

NEA ARTS

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NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS
AND STATE ARTS AGENCIES:
BRINGING THE
ARTS TO
THE
PEOPLE



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This issue

The reach of the National Endowment for the Arts is truly national—we directly fund projects in every state, investing in communities large and small, urban and rural, coastal and land-locked. To extend our impact, 40 percent of all NEA grantmaking funds go directly to state arts agencies (SAAs) and regional arts organizations. States must match the NEA funding they receive, significantly increasing the available amount they have to distribute to exceptional nonprofit arts organizations and programs throughout their state. More than 4,500 communities have been served each year by our state and regional partners with the support of NEA funding.

This collaboration extends beyond grantmaking however. The national poetry recitation contest Poetry Out Loud, for example, is an initiative of the NEA in partnership with the Poetry Foundation, and relies on our partners at state arts agencies to conduct outreach to schools and educators. Another important NEA initiative—in partnership with the U.S. Departments of Defense and Veteran Affairs—is Creative Forces: NEA Military Healing Arts Network. For Creative Forces, SAAs are helping build a support network of state, regional, and local partners that provide community-based arts activities for military and veteran families in states where military medical sites are operating.

Another area of our collaboration involves arts organizations receiving funding from both the NEA and SAAs. Not only does this give organizations a strong financial foundation with which to serve their constituents, but it provides a stamp of approval that enables them to leverage additional funding. In this issue of *NEA Arts*, we'll look at this last piece of our partnership through the lens of six organizations. As you read through this issue, we hope you'll see how the arts in this country thrive thanks to multiple layers of support—at the federal level, the state level, the regional and local levels, and through private investment as well. All of these funding mechanisms are critical for the arts to prosper in communities nationwide.

As Chairman Jane Chu has noted, "The essence of the community—its spirit, its energy, its vitality—can be found in its art."

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ABOUT THE COVER: A youth works the potter's wheel during summer camp at the Racine Art Museum in Racine, Wisconsin. The museum has been strongly supported by both the National Endowment for the Arts and the Wisconsin Arts Board. Photo courtesy of Racine Art Museum

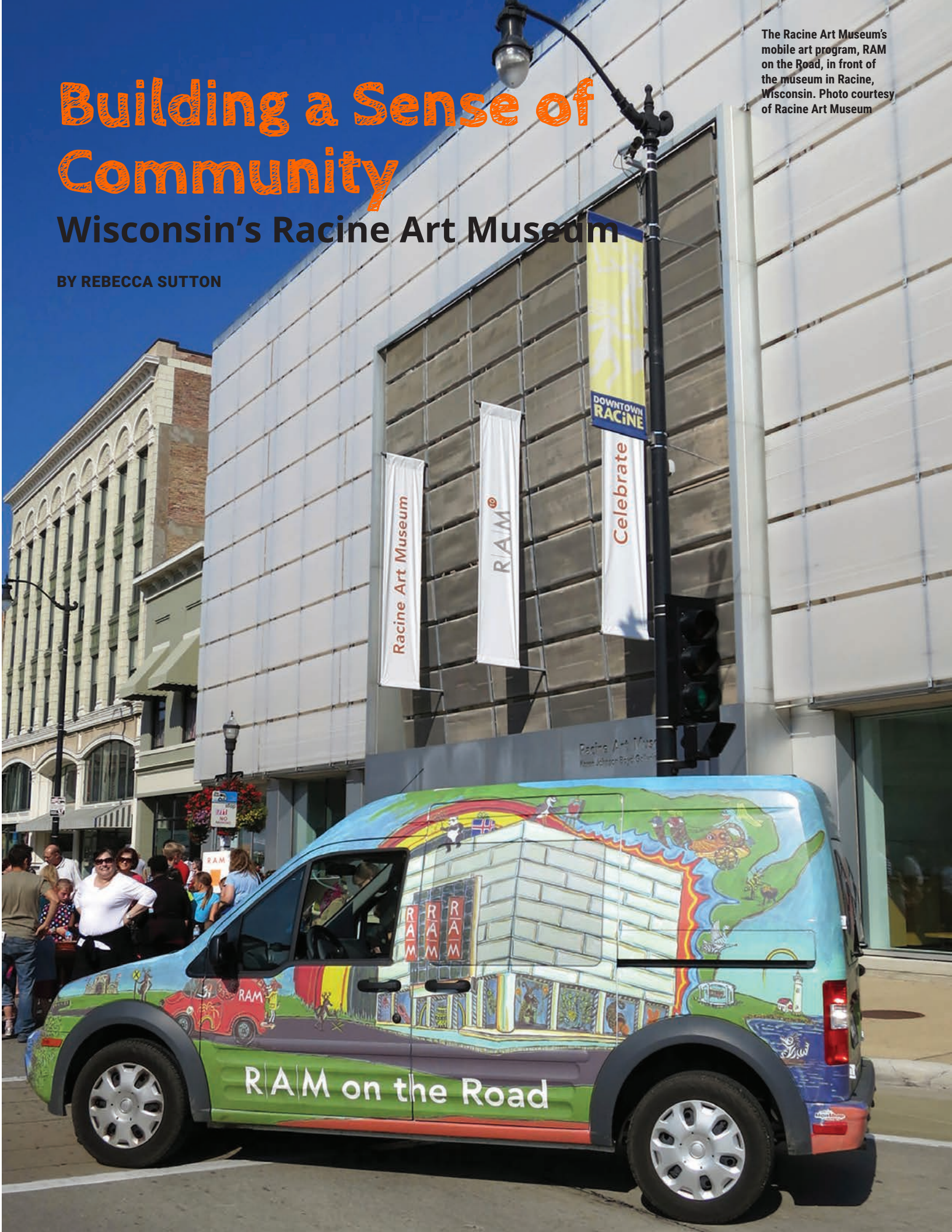


Building a Sense of Community

Wisconsin's Racine Art Museum

BY REBECCA SUTTON

The Racine Art Museum's mobile art program, RAM on the Road, in front of the museum in Racine, Wisconsin. Photo courtesy of Racine Art Museum





▲ Part of the *Variations on a Theme: Teapots* from RAM's Collection exhibition. Photo by Jon Bolton

How

do you run a museum in a blue-collar town?" asked Bruce Pepich, executive director of the Racine Art Museum (RAM). Throughout his 43-year tenure with the museum, Pepich's answer has never wavered: by focusing on the community.

"We try not to say, 'What is good for the institution?'" said Pepich. "We try to say, 'What is good for the community?' Because serving the community is good for us as an institution."

It's a commitment that the National Endowment for the Arts and the Wisconsin Arts Board (WAB) have been proud to support. Pepich estimates that, through the years, the two organizations have contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to the museum. NEA support has helped fund specific exhibitions and community programs, while the Wisconsin Arts Board is a consistent source of general operating funding. "God bless, you can use it for salaries, you can use it for utility bills—it's something you can count on from year to year that you can put into wherever you need it the most," Pepich said.

This foundation of support has allowed Pepich to continually innovate, which in turn has allowed the Racine Art Museum to flourish. When Pepich joined the organization in 1974, it was still the Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, located

on 13 acres of bucolic grounds and dedicated to works on paper. At that time, Racine was—and still largely is—a manufacturing town. Located on the shores of Lake Michigan in Wisconsin, the city has served as the headquarters of companies such as Western Publishing (the onetime publisher of Golden Books), J.I. Case, Dremel, and SC Johnson, whose administrative offices were notably designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

This history was one of the driving reasons Pepich added a second focus in craft to the museum's existing focus on works on paper in the late 1980s and early 1990s. "We found that there was a genuine respect for the work of the hand," said Pepich, who was named director in 1981. "We are constantly trying to reinforce the idea of the importance of handwork, and how that ties in with a community where people have traditionally made their livings either making something in factories with their hands, or growing it on the farms that surround the community."

Today, RAM holds the largest collection of contemporary craft in North America, with more than 4,500 works of fiber, wood, clay, glass, metal, and polymer in its collection. The museum exhibits artists of regional, national, and international renown, and opened a second downtown campus in 2003. The downtown campus has boosted attendance to an average of 58,000 to 60,000 visitors a year, and has been a major boon to Racine's creative economy.

This type of growth has been helped in part by the leverage that goes hand-in-hand with NEA and WAB support—the "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval" that Pepich said is equally if not more important than the funding itself. "That kind of third-party validation is in some ways priceless in that it says so much in so few words about who we are and what we do, the validity of what we're doing, and the quality of what we're doing," said Pepich. "Seeing the NEA and Wisconsin Arts Board already on the list of supporters frequently opens the door, at least for a conversation if not for funding."

State and federal support can have a different sort of impact as well, especially at critical junctures. Pepich credits the NEA with helping RAM focus the museum's change in direction, thanks to a two-year advancement grant in the late 1980s. Advancement grants at that time were offered for technical assistance and long-range planning to high-quality, emerging arts organizations. "The application package came in my mail, and I started reading the description

of what was offered through the program,” remembered Pepich. “I thought, ‘This is exactly what we need! We need help getting ourselves thinking about the future.’” During the first year of the program, RAM created a long-range strategic plan. During the second year, they received \$75,000 to inaugurate the museum’s endowment. “That endowment is now six million dollars,” said Pepich.

But even as RAM has grown in national and international prominence, George Tzougros, executive director of the Wisconsin Arts Board, praised the museum’s continued commitment to remaining accessible and available, making it one of his favorite destinations to take visiting dignitaries. (In fact, the museum is listed as the very first stop on a proposed four-day tour of Wisconsin by the Wisconsin Department of Tourism, which is the parent agency for the Wisconsin Arts Board.)

As an example, one of the museum’s current exhibitions is *Variations on a Theme: Teapots from RAM’s Collection*, which, like nearly all RAM exhibitions, was made possible in part thanks to general operating support from the Wisconsin Arts Board. “No matter what your economic status, or your ethnic background, everyone has a family member who has owned a teapot,” said Pepich. “People come in the door thinking, ‘Well, a teapot has a spout and it has a body, and it has a handle and a lid.’ And they walk in and it sort of takes their head off their shoulders and screws it back on at a slightly different angle to see so many different approaches to what a teapot could be.”

By focusing on a familiar object or medium, such as a teapot, “it becomes an entrée into the intellectual and aesthetic messages that are being communicated in the works we are showing,” Pepich said.

But the collection itself is only one component of RAM’s commitment to remaining an accessible community institution. It was one of the first museums in Wisconsin, for example, to participate in SPARK!, a program developed by Bader Philanthropies in Milwaukee in conjunction with the Alzheimer’s Association that engages people with memory loss and their caregivers through the arts. Not only does RAM host people with memory loss at their two campuses, but trained staff also visit residential facilities and adult daycare centers, enabling them to reach older adults who might be unable to travel. The museum is also working toward creating SPARK! programming for Spanish-speaking seniors and their caregivers.

The onsite and offsite programming, both of which have received NEA support, allow people with memory loss and their caregivers “to do something together that’s different than the normal things they have to confront every day,” said Pepich. “The hope is to lighten their emotional load, and give them an experience that they might not have had if they hadn’t come to the museum together. Some of the studies we’ve been reading say that people with memory loss have a longer emotional memory—they remember both good and bad experiences longer than [a person without memory loss] will. So a creative experience that builds confidence and is also pleasurable will have a longer positive effect for these patients.”



◀ The Racine Art Museum’s SPARK! program provides arts activities for older adults with memory loss. Photo courtesy of Racine Art Museum


The museum has also ratcheted up its arts education offerings in recent years. It has been offering studio art classes since it opened in 1941, which were held at various times throughout the day so that one could participate no matter what shift they worked on the assembly line. Today, arts classes are still offered for all ages, but partnerships with the school district have allowed the museum to reach an even greater share of the community. Not only are all fourth-grade classes required to visit the museum's Wustum campus, but all second-grade classes are mandated to host the museum's mobile art program, RAM on the Road, which the NEA has supported through three separate grants in recent years for a cumulative \$40,000.

These district-wide requirements have enabled RAM to enrich the children of Racine by giving them tools to express themselves and build their self-confidence. However, Pepich believes it has enriched their families as well. Children, he believes, have become museum ambassadors of sorts, and have brought their families to the museum following their school experiences. He has seen this effect occur among minority populations in particular, as RAM has seen minority participation in its programs grow from 8 percent to 39 percent since 2008. This is no small feat considering that 76 percent of museum visitors nationwide were Caucasian, according to the NEA's 2012 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts.

For Pepich, it simply affirms his belief in the symbiotic relationship between the arts and community. "We have always believed that exposure to art can cross economic lines; it can cross race and class barriers," said Pepich.



► A second-grade student at Wadewitz Elementary School participates in the RAM on the Road mobile art program. Photo courtesy of Racine Art Museum

"It gives children an idea of a possibility for themselves that maybe they didn't know before. Walking into a museum and feeling that you can belong there, that you can be part of this—there aren't very many public places in our communities now where people from all walks of life come into contact with each other. I think it's healthy for everybody to see each other enjoying the same kinds of things. It's very good for building a sense of community." 

NEA Chairman Jane Chu, on a visit to the Appalachian Artisan Center in April 2015, examines some of the dulcimers that originated in Knott County, Kentucky, with Doug Naselroad, who manages the luthiery school at the center. Photo by NEA staff



CREATIVE APPROACHES TO PROBLEM-SOLVING



Embracing Kentucky's Traditions at the Appalachian Artisan Center

BY REBECCA SUTTON



Located in the state's eastern Appalachian region, Hindman, Kentucky, has seen its share of hardship in recent decades. The collapse of the coal industry left behind rampant unemployment, and the nation's opiate epidemic has hit Appalachia particularly hard—in 2015, Kentucky had the third-highest rate of overdose-related deaths. Between these two issues, “there’s hardly a family in Knott County that has not been affected,” Jessica Evans said.

But as director of Hindman’s Appalachian Artisan Center, Evans has seen how the arts can provide a way forward for the town’s 750 residents, the community, and the region as a whole. Here, in a building where stacks of wood wait to be turned into dulcimers, where sparks fly from the blacksmith’s belt grinder, and where colorful canvases line the walls, artists are creating a balm for Hindman’s struggles.

The organization was founded in 2001 through former Governor Paul Patton’s Community Development Initiative, which also established the nearby Kentucky School of Craft. The two organizations drew on the region’s rich cultural heritage, which has been shaped by generations of basketmakers, potters, blacksmiths, and luthiers. By training artists at the school, and then offering them further professional development, studio space, and platforms to promote their work at the Appalachian Artisan Center, it was hoped that a new economy based on the arts and cultural tourism would emerge.

And bit by bit, it has. Today, the Artisan Center offers luthiery, pottery, and blacksmithing workshops and apprenticeships, as well as incubator studios that are open to artists working with any medium. The center draws artists

from 30 counties in eastern Kentucky, whose work is featured through an online and brick-and-mortar store, exhibitions and performances, and events such as the center’s Old-Fashioned Christmas celebration and the annual Hindman Dulcimer Homecoming Festival. In 2016, the center opened a new gallery and studio space, complete with a rooftop garden.

This momentum has been propelled in part by the Kentucky Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts. More than half of the Artisan Center’s income comes from grants, and in 2016, the Kentucky Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts provided a total of \$79,000. Operational grants from the Kentucky Arts Council have “had a hand in everything,” said Evans, while the council’s marketing platforms and invitations to statewide events such as Kentucky Crafted have helped vault the Artisan Center out of Appalachia and onto the state’s main stage.

On the national level, the NEA has awarded \$170,000 to the center through various grant programs since 2011, which have funded residencies, apprenticeships, and the expansion of the center’s luthiery school. The school, which is managed by master luthier Doug Naselroad, is a central piece of the Artisan Center’s activities, and will eventually include a program to help trained luthiers find work through the Troublesome Creek Stringed Instrument Company.

It is clear that these investments by the NEA and Kentucky Arts Council have paid off. As its facilities and programs have grown, the Artisan Center has given people “the ability to provide for their families or supplement their income with their own craft and their own handwork,” said Evans. It has also started to put Hindman on the map as a tourist destination: in 2015, the Appalachian Artisan Center drew 10,000 visitors, and artists saw a 67 percent growth in retail sales, with customers hailing from 21 different states.

“We’re able to see real proof that through embracing Kentucky’s traditions, our artists are providing innovation that leads the state,” said Lydia Bailey Brown, executive director of the Kentucky Arts Council. She noted that Hindman has become a primary stop for cultural tourists, particularly those who might be interested in the mountain dulcimer, a unique, hourglass-shaped instrument that originated in Knott County at the hands of Uncle Ed Thomas in the 19th century.

But economic momentum is just one facet of the Artisan Center’s impact—equally meaningful has been the deeper social and emotional change.

▼ Dan Estep hammering a knife into shape at the Appalachian Artisan Center’s blacksmith studio. Photo courtesy of Appalachian Artisan Center





“I truly believe that one of the things that the Artisan Center can offer people is hope for their own future—the gift of a larger life,” said Evans. “There are a lot of people for whom the Artisan Center is the reason that they get out of bed and come to town.” She has seen people recovering from addiction “latch on to crafts as a way to better themselves as an alternative to any of the other choices they could be making.” One paramedic who participates in the center’s blacksmithing apprentice program has said the rhythmic pounding helps mitigate the high-stress atmosphere of his job, where he sees overdoses on a daily basis.

Indeed, returning to the region’s creative roots has been a source of healing for the community at large, as it has refocused residents’ collective sense of identity from one of hardship to one of artistic innovation, cultural tradition, and local talent. “When they take that identity and share the story of it not only within the community but beyond, it becomes a symbol and something that makes them proud of their region,” said Mark Brown, director of folk and traditional arts at the Kentucky Arts Council.

Part of this pride has stemmed from the Artisan Center’s efforts to expand awareness of Hindman’s cultural history, in addition to enhancing artistic skill. In 2014, for example, the Appalachian Artisan Center hosted a six-week Community Scholars Program led by the Kentucky Arts Council. Twenty Hindman residents—including Evans and several other Artisan Center staff—took part in the training, which taught participants how to document and archive local folk traditions. “After the course is complete, you have 20 community members that can then take

that knowledge, go into communities, record the folk songs that their uncle learned from their grandfather, or document a family member talking about the craft their grandmother taught them, or how they learned quilting,” said Evans.

The certification coincided with the Artisan Center’s Dulcimer Project, which received \$75,000 through NEA’s Our Town creative placemaking program. In addition to workshops, the Dulcimer Project involved documenting oral histories surrounding the homegrown instrument. Artisan Center staff were able to take the skills they learned from the Community Scholars Certification Program and capture Appalachia’s rich legacy regarding the instrument, creating an archive of both global historical significance and intense local pride. The Hindman Dulcimer Homecoming Festival, which was first launched through the Dulcimer Project, will see its fourth iteration this November.

It’s an apt example of how the Appalachian Artisan Center has helped the region rediscover what’s been there all along: centuries of creativity and ingenuity, which Evans believes will serve the town well as it continues to recover. “At the core of the arts is creativity and a willingness to look outside the box,” said Evans. “We are in a tough spot in Appalachia. You need creative approaches to these problems to solve them, because all the traditional methods of problem-solving have been tried, and we haven’t seen significant results. I do believe the arts are important in that regard.”

▲ An apprentice in the luthiery program checks a carved peg head. Photo courtesy of Appalachian Artisan Center



Alfred Walker as Josh Gibson in the Pittsburgh Opera's production of *The Summer King*. Photo by David Bachman © 2017, courtesy of Pittsburgh Opera

Out of the Ballpark

A NEW OPERA IS BORN IN PORTLAND, MAINE

BY DON BALL

Maine is known for many things: lobsters, stunning vistas, lots of snow, lots of moose, and as the birthplace of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Stephen King, to name just a few. Opera, however, isn't one of them. But Portland Ovations is changing that. In 2014, with the assistance of the National Endowment for the Arts and the Maine Arts Commission, Portland Ovations commissioned a local music professor to complete an opera on a decidedly non-operatic topic: Josh Gibson, a member of baseball's Negro Leagues. The staged concert of *The Summer King* caught the attention of the Pittsburgh Opera, which eventually planned a full-scale production of the opera as its first world premiere in its 78-year history. How did this all happen?

There is only one professional opera company in the mostly rural state of Maine, and it produces one fully staged opera each summer. So the development and production of a new opera would require the collaboration of a number of different organizations.

In the early 2000s, University of Southern Maine (USM) music professor Dan Sonenberg decided to combine his love of baseball with his professional knowledge of music into something new: an opera. "I was actually interested in the Negro Leagues, and even in particular Josh Gibson, before I was interested in opera," said Sonenberg. "I didn't really get interested in opera until I got to college. When I got into opera, somewhere along the line those two ideas just kind of got married in my mind."

With support from American Opera Projects (AOP), a New York-based nonprofit that develops new works of opera by established and emerging American artists, Sonenberg was able to begin developing the piece as part of their Composers & the Voice Workshop Series, a program that pairs professional singers with composers to provide experience writing for the opera stage. From that start, he worked on the libretto with poet Dan Nester, who eventually dropped out of the project in 2004. Sonenberg continued working on the piece, composing the music and revising the libretto, on and off over the next few years.

The story Sonenberg developed focuses on Gibson, a great athlete who played for Pittsburgh's Homestead Grays in the Negro Leagues and once hit a ball completely out of Yankee Stadium. The story chronicles his early success (some had said he was better than Babe Ruth), the discrimination that kept him from playing in the major leagues, the death of his wife in childbirth, a stint playing baseball in Mexico, and his tragic early death at 35 from a brain tumor shortly before Jackie Robinson integrated baseball by joining the Brooklyn Dodgers.

The music Sonenberg composed is as eclectic (for opera) as his subject matter. "You're telling a story that takes place in Pittsburgh, where the Crawford Grill was a central location of the story, and that was a very important jazz destination in the country." So Sonenberg included saxophone and drums as integral parts of the orchestration. For scenes that take place in Mexico, he borrowed mariachi motifs to capture the spirit of the environment.



◀ The staged concert of Dan Sonenberg's *The Summer King*, produced by Portland Ovations, featuring (from left to right) Cameo Humes as the elder barber, Lori-Kaye Miller as the barber's wife, and Jorell Williams as the younger barber, with the Vox Nova Chamber Choir behind them. Photo by Bethany Roberge, courtesy of Portland Ovations

Sonenberg found himself at a crossroads with his opera—what to do with it next? That’s where the Maine Arts Commission—which provides grants to support the arts in the state—first stepped in. In 2012, the Arts Commission provided Sonenberg a grant of \$1,500 to support his burgeoning opera. “He wanted to create professional marketing materials so that he could market the opera to professional opera companies,” said Julie Richard, Maine Arts Commission’s executive director.

“Nobody knows what an opera sounds like unless they have a really good recording in front of them,” Sonenberg said. “And a really good recording is just tremendously expensive. I did a piano-vocal plus mariachi ensemble of a scene in Mexico from the opera. The Maine Arts Commission has been hugely supportive to me on this project.”

It was about this time that Aimée Petrin of Portland Ovations came into the picture. Portland Ovations, a nonprofit presenting organization, had worked with Sonenberg over the years, bringing him in as one of their go-to scholars for pre-performance lectures. When Petrin heard that Sonenberg had a major project that he had been working on for years, she was intrigued and had a meeting with him. “We started to talk [about] what it would take for him to be able to finish it and then for us to be able to mount it.”

Portland Ovations made a commitment to not just commission the piece, but to produce it as well. “This is the first time that we have commissioned something that we have been instrumental in creating from the ground up,” said Petrin. “We knew whatever we did, it would have to be a concert [without sets or costumes] just because even as an organization committed to doing this, we don’t have our own venue. We don’t have a scene shop or a costume shop.”

Once again, the Maine Arts Commission made a contribution to the project, providing a grant for \$6,000. “We used that funding to pay for the professional musicians in the orchestra and to do some honoraria for the collaborators who were Maine-based,” said Petrin. “We’re still hearing from musicians that participated in it

that this was one of the most exciting, thrilling, and important experiences of their professional life.”

Portland Ovations ended up using part of a \$40,000 NEA grant for their 2013-14 season toward *The Summer King* presentation, which would be the season finale. In 2014, USM received an NEA grant of \$15,000 to support the artist fees for the singers. “Obviously, we didn’t want to do this and not pay the artists, so having those two funding pieces from the NEA made it happen,” said Petrin. “We were able to breathe. We were able to say that we can do this.” In all, Portland Ovations raised \$75,000 to stage the concert.

In Sonenberg’s opinion, the NEA grant to the university “ended up being a great thing, because it pulled my university on board as collaborators in the process, which they took seriously. Once you get an NEA grant, then it’s a serious project.” The university held a symposium on the opera and helped promote the concert.

AOP continued to be involved in the project as well, pitching *The Summer King* to Opera America’s New Works Forum, which involved libretto readings and orchestral performances of pieces of the opera months before the Portland event. Christopher Hahn, general director of Pittsburgh Opera, was in attendance at the forum, and was interested enough to attend the Portland concert of the full score. AOP also assisted with the audition process for the lead singers and in bringing Steven Osgood, assistant conductor of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, on board as musical director.

The full-length concert—which included the Boy Singers of Maine, the Maine-based Vox Nova Chamber Choir (of which Maine Arts Commission’s Julie Richard happened to be a member), and a

► Composer Dan Sonenberg (second from right) celebrates the Portland, Maine, concert afterwards with the cast, Portland Ovations Executive Director Aimée Petrin (fourth from right), musical director Steven Osgood (third from right), and Portland Ovations board member Michael A. Boyson (far right). Photo by Bethany Roberge, courtesy of Portland Ovations





16-piece local orchestra—drew close to a thousand audience members, including representatives of various professional opera companies to see if it was something they wanted to mount as part of their seasons. Soon after the concert, Pittsburgh Opera invited Sonenberg to the city to discuss a possible production of the opera.

“I knew that, for Pittsburgh Opera’s first world premiere, we needed to reach out and embrace this whole community with a story that resonated deeply,” said Hahn. “Josh Gibson has a high level of name recognition, especially here in sports-obsessed Pittsburgh. And what more fitting subject could we find for our first-ever world premiere than a native son of athletic distinction who died tragically young?”

The opera would need significant revisions before the premiere, but the Portland performance gave Sonenberg the opportunity to see the opera as a whole, with singers, chorus, and orchestra. “Just to hear it performed from start to finish,” Sonenberg noted, “and to suddenly get this influx of feedback and responses to the story, to the character development—I took a lot of notes on people’s responses to the opera. There would be no revision process if that hadn’t happened.”

As part of the Pittsburgh Opera’s promotion, they held free community events, partnering with the Josh Gibson Foundation to hold discussions

about Gibson and baseball’s Negro League in relation to the opera. By all accounts, the premiere was a success, selling out Pittsburgh’s Benedum Center for the Arts, featuring Alfred Walker as Gibson, Jacqueline Echols as his wife Helen, and Denyce Graves as Gibson’s girlfriend Grace. A new production is scheduled next year in Detroit with the Michigan Opera Theatre.

The small investments from the National Endowment for the Arts and from the Maine Arts Commission had a large result: enriching the community of Portland with the presentation of a new operatic work, leading to a full-scale production in Pittsburgh, which enriched that community as well (and with a \$1 million-plus production, supported by an NEA grant, it was also a boon to the local arts scene and economy). Just as important, their investments to the collaboration of American Opera Projects, the University of Southern Maine, and Portland Ovations led to a new work in the American opera canon that celebrates a significant chapter from African-American history—which enriches all of us.

“You have to be willing to make the commitment to the artist and the process,” said Petrin. “If you’re not willing to do that, then things like this don’t happen and the world misses out on great works.”

▲ Alfred Walker as Gibson and Denyce Graves as his girlfriend Grace in the Mexican scene of the Pittsburgh Opera production. Photo by David Bachman © 2017, courtesy of Pittsburgh Opera



Preserving the Future in Texas

How Centro Cultural Aztlan Keeps Chicano Culture Alive

BY PAULETTE BEETE

All photos courtesy of Centro Cultural Aztlan

▲ Centro Cultural Aztlan celebrates the annual Dia de los Muertos with a group exhibition of *altares y ofrendas* by community artists and leaders, such as this altar by John McBurney and Henry De Leon, to help facilitate a dialogue on the history and traditions of this festival.

What makes a community vibrant? Is it its nightlife, restaurants, shops, or a proliferation of arts organizations and public art? While the answer to that question is all of the above, Centro Cultural Aztlan of San Antonio, Texas, would add one more factor: people. And that's where the center finds its mission—to foster community pride and engagement among San Antonio's majority-Latino population by helping residents connect to and maintain their cultural heritage.

Centro Cultural Aztlan was founded in the mid-1970s as a spin-off of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), which

primarily worked with issues of education, poverty, and housing but wanted to expand to include arts and culture. In 1977, the center was formally incorporated as a nonprofit to revive and celebrate the community's Mexican-American cultural traditions. Annual events include Dia de los Muertos, when the center invites community members to display their personal *altares* and *ofrendas* in a gallery setting; El Segundo de Febrero, which marks the anniversary of the treaty that ceded California to the United States and established the U.S.'s southern boundary; and a Lowriders Festival, which showcases the arts and automobile culture.

This type of programming, said Malena Gonzalez-Cid, is driven directly by the community. “We just fulfill their needs and expectations,” she explained. Gonzalez-Cid, who has been the executive director of Centro Cultural Aztlan for the past 30 years, works with a small but dedicated team and a cadre of artist-volunteers to keep the community connected to its culture. She and Arts Program Director Ruth M. Guajardo both have an open-door policy for community members to voice their needs and concerns. They also solicit feedback and ideas from local residents through regular open forums as well as a community-based advisory committee.

Today, Centro Cultural Aztlan serves an estimated 60,000 people annually, mostly from low- to middle-income families. While many of the people served by the center are Mexican-American, all of San Antonio are welcome to participate in the center’s activities. “Our focus may be on the Chicano population, but because we’ve been advocates of other institutions being more inclusive, we’ve striven for that inclusiveness ourselves, and that diversity,” said Gonzalez-Cid.

Centro Cultural Aztlan receives funding from both the National Endowment for the Arts and the Texas Commission on the Arts (TCA) to support its community arts projects. According to Gonzalez-Cid, public funds are important because “they help us leverage other monies. They help us present what we’re producing. They help us partner with businesses along the [I-10] corridor [and secure] sponsorships with corporations, individuals, residents, patrons.”

According to Jim Bob McMillan, deputy director of the Texas Commission on the Arts, organizations like Centro Cultural Aztlan often receive a combination of federal and state funds, as well as more local public funding. He acknowledged, however, that research has shown that it can sometimes be difficult for organizations that offer ethnically specific programming to secure private funders. For this reason, TCA has made a special commitment over the years to support organizations of color and minority-specific organizations, using both funds granted by the state legislature as well as funds the agency receives from the NEA.

McMillan added that supporting the type of work done by Centro Cultural Aztlan is important because of its impact on the population the center serves. “In Texas where we see our populations, particularly our Latino population, growing by leaps and bounds, many of these individuals and families are living in urban centers and they are not exposed to traditional celebrations,” he explained. “There need to be organizations that provide experiences so that these children and adults that have those traditions within their lives know what they’re all about, learn about them, and place their experiential stamp upon them.”

In addition to traditional programming, the center also assists contemporary art-making. The neighborhoods served by Centro Cultural Aztlan boast an unusually high concentration of artists, so it also manages a 2,500-square-foot gallery space, offering roughly ten exhibitions each year. Gonzalez-Cid explained, “Our artists need those opportunities so they can create new

work, so they can show and display their artwork. They have a space where they come together and share ideas, and it’s also a stream of revenue for them.” She added that the gallery is not only for professional artists, who may have formal training, but also for self-taught individuals.

Eighty-one-year-old Jose Esquivel is a longtime artist resident of San Antonio and

◀ A pottery demonstration by San Antonio Potters Guild during the Centro Cultural Aztlan’s El Gran Dia de los Artistas Festival in San Antonio, Texas.



volunteer at the center. He remembers that before Centro Cultural Aztlan came on the scene in the 1970s, there really wasn't any place for young artists like him to exhibit. "We did not have many places that we were close to. We didn't have anything in the neighborhood where we came from.... [It] was one of the first places where our work would fit." Esquivel added one of the things he really valued was the center's openness to all genres of artists. "What Centro Cultural Aztlan did right away was that it was very inclusive. They included the poets. They included musicians. So our presentations touched a little bit of everything, even the food. It became a central location for us," he noted.

While Esquivel's work has now been collected by both museums and individual collectors, he still exhibits at the center as it gives him a platform from which to mentor young artists and to share his knowledge about the community's cultural traditions. "I feel like people like me should be mentors to the younger artists that are coming up and Centro Cultural Aztlan has always had the doors open for young artists, amateurs, senior citizens, and now it's open to everybody in the city," he said. He also praised the way in which the center's exhibitions are welcoming to families: "When there's an exhibition, you see grandma, you see children, you see the parents, you see everybody there. It's very, very enjoyable to be part of that."

In addition to supporting local artists, the center also invests in the lives of community youth by welcoming them to its programs and working directly in local schools. Its Superhero program sends artists into classrooms to work with students on creating their own superheroes based on positive role models from their families and communities. The community then comes together for an annual Superheroes exhibit at the center's gallery showcasing artwork by these young artists. Not only does the event bring parents, teachers, and other students together to celebrate the students' achievements, but Gonzalez-Cid believes the experience opens up possibilities for their futures. "Hopefully the work that we've laid down, the foundation that we have is actually to continue to nurture the next generation of artists, the next generation of patrons, the next generation of collectors," she said.

Through all its activities, supported by the Texas Commission on the Arts and the NEA, Centro Cultural Aztlan is able to celebrate its community's Mexican-American culture as well as make San Antonio an attractive city for tourists. Gonzalez-Cid said, "People come to visit San Antonio because of the vibrant culture that there is. People want to see and feel how it is that we live on a daily basis, and they want to experience the local heritage, the local art, the local day-to-day activities.... What better way to bring an

understanding of your culture if it isn't through art? [Through] art activities, visitors become a participant and it becomes a cultural experience." 🌀



◀ The annual Superhero exhibition is designed for students from kindergarten to 12th grade to create artwork that is based on real-life heroes, comic book art, anime, mythological figures, or a positive role model they know and admire.



Making Music Together

Pennsylvania's Erie Philharmonic Brings Harmony to Its Community

BY LAURA SCANLAN

All Photos Courtesy of Erie Philharmonic

Erie, located at the far northwest tip of Pennsylvania on the southern shore of Lake Erie, is the fourth-largest city in the state with a population of roughly 100,000. In its heyday, Erie was home to large manufacturing companies and robust steel and coal factories, which have since relocated, and served as a hub for the westward expansion of rail and maritime commerce. The population has declined in recent years, and Erie's economy now includes a diverse mix of mid-size industries and a service sector that comprises health, insurance, and tourism-based businesses.

Despite the downward shifts in population and economic output, there is something special going on in the cultural sector that's breathing new life into the town of Erie. This is happening through the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts (PCA) and Erie Arts & Culture, which is a member of PCA's network of more than 30 regional partners around the states, as well as with support from the NEA.

"The arts and culture sector is an important asset in the changing economy of Erie," said Amanda Sisseem, executive director of Erie Arts & Culture, the oldest arts council in Pennsylvania.

▲ The Erie Philharmonic offers youth concerts annually for the city's fourth-through sixth-graders.





▲ Pianist Emanuel Ax performing at the Emerson Gridley Elementary School in Erie, Pennsylvania, as a guest artist brought in by Erie Philharmonic.

“We’ve been losing population, and our gains are in new immigrants and refugee communities, which bring great treasures to this community that are sometimes overlooked. Our cultural organizations are helping people find hope and inspiration. We’re a big part of the future of this place, and we’re also a part of making sure that we honor our past and our people.”

Since 1960, Erie Arts & Culture has operated as a backbone organization for the region, helping to support the arts and culture sector and helping the area achieve community-wide goals by embracing arts and culture strategies. As one of the PCA’s regional partners, they do this in part by administering grant programs designed by the PCA. Beyond grantmaking, Erie Arts & Culture works with the community and its six major arts organizational partners to determine the high-priority goals for which arts and culture can help move the needle. Sisseem explained, “We develop a shared agenda to enhance the community and bolster the cultural sector. Our six arts and culture partnering organizations sign a three-year agreement to help focus on the big needs in Erie and, in turn, we support their achievements by providing operating funds.” Cultural institutions are currently addressing community needs such as growing the tourism economy, increasing programming in schools, and increasing access and participation in the arts.

The Erie Philharmonic is one of the six partner organizations operating on all cylinders

and achieving results, according to Sisseem. Performing in the historic Warner Theatre that serves as an anchor to downtown Erie, the philharmonic has the popularity and capacity to sell out its 2,200-seat venue for consecutive performances, “even on hockey nights,” exclaimed Philip Horn, executive director of the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.

“We’re poised to be a critical element in Erie’s turnaround and in generating hometown pride. We’ve been a member of the community for over 100 years,” said Steve Weiser, executive director of the Erie Philharmonic. While

free outdoor summer concerts and the high-quality performances that attract audiences from Buffalo, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh are helping address the regional tourism goal, the philharmonic also focuses deep within its community to expand and strengthen arts programming in schools and neighborhoods.

The Erie Philharmonic’s capacity to reach students, teachers, schools, and neighborhoods is amplified by a PCA grant for a long-term residency program, which enables musicians to engage with one pre-school annually for 60 days of instruction over the course of several months. In the fall of 2016, instruction took place in a neighborhood community center where the majority of students were refugees from Nepal for whom English is a second language.

“There are community centers throughout Erie that are critical in helping to resettle the large refugee population that has migrated to Erie, and the centers are key to connecting us to students and their families,” said Lisa Herring, director of community impact at the Erie Philharmonic. “Whenever we have a visiting artist, or available seats in our theater, we’ll offer free ticket vouchers to the community centers.”

Sisseem added that classroom teachers have gone so far as to meet parents on a Saturday at their early-learning site and walk to a cultural activity together, so that students and parents felt comfortable. “We learned a lot from that experience,” Sisseem said. “Offering free tickets

doesn't guarantee participation. We needed to be sure that community members felt comfortable entering the space."

The Erie Philharmonic also has cultivated strong relationships with elementary school teachers and students. "The elementary schools have a music class that may meet once every six to eight days," said Weiser. "We'll bring a guest artist into different schools, typically every other week or once a month, to give students a chance to interact directly with an artist."

For the middle grades, the Erie Philharmonic offers youth concerts, which it has been holding since the 1950s, making it one of the first orchestras in the U.S. to offer them. The philharmonic's staff designs an extensive curriculum, geared to Pennsylvania's arts curriculum and common core standards, and sends it to teachers three to six months in advance of the concert. It includes pre- and post-concert tests; lesson plans in geography, science, and history that incorporate the concert material; and a listening CD with accompanying guide notes to the music.

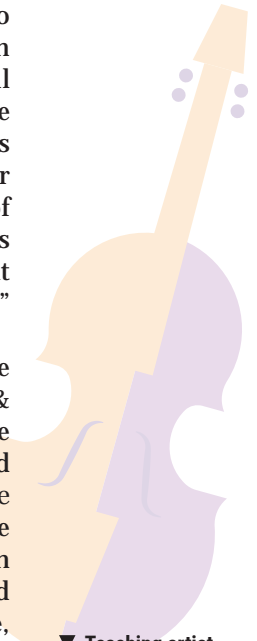
Everything in the concert is based on what the students have learned through the curriculum. The opening section of the curriculum explains the families of the orchestra, a second section deals with specific musical terms, and a third section is based upon the concert theme for that particular season. "The Pennsylvania Council on the Arts funding goes a long way in making sure we offer these concerts, that they are free of charge for all students, and that we cover busing expenses for all students from the city of Erie so they can get to the concerts," said Weiser.

Beyond the funding from PCA and Erie Arts & Culture, the Erie Philharmonic also has received direct NEA funding. Weiser noted, "We seek funding from the NEA for projects that have special meaning for our community. Beyond presenting a guest artist, we seek to reach places in our community that don't have ready access to classical music."

For example, the philharmonic received an NEA grant for an upcoming six-day festival in the 2018 season featuring classical pianist Simone Dinnerstein performing a world premiere piano concerto composed by Philip Glass. Outreach activities by both Dinnerstein and Glass will include master classes, in-school concerts, live radio performances, and high school lectures that will also feature music director Daniel Meyer and various philharmonic musicians. "Many of the schools we'll be reaching are in communities facing extreme poverty with close to 100 percent of the students on free or reduced lunch plans," said Weiser.

The collaborative support and resources of the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, Erie Arts & Culture, and the National Endowment for the Arts have helped the Erie Philharmonic yield great success in the Erie region, benefiting the health of the community and helping to realize important community priorities. As Horn described PCA's partnership with the NEA and with regional partners like Erie Arts & Culture, "We're really here to support an infrastructure that creates opportunities for Pennsylvanians to participate in the arts." 🎻

Laura Scanlan is the director of the State and Regional program at the National Endowment for the Arts.



▼ Teaching artist Sarah Lee had a long-term residency at St. Benedict Center as part of Erie Philharmonic's program supported by the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.





RURAL AND PROUD

Epicenter Brings the Arts to Southeast Utah

BY VICTORIA HUTTER

All photos by Ryan Baxter, courtesy of Epicenter

▲ Green River, Utah's new neon welcome sign by artist Lisa Ward for her Green River Lights project as part of the Rural and Proud Initiative supported by a 2016 NEA Our Town grant.

Green River, Utah, (population 952) is in the southeastern part of the state, 52 miles north of the mountain biking mecca of Moab and 182 miles from Salt Lake City. The high desert country here is stark and lunar, fierce and beautiful. Sparsely vegetated plains extend far into the distance, interrupted by rocky towers of reddish brown and flat-top buttes with

magnificent, striated sides. However, there are fertile areas here that support agriculture and creativity. Since 2009, much of that creativity has been driven by a local arts organization called Epicenter.

Epicenter's tagline is "Rural and Proud." As stated on their website, "To accentuate Green River's rural pride and pioneering spirit,

Epicenter provides housing and business resources and promotes the arts. A passionate, multidisciplinary team of young professionals, we engage, collaborate with, and learn from our community.”

Started by Jack Forinash, Rand Pinson, and Maria Sykes, AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers and graduates of Auburn University’s School of Architecture, Epicenter grew out of and maintains a focus on affordable housing. Forinash and Sykes are now principals with Epicenter of housing and arts and culture respectively, while Pinson serves on the organization’s board of directors. Their work ranges from designing and building a prototype home that matches the size of a single-wide trailer (popular in Green River) to adding lighted benches in the business area to organizing festivals.

In support of this work, Epicenter has received grants from Utah’s state arts agency, the Utah Division of Arts and Museums (UDAM), and has garnered four NEA grants. Cumulative NEA funding is roughly \$120,000, while UDAM grants range between \$11,000 and \$14,000 annually, and are unrestricted and devoted to sustaining the organization’s day-to-day operations and regularly occurring programs. “We think of our relationship with the state as ongoing support, leadership training, and networking,” said Sykes. “We think of our NEA funding as very project-specific that might tie into our ongoing work but allow us to accomplish big ambitious projects that are shorter term. They both have a lot of value in our little community.”

Although the federal and state grants serve different purposes, they both help leverage other funding, and have helped Epicenter extend

beyond the projects undertaken in Green River. The ripples of influence reach nationally and internationally when Epicenter staff are invited to conferences and meetings to share their stories with others committed to arts-based rural development. Sykes and Forinash have traveled as far as Iceland to exchange ideas and explore partnerships.

If not for Epicenter, this type of influence would have been inconceivable for Green River, whose history is one of peaks and valleys as the railroad, uranium mining, and a missile base came and went. In the 1970s, Interstate Highway 70 was built but bypassed downtown. When Moab to the south embraced mountain biking and the town’s proximity to the national parks, Green River didn’t find something on which it might have capitalized. Businesses closed, buildings fell into disrepair, and people left. Today, one in four people in Green River lives in poverty and the median income is approximately \$38,000.

Despite these challenges, or in part because of them, Forinash was drawn to the town. Green River’s strong interest in affordable housing and its western, rural setting appealed to his desire to make a difference in a community’s life. He suggested that Sykes come and spend a summer in Green River to check it out. She immediately fell in love with the people and the landscape. “There’s a reason to come and there’s a reason to stay,” she said. “Seeing the challenges of Green River as opportunities to develop programs and work with people was the reason to stay. Engaging with different community members that are passionate about this place, you learn more all the time. The history is constantly unfolding.”

▼ Green River Rock & Mineral Festival participants on a Sego Canyon field trip with rock art interpreter Steve Acerson as a part of Epicenter’s Rural and Proud Initiative.



When the team started Epicenter, their first projects were renovating a building that became their headquarters and conducting a housing study which found that approximately 50 percent of houses in Green River needed major repairs. This led to their Fix-It First program of home repairs and other projects developed after that.

Although neither Sykes nor Forinash were from Green River, Laurel Cannon Alder, UDAM's grants manager, said their devotion to the community was clear from the start. She noted that Epicenter is "a unique local arts agency" whose work "has created a sense of community for the diverse population who inhabit this small town. Rather than coming into this town with an outsider's agenda, the directors of Epicenter have helped lifelong residents name and celebrate their pride in their own community, and find ways to strengthen and improve the community for generations to come."

Through the years, UDAM has funded Epicenter, but also has helped them grow as an organization. "They're intimate supporters of Epicenter," Sykes said of UDAM. "I know the

entire staff, and they've helped out in different ways." For example, UDAM offers leadership training called the Change Leader Program, a weekend of sessions for arts and non-arts professionals from across the state that later becomes a valuable network. It was through the network that Sykes and Epicenter's Principal of Economic Development Chris Lezama learned how to introduce and assure passage of a RAP (Recreation, Arts, and Parks) tax for Green River. She added, "Getting a tax passed in a rural community, especially with the word 'art' in it, is a really, really big deal."

Then in 2015 Epicenter received the Governor's Award for Local Arts Agencies for their exceptional work and for being a model not only for Utah, but for the nation. As UDAM Executive Director Victoria Panella Bournes noted, "They are a star in terms of rural Utah."

To complement this state support, Epicenter received two NEA grants in 2015 and 2017 to support their Frontier Fellowships, one of Epicenter's first programs. Creative professionals apply for fellowships and are selected to come to Green River for four weeks

▼ Members of the Downtown Plan Steering Committee take a ride with Epicenter via a mule-drawn cart to observe their town of Green River, Utah, from a new perspective and pace. Observations and ideas will be included in Epicenter's upcoming cultural asset mapping and downtown plan.






to create new work that emerges from their interactions with residents and with the natural surroundings. Fellows' work covers a range of artistic mediums, from publications to music, filmmaking, photography, and interdisciplinary events. The visiting artists often collaborate with Green River High School students and the John Wesley Powell Research Center and Archives. While these fellows have a chance to deeply engage with the community, they bring a fresh perspective and energy to Green River. Their artwork highlights the town's unique cultural richness, benefitting both residents and the fellows' own communities with lessons the artists learned from their time in Green River.

In 2016, Epicenter also received an Our Town grant for their Rural and Proud Initiative, a three-phase downtown revitalization initiative. The first phase, which Epicenter has nearly completed, entails the development of a public art and design plan that will lead to installations, programming, and design standards to guide future development. In 2017, the organization received a second Our Town grant to continue its activities on creative public space improvements.

To begin the process and support local ongoing revitalization efforts, Epicenter selected designers to propose small-scale projects in downtown Green River. Project proposals were encouraged to reinforce the distinct character of Green River and activate forgotten locations

downtown. A committee of Green River citizens reviewed proposals and chose three projects: Reinhabitation (Artist: Erin Carraher and University of Utah Architecture + Planning students), Green River Lights (Artist: Lisa Ward), and the Green River Rock & Mineral Festival (Artists: Alison Jean Cole, Lisa Ward, and Anna Evans). The next step will be asset mapping to surface previously unrecognized creative assets, venues, and partners, as well as engaging a designer-in-residence to develop small-scale projects.

Although the main focus of Epicenter is to improve the quality of life in Green River and help advance the rural art-based development field, Sykes hopes that Epicenter will help address larger social concerns that affect all Americans, whether they live in rural areas or not.

"There needs to be a greater connection between urban and rural places," said Sykes. "The natural and agricultural resources that make people's lives successful in the city come from rural places, and yet urban residents may not care. But rural and urban places have to come together to create a sustainable future. Many urban places are becoming unaffordable and rural places often are struggling economically. What can we do, all of us working together, to make both places better for everyone?" 

▲ Another of Lisa Ward's works for Epicenter's Green River Lights project on the Green River Coffee Company in downtown.



Poetry Out Loud is a national program that encourages high school students to learn about great poetry—both classic and contemporary—through memorization and performance. Through the partnership of the NEA, Poetry Foundation, and the nation’s state arts agencies (SAAs), students compete at the state and then national level for a grand prize of \$20,000 and the title of National Champion.

Poetry Out Loud begins at the classroom level. Once school-wide finalists are chosen, they compete at the state level. The state champ travels to Washington, DC to compete in the national finals.

The SAAs’ role in the initiative is crucial to its success. SAAs are responsible for ensuring that competitions happen at the state level, including promoting the program, recruiting teachers and schools to participate, and hosting the state finals

competition, which includes obtaining venues and identifying a panel of knowledgeable judges to evaluate the students’ recitations. Many SAAs work with local partners to provide technical workshops to students, teaching-artist visits to schools, and professional development opportunities for teachers.

Above, Samara Elán Huggins, a senior at Whitefield Academy in Mableton, Georgia, won the title of 2017 Poetry Out Loud National Champion in April. Photo by James Kegley



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