

# Bridgebuilding Case Study: Memphis Public Libraries



*This case study was developed by [IREX](#) as an example of a "bridgebuilding" activity. IREX defines bridgebuilding as engaging across differences in ways that respect identities, foster mutual relationships, seek a common good, and promote a commitment to civic engagement, thereby contributing to increased social capital and strengthened civic infrastructure, and ultimately, a stronger democracy.*

### Background/context of the library

A key goal of Memphis Public Libraries (MPL) that is identified in their [strategic plan](#) is to advance the library’s role as a community anchor and serve as a catalyst for neighborhood development and civic engagement. The library seeks to do this in a number of ways, including offering programming designed to bring together diverse groups of people who might not otherwise have the opportunity to interact or learn from each other.

### What bridging initiatives/programs has the library offered?

CitizenFEST was an event that was organized and hosted in partnership with [Citizen University](#)—a non-profit organization that equips Americans to be [civic culture catalysts](#). CitizenFEST was designed to be a free, festive, learning summit on how to exercise civic power. Activists, artists, and everyday citizens were invited to come together for a day of art, and creativity, and to learn the concrete skills of effective change-making. The event aimed to be as inclusive and accessible as possible—because the work of citizenship requires everyone to show up. The agenda included a keynote presentation, moderated panel discussions, and a number of workshops, such as: “Can They Bridge the Divide: Arts as Healing Mechanism for a City” and “Do They Still Matter? The Role of Community Anchors and Approaches to Stewardship.”

### Why were bridging initiatives needed in the community?

MPL saw CitizenFEST as an opportunity to spark a series of conversations around the role of libraries in creating vibrant communities, the role of everyday people in shaping their communities, and the power of diverse people coming together to share their thoughts about the city’s future.

### What were the signs of success?

A key part of MPL’s strategic plan at that time was to develop programming designed to bring together community members who otherwise might not have the opportunity to interact or learn

<p><b>Library details</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Library name: Memphis Public Libraries</li><li>• City, State: Memphis, Tennessee</li><li>• Size of library system: 18 locations</li><li>• Contact for bridging information: Shamichael Hallman shamichael.hallman@gmail.com</li></ul> <p><b>Use this case study to learn:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• how strategic community outreach and pop-up programming can help with bridging activities</li><li>• about partnering with local and national organizations on bridging initiatives</li><li>• about employing tactics to ensure diverse audiences attend library programs centered on bridging.</li></ul>
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from each other. CitizenFEST accomplished that goal. Not only did people from different parts of the city attend, but some of the participants rarely interacted with the library. Throughout the program, participants were encouraged to introduce themselves to someone new.

MPL also captured post-program feedback from program participants through open and closed-ended survey questions, and observed levels of engagement during the event (discussion during breakout groups, questions asked of speakers and panelists).



Photo: Courtesy Memphis Public Libraries

### **What was learned?**

It can be challenging to get diverse audiences in the room, and it can take planning to effectively facilitate community engagement. Using strategic outreach opportunities is one way this can be accomplished through libraries. MPL hosted temporary pop-up libraries in different parts of the library's service area including farmer's markets, food halls, local businesses, and parks. Each of these outreach events helped to boost the attendance of CitizenFEST in addition to affording library staff the opportunity to meet new segments of the community and invite them to visit the library.

In planning CitizenFEST, MPL found that partnering the event with the arts (songs, dance, etc.) provided a wonderful vehicle for creating an environment in which challenging conversations can occur. When the library discovered that there was an appetite for this type of event, they worked with the founding organization to host similar events across the library system and continued to do bridging work with the community.