

Open Mic, Public Art, and Community Engagement

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~~Community Engagement Learning Exchange~~ [UNC-Chapel Hill MPA](#) student getting ready to graduate from the [School of Government](#). I usually blog over at [MPA Matters](#), but it is a real pleasure to get to write a guest post over here about a topic I love and care about: community engagement.

I get to tell you about puppets, [Frederick Douglass](#) and community fun and learning.

My experience in community engagement is what brought me to the MPA program in the first place. Outside of my time here, I moonlight as a [stand-up comedian](#). I started hosting an Open Mic at a bar called [Zog's](#) shortly after moving to the area in 2014.

The bar's owner, community fixture Mandey Brown, kindly informed me that I would be applying to join her on the [Chapel Hill Cultural Arts Commission](#) because it seemed like I had some free time. Through that work, I grew deeply interested in **how citizens can engage with local governments and nonprofits to collaborate on really cool public art**. Specifically art that is not only is aesthetically pleasing, but also **articulates civic and community values in interesting and thought-provoking ways**.

There are so many great examples of this, but one work I keep coming back to is the puppetry of Tarrish Pipkinks aka [Jeghetto](#). Tarrish also served as a citizen-member of the [Orange County Arts Commission](#). Katie Murray, the director of the [Orange County Arts Commission](#), is my good friend and professional mentor.

Last year, [Jeghetto](#) was commissioned to perform multi-media show in the Chapel Hill Public

Library and a local church honoring the 200th birthday of Frederick Douglass. He created a masterfully crafted puppet, a reading from Douglass' writing, and images from Douglass' life.

I saw how local community members, especially children, responded to the performance with a mixture of awe and reverence. It was a fantastic display of art that made community members think about their values and what it means to be citizen of a nation and a region within the context of the history of slavery.

Serving on the commission while simultaneously pursuing an [MPA degree](#) has given me an interesting opportunity to **apply lessons learned on a day to day basis**. For example, learning about open meetings laws and thinking about my responsibilities to be transparent when talking about commission business and **thinking about whether or not a social gathering constitutes a quorum** if the conversation shifts toward public business.

I have also had the pleasure in 2018 to serve as an assessor in the Assessment Center process for the selection of our current Town Manager, [Maurice Jones](#). **I brought to the process my role as a community member, but also my MPA training.** The experience gave me inspiration for a section of my portfolio (our thesis-substitute) and a deeper understanding what it means to search for public services executives.

Throughout my career in public service, I will equally rely on my MPA degree and the community service motivation that drove me to serve on the commission in the first place. I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to **learn from the experienced and passionate professionals within the [School of Government](#)** and hope to return often in a professional capacity.