

# Building Hope Through Service, Creativity, and Collaboration

## A Reflection on 5 Years of Arts & Wellbeing

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Five years ago, we started Performance Hypothesis with a whole lot of questions, and a few answers as well. But what carried us to co-founding the business was our shared conviction that the arts were a measurable tool that could uplift wellbeing.

I'm grateful, and honestly, in awe, that Performance Hypothesis has reached its five-year milestone. Importantly, I'm honored to count myself among the arts & wellbeing community. The brilliance of my colleagues and the international movement that has emerged amazes me, and I remain encouraged by this powerful force.

When we began, I did not imagine we would grow into what we are today. In 2021, the pressures of the COVID-19 period affected all of us. Like many, we were navigating uncertainty, isolation, and significant stress. During that time, Co-Founders Raphiel Murden, Sue Beasley, and I asked ourselves a question: "What if we advance the health impact of the arts by lending our collective experience in public health?"

### Our Beginnings in Evaluation & Research

In May 2021, we launched the work. Our first client was [Counter Narrative Project \(CNP\)](#), a narrative-change organization based in Atlanta. We partnered with founder Charles Stephens on their programs amplifying narratives about Black Queer men, to strengthen their approaches of measuring impact.

Soon after, we developed an evaluation for [TimeSlips](#), an organization that uses arts and creativity to create meaningful connections with elders with memory loss. TimeSlips' Founder, Anne Basting, awarded us a contract because of our expertise in arts and health, at a time when this kind of specialization was rare.

We were excited by our early work with these partners. It allowed us to establish ourselves in the arts & wellbeing field, demonstrate our strong evaluation and research skills to help strengthen communities, and build ideas about how to expand access to arts & health resources.

### Strategic Growth Through Relationships

In this same time frame, I met Dr. Jill Sonke, from the [University of Florida Center for Arts in Medicine](#). Jill's leadership and generosity were a true turning point. She introduced me to arts & wellbeing professionals across the interdisciplinary spectrum, and Performance Hypothesis was able to expand. We continued the core evaluation work and layered in

strategic planning work with partners including Segerstrom Center for the Arts, NYC Health + Hospitals, and Emory University. And we continue to grow our practice and partnerships now with global partners.

## Choosing Hope

Our world is navigating unprecedented challenges, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel overwhelmed by it all. But, I find grounding in the fact that community members are showing up in big and small ways to simply help one another in these scary times. Research innovations among my arts & wellbeing colleagues are making headlines almost every week. And a genuine sense of care and connection, both in my home of Atlanta and across the globe, inspires me to keep going with the next big idea.

As I look ahead, my goal is simple: to keep doing impactful work that advances wellbeing for people and communities through meaningful and creative measures.

I'm deeply thankful to our collaborators, mentors, and clients who have trusted us along the way—and I'm excited for the next chapter of Performance Hypothesis and the field.

*Marcel W. Foster, MPH, is an internationally recognized leader at the intersection of arts, policy, and public health. As CEO & Co-Founder of Performance Hypothesis, they directed the policy writing and passing of Georgia's House Resolution 1007—the nation's first legislation to formally acknowledge the effectiveness of arts for health initiatives in improving mental health outcomes. Performance Hypothesis partners including NYC Health + Hospitals, Atlanta Jazz Festival, the National Endowment for the Arts, the CDC, and projects with funding from Bloomberg Philanthropies, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. In fall 2026, they will begin their DPhil (PhD) in Translational Health Science at Oxford University.*



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