



VRtistry
The Joyce and Seward Johnson Theater
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Proposal for Support of VRtistry to:

The Aunt Sally Foundation
123 Kushner Road
Roland, Pennsylvania 98765

May 09, 2024

VRtistry requests the support of The Aunt Sally Foundation in the amount of \$250,000 to assist in the creation of our newest production focused on educating the public about schizophrenia, a debilitating disorder that can impair an individual's daily functions through causing delusions, hallucinations, and extremely disordered thinking. While this condition affects 3.7 million Americans, there is not much portrayal of it in the media and it is widely viewed very negatively which reflects on those grappling with it. VRtistry aims to change this by providing education through theatre about the disorder in order to destigmatize it and create a more empathetic, knowledgeable society.

VRtistry (pronounced vee-ar-tist-ree) is a non-profit theatrical company operating in New York City with a mission to educate the public on mental health disorders through performance and technology. We aim to bridge the gap between technology and performance by integrating virtual reality capabilities into cutting-edge theatrical productions focused on deepening the general understanding of psychiatric illnesses. The organization does this by producing an off-Broadway level show focused on one psychiatric condition with a handful of trained actors, all but one of whom are trying (and failing) to relate to their loved one who struggles with mental illness. This one actor is the only one on stage wearing a VR headset programmed with the same software as the audience's headsets that mimics as closely as possible what it is like to suffer from that mental illness. When wearing their headsets, spectators can see everything that that character sees and live life through their eyes, their worlds impacted by a simulated psychiatric disorder. When they remove them, they see the world as it is for everyone not plagued by a mental health condition and can compare each world to better understand the disconnect between mentally healthy and mentally ill individuals. The purpose of VRtistry is to

help foster compassion and patience for those struggling by giving society a glimpse into their day-to-day lives. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), around 43.8 million Americans face mental health issues which makes up 13% of the entire population. Despite this, there is still shame surrounding having a psychiatric disorder which is only exacerbated by the unjust portrayal of mental illness in the media. In movies and television, the actions of criminals and evildoers are explained by revealing the person has a mental disorder suggesting that everyone who grapples with one is a bad, unsafe person. VRtistry wants to disprove this by illustrating through live theatre that mental illness is not scary or shameful and many wonderful people struggle with it daily. But we as a society can make their lives easier by opening ourselves up to understanding them and learning how to best support our own community members.

Founded in 2018, VRtistry has thrived at its home location of The Joyce and Seward Johnson Theater on First Avenue in Manhattan, New York, producing three hit off-Broadway productions that have raised over \$500,000 collectively to be donated to research organizations focused on better understanding and curing dementia, bipolar disorder, and obsessive compulsive disorder.

However, in order to continue producing shows whose majority of profits go to psychiatric research and mental health organizations, we are in need of generous donations from people committed to improving the lives of people in their communities through art and education. As you so generously shared with us, Aunt Sally was a large supporter of organizations much like ours that exist to make the lives of the people they affect more fulfilling and who look to spread love and harmony in everything they do.

This year, we have a \$3 million spending budget in order to produce another show at the same level as our previous productions while also being able to pay our staff and operating expenses. While we have \$2.5 million of that at our disposal due to government grants, individual donations, and funding from other organizations such as the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and The Kresge Foundation, we are still seeking assistance in acquiring the other necessary \$500,000. VRtistry is in the process of receiving almost half of what we still need from individual patrons who are advocates for mental health education and artistic endeavors but we are seeking the other \$250,000 from people and organizations with similar passions which would go towards the salaries of the director, playwright, actors, and designers that would create the show. Because of the Aunt Sally Foundation's dedication to providing cultural enhancement in a community through education, VRtistry would be honored to be a recipient of ASF funding and continue on her legacy of wanting to make a positive impact in the world. In exchange for a donation, VRtistry would have a tribute to Aunt Sally and her foundation in the playbill for its next production as well as opening night tickets for her loved ones. It is just a small gesture we can extend as a token of our appreciation for your kindness which we could never properly express our gratitude for.

Our steps for creating the next show in the mental health series on schizophrenia would go as follows:

1. Acquire \$500,000 in support from generous foundations and individuals to reach the needed \$3 million show budget
2. Hire the show's creative (director, playwright, designers) and technical (VR software programmers, VR hardware repair technicians) teams
3. Hold auditions and compile a cast of 5-7 actors (depending on what the script calls for)
4. Begin rehearsals in early August 2025 and continue rehearsing until end of year
5. Show opens in January of 2026 and runs until February of 2027

Due to prior production experience, it can be estimated that the show will take around one year to be written with four months of rehearsals before it is ready to open in the theater. While the script is being worked on by the playwright, virtual reality software engineers will be creating the virtual world that the audience can enter using their headsets. During this entire process, organizations such as the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) will be consulted so that the disease can be portrayed as sensitively and accurately as possible. VRtistry has already contacted both organizations as well as specific institutions focused on schizophrenia regarding this new production and have their full support.

As was mentioned prior, VRtistry has a full-time staff of 25 employees with additional designers and production members brought on for each show. Our founder and Artistic Director, CJ McDonald, was motivated to start VRtistry after her grandfather was diagnosed with dementia and she saw her family struggle to understand him and exactly what he was going through. She saw him interact with the present-day world around him all while living 70 years in the past mentally and thought that there must be a better way to help the general public understand mental illness and provide support for those struggling with it including her dear grandfather. Thus, VRtistry was born. Currently, the executive team consists of an artistic/executive director (CJ McDonald), a technical director (Amy Bruno), a chief financial officer (Austen Meyer), the president of marketing and advertising (Patrick Tully), a development director (Bailey Tailleir), a fundraising manager (Michael Neri), and a program manager (Jo Wormuth). There are also a number of house staff, administrative assistants, and general employees who work out of the theater daily making sure that VRtistry is thriving and achieving its goals of education, advocacy, and community engagement. We also have a board of directors that includes 14 individuals involved in VRtistry as employees, patrons, former guest artists, and community members that meet three times a year during a show's run and every other month during a show's development. VRtistry is also lucky enough to have an advisory board that meets with the organization twice a year to discuss ideas for the company's future as well as dissect its current financial and social health and impact. For each show, a new director, VR software programmer, playwright, design team, cast, run crew, and show development team is brought on as VRtistry values giving multiple artists a platform for which to showcase their talents. This also ensures that each production is unique not only in subject matter but in style and execution which leaves returning patrons feeling refreshed and not like they have seen the show before.

In terms of measuring the impact of your gift to VRtistry, we find there is no better payoff than knowing you have bettered the life of someone else. We hope that through our productions,

crime against and persecution of mentally ill individuals in America and especially in New York City is significantly decreased. Mental Health America found that people with a mental illness are much more likely to be the victims of violent crimes rather than the perpetrators. Our mission in educating the public on these illnesses and creating empathy for our fellow man/woman/person is to help everyone, especially those struggling, feel safer and more supported in their communities. We hope to sell out every show so that we can reach the largest number of people and collect the greatest amount of money to be donated to research and cure efforts for these diseases. We, at VRtistry, all want to be a part of something bigger than ourselves and hope that you want to be as well.

Attached below are two presentations made during the early stages of VRtistry's development that illustrate how the services the company offers differ from anything currently available as well as how VRtistry functions as an entity. Should you require any further information on the organization or need other documentation including financial records, reviews from our patrons, information on the new production focused on schizophrenia, please do not hesitate to reach out. Any questions or concerns can be emailed to VRTistryProductions@VRTistry.com or mailed to our address in Manhattan which is included above. We appreciate your consideration for such a generous and immense gift and do offer our sincerest condolences for your loss. Thank you for your time and we look forward to hearing from you soon.

Respectfully,

CJ McDonald

Artistic & Executive Director of VRtistry

Submitted May 09, 2024