



Positive reinforcement

O+ Festival, at 3, gains national attention

As they proceed to dig through the massive musician registration list, round up their allies in the health care community and continue to spread awareness of their philosophy for the third year, the organizers of the O+ Festival seem to have found their footing – and have started attracting some serious attention elsewhere.

“It’s been really full throttle in the last year,” said O+ Festival co-founder Alexandra Marvar. “We’re getting our ducks in a row to do something that we all kind of dreamed about initially, which is expanding nationally ... and meeting people who are interested in bringing O+ to their cities.”

The three-day exhibition, in which musicians and artists directly exchange their services with medical, dental and other wellness providers, has quickly turned into much more than a unique festival in Uptown Kingston on Columbus Day weekend. The event has now assumed the influential role of a national blueprint, a new state of mind, and above all, a beacon in the broad effort to provide health care to citizens in need through alternative, unconventional avenues.

By Lindsay Suchow
Photos by Michael Bloom

“What we’ve all realized is that we’re not about health care – we’re about access to health care,” said O+ co-founder Joe Conra. “We build community through the bartering of the art of medicine and the medicine of art.”

Last year’s event helped connect 134 uninsured and underinsured people with 272 hours of medical care and alternative wellness services and 43 dental visits.

Marvar described the second year of the festival as a test of whether the organizers could actually have pulled off this volunteer-run operation twice. But year three has brought monumental changes in both the scope and reach of O+, as its philosophy has begun to cross state lines – starting with Medical Committee Chair

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JOE CONRA
O+ co-founder

Dr. Art Chandler giving an 18-minute presentation about the festival at one of the popular TEDx talks at Lafayette College in Easton, Pa.

A chance to spread the word

The momentum only grew stronger as the O+ crew took its message even farther in May, when an invitation was extended to Marvar, Conra, Chandler and co-founder Denise Orzo to attend the Society for Arts in Healthcare’s annual conference in Detroit. After presenting a session about the festival and showing a video, curiosity spread like wildfire.

“Joe and Art gave the talk ... and afterward, we were mobbed,” said Orzo.

Suddenly, group members found themselves bombarded by inquiries as to how they could bring O+ to their own communities, from Tennessee to California to Virginia.

“We got a chance to break out of the Hudson Valley and start meeting people across the country and spread the word a little bit,” said Marvar. As a result, plans are in the works between the Kingston crew and interested parties nationwide to introduce both the O+ brand and mission

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Hudson Valley band the Repeatos perform as one of dozens of acts at the 2011 O+ Festival. Backstage Productions provided a venue for multiple concerts throughout the weekend.



Left, musicians register for health care at the O+ Festival. Organizers said a number of artists have benefited longterm from care they were given during the festival.

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to other locations all over the United States.

Ideally, a step-by-step guide would be made available to those who want to start their own O+ Festivals, providing guidance on everything from logistics (How many venues will you need? How long will your festival run?) to drum-

ming up local interest and making the right connections ("Step One: Go meet all your neighbors and figure out who does what," said Marvar), as well as advice on how to tailor the festival's programming to make it reflective of your own geo-

graphical region.

Additionally, with the "tremendous help" of Evolving Media Network of Kingston, Music Director Jeff Mercel said an "infrastructure" is being put in place for the O+ brand to "give people tangible things they can use to organize their own O+, wherever it may be."

"We want to wrap it in a bow and send it to any community in America. We want to be able to send them a little playbook, both figuratively and literally," added Marvar. "We want to have it be this central network that has little tiny branches, like veins spreading out all over America."

Heavy competition

But while the prospect of other O+ festivals blooming across the country is rapidly becoming a reality, the fast-approaching

O+ FESTIVAL 2012

When: Oct. 5-7

Where: In venues throughout Uptown Kingston

Visit: opositivefestival.org

Kingston O+ on Oct. 5-7 remains the primary task at hand. More than 100 bands and musicians had thrown their hats in the ring to perform at the festival by mid-July, and Mercel predicted they'd have about 125 by the time registration closed.

"It's becoming pretty competitive, and it's unfortunate that we can't serve everyone," said Mercel. He added the crew tries to follow a "self-imposed quota" of featuring Hudson Valley musicians and bands in half of the 30-35 spots, while also keeping an eye on out-of-towners who



Left, energy healer Lorry Salluzzi treats Stephen Weinheimer of the band Spirit Family Reunion. Right, Matthew Davidson, of the same band, gets a blood pressure check from registered nurse Devon Jameson. The band performed at O+ and, as a result, received free health care.

can carry with them their stories of getting paid in dental work and acupuncture on the road.

An Aug. 24 benefit featuring Mike & Ruthy was planned at the Old Dutch Church in Kingston. Funds raised were to be put into the festival's operating budget to help cover expenditures such as merchandise, clinic startup costs, subsidization of artists' travel expenses (or shipping costs if they are sending art), and various other odds and ends that tend to add up quickly, Mercel said.

While the first O+ was "held together by duct tape," said Mercel, "this year what we're really aware of is that for it to be sustainable, not just in Kingston but in the larger picture, we have to start building some protocol into what we do." To that end, O+ has assembled a board of directors, and has also been working with

the nonprofit law firm Pro Bono Partnership of White Plains to establish itself as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit entity.

But beyond their own growth and development forming a legitimate grassroots organization, the O+ founders say the festival's commitment to building community through access to care has permeated the local medical community. Coupons for free bloodwork were distributed last year by a lab, doctors have formed relationships with artists and some practices have begun offering sliding scale fees for ongoing post-festival care.

"It's really been heartening. It makes me feel really, really good about the Hudson Valley," said Concra. "It makes me feel like we really are there for each other. I really take it to heart. I think everyone does. ... At the end of the day, when all is said and done, we're all neighbors."



■ O+ co-founder Joe Concra