BarnArts programmer chosen for National Leaders of Color Fellowship

By Aaron Rubin
Standard Correspondent

For BarnArts music program manager, Victoria Johnson, music has always been an integral part of life. Growing up in Michigan, Johnson was involved in theater and choir starting in elementary school, and sang in church.

"I've always been a musical person," Johnson said. "I grew up [with] my parents playing music in the house, I grew up collecting CDs. Music is always what drove me."

As the current music program manager at BarnArts Center for the Arts, Johnson has seen how musical events can bring many people together and expose listeners to different forms of music they may have not otherwise sought out themselves.

But Johnson sees that there are still barriers for total acceptance and safety for non-white artists performing in a predominantly white and rural state like Vermont. To learn how to establish a safe space for those artists and give them a platform for exposure to mostly white audiences, Johnson will participate in the second annual cohort of the National Leaders of Color Fellowship (NLCF). The national development program provides local leaders in the arts across the country access to specialists in the field and learning objectives to support more racially and culturally inclusive practices at their respective programs.

Only having been at BarnArts since April, Johnson has already made strides in providing new musical opportunities for non-white artists in Barnard. Through BarnArts, Johnson arranges the arts center's Global Music Residency, offering an educational platform for international culture exchanges through song and dance with ensembles from countries like Guinea and Haiti.

"Twice a year, we bring an international artist or group to Barnard and they perform, they do a week of school workshops, they'll go around mostly elementary schools," said Johnson. "They'll do workshops with the schools teaching them about their instrument or their style of music, or sometimes their dance."

Johnson sees it as important to invite those musical acts to schools in Windsor County as part of a student's education.



Victoria Johnson grew up in a musical family, including her dad who was a DJ, and performed all throughout high school in her native Michigan.
Courtesy of Victoria Johnson



The Feast & Field summer concert series has provided a platform for non-White performers like Fabiola Mendez, but Johnson wants to expand that opportunity for greater a sense of safety and inclusion for black and brown musici
Courtesy of Victoria Johnson

"When we bring in groups that we especially feel could make a great impact and could bring good work to the schools in the area, we really try to book some sort of school program with them," Johnson said.

While Johnson has seen through the Global Music Residency program that mostly white students have been exposed to non-Western forms of music they "may have never heard of," Johnson wants to broaden those connections beyond the schools. Through NLCF, Johnson wants to learn how to take those kinds of moments and expand them to Black and Brown musicians coming to BarnArts-organized events. For musicians of color who play music other than the more popular genres in Vermont such as Americana or bluegrass, Johnson hopes to learn how to create musical events to branch away from those styles and "bring a more diverse array of artists while also making sure those artists are safe."



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— Victoria Johnson

Johnson added that "wanting to reach out to folks who are in these rural areas who are Black or Brown and are not seeing artists, and understanding that's something they can do, feels like a really important barrier I want to break down and that I hope to be able to do more through this program."

Johnson continued, "There were many times throughout the summer we had really awesome artists coming and I was telling my friends who are Black and Brown that we're having these really awesome artists. But they're nervous about coming to these shows because it's in rural Vermont, the audience is mostly white."

Johnson wants to assure them that they are in a safe space when they ask, "Is it safe for me to be there? But me saying yes won't stop some white person in the audience, micro-aggressing or aggressing them," Johnson said. "You can say, 'You're welcome here, we want you here,' as much as you can, but that doesn't make the reality of that truth."

Through participation in the NLCF fellowship, Johnson wants to be able to answer an important question: "How can you have folks of color, who are attending shows with other artists of color as performers, feel safe in those spaces, and feel welcomed in those spaces?"

Until then, Johnson says they are excited to develop new skills, expand their capacity to understand "the nitty gritty" of music programming, and learn a thing or two from other people of color in similar positions with similar goals.