



## Robert Poulton's Love Project Attracts Shepard Fairey Collab

06.07.2021

If only one person hung one of Robert Poulton's art prints on their wall and had it inspire someone else to stop, think and talk - then according to him, he wins.

"Nothing else matters," said Poulton, VP, brand and marketing, NBC10 Boston, Telemundo Boston and NECN.

"If two people stand in front of this thing and it makes them have a conversation about something related to that, and that conversation is authentic and organic and wasn't forced in any way, that's how people's minds get changed," Poulton said. "That's how people broaden their thought process. In my mind that's what art does. Or can do."

Creating art that sparked those sorts of conversations is the driving force behind The Love Project, a non-profit in the works that began with Poulton drawing pictures as a kind of personal therapy fueled by the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd as well as by the Black Lives Matter movement. Poulton decided to create prints from some of his drawings, and donated them to friends and colleagues who agreed to make a contribution to organizations fighting for social justice reform, education and the arts.

Poulton's effort stepped up several notches when he had the opportunity to collaborate with world-renowned artist and activist Shepard Fairey for the release of limited-edition print "Push Forward" (image above). That allowed the Love Project to evolve into a creative way for Poulton and his supporters to advocate for equality and anti-racism initiatives through his artwork. Proceeds from all sales support the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Equal Justice Initiative and Castle of Our Skins. But the real power of putting his prints out into the world goes beyond any kind of financial gift.

It's that attitude of creativity and entrepreneurialism, along with the fortitude he developed throughout his career and through Promax's professional development program, Thrive, that helped Poulton establish The Love Project and forge his collaboration with Fairey, who saw parallels between Poulton's work and his own.

"I liked the imagery that Robert was making with his art and design to raise money for The Love Project," Fairey said via email. "I saw him as a kindred spirit, and because he's Black, he has firsthand experience with the race issues that I've wanted to address with my work. I felt like it would be great to work with him as an ally and hear his perspective directly."

#### Connecting Over a Good Cause

As an NBC marketing executive who will soon be moving up to a new role as VP, global creative director for CNBC, Poulton has worked in the entertainment industry for more than 20 years. He understands the importance of building strong relationships, and also credits Thrive with helping him develop the confidence and poise to pursue both The Love Project as well as a partnership with Fairey.

"I might not have done this project prior to [Thrive]," Poulton said. "It's so easy to just do these drawings and not put them out there."

One of his biggest takeaways from the program was learning how to present himself to others with an "it's not what you say, but how you say it" mindset.

"It's less about the details, and more about having conversations with people, being authentic when you show up, and believing in the thing that you're doing," Poulton said. "It might seem like a simple thing, but that was a big revelation to me - the notion of being present and bringing your full self to something."

His desire to do some good in the world seems to proliferate wherever he goes, and his art captured the attention of Cary Ocon, co-owner and manager of Aardvark Letterpress, where Poulton has many of his drawings printed.

"I could tell he understood what I was trying to do, and he wanted to be a part of it," Poulton said.

When Ocon first met Poulton, George Floyd marches were happening on the street outside his home.

"He and I got along really well, talking about race which is always a difficult thing to talk about, and it was really interesting," Ocon said. "He was telling me what he wanted to do with the project. I said, 'if you're trying to build followers, Shepard has a lot and is always very interested in social justice causes.' I've gotten to know him a little bit over the last few years we've been working together, and he's very genuine."

Ocon sent an email introducing the two of them, and the collaboration took off from there.

"We began to correspond via email, but when we met in person in LA and spent the afternoon together signing prints and hanging out at my art studio, I liked him a lot," Fairey said. "He's somebody who's worked in art and corporate graphic design for a long time but recognizes the value of art to engage people on social issues, which is core to my philosophy as well."

Poulton saw similar characteristics in Fairey - but also described himself as "fan-boying" and "pretty starstruck" when he and Fairey met. After "Push Forward" was printed, Fairey, Fairey's wife Amanda, Ocon and Poulton went out to dinner at a fancy Mediterranean restaurant in Los Angeles.

"You hope that the people whose work you like, if you ever get a chance to meet them, that they actually live up to who you think they are. You hope they're good people," Poulton said. "And he is exactly that. He got what I was trying to do and was willing to collaborate and do something together."

'Push Forward'

When it came to the "how" of a collaboration, Poulton left it in Fairey's artistic hands.

"He's the one with the platform so I really said to him, so what do you think we can do? And he said, 'I have this print that I've run before.'"

Fairey had just made the image "Step Forward" to recognize the specific steps forward in the election of Kamala Harris, celebrating her as the first vice president to be a woman and person of color in the United States.

"I asked Robert if he would be interested in potentially co-releasing that as a

letterpress image to benefit the Love Project." Fairey said. On May 18, 100 prints of "Push Forward," were released through the Love Project website, followed by 400 prints released May 25 through Fairey's Obey Giant website.

The image itself is an updated variation of Fairey's "Power and Equality" print from 2007.

"I feel that the image is still relevant and will still be relevant until true equality is achieved, and that true equality can only happen if we continue to push forward, hence the title 'Push Forward' rather than 'Step Forward' in the Love Project version of the art," Fairey said. "As far as the inspiration for the original image, I'm a student of the history of civil rights and Black Power, so I admire both Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Black Panthers. The 'Power and Equality' image is an homage to the Black Power movement of the late '60s and early '70s. I think that the ideas behind the Black Power movement are still relevant today and have an appealing visual style."

Poulton's work is also inspired by history, from a national perspective as well as influences from his own past. His print Sarah (above), which he gifted to Fairey, features his depiction of Sarah Grant Poulton, a 14-year-old girl who he found listed in an 1817 slave registry in the National Archives, tied to a plantation in the Carribean from where his family originates.

"I don't know if she's specifically related to me, but it was so interesting to see this document from literally hundreds of years ago with someone who had my last name, who had a whole different life than I could ever think of. The image I drew was of that," Poulton said. "The idea beyond that work for me was to say that this person lived, and I was able to, in my mind, bring her from a few hundred years ago to be relevant in our kind of world today."

While race continues to be a muse, his next piece, "First, Do No Harm," will highlight some of the systemic maternal health disparities in our healthcare system.

As The Love Project progresses, Poulton's in the process of turning it into a 501(c) nonprofit organization, and plans to use it to address many of our country's current social concerns. From establishing living wages, to the politicizing of non-political issues, to the gravity of basic human empathy, Poulton is on a mission to make a mark on the world through his artwork and, as the name of his endeavor implies, through love.