional, they don't have room to change." But, ultimately, we have to find more balance in our work. We have to find more balance in the way that we have conversations, and in the way that we understand the world.

For me, the work has to be pragmatic — it has to meet the people where they are — but it also has to be aspirational, always. It has to be visionary, always. It has to be looking toward something that is greater than the moment. We can never be satisfied with where we are. Which isn't to say that we can't be content, but rather it means understanding that there is much that we can change that is within our reach.

At the end of the day, I believe that we are enough. If we are guided by principle and vision and if we seek to work on behalf of all people — not from a place of fear or selfishness, but from a genuine desire for goodness — we are going to see the outcomes we hope for.