



## The Strategic Joy Series:

### Strategic Joy: A Framework for Collective Flourishing

*By Michael Selkis*

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Last night, in a quiet room tucked inside a Jackson Heights restaurant, something rare and powerful happened. Representatives from across Queens gathered—CBO leaders, educators, youth advocates, even a voice from Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez’s office. We broke bread. We laughed. We shared stories. And we began to sketch a vision.

We didn’t call it that at first. But what we were building wasn’t just infrastructure. It wasn’t just coordination. It was joy. Strategic joy.

This gathering marked the first official convening of the Jackson Heights Consortium under a working name: **ASPEN**—the Adaptive Services Platform for Equity Networks. The name comes from a tree that appears to be many but is, in fact, one. One root system. One nervous system. Multiple trunks. Each independent, each unique, but quietly sharing nutrients, memory, and resilience beneath the surface.

It feels radical because it is. In a moment when so many systems are splintering, ASPEN asks: *What if our coordination was as alive—and as interdependent—as the people we serve?*

But I also can’t tell this story without naming the atmosphere we’re navigating. We are living in a time when difference is too often treated as danger, when nuance is flattened, and when joy—especially joy rooted in identity, community, and expression—is framed as unserious or even indulgent. Across sectors and institutions, efforts to foster creativity and inclusion are being questioned, scaled back, or quietly erased.

The very things that make our neighborhoods vibrant—our stories, our languages, our ways of caring—are being scrutinized or stripped away. In such a climate, the foundation of joy—connection, trust, and shared humanity—can feel fragile. That’s why building joy into our systems isn’t just desirable. It’s necessary.

So, when we gather to build something like ASPEN—when we laugh across tables, when we imagine a system rooted in dignity and design dashboards that center narrative instead of surveillance—that’s not just collaboration. That’s resistance.

It got me thinking: *What were we really doing in that room?* Yes, we were mapping workflows, demoing beta tools, and talking governance. But underneath that, we were reimagining the purpose of a civic system. We weren’t organizing around trauma. We were organizing around joy.

That’s where this idea was born: **Strategic Joy.**

Not joy as escape. Not joy as garnish. But joy as a design principle. A system value. A measurable, replicable, intentional force for collective transformation.

Because joy—unlike happiness—isn’t about ease. Joy can live inside struggle. It can hold grief in one hand and celebration in the other. It doesn’t require perfection. Joy says: *I see you in your fullness, not in your deficit.* It’s a sense of alignment. Of purpose. Of pulse. And when that pulse is shared—across classrooms, case notes, dashboards, and dinner tables—it becomes a civic infrastructure of its own.

That’s what we’re building with ASPEN.

The platform isn’t just tech. It’s a living organism of trust. Consent Wallets that return control of stories to families. Partner dashboards that flag gaps not only with data—but with relational cues. A Civic Neural Engine that doesn’t score children; it listens for the signals of disconnection *before* a crisis hits. This isn’t a compliance tool. It’s a care system. It learns through stories. It creates feedback loops not just for oversight—but for insight.

And joy is embedded at every level.

It shows up when a parent logs in and sees a message in their home language—not another form to complete, but a note of thanks. It shows up when a youth advocate sees that a referral didn’t disappear into the void, but led to real, visible support. It shows up when families don’t have to relive trauma ten times just to be heard.

These are the micro-moments of strategic joy. They are not incidental. They are designed. And they scale. If we can design for joy, then we can measure it.

We need joy audits. Celebration logs. Equity dashboards that ask not only “*Did we serve?*” but “*Did we affirm?*” Metrics that move beyond safety into belonging. Systems that ask: *When was the last time someone felt seen here? Not just processed. Seen. Loved. Activated.*

And let me be clear—this is not about bypassing harm. This is about building systems that do not reproduce it.

Strategic joy requires rigor. It means designing consent with legal teeth. Building governance tables where youth hold real voting power. Refusing AI models that perpetuate bias. It means saying no to metrics that reduce us—and yes to stories that repair us.

Strategic joy is not just a feeling. It's a choice. A tactic. A form of civic intelligence.

So what began as a dinner, a demo, a roundtable, became something else entirely. It became a proof point. That we can organize not just around survival, but around **flourishing**. That we can build infrastructure that is joyful without being frivolous. Rigorous without being extractive. That love can be architectural. That joy—strategic, radical, and rigorously designed—can be the future of public systems.

Let's treat joy like infrastructure.

Let's fund it like water, build it like code, and protect it like policy.

Because in a world trying to make us smaller, **strategic joy makes us whole.**

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## Coming Next: From Poetry to Protocol—How to Operationalize Joy Without Losing the Pulse

This next chapter is about movement from theory into structure. We'll explore what it takes to *design* for joy across sectors—without reducing it to a checkbox.

What does strategic joy look like when it's embedded into:

- **Program onboarding and referral architecture**
- **Staff rituals and community feedback loops**
- **Grant logic models, impact dashboards, and AI signal detection**

We'll share:

- A joy-centered **evaluation framework**.
- A blueprint for **relational governance** rooted in consent and story.
- Real-world examples from the ASPEN pilot—moments when joy was felt, tracked, and scaled.

Because it's not enough to believe in joy. We must **build with it**. And that's where we're going next.