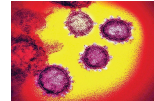




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After a moment of silence Saturday in honor of the victims of substance abuse, gun violence and the harm caused to immigrant communities, cellist Yo-Yo Ma treats the crowd at the Pittsfield Common to a Bach solo during Ma's "Day of Action." Ma made the city stop No. 18 on his mission to explore how culture connects humanity in 36 locations on six continents - and to give back to the community.

STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN - THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

At Pittsfield's 'Day of Action,' Yo-Yo Ma brings a sense of community to the table

Posted Saturday, August 10, 2019 6:36 pm

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By Nicolas Davidoff, The Berkshire Eagle

PITTSFIELD — Cellist Yo-Yo Ma has been all over the map while on his Bach Project tour — Athens, Greece, Medellin, Colombia, and Barcelona, Spain, to name a few of the destinations on his itinerary.

On Saturday, it was Pittsfield.

Businesses, organizations and community members welcomed the world-renowned musician with open arms as Ma made the city stop No. 18 on his mission to explore how culture connects humanity in 36

locations on six continents — and to give back to the community.

The part-time Berkshire resident hosted a "Day of Action" at the Common on First Street to highlight the work being done in the community by bringing together participants and volunteers under a single tent roof to foster conversations that could incite change. Tables were chosen as the day's central project because they bring people together and inspire real conversations in a communal setting, said Ma, who is a member of The Berkshire Eagle's advisory board.

Over 200 representatives and volunteers from 36 businesses and organizations, including Roots Rising, Berkshire United Way and Multicultural BRIDGE, were tasked with building their own wooden tables.

The finished tables, which were made from local ash tree wood and cut into 720 pieces by the Berkshire Woodworkers Guild, will be laser-engraved with the community's submissions to the prompt: "The Berkshires Make ..."

"These tables symbolize that we can come together and make things happen. People talk about the creative economy; we are the making economy here," said Jennifer Trainer Thompson, the president and CEO of Hancock Shaker Village who collaborated with Ma's team in organizing the event.

"There is too much division in the world today, and this is about us coming together."

Most participating organizations and businesses will keep their finished tables, but some will be sent into the community at large with the hope that the Day of Action's message will live on.

"There has been no city that has had as much community participation as Pittsfield, and that is thanks to all of you," Ma said in his speech. "Some of the responses I like the most are 'The Berkshires make sense,' 'The Berkshires make community happen,' 'The Berkshires make wanderers settle down,' 'The Berkshires make refugees feel welcome,' 'The Berkshires make a place at the table for all.'"

"This is all from you, and I want to thank you for it."

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER THESE ADS

Throughout the table-building, a quintet from the Berkshire Jazz Collective, singers from the organization Music in Common, and Billy Keane of The Whiskey Treaty Roadshow performed live music. Mitch Nash, the owner of the design-focused sock company Blue Q, and artist Michael Rousseau supervised the making of a series of murals for bystanders and curious visitors of the adjacent Pittsfield Farmers Market to take part in the day's activities.

The murals, made up of a series of collages and quotes, echoed the messages that will be inscribed on the finished tables, with the same purpose of highlighting the "making economy" that exists in the Berkshires. The murals will be displayed throughout the city and hung inside empty storefronts.

After the table-building and mural-making, Ma shepherded the crowd to a spot on the Common where he planted a tree. After a moment of silence in honor of the victims of substance abuse, gun violence and the harm caused to immigrant communities, Ma sat down beside the freshly planted tree and treated the crowd to a Bach solo.

He then directed those in attendance to nearby Zion Lutheran Church, where Jenn Smith, The Eagle's community engagement editor and education reporter, led a discussion panel on pushing the city forward through concrete initiatives that would mitigate issues such as substance abuse, as well as addressing how to promote teen community involvement through harm reduction.

"We as a community are all involved in harm reduction by being here, because we are all here together strengthening the bonds that make us resilient," said Roots Rising co-director Jamie Samowitz, one of the panelists. "If we can all make the effort here today, then that's a step towards solving our problems together. That's why all these organizations were brought here today."

The first panel was made up of children's book author Ty Allan Jackson and architect Tessa Kelly, who discussed building a new Pittsfield identity that would be proud of its history and culture.

The second panel focused on harm reduction and was made up of Roots Rising co-directors Samowitz and Jessica Vecchia; Aviva Skoblow, one of the graduates of the Roots Rising program; and Jess Tilley and Albie Park, co-founders of Harm Reduction Hedgehogs of 413, which focuses on reaching people who use drugs "who cannot or will not use traditional brick and mortar syringe access sites," according to its website.

After the hourlong panel discussions, participants and organizers were invited to celebrate the day by admiring their finished tables and enjoying ice cream provided by SoCo Creamery.

"The highlight today was definitely getting to talk to Yo-Yo Ma," said Joseph Cracolici, a rising freshman at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester majoring in cello performance.

"Another big part of what I loved about today is to see how a lot of these people who don't know each other have been able to come together and build these really great tables — I think it's really inspiring. Yo-Yo Ma has always been a model of mine, so, I've always dreamed of meeting him; he's been my favorite cellist ever since I started playing.

"This year it's been especially inspiring to see him go all over the world with the Bach Project, and then the fact that he's come here, of all places, a place that is five minutes from my house, it's absolutely amazing," Cracolici said. "I think Pittsfield is starting to reestablish its identity, and events like this really help do that."

On Sunday, Ma will play Bach's six suites for unaccompanied cello in a concert at Tanglewood's Koussevitzky Music Shed.



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