Playground of Empathy

Our vision of empathy is to create a community that does not only speak of inclusion, or try to understand it conceptually, but is actually able to apply the knowledge and become truly inclusive.

Walking in the shoes of marginalized identities living in our country, who are black, or queer, first generation low income, and/or transgender, etc: this has never been possible until now. To make this vision a reality, our team has built a program which helps frame the diverse voices of our country, through point-of-view immersive experiences.

This experience is unlike a training. Because the personas are representational of actual, national (anonymous) marginalized individuals, its impact on community members can lead to an increase in advocacy that we’re able to measure over time.

Now, we want to engage places of learning and non-profit communities throughout our country, to have their empathic perceptions enhanced, by taking part in these walk-in-my-shoes experiences. We have the support of many national high school and non-profit leaders, and are looking for our community’s generosity to make this possible.

The Experience

Through a curated blend of real-life scenarios and guided discussions, participants explore the persona of someone unlike themselves and figuratively walk in that person's shoes.

In this immersive experience, participants explore their own implicit biases in a safe, non-judgmental environment. Users participate in a virtual reenactment of events that have happened in the life of a particular individual via a series of interactive vignettes.

They see the events through the eyes of the persona, as if they’re happening to the users themselves. A trained facilitator provides guidance as participants share their insights, revelations, questions, and curiosities about the affirming and discouraging encounters this person has faced in daily life.

The Goal

Our goal is simple: to share this experience in non-profit and informal education settings nationally.

Specifically, one of our first national benchmarks is to get high school students in our country to understand their own biases and be able to stand up for their peers as a result of this immersive, educational experience.

We believe this can result in a national impact for decades to come. We are focusing on high school students because they are at a critical point in their social learning journey when a meaningful and thoughtful educational experience has the potential to shape their intergroup relationships for the rest of their lives.

Our non-profit board focus is due to the ripple effect their deeper understanding of inclusivity can have in their decision making, which collectively impacts the lives of thousands in our country.

The cost to provide this program to an estimated 10,000 students and non-profit leaders nationally is $300,000.

This means we are not only prepared to be the most effective learning program available, but also the most scalable, cost-effective program that innovates our learning of diversity, equity, and inclusion for high school and non profit programs nationally.
How you can contribute

$1,000
This will cover a Playground of Empathy experience session, including impact measurements, for 50 high school students, faculty, and/or staff.

$2,500
This will cover three Playground of Empathy experience sessions, including an extended intention-setting session, listening circles, and impact measurements, for 50 high school students, faculty, and/or staff.

$15,000
Each local experience shares a story of a unique, different perspective: Framing a national high school student’s experience from that environment will create a significant increase in student and faculty conversation and advocacy.

This donation level enables the creation of a new persona for participants to experience. The identity created may be in line with your personal outreach goals. Empathy is needed in so many areas, there’s no lack of representation that we could be working to support.

$25,000
Supporting an entire high school with three identities, of three sessions each including faculty, staff, and students.

About Us

Playground of Empathy was established in 2018 after seeing how a lack of emotional education has led to xenophobia and polarization.

After discovering through research, how ineffective the majority of bias training can be—to answer this challenge—we have created a virtual, science-based, immersive experience for participants to explore their own implicit biases in a safe, non-judgmental environment. Our data shows this will support diversity, equity, and inclusion on a community level in a way that facts and statistics never will.

We work nationally with world-renowned academics to bridge science, technology, and art, including the most-cited emotions researcher in the world, Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett (former President of the Association for Psychological Science and Guggenheim Fellow), scientific advisors at the Interdisciplinary Affective Science Lab (based at Northeastern University and Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH)/Harvard Medical School), diversity experts at the University of Virginia, and clinical advisors at MGH’s Transgender Health Program.

Playground of Empathy has presented this award-winning experience for hundreds of our community members, and thousands nationwide, including invitations from the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education Conference, the Boston Museum of Science, and have developed their anti bias app experience with a sizable in-kind donation from WillowTree apps.

Micah J. Wonjoon Kessel is Executive Director and founder of Playground of Empathy and Emotions Centered Design Lead at the Interdisciplinary Affective Science Lab at Northeastern University.

As a designer, Micah works at the intersection of emotions research, immersive experience, and the study of performance culture, with a focus on bridging the equality of human flourishing across difference. As a young adult, Micah performed at the Metropolitan Opera. Then he focused on his masters in human centered design at the Royal Academy of Art in Belgium. He founded the immersive design bureau, Sherlocked Amsterdam, the world’s top rated escape games according to TripAdvisor. Pioneering behavioral design in the Netherlands, Micah collaborated on concepts with Google, Disney, and the Diabetes Fund, and then left to co-found Playground of Empathy.

Micah has presented his work at the Society for Neuroscience and Creativity, the Spectrum conference for founders of color, was a SOCAP scholar, and a Byron Fellow. Under his direction, Playground’s team was a winner of the Harvard Culture Lab Innovation Fund Award in 2020, granted by their joint council of Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging, and has since shared the Walk in My Shoes Experience with over 50 organizations, including the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education Conference, the Black in Design Conference, and The Boston Museum of Science. Most recently, Micah advises as a designer with Dr. Mahzarin Banaji, the most accoladed psychologist to date in bias research, known for popularizing the concept of implicit bias, and her lab, OHM at Harvard.

To donate, please reach out to micah@playgroundofempathy.com