

# **STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY THROUGH ARTS AND INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY**

**THE IMPACT OF JAMII ON ARTISTS/STAFF, PARTICIPANTS  
AND AUDIENCE MEMBERS**

**JAMII & ANITA BOEY, 2024**



In 2020, Jamii embarked on a transformative four-year journey with the Metcalf Foundation as part of Staging Change. Early in this process, we committed to exploring intentional structures that could nurture leadership and agency while remaining true to our essence as an organization.

We envisioned Jamii as sparks of magic that ignite a social invitation for all members of the communities we serve—to heal, (re)connect, collaborate, nurture one another, share space, and inspire creativity.

As part of this journey, we began questioning two key concepts: Institutional Memory and Leadership. How can an organization share leadership when its institutional memory rests with one person?

This inquiry revealed two important realizations:

**1)** Everyone who has been part of Jamii—staff, board members, volunteers, artists, residents, and participants—carries a piece of its institutional memory. Jamii is defined by the emotions, experiences, and stories people associate with their involvement in the organization.

**2)** While Jamii may have a leader, it is ultimately shaped by the collective efforts and passion of the community, which operates with care and intentionality at its core.

This exploration led us to a pivotal question: Can we measure Jamii's impact by examining collective memories and the stories people carry about the organization?

To address this, we partnered with Dr. Anita Boey, a professor and researcher specializing in leadership and workplace innovation. Anita's unique perspective—as a participant, local resident, and artist deeply connected to Jamii—has greatly enriched this study.

This study investigates what people remember about Jamii's initiatives and how they communicate these memories. By examining the lived experiences and narratives of:

- 3)** Artists and staff who facilitated Jamii's projects,
- 4)** Community members who participated in these projects,
- 5)** Audience members who witnessed these initiatives,

we aim to uncover the ways in which Jamii's work influences individuals and communities through their shared recollections.

As with everything Jamii undertakes, this study is not a final outcome but part of our ongoing journey. It will continue to evolve and reshape as we grow, transform, and co-create our shared future.

We are grateful to the Metcalf Foundation for encouraging and nurturing us in taking this journey.

# ABOUT JAMII

**Jamii** is a not-for-profit arts organization based in The Esplanade community, Toronto, whose vision is to enhance togetherness within the communities it engages.

**Jamii** initiates, welcomes, enables, facilitates, and produces creative experiences, arts events and workshops with, for, and by the people of The Esplanade and beyond with the intent of creating shared memories. **Jamii** is the proud recipient of the 2020 Community Arts Award, awarded by the Toronto Arts Foundation. More information: [www.jamii.ca](http://www.jamii.ca)

# ABOUT THE RESEARCHER AND AUTHOR

Dr. Anita Boey is a seasoned qualitative researcher and a professor of Human Resource Management, with over 12 years of experience in tertiary education and research in Canada and internationally. Born in Newfoundland, Canada, Anita has lived in Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, the United States, Finland, and Sweden, enriching her perspective with a truly global outlook. In addition to her academic expertise, Anita is a self-taught fashion designer with a passion for storytelling through garment design. She began collaborating with **Jamii** in March 2023 as a Sewing Workshop Facilitator, where she shares her love for garment construction and machine sewing. Her designs reflect her multicultural upbringing, weaving narratives of cultural diversity into each piece she creates. Anita's rich personal and professional experiences inspire her holistic approach to understanding the world, bridging the fields of research, education, and creative expression. More information: <https://boeyxiaohua.wixsite.com/anita>

# THE IMPACT OF JAMII ON ARTISTS/STAFF, PARTICIPANTS AND AUDIENCES, STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY THROUGH ARTS AND INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY

By Dr. Anita Boey, November 2024

The **Research Goal** is to analyze the impact of Jamii's programs by examining the collective memories and shared stories of those involved. This research seeks to understand what people remember about Jamii's initiatives and how they communicate these memories, thereby revealing Jamii's institutional impact. By exploring the lived experiences and recollections of (1) artists/staff who facilitated the art projects, (2) community members who participated, and (3) audience members who witnessed these experiences, we can measure the influence of Jamii's work through the narratives shared across these diverse perspectives.

## JAMII'S IMPACT ON ARTISTS/STAFF:

- Jamii's programs emphasize mentorship, skill-building, and collaboration.
- Artists play dual roles as creators and community mentors.
- This role promotes personal and professional growth and long-term relationships with the community.
- Artists' careers and outlooks are transformed through their involvement in the community.

## JAMII'S IMPACT ON PARTICIPANTS:

- Participants gain new skills and confidence.
- Jamii provides a safe and inclusive space for self-expression, benefiting mental health.
- Projects such as murals and public performances increase neighbourhood pride and engagement.
- Jamii strengthens the community identity through these initiatives.

## JAMII'S IMPACT ON AUDIENCES:

- Jamii's initiatives provide a sense of connection and pride for audiences.
- This is especially important during challenging times, such as the pandemic.
- Jamii creates a welcoming environment, encouraging even newcomers to engage with the community.

## JAMII'S LONG-TERM IMPACT:

- Jamii fosters a shared institutional memory through the experiences of The Esplanade residents.
- This memory strengthens Jamii's role as a community anchor.
- Helps ensure continuity, resilience, and growth for the future.

## JAMII'S OVERALL CONTRIBUTION:

- Jamii exemplifies the power of art to bring diverse individuals together.
- Supports connection, reflection, and the creation of a shared future for the community.

## ABSTRACT

This study explores the influence of Jamii, a community-based arts organization, on artists/staff, participants, and audiences within Toronto's The Esplanade neighbourhood. Through an analysis of qualitative data collected from interviews with artists, staff, program participants, and community members, this study investigates how Jamii's projects foster a shared sense of identity, belonging, and resilience within the community.

Jamii's programs, which emphasize mentorship, skill-building, and collaborative creation, offer profound benefits for both participants and facilitators. Artists involved in these initiatives take on dual roles, acting as both creators and community mentors, enabling personal and professional growth that extends beyond their artistic contributions. This role fosters a shared sense of purpose, as artists cultivate long-term relationships with the community, transforming their careers and outlooks.

Community members who participate in Jamii's initiatives gain new skills and confidence, while experiencing the mental health benefits of a safe and inclusive space for self-expression. Projects like murals and public performances not only enrich participants' lives but also cultivate neighbourhood pride and agency, reinforcing Jamii's positive influence on community identity. For audiences, Jamii's initiatives provide connection and pride, especially during challenging periods, such as the pandemic. This sense of welcome and inclusion has made Jamii a central part of The Esplanade's cultural landscape, encouraging even newcomers to engage with and feel connected to their new community.

Beyond these individual impacts, Jamii fosters an enduring institutional memory, which is preserved and enriched by the collective experiences of The Esplanade's residents. This shared memory reinforces Jamii's role as a community anchor, creating a legacy that supports continuity, resilience, and future growth. Through its multifaceted, community-centered approach, Jamii exemplifies the transformative power of art to build spaces where diverse individuals can connect, reflect, and envision a shared future.

## INTRODUCTION

This study aims to analyze the impact of Jamii's community-driven programs on the lives of its artists/staff, participants, and audiences. Through community projects, mentorship, and shared artistic experiences, Jamii has established a sense of belonging, pride, and social cohesion within The Esplanade community. This analysis uses a qualitative approach to explore how memories and experiences shared by various community members highlight the far-reaching impact of Jamii. Interviews with artists, staff, program participants, and community audiences (sample size of 53 individuals) have been collected and analyzed to achieve the research goal.

The Research Goal is to analyze the impact of Jamii's programs by examining the collective memories and shared stories of those involved. This research seeks to understand what people remember about Jamii's initiatives and how they communicate these memories, thereby revealing Jamii's institutional impact. By exploring the lived experiences and recollections of (1) artists/staff who facilitated the art projects, (2) community members who participated, and (3) audience members who witnessed these experiences, we can measure the influence of Jamii's work through the narratives shared across these diverse perspectives.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF PRESERVING AND SHARING INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY FOR ARTS ORGANIZATIONS, SUCH AS JAMII, ANCHORED IN COMMUNITY

The preservation, protection, and sharing of an arts organization's origins, defining stories, and experiential narratives are essential to sustaining its relevance and impact. Institutional memory is "the information held in team and community members' personal recollections and experiences that provides an understanding of the history and culture of an organization, especially the stories that explain the reasons behind certain decisions or procedures". Institutional memory forms the heart of an organization, embodying its essence and grounding its work. By inviting the community to serve as guardians of these memories, Jamii retains its depth and becomes a place of growth. The collective memory of shared experiences, such as the creative process, nurtures a bond between the community and Jamii, potentially influencing future generations. Through this enduring connection, Jamii can reflect on its origins to shape its future, ensuring that its evolution remains rooted in the values and experiences that define it.

## IMPACT MEASURES

Jamii's impact is best understood by examining the perspectives of three main groups: artists and/or staff who create programming, community members who participated in these programs, and audiences who witness these programs as performances or art exhibitions. Each group's reflections provided insight into the transformative and lasting nature of Jamii's initiatives.

## ARTISTS/STAFF WHO FACILITATED JAMII'S PROJECTS, GIFTING THE EXPERIENCE

Artists play a pivotal role in nurturing Jamii's collective memory by capturing the community's stories, creating opportunities for dialogue, and building resonance within the space. They act as vessels of memory, their work making each program and experience memorable, leading the audience to connect deeply with Jamii and anticipate future events. This process transforms each interaction into a record of the community's shared experiences, with the depth of impact often outweighing the reach. Through this narrative, stories become institutional memories that bridge the past with the future, inviting growth and evolution.

Artists (or staff or board members) who collaborate with Jamii often take on the dual role of creators and facilitators, using their skills to shape meaningful community experiences. Their contributions go beyond traditional artistic expression; they engage in long-term collaborations, nurturing relationships that extend well beyond the project's end. This commitment to continuity and growth enables artists to develop alongside the community, creating an environment where mentorship and mutual growth are central. By becoming part of Jamii, artists not only experience professional growth but also reflect on their purpose within a supportive community context, transforming their careers and personal perspectives.

## IMPACT OF INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY ON DECISION-MAKING AND SHARED LEADERSHIP

Institutional memory significantly shapes decision-making processes within community-focused arts organizations by grounding them in their core mission and values. For organizations like Jamii, the community's voice informs what actions to take, fostering a model of shared leadership. Even when a single leader directs the organization, consultation with the community means the vision incorporates multiple perspectives. This collaborative approach invites diverse

ideas under a unified purpose, creating a cohesive, community-driven approach to leadership that is responsive to collective needs and insights.

## BUILDING LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS FOR ENDURING COLLABORATIONS

Artists who have facilitated Jamii's projects reflect on the strong, enduring relationships formed through long-term collaboration. Artists have observed that the personal commitment to both people and the arts creates an intertwining of private lives and work. One artist explained, "Commitment and passion [that] we both have for people and arts, and that each of our private lives and work intertwines". This shared commitment nurtures an environment where artists, participants, and community members feel invested in a collective vision.

Artists have captured the evolving, experimental nature of Jamii's approach, which ensures continuous growth and engagement within the community: "Jamii's strength lies in its desire to keep growing and evolving. It doesn't engage in navel-gazing but strives to experiment with new ideas, new ways to connect people, using different art forms and artistic sensibilities." The physical and emotional transformation of The Esplanade through Jamii's projects creates long-lasting memories that become part of the community's collective memory: "The whole neighbourhood is involved... The street never looks the same after that. And the memory of that transformation is long-lasting". Long-term programming and experiences allow relationships to evolve, anchoring memories and connections over time, essential for maintaining community bonds and enhancing organizational sustainability.

“Jamii’s strength lies in its desire to keep growing and evolving. It doesn’t engage in navel-gazing but strives to experiment with new ideas, new ways to connect people, using different art forms and artistic sensibilities.”



## LEARNING FROM COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS: MENTORSHIP AND MUTUAL GROWTH

For many artists, working with Jamii fosters reciprocal mentorship, where they learn from each other and from the community. This mutual growth, as described by one artist, creates a “sense of comfort and welcoming,” which is essential for a meaningful collaboration. Another artist emphasizes how shared memory can enhance organizational responsiveness to community needs: “By focusing on the importance of creating memories, arts organizations will naturally be more responsive and reflective to those they serve.” This approach allows for a fusion of history and vision, where “keepers of the history” blend memory and future aspirations, making the creative process deeply impactful for both artists and the community. Artists become nodes within a network that deepens existing connections and fosters new ones, contributing to the continuity and richness of institutional memory. These personal connections give humanity to the organization, building a foundation of trust and mutual respect that strengthens Jamii’s mission.



“Artists report that Jamii’s consistent, creative, and adaptive programming not only benefits the community but also contributes to their own sense of belonging and personal identity as artists.”



## SELF-REFLECTION AND PERSONAL GROWTH, A CATALYST FOR ARTISTIC AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Working with Jamii provides artists with opportunities for self-reflection and personal development. One artist describes her transformative experience: “Being a part of this organization has provided me many opportunities to express [myself] when I feel insecure, unclear, or unmotivated. Seeing and hearing about my impact on our community gave me space to consider other perspectives and realign my thinking.” Artists report that Jamii’s consistent, creative, and adaptive programming not only benefits the community but also contributes to their own sense of belonging and

personal identity as artists. One board member recounts her journey with Jamii, from her first encounter with Jamii for a movie screening night, to becoming a board member of Jamii, she said “Ahead of participating in a Jamii event, I didn’t know that I needed to experience the project and artistic process. It broadened my thinking, and stretched spiritual muscles I didn’t know existed. Since participating, I learned and grew personally in ways I didn’t know were needed. Community is collaboration and support. Jamii is the bridge to many networks within the neighbourhood to enable those possibilities. The shared experience, trust in the process and collaboration with arts and artists could all be considered food for the soul.”

## FUTURE DREAMS AND BUILDING GENERATIONAL MEMORY: TRANSFORMING COMMUNITY THROUGH STORYTELLING AND INCLUSION

Jamii’s programs foster generational continuity, creating a legacy that future Esplanadians can inherit. One board member observes that, “Beyond the literal explanation of generational memory... there are also ‘generations’ of Esplanadians where storytelling can be passed on.” Jamii’s commitment to welcoming new residents to the physical space and to the community and connecting them with longstanding community members ensures that The Esplanade’s culture of togetherness and pride continues to flourish. One artist shared this, “This has gone beyond the people in Jamii to the stories that are captured and showcased in projects. Stories that glorify people’s cultures, social statuses, disabilities. Jamii has shown the community that people are important as they are and through this have dispelled stereotypes that usually lead to aggressions and eventually racism. This approach to social justice leads to true transformation of a society.”

## COMMUNITY MEMBERS WHO ACTIVELY PARTICIPATED IN JAMII’S PROJECTS

For community members, participating in Jamii’s projects provides an invaluable space for personal and collective growth. Many gain exposure to new skills and techniques, which they then integrate into their daily lives. This skill-building process fosters a sense of ownership and identity, as community members actively shape their own creative experiences and the physical landscape of their neighbourhood. Furthermore, these projects contribute significantly to mental health benefits, allowing participants to form supportive relationships and express themselves in a safe, inclusive space. Through this involvement, community members gain a heightened sense of pride, accomplishment, and agency.

## ARTISTIC SKILLS AND PERSONAL GROWTH: THE ROLE OF ARTS IN NURTURING INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY

Participants frequently highlight the development of new skills and self-confidence gained from participating in Jamii's artistic initiatives. One community member recounts a particularly memorable experience performing in costume: "Jumping out of my comfort zone, in an abstract way with the sounds, and costumes... I had to stay in character... my daughter still remembers that day and retells the story often." Such projects cultivate shared memories that deepen connections among Jamii's work both impactful and necessary to document. Through these stories, relationships with the past, present, and future are preserved, allowing memories to remain alive.

## TAKING OWNERSHIP OF ART AND IDENTITY THROUGH COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY ART

Community projects like painting large murals on the basketball court or on the community center, encourage residents to take pride in their creative contributions. One participant reflects, "Each member was able to bring their own flavors to the creative process and their own experiences to the art projects. And because of how diverse it is, the audience can see themselves in the art that's created." This collaborative approach reinforces the community's sense of pride and ownership over the public art that represents them. Another community member recounts how proud she was to see her mother's portrait and story on display for six months as part of an art exhibit, gave her a deeper appreciation for her mother's sacrifice to bring her family to Canada, and a new level of realizing her identity as a new generation in Canada. While memory can be ephemeral, certain artifacts—whether physical records, photographs, or community stories—serve as anchors. These artifacts help ensure the continuity of values and memories, providing a foundation for future generations. Jamii's values of organic growth, resilience, equity, and empowerment guide this process, grounding future decisions in a legacy of meaningful community engagement.

“This collaborative approach reinforces the community’s sense of pride and ownership over the public art that represents them.”

## PROMOTING HEALING AND RESILIENCE THROUGH CREATIVITY DURING CHALLENGING TIMES

In challenging times, Jamii's programs have offered participants a source of mental health support and healing. A participant in a pandemic-era film project recalls the light-hearted interactions that helped relieve the community's collective anxiety: "We created a film... ended up being something that we all needed... a way for us to all validate our feelings." This project underscores the power of creative outlets in fostering resilience and emotional well-being during difficult periods. Memory is fluid, yet it gains meaning and continuity through storytelling and shared experiences, especially in challenging times. Jamii's consistency in providing a safe and welcoming space for the community has been deeply appreciated and blessed many.

## AUDIENCES OF JAMII'S PROJECTS AS WITNESSES AND REFLECTORS

Audiences, while often perceived as passive observers, play an essential role in the impact of Jamii's projects. For them, these programs provide an opportunity to engage with art that reflects the community's diversity and vibrancy. By experiencing performances and installations, audiences develop a deeper sense of belonging and appreciation for The Esplanade community. Many audiences experience community pride and a renewed sense of hope through these interactions, which often occur at pivotal moments—such as during the pandemic, when public performances brought much-needed solace and connection. For new residents or visitors, these events offer a warm welcome, establishing Jamii as an integral part of the neighbourhood's social and cultural landscape.

## ENJOY A WELCOMING ATMOSPHERE

Audiences report feeling welcomed and included by Jamii's inclusive approach, which fosters a sense of community and belonging. One newcomer to Canada describes her immediate connection: "Just moved to Canada from Hong Kong... and I've already joined the dancing workshops... I am studying event planning and can help Jamii plan or run events." The supportive environment encourages new arrivals to become active participants in their new community. Some audience members who traveled from afar to attend Jamii's performances have been drawn to the Esplanade neighbourhood and they are even considering moving to the neighbourhood. Jamii's role in enhancing The Esplanade's reputation is evident.



## **INSTILLING PRIDE AND TRANSFORMING THE NEIGHBOURHOOD**

Jamii's projects, including murals, parades, and performances, have become essential to The Esplanade's identity, helping residents and audiences alike take pride in the neighbourhood's distinct culture. A long-time resident describes Jamii as a symbol of pride: "There's nowhere else like Jamii... The Esplanade sign represents the diversity of the people in our community... we are proud of our community." This pride, fostered through the arts, redefines how residents view and relate to their neighbourhood. Physical spaces become repositories of memory, with Jamii playing an integral role in shaping these spaces through community engagement. Jamii and the community are co-creators of the space, embedding memories in every corner and extending the organization's presence beyond its physical boundaries.

### **BUILDING A LASTING SENSE OF BELONGING**

The shared memories created through Jamii's projects have helped residents feel deeply rooted in their community. This sentiment is echoed by a widow who considers Jamii her "lifeline," as well as others who express a similar sense of belonging through regular involvement in Jamii's events. These community-driven initiatives have cultivated a sense of connection that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. For a community-based arts organization, institutional memory is deeply intertwined with community connections. Jamii is inherently bonded to its community, with these connections forming the backbone of the organization's sustainability. Embracing and honouring memories attracts people, partnerships, and resources, reinforcing Jamii's role in the community. The longevity and strength of these bonds enrich Jamii's impact, fostering resilience and growth.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **OVERLAPPING IMPACTS AND MUTUAL BENEFITS**

The intersecting areas of influence among these three groups highlight the depth of Jamii's impact. Mutual growth and relationship building emerge as artists and community members work together, learning from each other in a mentorship that transcends age, background, and experience. This interaction fosters a spirit of reciprocity, where both parties benefit from the unique perspectives they bring to the creative process.

Between community members and audiences, the shared experience of diverse representation and mental health support helps bridge personal and social divides. By engaging in or witnessing art that reflects a variety of identities, both groups gain a broader understanding and appreciation of each other's stories. This overlap is crucial to maintaining an inclusive, understanding, and resilient community.

Perhaps the most profound intersection is the collective memory and community resilience cultivated across all three groups. Jamii's projects generate shared memories that transcend individual experiences, forming a foundation of collective identity and pride. Artists, participants, and audiences alike contribute to a living narrative of The Esplanade, a shared history that is continuously enriched by new voices and perspectives. This collective memory acts as a cornerstone for community resilience, equipping residents to face future challenges with a shared sense of belonging and solidarity.

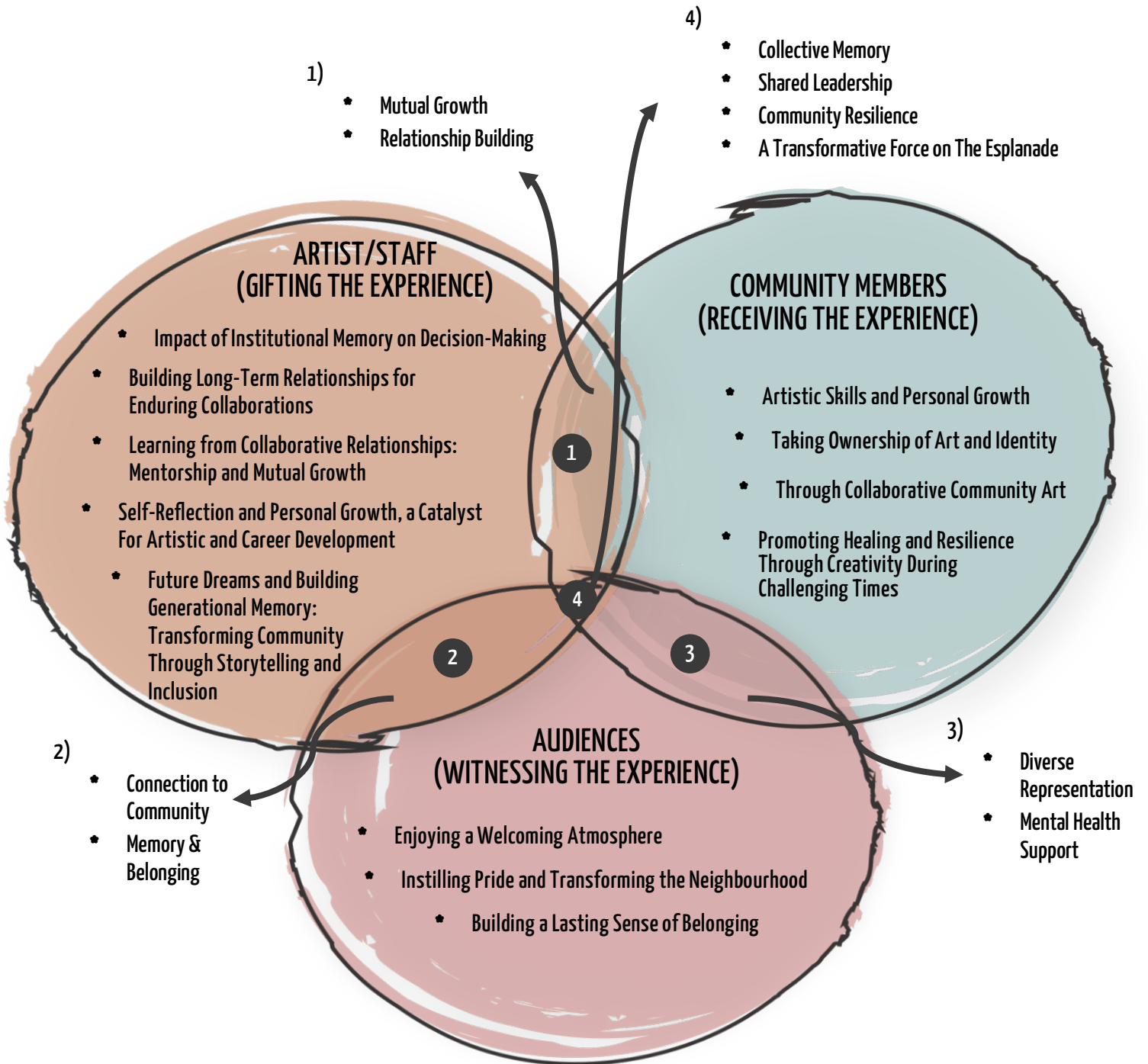
### **BUILDING A FUTURE THROUGH ART AND CONNECTION**

Through its intentional, multifaceted approach, Jamii not only enriches individual lives but also strengthens the bonds that hold The Esplanade community together. Jamii's programming offers more than just artistic experiences; it provides platforms for expression, understanding, and unity that go beyond traditional community engagement. Each group—artists/staff, community members, and audiences—brings unique contributions that enhance the collective well-being, fostering a sense of continuity and resilience. Jamii's impact thus extends far beyond its immediate participants, cultivating an enduring legacy that will shape the community for generations to come.

By fostering relationships and shared experiences, Jamii embodies the profound potential of community-centred art to create spaces where individuals can connect, heal, and imagine a collective future that is both vibrant and resilient.

Jamii's projects provide deep and lasting impacts on artists/staff, participants, and audiences by building relationships, nurturing a sense of community, and fostering personal growth. Through shared memories and collective creativity, Jamii has become a transformative force on The Esplanade, weaving a narrative that unites diverse individuals through art, culture, and mutual support. This qualitative analysis of Jamii's impact highlights the essential role of community-centered arts organizations in fostering social cohesion, resilience, and pride.

# THE IMPACT OF JAMII'S COMMUNITY PROGRAMS: A VENN DIAGRAM OF INFLUENCE



## SOURCE OF PRIMARY DATA FOR THIS QUALITATIVE STUDY

### 1. PERSONAL TESTIMONIES:

- Eighteen written testimonies from members of the "Belonging" group, a community for individuals aged 55 and older.
- Participants meet weekly at Jamii to engage in indoor art and exercise workshops, as well as group outings to places like museums and the lakeshore.
- These testimonies detail the personal impact of their participation in Jamii's programs.

### 2. VIDEO INTERVIEWS:

- Sixteen video interviews conducted with artists, facilitators, and participants involved in Jamii's indoor and outdoor events.
- Interviewees shared memories of their roles in various projects (spanning the years of Jamii's existence) their experiences as participants or observers, and the impact of these activities on their personal lives.

### 3. AUDIENCE INTERVIEWS:

- Ten face-to-face interviews with attendees of Jamii's October Mingling event.
- Topics discussed included how they learned of Jamii, their first interaction with Jamii, the impact of Jamii's programming on their lives, and their hopes for Jamii's future.

### 4. REFLECTION ESSAYS:

- Nine reflective essays written by former artists and workshop facilitators who collaborated with Jamii over the years of Jamii's existence.
- These essays capture their personal experiences during their involvement with Jamii, the projects they contributed to, and the lasting effects of these engagements.

This data provides a comprehensive and diverse perspective on the impact of Jamii's initiatives.