Shakespeare in the Ruff created the following *Project Field Notes* in 2023 as part of their Balancing Act Level UP! Pilot Project.

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SHAKESPEARE IN THE RUFF

BALANCING ACT

Shakespeare in the Ruff
Level UP! Compassion Fund Pilot
Project Field Notes

The following notes were written by Christine Horne and Jeff Yung, Collective Members of Shakespeare in the Ruff after Shakespeare in the Ruff completed their Level UP! Pilot Project.

Project focus: A Compassion Fund for guest artists engaged in outdoor summer programming.

Project inspiration: Meeting the extraneous comfort and care needs of artists working outdoors.

Planning and implementation

We began planning our Compassion Fund pilot in late March 2023. This was an ideal time because it was after two major early fiscal events: our AGM and our winter programming, and a few months ahead of our summer rehearsals.

Planning started with discussions about the best way to use the Compassion Fund. Due to the nature of the work we were doing during the summer, we knew that disability accessibility would be at the forefront of our support for the season, so our initial thoughts went there. However, after recognizing that the bulk of our other funding sources would cover accessibility, we decided the best use of the Compassion Fund would be to support anyone who was working with us in the park full-time, helping them with self-care and making their work easier.

For context, working in the park presents unique challenges: typical day-to-day amenities (such as kitchen appliances, tables and chairs, level ground) are not readily available. Additionally, we are always working against weather and other elements of a public space (summer camp programs, park recreation, teens). While Ruff makes every effort to provide support for certain things, we knew that many of the artists coming to the park daily might require additional resources to make their work easier.

We decided the best way to distribute the funds would be as a taxable stipend, with participants signing a one-page agreement.

In June, we sent out an email informing participants about the pilot with the agreement attached. From there, cheques were mailed to each participant in advance of the first day of rehearsal to support whatever needs they had. We wanted our participants to receive the stipend before the first week of rehearsal in case they needed to make any purchases to support them during the first week.

Participants in the pilot used the funds for a variety of things:

- Two out-of-town artists used the funds to make their commute and time in the park easier. One used it for occasional taxis home (especially after dark), and the other used it to fix a blown tire.
- One artist had unexpected expenses due to a life event and used the stipend for household items and to help with rent.
- One artist, who is blind, used the stipend for taxis and to support an unexpected illness during the run.

At the end of the pilot, we asked participants to complete an anonymous survey to share details about how they used the funds and any feedback they had about the project. Overall, this follow up took a few weeks.

Key conversations

We had conversations with leadership about the pilot during the planning phase, though not with our board. We shared details about the pilot with guest artists by email, and they were pleasantly surprised and thankful for the project.

Future planning

If we were to offer a similar program again, it would be important to consider how we could support the leadership who also spent time in the park, almost on a daily basis. We would like to find resources to establish a Compassion Fund for the collective, not just guest artists, and find ways to incorporate such initiatives into our policies and budgeting to prioritize them. Additionally, it would be valuable to look at ways to expand the care program to include some of our winter programming artists.

Language considerations

The use of the word “care” as opposed to “accessibility” was quite powerful. I think it gives people pause and asks them to look at the systems in which we work and how and where care is lacking or can be improved.

Care is also a word that I feel like isn’t yet coded the way accessibility sometimes is so people are more open to the interpretation of what that means.

As with anything we do, we approached the language/wording we used for this project with openness and curiosity of how we could make it as welcoming and supportive as possible, while also being clear about what would be expected. Clarity is care in its own way.

Sustainability

Here are a few thoughts about sustainability:

- We would love for this pilot to become a regular part of season planning.
- Having dedicated minds to administer the Compassion Fund would be useful.
- Budget-wise, it would need to be supplemented somehow.
- Expansion would only be possible with more testing and resources.

Key advice and information

Some advice from our team:

- Remember that sometimes a little means a lot.
- Consider what care practices are already in place and identify any gaps.
- Sometimes providing a taxable stipend is easier/more accessible than offering reimbursement.
- Remember that care and compassion look different and are not always visible.
- While respect and privacy are important, taking time to find out where there may be needs can be vital in ensuring you’re making the most impact with what you have.

Other thoughts

We appreciate the patience that Balancing Act had with us, as our timeline was different from theirs and most other companies. We are grateful to all the other partners for sharing their experiences at strategy meetings. This allowed us to understand what different companies were already doing before we piloted our own program. One of the

most impactful aspects of the Level UP! program was Balancing Act's Conference of Care, which many companies could benefit from attending.

An exciting development that happened alongside this pilot was that Ruff was able to pilot a separate childcare program (for one of our actors) funded by a different source but fully inspired by Level UP!. Since before our tenure, Ruff has always had a budget line for childcare, which has allowed us to hire caregivers for guests' and artists' children during rehearsals. Last season, we piloted a program where the caregiver picked up the child from the park and spent the day taking them places, with an amount set aside to reimburse the caregiver for expenses incurred during care (tickets to events, etc.).