



# Safety vs. Participation

*Reported abuse involving program participants:  
local NPO navigates uncharted terrain*

Written by Holly Bechiri (ArtPeers)

“He approached me on a downtown sidewalk a few weeks after I filed the police report. He was yelling how I ‘*didn’t have nothing*’ on him. “*But I got something on you,*” he said. Now, I have no idea what he thinks he meant, but he’s not wrong. I’m a young black woman living in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Nobody’s going to listen to me.” (*Ella*)

## Safety vs. Participation

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### ABSTRACT

ArtPeers is a Grand Rapids, Michigan based 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that creates collaborative, site-based projects. In 2019, during pre-production for a project centering around natural (Afro-textured) hair, a community member reported two instances of assault and battery by a collaborator working with the organization on that project. Without clear orientation on how to confront this unexpected development, the organization’s leadership worked to navigate how to respond to the reported abuse. In the weeks that followed, leadership sought to address the lack of information in place to guide nonprofits faced with such reports, by documenting their experience confronting the reported abuse. By creating an honest accounting of the day, and with the permission of the person who came forward, leadership wanted to create a shareable document to solicit feedback, and to advance further conversation about the societal epidemic of abuse, with a focus on the failures of leadership to address it.

### AUTHORS

ArtPeers contracted and co-created this report with journalist Holly Bechiri.

## FOREWORD

My name is Holly Bechiri. I am a journalist contracted by ArtPeers to create documentation of their public art activities. ArtPeers expressed a desire to avoid writing their own version of things. Their goal made sense to me: ArtPeers wanted to merge its public interactions with its reporting for foundations, to ensure there weren't discrepancies or imbalance between (a) what was reported and (b) what actually happened. Good or bad. ArtPeers proposed a structure designed to be objective and transparent. This included autonomy: I have my own login with full privileges to publish articles, and ArtPeers cannot edit this documentation.

With all that in mind, the following documentation will not be made public. We arrived at that decision together. Public sharing presents many advantages to almost every other scenario imaginable, but in this case, it would limit our ability to speak freely, and moreover, it could further damage the collaborator who is the focus of this specific documentation. This is a sensitive and complex topic involving vulnerable voices. ArtPeers E.D. Erin Wilson and I felt like we stood the best chance of fulfilling our responsibilities by restricting access to this article. We hope we are correct. Thank you for understanding. -hB

## ORGANIZATION

ArtPeers is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Grand Rapids, Michigan USA

## CONTEXT

The developments detailed in this report were part of the I ROCK MY OWN project by ArtPeers, which explores the cultural and historic significance of Afro-textured hair (a.k.a. the natural-hair movement) that culminated in public activities at DeVos Place and Convention Center (2/24/19) and MUSE Gallery (2/25/19). The specific day featured in this accounting was "pre-production" at ArtPeers studio, several days before public activities took place.

## CONFIDENTIALITY

This page contains sensitive content involving real people currently living in Grand Rapids, MI. Please use discretion when reading or privately sharing this content. Some names have been withheld but everyone involved has consented to receive any additional questions. Freely contact Erin Wilson (ArtPeers Exec. Dir.) or anyone named in this document, and they can forward your questions to the others.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this documentation is to advance a conversation about how we can better fulfill our responsibilities when abuse is reported.

This accounting will be shared privately with senior leadership from different sectors, to solicit feedback. Several of our artists and board members have suggested turning this into an audio recording, in the narrative format of "This American Life," to be shared privately as a tool. Any feedback from this written iteration could be applied to a final transcript for audio recording, tentatively scheduled to take place in December 2019.

The entity at the center of this documentation is ArtPeers, a Grand Rapids (MI) based 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that creates collaborative, site-based projects. During pre-production for a 2019 project based around the cultural significance of natural (Afro-texture) hair, a community member reported instances of assault and battery involving a project collaborator. Leadership attempted to navigate this situation and respond to the reported abuse without clear orientation and no apparent model to follow.

In the weeks that followed, leadership sought to address the lack of guidance by documenting their experience confronting the reported abuse. With the permission of the person who came forward, leadership wanted to create a shareable document to solicit feedback, and to advance further conversation focusing on the failures of leadership to effectively address reported abuse.

Thank you for dedicating your valuable time, as a leader in Grand Rapids, to reviewing the documentation included here. We look forward to your feedback.

*The following took place Feb. 21, 2019*

### **Situation normal**

Thursday started early at the studio. ArtPeers had arranged for an onsite visit by a local TV station to generate advance coverage for "I ROCK MY OWN," a project about cultural identity. With public events scheduled for Sunday and Monday, promotions were in full swing.

The news anchors interviewed a dozen ArtPeers collaborators about event details, and they discussed the historical context for natural hair, from slavery through the Civil Rights era.

Interviews wrapped shortly after 8 a.m. The segment was featured multiple times throughout the morning and evening news broadcasts.



## **'I Rock My Own' celebrates West Michigan's natural hair movement**

In conjunction with Black History Month, local business owners are teaming up for the 'I Rock My Own' natural hair event.

Three people stayed behind to clear the studio: Raleigh Chadderdon, Josh Tyron, and Erin Wilson. Before tearing down, they decided to go into the studio office for a minute, to refill coffee and be near space-heaters.

Around that time, Raleigh got a text from an artist they'd invited to be part of the project: "Ella" [name withheld] messaged to ask who else was at the studio.

After Raleigh told her that Josh and Erin were there, Ella replied to ask that her next message be read aloud.

*It's too bad I can't participate with this project.*

Then another message appeared.

*One of the collaborators date-raped a friend of mine and attempted to rape me. I can't be around him. It's not safe.*

And one more message.

*It was [name withheld.]*

The person she named as her assailant was a local business leader who'd been part of the project since its inception.

### **8:45 A.M. | The first moments**

"We're sitting there, in the studio office, and nobody's saying a word," Wilson says. "I've thought about how that morning might have gone, if Ella had been there."

At the time, he says, it made sense that she was texting: she said she felt unsafe. Communicating by text message can offer some control, which could make the difference in deciding to come forward.

Wilson says he began jotting down notes on the back of an envelope.

"I was trying to figure out what to say to her," he says, "but it was all coming out thoughts and prayers."

He set the notes aside. Instead of sending any lengthy reply, they messaged Ella to ask if she could talk by phone, later that morning. She said yes.

The next day, Wilson would rediscover the envelope on the office table, with the notes he'd scribbled down.

**Notes on the envelope**

grateful for her trust in sharing this...  
distracted about what we just learned  
commitment to be here for our friend

"I was reacting like a friend, trying to find the right words to say," Wilson says. "Which is almost definitely not the reason someone comes forward like this."

A larger context was set in motion when Ella asked if Wilson was in the room, before she explained what happened.

"I wish I could write notes to myself, now, about what was actually happening, in that moment," he says.

**(What was actually happening)**

What you just learned about is abuse.  
She wasn't sharing; she was reporting.  
You are the leader of the organization.

"It was my job to react based on my role, not just as a friend," Wilson says. "I was supposed to see the full picture, rather than focusing on one part of it."

He says there was almost a "resistance" to seeing all of it at first.

"There's no possible reason to explain why I wasn't seeing things clearly, because she literally put it in writing that she'd been assaulted," he says. "There was nothing to decode."

Furthermore, the organization had a framework for what was happening. Most of its projects involve a majority of artists who are women.

"Workplace mistreatment and abuse are discussed frankly, and often, from a first-person point of view," Wilsons says.

And this wasn't the first time the organization has confronted abuse during project work.

“I think I knew right away that this was all very large and very complicated,” Wilson says. “And I focused on one part of it, at the expense of everything else, and that’s a problem.”

*It’s a problem with a name:* “perceptual blindness<sup>1</sup>.”

## **Perceptual Blindness**

A Harvard University study showed “perceptual blindness<sup>1</sup>” can occur when we’re confronted with multiple, unexpected stimuli, making it difficult to attend to all the information in a given situation. The result is a temporary “blindness” effect: one piece of information takes over our attention, as we fail to process or recognize other aspects that are being presented.

Perceptual blindness can be a significant liability when abuse is reported.

“Most of us know instantly that there’s a responsibility to respond when we realize that a community member is reporting abuse done by a person involved with your programming,” Wilson says.

But if you don’t recognize that’s what’s happening, he says, your response is delayed, interminably. And that’s a problem, because your responsibility to respond begins the moment the individual comes forward.

“Any delay in addressing reported abuse diminishes the potential impact of the response,” Wilson says. “It diminishes the very act of coming forward.”

### **To Be Part Of Problem Or Solution**

According to the National Task Force to End Sexual and Domestic Violence (NTF), when people in power fail those who come forward about abuse, it can cause profound damage, serving to drive victims into the shadows and to further embolden abusers.

The NTF further states that ineffective responses by leadership send a message to every victim of sexual violence that their pain doesn’t matter, that they do not deserve justice, and that—for them—fair treatment is out of reach.

However leadership decides to address reported abuse, the response will either result in further damage or meaningful impact.

“If the capacity to commit abuse is some kind of given, then we have to shift the power dynamic in situations where assault may take place,” Wilson says. “We have to make it a given that abuse will be addressed effectively, and right now it’s almost the opposite of that.”

## **Going beyond specifics: system change**

“The wider, societal problem with abuse was ever-present in our minds during this experience,” Wilson says. “In the weeks and months after, we started to think about how we could go beyond the specifics of this situation, because the problem certainly is not going to stop here.”

This documentation is an examination of the handling of an incident of reported abuse, by one organization, intended as a catalyst for wider discussion about what can happen, and how to do better.

“When we rediscovered those notes on the envelope, scribbled out during the first moments, it was easy to see our early mistakes,” he says. “And it’s safe to assume we made a lot more.”

The premise for creating an accounting of the day, Wilson says, centers around the potential power of the response by leadership, when confronted with reported abuse.

“We set out to be honest about our process, and to share this account privately with senior-level leaders from different sectors, to solicit feedback,” Wilson says. “We committed to really putting everything out there, especially the parts that now seem problematic.”

### **Gaining consent**

Before documentation began, Wilson met with Ella to get her approval, proposing the idea of contracting with a female journalist to co-create an accounting of the day. Ella said she supported the idea.

“What happened to me happens more often than we care to admit,” Ella says. “I agreed we should do whatever we could to help the next person, and the next person.”

## **9:30 A.M. | Storm warning**

With events kicking off in three days, time was not on the organization’s side. Wilson would need to check in with his board president Monroe O’Bryant regarding the reported abuse. And there had to be dialogue that involved all the project partners, not just the three white guys currently in the office.

Wilson asked Chadderdon and Tyron if they could sit down in a half an hour, to talk about reaching out to the other project partners. In the meantime, he says, he needed to find some kind of starting place or framework to propose as next steps.

He grabbed his jacket and headed for the door.

Suddenly, all their phones started dinging.

“It wasn’t a normal notification,” Wilson says. “It was more like Morse code.”

**From the National Weather Service (2/21/19):**

“A fast-dropping, low-pressure system called a “bomb cyclone” is headed into West Michigan, Feb. 24-25. It’s similar to storm conditions on Lake Superior the night the Edmund Fitzgerald tragically sank and broke in two.”

A blizzard was moving into the region, predicted to hit on Sunday, the first day of activities for the natural-hair project.

“So now there’s that,” Wilson says. “And we’d have to deal with the weather, sooner than later, but it had to take a number.”

Wilson walked out the back door, heading down the alleyway.

He tried to recall if he knew anyone ever mentioning a situation like this: a friend, peer, or even acquaintance.

“If I could’ve thought of anyone who dealt with something like this, I would’ve contacted them immediately,” he says. “Just to have anyone point in any direction, and say, ‘Go that way.’”

Is Addressing This... Out Of Scope?

Wilson began walking in a loop around the city block near where the studio was located.

“I wanted us to start at the start, and not get ahead of ourselves,” he says. “Somehow this led to questioning our responsibility, and whether it even existed.”

Did they have to address it?

“Of course you want to do something, and take action, when you see a problem, and you see the damage it’s causing,” Wilson says. “Yet doing something can have its own costs.”

Engaging in controversial issues can have unintended consequences, he says: misperceptions could impact relationships with other organizations, community leaders, the public, and donors.

“We have to be realistic about potential costs, especially if we’re leaning toward doing something,” Wilson says. “It just couldn’t be based on a gut reaction, because, if we were going into this, we were going all the way.”

## Discretion and valor

Is it possible to justify doing nothing?

“Your mind does whatever’s necessary to make sense of it, when unexpected things start to happen,” Wilson says.

If you don’t have any context for what is happening, your mind fills in the blanks for you.

“I was putting things in boxes from the word go, keeping everything separated,” he says. “I think it was about control.”

If you can convince yourself these things aren’t interconnected, then you can simply prioritize.

“If the reported abuse is its own thing, and the programming is its own thing, then it’s just a matter of prioritizing,” Wilson says. “Then you’re doing your duty to protect the organization.”

By doing nothing.

### Justifying doing nothing

- Action creates risk of misperception.
- Avoid creating confusion with donors.
- Don’t risk relationships with partners.
- Prioritize the high value of activities.
- Don’t compromise all the hard work.
- Project deserves our full attention.
- Abuse didn’t happen during project.
- It’s your duty to protect organization.
- Give this the time it deserves, later.

“Forming your reasons around your conclusion is probably a red flag,” Wilson says. “But there are almost no rules, for organizations, so there’s nothing to prevent you from rearranging things, based around your conclusions.”

According to the *Nonprofit Risk Management Center* (NRMC), public and private institutions have nearly unlimited discretion to manage situations involving reported abuse.

If [policies] are too general, too much is left to the discretion of individual administrators and problems routinely arise in that similar situations are often given disparate treatment. If they are

too strict, they make compliance difficult and cumbersome. It is best to strive for balanced policies... (*Protecting Vulnerable Clients From Abuse*,” by the NRMCC.)

The NRMCC article (above) says victims have a limited timeframe within which to file litigation, if an organization fails to take appropriate measures, after abuse is reported. Since many NPOs serve vulnerable communities without the means to pursue such legal recourse, the discretion available to institutions can add to communities’ vulnerabilities.

“This is a critical imbalance, where leadership has options to give other factors almost equal weight to the abuse,” Wilson says, “But abuse already happened: there were no options for the person who experienced it.”

The line of thought about doing nothing made one thing increasingly clear: the project was inseparable from the reported abuse.

“Every part of this was interconnected,” Wilson says. “That fact was inescapable, and it would define our process.”

### **Project And Abuse Are Inseparable**

By approaching the reported abuse as inseparable from the project, Wilson says they gained a starting point, a place to begin to form a response.

“Our projects involve a defined process,” he says. “The work is a series of responses to what collaborators learn, and sometimes this sends us in very different directions.”

It is paramount, Wilson says, to have an authentic connection to the subject matter. Often, this requires the addition of new voices, and a shifting of roles.

“Some things can’t be understood through research, or spoken to without a lived experience,” Wilson says. “It’s critical to know where these lines fall.”

The natural-hair project had important rules, as it centered around cultural identity and the historical significance of Afro-textured hair. This involved a careful consideration of roles. Because the subject matter existed outside of Wilson’s own experience, he had invited 10 African American leaders to form the planning committee, and they would have creative control. Wilson would shift to a support role, focusing on logistics and sponsorships, for things like securing locations owned and/or operated by African American leaders for public activities.

Now, the natural-hair project included another dynamic: gender.

“We needed to have our bearings before we took a step in any direction,” Wilson says.

## **Right Person To Lead Response?**

The organization's dexterity with roles did have its limits.

"I only know for sure that I'm in charge when things go sideways," says Wilson.

Titles notwithstanding, the question remained:

Should a white, straight male lead a response to reported abuse?

Statistically, abuse is epidemic for women and transgender individuals<sup>2</sup>. The person reporting belonged to the demographic statistically most likely to be abused or raped: young African-American women.

The person to whom she reported the abuse belonged to the demographic statistically most likely to commit it: middle-aged white, straight men.

## **Below the surface**

An argument could be made that Wilson was a tenuous choice to lead a response to reported abuse, as men in positions of power consistently fail those who come forward.

But there's more to it. Wilson has firsthand experience being failed by an institution in the aftermath of an assault that was committed by others who are served by its programming.

"I haven't talked about this much, but it was always in the back of my mind, after Ella came forward," he says.

*[Editorial note: Details below are provided because this aspect introduced a unique dynamic that had bearing in determining the organization's course of action.]*

In his final year of college, Wilson was brutally beaten by two new recruits to the university's football team for dating outside of his race. In the days after the assault, university leadership "said all the right things" to him, he says; ultimately, though, their actions said something else entirely.

"She and I were sitting in the commons when these two guys walked by, staring at us," Wilson says. "One of them said, 'That's f——d up.'"

A few moments later, Wilson says, they re-entered the room and rushed at him.

“The last thing I remember was seeing a glass bottle, and that was it,” he says.

It was a large, empty gin bottle, which they smashed over his head. According to witness statements, Wilson slumped to the floor, and the two assailants began kicking and punching his upper torso and head, leaving him unconscious and bleeding on the floor.

Several hours later, Wilson regained consciousness at the hospital. He had a severe concussion. His right-side cheekbones and orbital bones nearly collapsed and required reconstructive surgery.

“The X-rays of my face look like a map of Central America,” he says. “The doctors instructed me to have someone sitting nearby when I slept, for several days.”

University leaders visited Wilson several times, after the incident.

“I really felt like they were in my corner,” he says.

The university’s public safety department had confirmed the names and permanent residences of the two assailants, and a warrant was issued for their arrest.

However, the warrants were never served. Nearly a decade later, Wilson would receive a likely explanation why, from an unlikely source.

“The Flint city attorney’s office contacted me after one of my attackers had assaulted someone else,” he says. “They wanted me to testify in the new case.”

The prosecutors in Flint found Wilson’s information on the old warrant, that originated with the university’s public safety department. During a phone call, the assistant city attorney asked Wilson why the university had decided on such a limited distance as the “radius” for the warrant.

“The attorney said ‘It’s almost like they didn’t want to catch him,’” Wilson says. “And I didn’t say anything for a really long time, because I knew he was right.”

The assistant city attorney quickly changed the subject.

“I think he knew right away that I’d never considered that,” Wilson says. “But, of course the school didn’t want this public, with a trial involving two of their football players.”

In other words, the institution chose its own public image over addressing what happened.

Nonetheless, Wilson agreed to testify in the new case. It would require him to relive his own attack, while reconciling with the late revelation that his university had failed him. On purpose.

“My experience made a bad argument for doing nothing,” he says. “Bad for me, and bad for my attackers: their violent behavior only got worse over time.”

### **Apples and oranges**

“My experience with assault isn’t the best context because it’s rare, on a lot of different levels,” Wilson says. “Meanwhile, Ella’s experience is something that happens all the time.”

Dozens of times per minute, according to the National Domestic Violence Hotline.

“I don’t have any context for what it is to be a young Black woman in America,” he says. “The strongest connection she and I have is that my demographic consistently fails hers.”

And that was a critical factor, he says, in his decision to lead the response.

“Aside from the reality that time was against us, the fact is, I don’t get a pass,” Wilson says. “I have to be part of the solution.”

### **To Risk Relationships In Both Directions**

Relationships played several different roles in the organization’s response.

“Our response had to be something that could be applied universally, regardless of relationships or familiarity with those involved,” Wilson says.

At the same time, actions have consequences: relationships would be impacted by whatever they did. This created a difficult predicament for an organization that relies on relationships to accomplish its mission.

Because the organization works with a majority of artists who are women, however, their relationships demanded action.

“One of our staff is a primary witness against (Michigan State University physician Larry) Nassar,” Wilson says. “There are people involved with ArtPeers that we have to be able to look in the eyes, at the end of the day.”

## **Accountability**

While inaction can have certain consequences, so, too, can action.

Several years ago, ArtPeers severed a relationship with an organization whose leader cornered one of their dance artists in a darkened venue, groping her.

“We’d just finished some really successful live performances in the space,” Wilson says. “Everything up to that moment was incredible; we were all in great spirits.”

Then some of the other artists noticed something happening in a darkened corner. They moved closer. The leader accosting the dancer backed off.

“We severed ties with the organization,” Wilson says. “That was as far as she wanted us to go with it, and we followed her lead.”

Since then, the leader’s response has been ‘surprising yet probably predictable.’

“We collaborated for years and it was profoundly successful,” Wilson says. “But since then, he has been portraying us as not worth taking seriously.”

Straight from the playbook: discredit anyone who knows about your behavior. Then, if they say anything, it’s because they’re unstable.

“Personally, I can disregard it, when I hear whatever new thing he has said about us,” Wilson says. “But what if you’re the actual victim of the behavior, and you don’t have the power to disregard it?”

The individual leads one the region’s most powerful and well-funded organizations.

“People ask us often if we’re going to do anything with the organization again, and I know they ask him, too,” Wilson says. “Our projects were really successful, and there’s not many people who know what happened that night.”

Without leverage or power, though, smear campaigns can invalidate alleged abuse before it’s even reported.

## **To Cancel: Another Form Of Control?**

Wilson says he briefly considered proposing that they cancel all events, outright.

“In my head, when I started to think about canceling, I was framing that in terms of safety,” he says. “We do a lot of projects in nontraditional spaces, and especially with dancers, it’s my job to crawl on floors for nails, pull on beams to see if they’re weight-bearing, etcetera.”

Obviously, though, this wasn’t a risk related to the spaces: this was a person, who was part of the project, who was now accused of at least two assaults against women.

Considering the risks to safety, could the events take place?

Canceling could eliminate correlations between the organization and the incident.

“If I’m being honest, the idea of canceling was about control,” Wilson says. “It would be a costly dodge that did nothing to address the actual problem.”

The idea of canceling once again invokes the need to consider the costs, beyond the lost opportunity that had been created for the greater community.

“If we’re being real about considering potential costs of what we do, we have to consider that canceling gets laid at Ella’s feet,” Wilson says. “There were even odds that she’d get blamed for that, somehow.”

They had to find a path forward based on what they knew, rather than prematurely placing an outcome upstream of all other concerns.

If the path led to cancellation, it had to be out of necessity, rather than expedience or control.

## **A Starting Point, And A Framework**

### **10:30 A.M. | Rubber Meets Road**

Wilson asked Chadderdon to reach out to Ella, to outline what they proposed to do. And to ask permission.

“The moment we did something, there was a risk of retribution against her,” Wilson says. “She had her choice taken away from her once already.”

Chadderdon went into the office to call Ella. Wilson got to work on a list of partners who needed to be contacted.

## **Consent**

Chadderdon finished his phone call with Ella. She said she was not afraid of retribution, and approved of the proposed next steps.

“She said she hadn’t expected any of us to do anything, and everyone else had ignored what she told them,” Chadderdon says. “She said this was the first time anyone listened to her, or had any interest in doing something.”

Ella says she told the organization what happened to her as a means of explaining why she could not participate in the project.

“I felt like they should know why,” Ella says. “But, no, I did not expect anything else to happen, because that was my experience: nothing happened with people I did expect to do something.”

The list of individuals and entities who didn’t take Ella seriously is long: authority figures, law enforcement, the president of a local college, and more.

“That day was the first time anyone took it seriously,” she says.

Discussions with other partners

Moving forward with project activities hinged on the majority of the other partners agreeing about proposed next steps.

Wilson would attempt to meet with partners however he could: by phone, FaceTime or messaging.

There would need to be a common description of the developments and proposed actions.

### **Notes for production partners**

- No time/means to adjudicate guilt.
- Specifics won’t be made public now.
- Response won’t decide/declare guilt.
- Response will take matter seriously.
- Co-creators to have access to all info.
- Next steps to be decided collectively.

Communicating quickly and clearly with project partners was a critical priority. In order to make an informed choice about the proposed next steps, the partners would need information that was thorough yet concise, dispassionate yet relatable.

There was another key reason to equip the partners with good information: realistically, discussions would happen outside the circle of project collaborators. People talk. The project partners, each in their own way, were connected to many overlapping circles, socially and professionally. When the secondary discussions inevitably happened, it was in everyone's best interest for the situation to be comprehensible, and for the justifications to be compelling.

But it's a heavy thing to put out in the world: they were about to remove an important business leader from a highly visible project.

Wilson says he struggled with how he might react if he were being removed from a project, based on a similar accusation.

"I've deconstructed and reconstructed this whole day so many times," he says. "I don't second-guess where we landed, but this was a minefield."

From the risk of slander to the likelihood of damaged relations, there were tripwires in every direction.

### **11 A.M. - 2 P.M. | Check-Ins**

The project planning committee was comprised of a dozen of the community's most widely regarded arts and culture leaders, with a gender ratio that was 2:1 female, and had just one non-minority member. Wilson says he started the conversation with each project partner the same way.

"I explained concisely what happened, said what we proposed to do in response, and then asked for input," he says.

The feedback from the different partners fell into one or more of three categories:

Agreement with proposed next steps.

No major surprise about allegations.

Recurring comment to the effect of, 'Glad I'm not you today.'

“If anyone had a different take on things, I have no doubt they would’ve let me know,” Wilson says. “These are trusting relationships, in many cases going back years, even decades.”

Trust can be tricky, though: the developments of the day show how trust is a good way to get blindsided.

“At every pivotal juncture, we navigated decisions collectively, and transparently,” Wilson says. “Accountability in real time.”

Ultimately, an organization is accountable to people: program participants, volunteers, donors, and the community as a whole. However, cycles of accountability are often measured in years.

“Incidents of human abuse, as we learned, are emergent, and unpredictable,” Wilson says. “If you’re reviewing programming choices a year later, that’s obviously too late for the person that reported abuse to you.”

And there’s no guarantee that the organization’s handling of abuse would be made part of an annual review of programming.

“So, again, there’s this option to put reported abuse in a box: to convince yourself that it’s separate from your organization’s programming,” Wilson says. “But then there’s no accountability whatsoever.”

## **2:30 P.M. | Associate Of The Accused**

By early afternoon, Wilson had touched base with more than half of the project partners, among them ArtPeers board president Monroe O’Byrant, a photographer and film producer.

That in place, it was time for Wilson to reach out to the individual accused of the assault, and to set up a face-to-face meeting with him.

There was also the matter of the project partner who had the most direct ties to the accused: his business associate. Wilson says he wanted to meet face-to-face with her as well.

“Her availability was the opposite of his: I’d have to meet with her first, if I wanted both meetings to be face-to-face,” Wilson says. “That felt out of order, if I’m trying to imagine it from his perspective.”

In other words, the person accused of the abuse might consider it inappropriate to talk to his own associate, before him.

“At this point, we were operating under some really hypothetical best practices, if you could even call it that,” Wilsons says. “And it was all based around alleged behavior that broke every common understanding of what is fair.”

In the end, he decided it was more important to meet face-to-face with each of them, and met with the associate first.

### **Meeting with partner with business ties to accused**

Wilson scheduled a mid-afternoon meeting with the associate at the studio, and an early evening meeting, with a location yet to be determined, with the accused individual.

“His associate had played a huge role in everything good about this project,” Wilson says. “She was the go-to person for anything and everything.”

Wilson sat down with her in the studio office and went into the details of what was reported. He was hoping this meeting would end with her remaining a part of the project.

He says her initial reaction was “measured.”

“Based on her body language, early into the conversation, there was some defensiveness, or protectiveness maybe,” he says. “I got the feeling this wasn’t her first time hearing he’d done something like this, and that complicated things.”

If she were aware of allegations against her business partner, did she have an obligation to do something? Was her silence effectively enabling his behavior?

And if her business partner truly hadn’t done anything wrong, did he have an obligation to address it, head-on?

“The whole conversation seemed to be going in a difficult direction, even before I got into proposed next steps,” Wilsons says. “Then, suddenly, the tension just seemed to release, as she asked me what we were going to do.”

Wilson outlined the action steps to be taken with regard to the collaborator accused of abuse, which culminated with him agreeing to sever all ties with the project, effective immediately.

She asked if the business name also would be removed from the project.

“That made sense because she had skin in the game, with the business,” he says. “I told her the only thing I had discussed with the others was removing the individual, not the business name.”

But then she asked Wilson a question he wasn't expecting: she wanted to be the one to tell her business partner that he would need to step away from the project.

"She said she'd understand, if I felt like I needed to do that myself," Wilson says. "I didn't expect that, but again, it made sense."

Wilson agreed to let her be the one to tell him. He said she could let him know their early evening meeting could be tentative, based on what he wanted to do.

He explained to her what they needed from him.

"I told her we'd need something in writing from him, and by the end of the day, if he agreed to step away," he says. "If he didn't, I said, we'd have to cancel the public activities."

Wilson says she started getting her things together, and then she got still, for a moment, and took a deep breath.

"She looked at me and said, 'The project is the thing, that's the important thing,'" he says. "I'll always remember that, as something I was deeply grateful for: that was a testament to her commitment to the work and its value."

#### **6:00 P.M. - Message from the collaborator accused of assault**

"And she did everything she said she would," Wilson says. "She messaged an hour after we met and said (the accused individual) didn't need to meet with me, and he'd be messaging me, soon."

By early evening, a message appeared on his phone, sent from the collaborator accused of abuse: he was agreeing to step away from the project and stay away from the public activities.

"I stared at the message until the screen on my phone began to dim," Wilson says. "I hadn't realized how much tension I was carrying with me, until I got that confirmation from him."

But it wasn't over yet.

## 8:30 P.M. | Accused Wanted Names

Wilson's cell phone rang that evening and he looked at the screen to see who it was.

It was the collaborator accused of abuse, the individual Ella had named as her assailant.

"There was a brief hello and then he got right to it," Wilson says. "He wanted names."

*I need you to tell me who told you this.*

"I told him that was not going to happen," Wilson says. "I hadn't expected his call, much less that question, but when I said we weren't going down that road... it was one of the few things that I had absolutely no doubts about, in the moment or ever since."

Nope. That's the trap, Wilson says. And it's not the point.

"He asked me how I would feel, if I were in his place," Wilson says. "This was something I had thought about, a lot, and I tried to answer as honestly as I could."

Wilson told him he didn't know how he would feel, that he'd probably be confused, and he might feel betrayed, even angry.

"I told him I hoped I would react by placing the work above my feelings, but I don't know if that would be the reality of it," Wilson says. "And then I asked him, as a leader, how he would have reacted, if roles were reversed."

Long silence. Then a long sigh.

"He said he understood the position I was in," Wilson says. "He said he would like to talk about this further, some other time, and I told him I committed to being available for that."

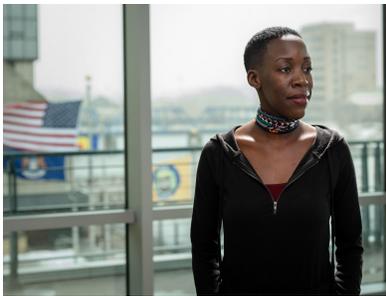
That was the last time the two spoke.

The next morning, Wilson sent out a summary of the previous day to everyone on the planning committee.

And then they picked up where they left off, with final pre-production for the two days of public activities. Several hundred people took part in the events. The public phase of the project was an unqualified success.

IMAGES FROM ACTIVITIES (FEB. 24-25)

“I ROCK MY OWN” is a project exploring the cultural and historic significance of Afro-textured hair (a.k.a. the natural-hair movement) that culminated in public activities Feb. 24-25, 2019 at DeVos Place and Convention Center, and MUSE Gallery, both in Grand Rapids, Michigan.



## Final thoughts and questions

### Footnote: Background check

A background check was performed in the weeks after the natural-hair project concluded. Wilson says the results of the background check confirm the accused individual has a documented history of criminal behavior, including assault.

### Footnote: Ripple Effect

In two subsequent instances, members of the planning committee who were privy to the details of ArtPeers experience canceled unrelated projects involving the individual Ella came forward about. This demonstrates the power of talking openly but discreetly about these matters.

“Our actions created a ripple effect that enabled another project involving this person to address it as well,” Wilson says. “They had some kind of a precedent for action to be taken, a path to follow.” Because ArtPeers made this decision, another organization felt like they could make their own decision to not work with an abuser. Seeing others make those decisions not only gives you permission to do the right thing, it also creates some accountability to not look like you’re willing to allow abusive behavior, when others are taking a stand against it.

### Structure: Open Channels?

An open channel of communication between NPOs could be effective in reducing repeated incidents of abuse, especially those committed repeatedly by the same individuals. Clearly, silos favor the abuser, by providing “a clean start” in any direction. Responses become a process of “figuring it out from scratch” each time, as if it never happened before, and never will again. However, open channels of communication may be fraught with complications: it’s critical to consider the rights of the accused, so people aren’t unjustly put on lists that negatively impact them.

In subsequent conversations with peer NPO leaders, Wilsons says there is a predominant concern with liability, in relation to the accused, when talking about these situations: even in organizations whose work focuses heavily on victims of abuse, such as Planned Parenthood, exposure and liability concerns have an almost paralytic effect on inter-organizational communications about named assailants. There’s a lot of whispering behind closed doors, but little in the way of actionable responses.

### Imperative: Do something

There's an almost cultural belief in our region that things will work themselves out.

"People like to just wait for things to blow over and they'll just stand still, freeze, while waiting for things to blow over, so they don't have to deal with them," Ella says. "But people are getting hurt here. People are being harmed and in more ways than their reputation. He hurt me in more ways than I could ever hurt his reputation."

### Solutions: Advance Stipulations

ArtPeers leadership has been discussing ways to initiate conversations about abuse before a project begins, e.g. a signed agreement from all participants that "there's nothing swirling out there, that hasn't been disclosed, in terms of concerns that we should talk about before we begin working together," Wilson says. This would not be a binding guarantee of anything, he acknowledges. At the same time, it would remove the passion from the decision to remove someone who had been accused of abuse, but failed to disclose that beforehand. And it would indicate (accurately) that the collective takes the general topic of abuse very seriously, enough to have this symbolic step in advance.

### Question: Restorative Justice

ArtPeers has discussed preliminarily exploring the idea of restorative justice, with regard to those accused of abuse. Is there a pathway back, for the person accused of abuse? What is the threshold for what behavior would be considered 'eligible' for considering any process of restorative justice? What behavior is too far beyond the pale? What role would be available to the person who had been subjected to the abuse, in deciding what is required of the abuser, or vetoing the idea of restorative justice for that person...? Research shows the ways we react to those who have experienced abusive behavior affects their ability to recover—or makes it worse. We want to be part of their recovery, instead of participating in an environment full of lack of belief, and lack of taking accusations seriously, which adds further pain to an already psychologically traumatic event.

## **In Conclusion**

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) provide vital services to communities. One fundamental value is access to programs by potential participants. Concerted effort is made to overcome barriers to access. The prevalence of abuse, however, creates a high potential for barrier to access: when a participant has abused another potential participant, that potential participant must choose between participating or safety. Undoubtedly, many potential participants silently choose to not participate, which is a problem. Some that come forward receive responses that further damages them.

This documentation illustrates one NPO's experience trying to navigate reported abuse, illustrating what can happen without guidance or structure—and without any alternative or superseding options or channels for the victim, giving all too much power to the NPO, in the rare instance when the abuse actually gets reported. Partners from municipal and philanthropic sectors empower and shape the work of NPOs.

This documentation is intended to provide some boots on the ground understanding of what can happen, with a goal of soliciting feedback about the process of responding—in hopes of finding ways to get better at such an important question of our time: how do we respond to abuse?