

Community engagement and art: A powerful combination in public health

Finding his way into photography and videography

Byron Roberson started Poet Photography in college as a way to channel his talents toward a part-time job that would alleviate the financial stress on his family as he pursued a computer science master's degree at Clark Atlanta University. Although he moved around, living in Georgia, Illinois, and now Minnesota, photography and videography always remained in his life. When he moved to Minnesota, he found different opportunities for him to showcase his photography through his church and community education programs. He photographed weddings, senior pictures, and even [Black Nurses Rock](#), the Minnesota Chapter of the national organization to support Black nurses.

Putting community needs first

During the COVID-19 pandemic, he partnered with the Minnesota Department of Health through a diverse media contract to create [Poet's Uplift](#), a website dedicated to sharing COVID-19 information tailored to the African American community. Roberson develops his own visual graphics and curates posts for community groups using both information shared by the MDH and from other trusted sources like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and World Health Organization. Roberson even joins meetings with local and trusted health groups like Black Nurses Rock in order to send out more timely and accurate information. He sends out emails with the latest updates to high schools, churches, LGBTQ+ organizations, librarians, and senior centers on his subscription list reaching on average around 3,000 people.

Community engagement is central to the Poet's Uplift approach. Because of Roberson's connections in the African American community in Minnesota, he is able to track community needs in real-time and address them through the Poet's Uplift platform.

Most recently, he has posted articles on [How to talk to about COVID-19 vaccines with friends and family](#), [How a vaccine helps](#), and [Governor Walz: All Minnesotans Eligible for Vaccine](#). Poet's Uplift content addresses rising concerns in the community about COVID-19 and COVID-19 vaccines. Roberson prides himself on ensuring Poet's Uplift articles cater to specific communities based on their evolving needs and interests. Most recently the focus has been on the senior and LGBTQ+ community after hearing they were more interested in articles on how to socialize as a senior, and how COVID-19 and the vaccine has affected the LGBTQ+ community, respectively.

The visual graphic is the centerpiece of every article he develops. Roberson believes that "visuals have a way of drawing people in." He is happy that there are so many ways now to "create beautiful images," especially when "communities are asking for better videos and illustrations." Below is just a tiny snapshot of the graphics that Roberson has designed for each of his articles.

In addition to the website, Poet's Uplift has a Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube presence. Most recently, Roberson's daughter received the COVID-19 vaccine, and they worked together to document the vaccination journey as a video series available at [Poet's Uplift - YouTube](#). Roberson also collaborates with [TalkingwithToya - YouTube](#) and other influencers on Facebook to share COVID-19 messages with an even larger audience.

As the COVID-19 pandemic has passed its one-year anniversary in Minnesota, and highly effective vaccines become increasingly available every day, Roberson still sees opportunities for Poet's Uplift to have a significant positive impact on the community. He is currently working on content to help answer the African American community's COVID-19 vaccine questions and encourage them to get their vaccine. Roberson is also planning on developing a music competition for youth to develop songs about COVID-19. And, as a prolific writer under the penname "Poet," he plans to share a collection of haikus about COVID-19.

Looking Forward

As a first-time contractor with MDH, Roberson reflects that the opportunity has allowed him "to connect and get involved with the community more than [he] could have imagined." For him, "Poet's Uplift is all about alleviating pain in the community and helping to uplift others." He imagines a future in which Poet's Uplift continues to be a trusted communications platform in the community beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. He sees potential for the platform to inform his community around more topics, such as education and physical fitness. He continues to be a champion of how crucial it is to integrate the arts and sciences to build trust and engage with the community.