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Joining Us Together with Bright Pink Yarn: The Unity Art Project ^[1]

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By:

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Jerry Jennings walks around in a circle, stopping at each pole to push up the strings wrapped around them. Some strings, left by toddlers, need a bigger push than the higher ones left by adults. Jennings continues this for hours until the strings at the top of the poles look like a neon-pink blanket over him.

On Sunday, September 8, community members participated in the Unity Art Project at Valley Court Park. For the activity, dozens of poles were placed in a circle, and each one was marked with a sign signifying a particular identity:

I am a parent.

I speak English as a second language.

I am a gun rights supporter.

I work more than one job.

I believe in a higher power.

I rent a home.

I am a cat person.

Participants were each given a ball of hot pink yarn and then wrapped it around the poles that they identified with. This creating a web of string, all connecting at different points.

"It's meant to symbolize the interconnectedness of everyone in our community," explained Jessy Gregg, a member of the East Lansing Arts Commission and one of the organizers of the event. "Each one of these poles has a different identifier that people may or may not react with. Everyone will probably have at least something that they feel describes them, and others that don't, and as everyone builds their own personal string of identities through here, then we kind of see how our whole community is connected."

Several communities across the country have enacted this kind of community artwork, which is how Gregg and her fellow organizers found the idea. This is the second year that Gregg has helped organize this event in East Lansing.

Assistant Director of East Lansing's Parks, Recreation and Arts department Wendy Wilmers Longpre took the lead on the project. Says Gregg, "She did all the organizing and set up."

Just like Gregg, Jennings saw the importance of the project and also decided to volunteer to help. So, Jennings pushed the strings up the poles in order to get them out of the way for new participants.



"When you look at the mass coming together, it's hard to not see the sense of community," Jennings said. "The lines have no sense of order, but they have a lot of sense of cohesion. So, we're not all alike, but we can find ways to accomplish things, I hope."

The project brought together people of all ages and identities. MSU students, small children, and people passing through the weekly farmers' market were among those who participated. Gregg hopes to do this again in the future because she thinks it's a good way to bring the community together and create a dialogue about our commonalities.

"We tend to focus a lot on things that divide us as a community," Gregg said. "So, this is just a way to really visually represent that we are all connected. At the heart of it, we probably have more ways that we are similar than ways that we are different, and this is kind of a strong visual metaphor for that. It's really fun to see different people — they are literally getting tangled up in there together, so people are talking to each other, and it's a nice way to start a community conversation."

Photos by Sarah Preisser.

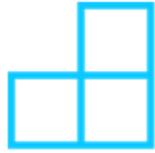
Note: This article was amended after publication to add the information that Gregg's work on this project is as a member of the East Lansing Arts Commission. We also added: "Assistant Director of East Lansing's Parks, Recreation and Arts department Wendy Wilmers Longpre took the lead on the project. Says Gregg, 'She did all the organizing and set up.'"

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