

# AMERICAN ARTSCAPE®

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# This issue

The COVID pandemic took a great toll on the health of the nation. Beyond the physical—the huge loss of life, our quest to deal with the various new strains appearing suddenly, and the lingering Long COVID—there was the mental toll as well. As the Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy noted in a public health advisory released in May 2023, there is an epidemic of loneliness, isolation, and lack of connection in our country: “The mortality impact of being socially disconnected is similar to that caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, and even greater than that associated with obesity and physical inactivity.”

The arts are part of a healthy life, contributing to greater social cohesion, health equity, and community well-being. This could include individual practice to improve one's mental health, orchestra members playing in health care facilities to soothe patients and their families in tense and anxious situations, arts education programs that support the social and emotional needs of students, the stories we share that allow us to come together and acknowledge our histories and bridge differences, and more.

Mindful of the toll that the pandemic has also taken on the arts and cultural sector, this issue will look at some of the ways that the arts continue to address and contribute to public health, healing, well-being, and community resilience. These are just a few of the stories demonstrating the importance of the arts sector and the incredible power of the arts to help individuals, organizations, and communities come out of a difficult time, think differently about how they live, take control of their own narratives, and advance efforts to be whole. Living an artful life is essential to living a healthy life.

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Cover: Accent Pontiac musicians Deshaun Arnett (left) and Lay'Onna Scruggs (right) are all smiles while warming up to perform at the 2023 End of Year Showcase concert. Photo courtesy of Jeff Dunn Photography

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# Harnessing the Healing Power of the Arts

BY MARIA ROSARIO JACKSON, PHD

**T**he National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has long recognized the potential of the arts to strengthen communities and improve health outcomes. Through our grantmaking programs and national initiatives, the NEA provides vital support to organizations that rely on the arts to help enhance community well-being, empowering artists and communities alike, all the while fostering a symbiotic relationship where creativity can thrive and health can flourish.

I have talked about how unleashing the full power of art requires not existing only in isolation or in a bubble. It requires animating work at the intersections of arts and education, community development, climate, and more, including work at the intersection with health and well-being. Helping to animate the full power of the arts

requires bolstering what I call an arts-infused civic infrastructure—art (defined expansively) woven into the relationships and mechanisms we rely on to care for each other.

The NEA is a national resource for creating and strengthening healthy arts ecosystems that contribute to building healthy communities where all people can thrive—where people can lead artful lives and where the important work happening at the intersections of the arts and other fields of policy and practice is advanced. We do this through our work with nonprofit arts organizations, local arts agencies, state arts agencies, and regional arts organizations, and through our collaborations with other federal agencies, which we are growing and strengthening.

For more than a decade, we have been partnering with the Departments of Defense

▲ NEA Chair Jackson in discussion with Rear Admiral Paul Reed, director of HHS's Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, in March 2023. NEA File Photo

and Veterans Affairs on the initiative Creative Forces®: NEA Military Healing Arts Network, which seeks to improve the health, well-being, and quality of life for military and veteran populations exposed to trauma, as well as their families and caregivers, through creative arts therapies and community arts engagement activities. In 2021, we were involved in a partnership with the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) and the CDC Foundation to launch an initiative that engaged artists and arts organizations to promote COVID vaccine readiness in their communities. As a direct result, with funding from the CDC, the CDC Foundation awarded grants to 30 organizations nationwide to support these efforts. Working alongside the Department of Health and Human Services, the Arts Endowment is planning to convene an Interagency Working Group on Arts, Health, and Civic Infrastructure. This collaborative effort fosters exchanges of insights and information among federal agencies and serves as a catalyst and resource for new and existing work harnessing the power of arts and culture to advance health equity and create resilient communities.

In addition to these growing federal partnerships, the NEA is looking to deepen our

understanding of the science behind the arts and healing. The NEA's Office of Research & Analysis (ORA) commissions clinical research through our research grants and NEA Research Labs on the arts' ability to help treat chronic pain, improve longitudinal health outcomes in the general population, help delay cognitive decline among older adults, and to foster social and emotional development in early childhood. Recognizing the potential of music to heal and connect, the NEA's Music department and ORA have partnered with the University of California, San Francisco, in collaboration with the National Institutes of Health, the Kennedy Center, and celebrated soprano Renée Fleming, to establish the Sound Health Network. This pioneering collaboration explores the impact of music on brain health and well-being, paving the way for innovative treatments and interventions.

As our nation emerges from the devastating impact of a global pandemic, the role of the arts in healing and rebuilding has never been more crucial. Societal movements addressing social inequality, and the growing concern for social and environmental determinants of health outcomes, present a unique prism through which the arts can be channeled to bridge gaps and foster well-being.

► NEA Chair Jackson with National Council on the Arts members along with Ashé Cultural Arts Center staff and community health workers in New Orleans, Louisiana, June 2023. Photo by Kasimu Harris





The arts community, already grappling with immense challenges, requires support and opportunities to contribute to the collective healing process. Now, more than ever, we need to attend to the health of the arts sector and recognize that its health has implications for the well-being and health of our nation.

As I noted in [my discussion on the Federal Plan for Equitable Long-Term Recovery and Resilience with Rear Admiral Paul Reed](#), director of HHS's Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion: "There are many ways in which the arts play a critical role in our ability to survive something like a pandemic. Some of those ways have to do with our personal well-being, and some of them have to do with our ability to show up as part of a collective and care for each other. If you think of how the arts help us make sense of the world, that's important during a time when everything is turned upside down."

A framework I have used for a few years now, as I have tried to boil down the myriad ways that the arts intersect with a number of different fields, including health, is that the arts are crucial to helping us reframe—see things differently and become available to paradigm shift, retool—expand or change the ways in which we have gone about addressing challenges, and actually do the work of repair—the work of mending, healing, and growing anew.

The stories in this issue provide examples of this framework. In New Orleans, the Ashé Cultural Arts Center is creating opportunities for community wellness-focused artists and cultural workers—what the center's chief equity officer, Asali DeVan Ecclesiastes, calls the community's "most trusted messengers"—to promote health and wellness resources and education, with the goal of increasing life expectancy in Black neighborhoods. In June, during our National Council on the Arts meeting in New Orleans, I was able to meet in person with some of these messengers and hear their stories about how they are building trust and connections in their community as they pursue their arts practices. I also had a chance to meet with the staff at LA Opera during their annual Los Angeles County Arts and Health Week Summit and learn about their *Connects* initiative, featured in this issue, through which the company offers health-related activities and resources in the community. Also featured is Joseph Allen, associate professor at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, who talks about the need to retool the infrastructure of theaters to make them healthier and safer for audiences.

This issue also looks at NEA Our Town grantee Fort Apache Heritage Foundation, which is planning to renovate a former Army fort and adjacent Native American boarding school and repurpose the sites into a place of rejuvenation, reconnection, and healing. We also look at Accent Pontiac, which relied on musical education to help address some of the mental health problems students experienced due to the COVID pandemic. And Brushwood Center, a nonprofit that is striving to improve health equity and ecological wellness, received a Creative Forces Community Engagement grant to expand its At Ease: Art and Nature for Veterans programming to serve more veterans, as well as active-duty personnel at Naval Station Great Lakes.

As we navigate the challenges of our time, let us embrace the healing power of the arts to cultivate greater social cohesion, health equity, and community well-being. And while I have your attention—here is some wellness advice from me to you: go to a concert, a play, or an art-based community outing. You will likely leave feeling renewed, recharged, and reconnected. Our ability to live artful lives is essential to advancing our full humanity and our health and wellness as a nation.

*Maria Rosario Jackson, PhD is chair of the National Endowment for the Arts.*

# Most Trusted Messengers

Ashé Cultural Arts Center Relies on the Power of Art to Promote Health

BY AUNYE BOONE





In the resonance of the Yoruba word “ashé,” signifying “to speak into power,” lies an acknowledgment of the collective ability to manifest our intentions. Ashé Cultural Arts Center co-founders Carol Bebel and Douglas Redd harnessed the power of this concept to shape a narrative of empowerment and positivity for Black people in New Orleans, Louisiana, establishing the center in 1998.

The organization’s chief equity officer, Asali DeVan Ecclesiastes, said, “It immediately became a hub for the entire New Orleans cultural community, helping to meet the demand for spaces where Black folks had the keys and could meet with regularity to plan and to create art, and eventually house productions, art exhibits, community events, and gatherings.” Reflecting on the last 25 years, she said, “Our campus has expanded from one-third of the commercial space in Venus Gardens to owning the entire commercial space, the 29 apartments above, the theater around the corner, an artist residency two miles away, and across the street—the future site of a community and worker-owned real estate development project.” As stewards of an intricate ecosystem, Ashé’s offerings encompass programs and direct services that uplift, empower, and strengthen Black narratives.

From a tourist perspective, New Orleans appears to be a bustling city rich with culture, music, and eclectic cuisine. Explaining the harsh realities, Ashé’s health equity leader, Avis Gray, MSN, RN, said, “Black New Orleanians experience the poorest health outcomes as it relates to hypertension, diabetes, obesity, and mental health, exacerbated by historically higher uninsured rates. These concentrated disadvantages have led to a 25-year life expectancy deficit between Black New Orleanians and White New Orleanians.”

To combat this deficit, Ashé’s I Deserve It! program—a collaboration with Tulane University School of Public Health, New Orleans East Hospital, and other institutions—hires artists and culture bearers to promote health and wellness resources and education, with the goal of increasing life expectancy in Black neighborhoods. Ecclesiastes said, “Arts and culture are intertwined within everything we do, see, and feel as human beings.”

At Ashé, many artists care deeply about the local community and are invested in making positive impacts. One of the ways in which Ashé leverages artists’ influence in promoting health and wellness is by providing platforms for artists to engage with their communities

through various mediums, from poetry readings to council meetings, turning these events into wellness opportunities. Artists are also leading and contributing by crafting social messaging campaigns, equity toolkits for health care providers, and advising on health policy. “Historically,” said Ecclesiastes, “in New Orleans and Black communities alike, culture has often been a survival tactic. Therefore, artists and culture bearers hold a precious place in our communities as those who we look to for creativity, inspiration, and healing. Moreover, the data collected in our health impact assessment told us that here in New Orleans, artists and culture bearers are our communities’ most trusted messengers—so who better than them to serve as the changemakers and voices to connect communities to the resources and information that directly impact their well-being?”

Ashé’s programmatic approach is rooted in culture, community, and commerce. Ecclesiastes explained, “Culture is a keystone of our collective existence as Black people, especially in New Orleans, where our biggest industries and collective livelihoods are directly tied to the culture we have created. Community is the driving force behind our work and we recognize the ability of art and culture to shift the social and economic factors that impact our communities across the African diaspora. Commerce is a commitment to economic justice and cooperative economics, ensuring the ability for artists and culture bearers to have dignified, productive, and creative lives.”

Community health workers in Ashé’s I Deserve It! program “are making larger systemic changes by connecting over 400 residents to primary care in six months and by being an accountability partner within the state’s system of care access, and being able to identify when services aren’t being offered to the residents they are connected to,” said Ecclesiastes.

One such community health worker is poet Sunni Patterson, who, through a collaboration with the New Orleans Regional Transit Authority, created

◀ Releasing of the doves at the 2021 Maafa Commemoration, an annual community healing and remembrance event that Ashé Cultural Arts Center hosts in New Orleans. Photo by Jafar M. Pierre

▼ Community member receives a free COVID-19 vaccine as part of Ashé Cultural Arts Center’s I Deserve It! program, administered by New Orleans East Hospital. Photo by Cris Guidry





▲ Sunni Patterson and Drew Baham, I Deserve It! community health workers, lead a group in a breathing session at Imagining America National Gathering in October 2022. Photo by Cfreedom Photography

▼ I Deserve It! community health workers Brian Washington and Victor Pizarro provide resources to guests at A Culture of Wellness: Because I Deserve It! event on December 3, 2022. Photo by Cris Guidry

a recording to play in buses across the city, declaring the I Deserve It! Wellness Manifesto, an affirmation to empower individuals in the community that they deserve and are worthy of a life of physical, mental, and emotional wellness.

A prominent component of New Orleans culture is its music, and musicians have been at the forefront of community engagement through Ashé. They have initiated youth mentoring programs, relying on music as a vehicle for addressing youth behavioral health and trauma. Gray said, "Since many of the artists have dealt with some of the issues that the youth are dealing with now, they are able to display how playing an instrument made a positive impact on their lives. The utilization of the arts provides a link to the heart and soul of the community." The community-based group's outreach extends to everyday settings such as barber shops, hair salons, and corner stores.

During the COVID pandemic, Ashé uplifted the importance of strategic planning and equity. Ecclesiastes said, "By being able to pay our staff to stay at home and serve our varied constituencies, we ensured our ability to transition more straightforwardly from social separation back to social closeness, while supporting 11 employees and 50 residents by making them less susceptible to the economic pitfalls of the moment." To address the economic distress faced by artists and culture bearers, "Ashé repurposed programming dollars to address their dire need," said Ecclesiastes. Partnering with Antenna Gallery and Junebug Productions to create the NOLA Creative Response Fund, this initiative provided much-needed relief to the backbone of New Orleans' cultural economy, ensuring that creative workers could stay afloat.

"These workers form the cornerstone of our cultural economy, which shapes every aspect of our city. The current COVID crisis has ground to a halt both gig work and the tourist industry that many of them rely on. Funds that were intended as grants for the creation of artwork have been distributed as emergency funds for creative workers in the cultural economy," said Ecclesiastes.

"Hosting and participating in events that present ancestral, complementary, and traditional healing practices have made a tremendous impact in the communities we serve," Gray said. Extending beyond the traditional venues, Ashé used the New Orleans East Hospital's mobile medical van to educate and vaccinate communities. Their Culture of Wellness event, which was the public launch of the I Deserve It! program, provided health resources and direct services to the community.

"Our most impactful public event is our annual Maafa Commemoration, a collective healing event for our community," said Ecclesiastes. "For 20 years, we have held a ceremony to honor our ancestors who suffered, survived, and perished under the transatlantic and domestic slave trades. We identify the told and untold stories of triumph and healing through drumming, dancing, song, poetry, storytelling, and the appointment of our annual Grand Griot." At the event, hundreds of people wearing all white gather at Congo Square, where a procession starts through the streets of New Orleans and ends at the Mississippi River, where the crowd releases "our offerings of flowers and fruit, representing the purification of our collective psyche."

*Aunye Boone is the editor of American Artscape.*







# Healing Wounds in the Wilderness

Brushwood Center's At Ease: Art and Nature for Veterans and the Military Community

BY CAROLYN COONS



**T**he Edward L. Ryerson Conservation Area is a 565-acre forest preserve about 30 miles north of Chicago. When you're hiking the area's six-and-a-half miles of trails, you'll also cross paths with the Des Plaines River. In the middle of the woods, which are the ancestral home of Algonquian-speaking peoples as well as other Native nations, there is a historic home that houses Brushwood Center, a nonprofit that is striving to improve health equity and access to nature across Lake County, Illinois.

The center's location is no accident. As described by Brushwood Center Executive Director Catherine Game, "What is core to our

belief at Brushwood is that nature is for everybody, and these spaces, these resources, they need to be accessible for everybody. Our work is really centered around a mission focused on improving health equity through the arts, through nature, and through community."

The center's staff work with artists, community organizations, health care providers, and scientists to conduct arts programming both on-site in Ryerson Woods and other locations around the Chicago area, including at the Captain James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center, the only combined veteran and active-duty hospital in the nation. At Ease: Art and Nature

▲ Catherine Game, Executive Director, Brushwood Center. Photo by Rafael Santiago, In Life Photography





▲ Group photo of At Ease participants with their final artworks of the 2023 Water(color) for the Soul Music Composition Residency with Black Moon Trio. Photo by Michael Kardas Photography

► TOP: At Ease participants painting a mural at the Captain James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center. Photo by Ewa Pasek Photography

MIDDLE: 2023 Luminary Workshop in partnership with Veteran Art Tribe, taught by community artist Kirsten Saunders. Photo courtesy of Brushwood Center

BOTTOM: Angela Walker—artist, At Ease participant, and U.S. Navy veteran—performs at the 2022 At Ease Art Exhibition. Photo courtesy of Brushwood Center

for Veterans and the Military Community, the initiative that developed out of the partnership between Brushwood and the Lovell Center's recreational therapy department, each year offers free nature-based painting and drawing classes, music classes, and photography workshops to approximately 400 veterans experiencing post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety. There is also a growing number of other community organizations that partner with Brushwood to reach veteran populations.

In 2022, Brushwood Center received a \$50,000 Creative Forces Community Engagement grant to expand its At Ease programming to more veterans, as well as active-duty personnel at Naval Station Great Lakes. Creative Forces®: NEA Military Healing Arts Network is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with the U.S. Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs that seeks to improve the health, well-being, and quality of life for military and veteran populations exposed to trauma, as well as their families and caregivers.

"With all the need for mental health services in the [military and veteran] community, it's so important to invest in these community-based programs and to create opportunities for people to access non-pharmacological methods of healing, knowing that both modalities are super important. There's a lot of untapped opportunity," Game explained.

"Our approach is evidence-based, and there is a lot of evidence demonstrating the mental health benefits of the arts. There's also a lot showing the

mental health benefits of spending time in nature. Spending just five minutes in nature, standing outside in a quiet space in nature, immediately you'll start to see physiological impacts of reduced stress in your body," she added.

For Game, the success of At Ease owes a lot to the program's natural environment. "There's actually research that shows people are more compassionate and more open-minded when they're in natural settings," she said. "It's why these spaces are so conducive to creative expression. Nature creates this space where you can let go, you can feel safe, and you can let your mind do what human brains have this incredible ability to do, which is to create new ideas

and to translate that into artistic expression. [At Brushwood,] we strongly believe that everyone has the ability to do that. This is not limited to the veteran community—there are a lot of adults, especially, who think, 'I'm not an artist. I don't know if I can do this.'"

Another critical aspect of At Ease is that the programs are mostly recurring, rather than one-off events. Game acknowledged that this continuity is important for the community-building that occurs among participants.

"You're coming back time after time, you're meeting new people, you're getting to establish relationships. We have seen in our evaluations that's an important part of this—the social connection that comes with creative expression in a group setting. There's also the shared understanding of experience, which is really helpful. We've had folks come through who've said that the program has saved their life," Game said.

To demonstrate that the beneficial effects of being engaged in nature are not only anecdotal, the center has recently released its first locally focused report, *Health, Equity, and Nature: A Changing Climate in Lake County*.

"We incorporated arts throughout the report, working with 26 different artists who created pieces kind of inspired by the major themes of the data, which I think made the data even more powerful, to be able to see representation from an artistic perspective," Game said.

"There were many veterans actually from our program who participated in the qualitative data collection component, and what we saw is many



people identify nature as a source of healing, especially for individuals who are coping with traumatic experiences,” she added.

“There’s an example of one of the veterans we worked with who shared how after having dealt with killing people through his service and being in the process of recovering from that experience, being able to create life and to be around life, to plant something in the ground, and then to reflect on it, to create artwork and [have] creative expression was very powerful. The researcher who worked with us on the report phrased it as a kind of restorative justice, because you’re confronting [trauma] in a way that is healing.”

According to Game, further proof that the program is working is that program participants themselves actively work to help the community grow its partnerships.

“They’re out in the community thinking about, ‘Oh, Brushwood should partner with XYZ organization because they’re doing amazing work,’” she said. “One of the bus drivers from Lovell helped to connect us to this group, Growing Healthy Veterans, which is another organization in our region that has community gardens that provide opportunities for veterans to help grow food and access food. He helped bridge that connection, and now we have this really strong partnership with them. One of our staff serves on their board.”

She also acknowledged that it’s important to tackle issues like the well-being of military and veteran populations at the community level, in addition to any statewide or national offerings, as local organizations tend to have greater flexibility.

“There’s so much opportunity for this work, but it’s challenging to be nimble when you are a very large system, and I think that’s a huge asset that community-based arts organizations can bring—this nimbleness, this ability to be responsive to the needs of different populations,” she said. “It’s actually a really efficient use of resources in many cases because of that. I just hope that there is a lot of investment in this work in the future, across the health care space, because there is so much need.”

*Carolyn Coons is a staff assistant in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.*







# **Resilience and Opportunity**

**The Fort Apache Heritage Foundation  
Reclaims Its Land and Community**

**BY PAULETTE BEETE**

**All photos © Thinc Design. All rights reserved**



**A**ccording to a recent story in the *New York Times*, at one point in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there were more than 500 boarding schools for Native children across the United States, more than three quarters of which were federally supported. Children were often forcibly removed from their homes and sent to these schools where they were stripped of their original names and given English-language ones, their traditions and languages were forbidden, and contact with the families left behind was severely curtailed. The children were often engaged in forced labor, and the chief educational goal was assimilation into non-Native culture. Some children died under the harsh conditions; those that survived were left traumatized, a trauma that continues to haunt generations of families still today. As U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo) noted in the *Times* piece, “Federal Indian boarding school policies have impacted every Indigenous person I know. Some are survivors, some are descendants, but we all carry this painful legacy in our hearts and the trauma that these policies and these places have inflicted.”

The Theodore Roosevelt Indian Boarding School, one of the federally supported schools that remains in operation, is located in Arizona. Sharing the site is the now-decommissioned U.S. Army’s Fort Apache. For decades, these twin representatives of colonial power kept strict watch over a people whose land had been usurped, reducing their lives to a subsistence level governed not by the values the Apache had held for centuries but by a system of laws and regulations determined to break the people’s spirit, with the supposed intention of creating “good Americans.” Despite everything, the Apache people have persisted. Today, with support from an NEA Our Town grant, the agency’s creative placemaking grants program that supports activities that integrate arts and design into local efforts, the Fort Apache Heritage Foundation is working with a range of partners to actively reclaim the site now known as the Fort Apache and Theodore Roosevelt School National Historic Landmark for its community. They will be turning a place of loss and grief into a place of rejuvenation, reconnection, and healing.

According to Executive Director Krista Beazley (White Mountain Apache), the foundation’s mission includes education, health and wellness, preservation, and economic development. They also co-manage both a gift shop that sells local crafts and Nohwike’ Bágowa, the White Mountain Apache Tribe Cultural Center and

Museum. The foundation is actively engaged in rehabilitating the natural landscape as well as existing historic structures on the site’s 300 acres of protected land to meet community needs such as housing, office space, athletic fields, and places to gather. “The tribe is very in need of spaces just to do programs,” Beazley explained. “On the reservation, we have a shortage of living quarters. It’s so sad that close to 1,200 tribal members are on a waiting list for a home to be built. Most of our structures that are rehabbed we try to rent to commercial and residential tenants.”

The foundation’s board secretary, John Welch, a trained archaeologist who has worked with the tribe for decades, noted that reclaiming the entirety of the site for use by the tribe is at the heart of the healing process. “In the Apache way of thinking about the world, there’s no separation between the land, the spirit, the mind, and the body. To the extent that we can heal the land at and around Fort Apache and eliminate the boundaries that have been erected between Fort Apache and the rest of the land, [it will] enable people to be healthy through greater connections to the land.”

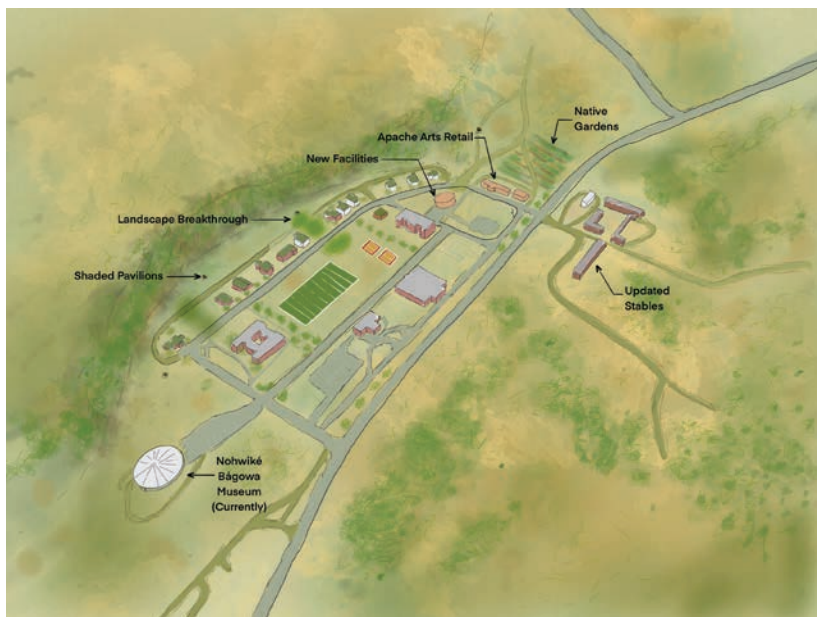
He added, “We want to turn the place kind of inside out, because it was set up architecturally and institutionally to be a bounded place where people were brought in and their attentions focused in on the military power structure that was at the core of it, and then the school power structure.”

In order to make sure that the foundation’s plans are in alignment with community priorities

◀ Visual projection of a view from the back side of Fort Apache right across the canyon.

▼ Former boys dormitory at the Theodore Roosevelt Indian Boarding School.





▲ Map of Fort Apache Historic Park and rendering of proposed gathering space.

and values, the Our Town grant has been used to support a series of listening sessions facilitated by Thinc Design, a New York City-based design and exhibits studio. Welch said, “We wanted to hit a reset button and say, ‘Hey what are we missing? What are we forgetting about?’ And to talk to people, to go a bit more systematically through segments of the community: religious leadership, community leadership, youth leadership, artisan leadership, and representation of communities that aren’t normally brought into the fray, including [those] that are unempowered, even in an unempowered community of Apache people.”

Based on these conversations, a number of community priorities arose, such as language preservation. “It’s a bittersweet area, but still they consider Fort Apache as the cultural site, and language preservation is where it should all start,” said Beazley. “One of the elders, I remember him saying, ‘When you come on to

Fort Apache, I want to put a sign that says when you pass this sign, you have to speak Apache.’”

Welch added another community need is “lots of spaces for intergenerational contact, lots of places where elders and kids would feel comfortable interacting in shady green places with access to water and places to sit down. It’s a community of over 10,000 people, and there’s just no place for people to go and play and sit in the shade and watch the kids and be Apache.”

Even though the project is in early stages, and was delayed, as most everything was, by the onset of the COVID pandemic, there are already signs of healing. For example, as new buildings are planned and existing ones rehabbed, the designs reflect Apache ideas of harmony and balance, with a preference for organic shapes. Describing a site visit by a group of tribal engineers to a possible location for a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) lab, Welch said, “They’ve never been inside a building in Fort Apache, and they walk in and they’re just like, ‘This is freaking cool! Look at the cool structure. Look at the thick adobe walls, these gigantic, thick timbers.’ To me, when somebody walks in and lights up in a historic building and says, ‘I can share the vision of this place as something that’s going to be good for kids, have them not be afraid that something bad is going to happen to them because they’re at Fort Apache,’ that’s success.”

Beazley also reported that the local health center has organized foraging trips for traditional foods, such as acorns, and the foundation has partnered with the local farm to reintroduce Apache foodways such as wild tea and traditional cornbread. Even the annual fun run represents Apache tradition as, according to Beazley, the tribe was originally nomadic, traveling to different areas for food sources until they were confined to the reservation.

The project’s next steps include securing funding to continue restoring the site’s historic buildings. They are also working to make sure that even more community feedback is integrated into the planning process. Beazley noted that she also hopes to strengthen their relationship with their partners.

Though it will take years for the Fort Apache site and community to be completely healed, the healing is well underway. As Welch put it, “People are starting to see the place as opportunity, as [a source of] pride.”

*Paulette Beete is the social media manager in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.*



Accent Pontiac combined ensembles perform their original composition "Drum City" at their 2023 Winter Showcase.



# Transforming Lives Through Music Education

A Look at Michigan's Accent Pontiac

BY AUNYE BOONE

All photos courtesy of Jeff Dunn Photography

**I**n 2014, armed with a generous commitment of one million dollars from Kirk's Capital Campaign, Kirk in the Hills Presbyterian Church embarked on a journey to create a project that would touch the lives of its

neighboring community, Pontiac, Michigan. Driven by a deep-rooted love for music and a belief in its ability to touch the human spirit, the Kirk leaders researched various avenues for social change through music. It was during this



▲ Accent Pontiac musician Validity Shirley performing in bucket band at the 2023 End of Year Showcase Concert.

exploration that they stumbled upon the world of El Sistema-inspired programs—a global movement that has brought the gift of music to thousands of children worldwide, transforming their lives and strengthening communities.

The values and principles of El Sistema resonated deeply with the Kirk leaders, and the decision was made to launch Accent Pontiac, a music education organization where children from the Pontiac School District come together to learn, grow, and unlock their full potential. Accent Pontiac serves more than 270 students, providing a free comprehensive music education experience that includes in-school and after-school classes. Through community-based partnerships, students receive transportation, daily snacks, and meals. The summer programs offer day camps, overnight experiences, and scholarships for students. Sommer Dawson, Accent Pontiac's executive director, said, "Music brings the community together. When Accent Pontiac students perform, they create bonds with their audiences and boost community pride. Music adds vibrancy to communities and strengthens our sense of belonging and connection with others."

A distinctive feature that sets Accent Pontiac apart is its unwavering commitment to giving children a voice, allowing them to compose their own music. Composition classes at the organization foster active listening, teamwork,

and collaboration. Students come together to craft original pieces of music, requiring them to collaborate closely in order to integrate all elements into their new compositions. "Accent Pontiac has seen the powerful impact that music has on Pontiac students, including greater confidence, improved focus, increased school attendance, and stronger leadership skills. When a child discovers that they can create something of beauty and contribute that to their community, it can change the whole trajectory of what that child believes is possible for their life," said Dawson.

Each activity at the organization is crafted to be culturally sensitive and place

students at the forefront of their experiences. Alongside the musical curriculum, they have established a social-emotional curriculum that encompasses self-awareness, relationship-building, effective decision-making, and self-management. Dawson said, "We provide leadership activities throughout programming: younger students may be asked to count off the start of a piece or introduce a piece to the audience at a performance; older students may be asked to lead a piece during a rehearsal or performance, or to mentor a younger student."

The onset of the COVID pandemic brought into sharp focus the mental health concerns faced by students across the nation, including those in Pontiac. Dawson said, "Students have shared feelings of anxiety and uncertainty with Accent Pontiac staff, and this has become more prevalent as students approach middle school. Our after-school programming supports students by providing a consistent presence with trusted adults that students can rely on." Additionally, Accent Pontiac partnered with the Pontiac School District to offer students access to professional mental health services, when needed.

"I think some of the most important lessons we learned [from the pandemic] were around flexibility in our approach and to the specific needs of each of our students and families. During the pandemic, we pivoted to providing individualized lessons with students at their



homes, outside on their porch,” said Dawson. This customized approach remains integral to the organization’s mission, as they continue to assess each student’s unique circumstances and address any obstacles to their participation, including transportation and food accessibility. This current school year, with support from the NEA, Accent Pontiac will expand after-school programming at Pontiac Middle School to serve students transitioning from Herrington Elementary School, Walt Whitman Elementary School, and Alcott Elementary School.

Accent Pontiac’s students recently performed and received a standing ovation at the State of the City Address, an event that had more than 300 people in attendance. Dawson said, “By providing opportunities for Accent Pontiac youth to perform throughout the community, we not only develop the joy and confidence of Pontiac youth, we develop the pride of the Pontiac community in seeing its youth thrive through music.” Dawson added, “I received an email from a community group saying that they saw our students perform at the State of the City Address. She said that they were amazing and wondered if we would be available to participate in their upcoming event.”

Accent Pontiac is continuing to expand, hosting a four-day overnight musical retreat in West Michigan for a group of middle-school students, and looking into partnering with

another El Sistema-inspired organization (i.e., Kalamazoo Kids in Tune or EcoSistema) for special programming that brings students together through music.

Reflecting on the organization’s impact thus far, Dawson said, “Social change is not something that takes place overnight; it is a gradual change in mindset and a societal view that can often take decades to fully achieve. We are achieving social change through music by providing opportunities for Pontiac students to be seen as leaders and creators, with hopes that how they are viewed by the community becomes the norm for Pontiac youth. Our young musicians are helping bring their community together through music.”

*Aunye Boone is the editor of American Artscape.*



◀ Accent Pontiac musicians Dynasty Smith (left) and Early Porchia (right) performing on percussion at their 2023 End of Year Showcase concert.



# Lifting the Curtain on Building Health

Creating the Roadmap for  
Recovery and Resilience in Theater

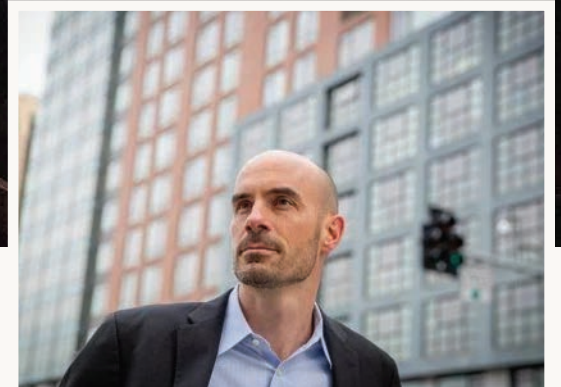
BY CAROLYN COONS

▲ Joseph Allen.  
Photo courtesy of  
Joseph Allen

**L**ess than three months after performing arts venues across the country began closing their doors in response to the COVID national emergency, Harvard University's American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.) and the Healthy Buildings Program at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health released Roadmap for Recovery and Resilience in Theater, an

online guide that uses public health principles to inform theaters of best practices to keep staff and audiences safe, evolving as the science around COVID advances.

The project was spearheaded by A.R.T.'s artistic director Diane Paulus and Joseph Allen, director of the Healthy Buildings Program and associate professor at the Harvard T.H.





Chan School of Public Health. Allen's academic background is in exposure and risk science, and his research is focused on how indoor air quality affects health—expertise that was highly sought after during the pandemic. Allen served as commissioner of the Lancet COVID-19 Commission, an interdisciplinary initiative convened to provide recommendations and address crises that arose from the pandemic, and has written opinion pieces for the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *USA Today*, providing insight on how best to combat the spread of COVID.

Allen spoke with the National Endowment for the Arts about creating the roadmap with A.R.T. and how performing artists and theaters are uniquely positioned to advocate for public health interventions.

"I'm a fan of performing arts, have been my entire life, and I love the work of the American Repertory Theater," said Allen. "Maybe a year or so before the pandemic, I started working with Diane Paulus, who directs A.R.T., on their new theater that was being built on the Harvard campus."

They sought input from professors and community members on its design. "We had a great discussion with the architects, the engineers, and the artistic team about this new building and started to talk about not only energy-efficient buildings, but also healthy buildings," Allen said. As COVID began to sweep across the globe, Allen turned his attention to the issue of airborne transmission of the virus. "Once you accept that [COVID spreads through the air], then you know how you manage the building is going to have a major impact, specifically around ventilation and filtration," he explained. "If you take some basic control measures, we can keep people safe in any environment."

Paulus and Allen recognized that the performing arts faced unique challenges during the pandemic, as theaters were forced to shut down. They also understood that their combined knowledge could help keep people safe indoors, even in theaters. "We decided to take the meetings we were having at A.R.T. with their staff, what we were going to do in their theater, and turn it into a larger project to share this information of how we were thinking about recovery

and resilience in theaters," Allen said. "We wanted to bring some of this science forward, recognizing [that] we have an obligation. We are a university that had a school of public health and a world-class theater—there aren't that many of them."

The response to the roadmap was in Allen's words, "terrific." "The feedback I got was that it was a helpful resource and helpful to have somewhere to turn [in a confusing time]. Our goal was to make it really actionable and solutions-oriented, such that any building anywhere could have been a space where you could congregate and keep risk low," Allen stated.

Making improvements to building health does not have to be complex or expensive. In fact, Allen pointed out that the Lancet COVID-19 Commission's report, *The First Four Healthy Building Strategies Every Building Should Pursue to Reduce Risk from COVID-19*, emphasized four essential strategies: getting building tune-ups, bringing in outdoor air, upgrading filters, and deploying portable air cleaners. "Health isn't just absence of disease or avoidance of disease," Allen noted. "There are the pro-health benefits like feeling good and overall well-being and being able to perform optimally, and indoor air quality influences those aspects of health too."

While theaters pay attention to air quality, with a focus on thermal comfort, Allen believes it's time to broaden the perspective, such as, "How do we improve air quality beyond making sure it's comfortable from a temperature perspective? Then we can think about water

▼ Audience at pre-show for American Repertory Theater's production of *WILD: A Musical Becoming* in 2021. Photo by Nile Scott Studios



quality, and we should think about the materials we use. A lot of the products we put in buildings have toxic chemicals that interfere with hormone systems. COVID has opened up the door to a wider conversation on what else matters in the building related to health," he said. The project's healthy building strategies extend beyond COVID mitigation. By improving air quality throughout an entire theater, the risk is lowered for COVID, influenza, and other respiratory illnesses. "The beauty of your building, the inspiration, the awe, the acoustics, the lighting, clearly theaters think about all that, but there are these other aspects of how they actually influence health beyond the performance, including the spaces the public doesn't see. It's not just the auditorium," he said.

Artists occupy a powerful place in shaping society's perception and decisions. "The wider role artists play in society are messaging and standard setting. Others are listening and paying attention. Artists are inspiring and bringing their message beyond what happens in the theater itself," said Allen. "Theaters are a highly visible community, and that pushes society forward both

in terms of the art, but also decisions about how they operate."

The healthy building movement is gaining momentum, and Allen believes that it is one of the greatest public health opportunities that our society can benefit from. The future of theaters is not only about the performances but also about the health and well-being of those who enter their doors. Reflecting on the path forward, Allen said, "We need to start thinking of our buildings as a public health intervention tool, and the goals and mission of theater and performing arts are aligned with the goals of public health."

*Carolyn Coons is a staff assistant in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.*

▼ Adi Dixit, Rowan Magee, Celia Mei Rubin, and Nikki Calonge in *Life of Pi* at A.R.T. Photo by Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman for Murphy Made







# MUSIC AS MEDICINE

## LA Opera Sets the Stage for Community Health, Wellness, and Recovery

BY PAULETTE BEETE

All photos courtesy of LA Opera

**W**hen we think of the art of opera, we may think of lush, embroidered melodies, ornate costumes, and stories told in languages we may not understand. At its most basic level, however, the art of singing opera is simply about controlling the ability to breathe. Air over the vocal cords creates lustrous sound, and even more air amplifies and sustains that sound as it exits the mouth. In other words, while opera can certainly elevate the spirit, it also is rooted in one of the body's most basic functions. This idea—that music can be an essential part of healing, in a holistic sense that is linked to both our physical and mental well-being—is at the heart of LA Opera's health, wellness, and recovery programs.

The company's commitment to these activities reflects its profound belief that, as a nonprofit arts organization, it exists to serve the Los Angeles community. This includes not just the presentation of high-quality opera performances—*Don Giovanni* and *The Barber of Seville* are highlights of this year's season—but also the power of opera as a vehicle to meet other community needs.

Tehvon Fowler-Chapman helms *Connects*, the company's community engagement and learning department. As he explained, "Everything we do at LA Opera is for the community, right? It's part of the idea of social impact within an opera company. When we are talking about community service and social impact, it is more or less saying

▲ Veterans Circle participants discuss their experiences and connect with others at an LA Opera post-show talk.



the art is fantastic, but it is not the center. It is the catalyst for serving something that is greater than itself, the community.”

Under the umbrella of *Connects*, the company’s health-related activities are diverse, ranging from one-on-one bedside hospital visits with Alzheimer’s patients and patients with traumatic brain injuries to online breathing workshops for those facing pulmonary issues, such as Long COVID and asthma. The company also works with military veterans suffering health challenges by hosting post-performance conversations where opera is a jumping off point to encourage participants to share their own stories and develop a sense of connection to a larger community.

“Now that we have looked at wellness in a more holistic way, we’re thinking about our education programs beyond the fact that they teach people about opera. They also give people a chance to connect as a community and to engage in art making. Those two things in themselves are therapeutic and help people not just make sense of the world but also help them in ways that we would not have thought about in terms of well-being,” explained Fowler-Chapman.

To develop and facilitate its health, wellness, and recovery programs, LA Opera works with a number of health care partners, including Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center, UCLA (University of California Los Angeles) Health, and the Mindful Veteran Project. “We don’t do this in a vacuum. It is done in partnership with health care professionals,” Fowler-Chapman acknowledged. “So the other important thing for us is being receptive to the feedback from our health care partners.”

Fowler-Chapman views the company’s wellness activities as giving the community another way to connect with the company, one that builds a personal relationship even if someone doesn’t consider themselves an opera lover. “Our music and mindfulness programming is trying to give the space for people to actually use music as their own catalyst. It doesn’t feel like we have to be the center of it, but we’re actually giving them tools to process the things that they are doing,” he said.

Nani Sinha, a longtime teaching artist with LA Opera, is certified as a trauma-informed instructor and provider as well as additionally certified by the National Association of Dementia and Alzheimer’s Caregivers and Practitioners. Like Fowler-Chapman, Sinha believes that arts organizations have a powerful role to play in supporting community health and wellness efforts. She said, “I think it is so important that the opera get involved, or any arts organization get involved, because music is inherently human. Music is important for brain health and for physical health, and the fact that LA Opera recognizes that and champions this is so important.”

Having suffered a life-changing accident that initially left her paralyzed and unable to sing, Sinha has experienced firsthand how her training as an opera singer helped her recover not just emotionally but physically. “One of the doctors at UCLA, Dr. Nida Qadir, who is on the pulmonary team there, she said, ‘Opera singers are the Olympian athletes of breathing.... Who better to [to teach breathing] than an opera singer?’”

Inspired by her own medical experience as well as a similar program by the National English Opera, Sinha and fellow LA Opera Teaching Artist

▼ LEFT: Renée Fleming at the 2022 Arts and Health Week Summit.

RIGHT: LA Opera Connects artists perform holiday carols at local hospitals.





Michele Patzakakis worked with UCLA Health to develop a six-week workshop, which can be held over videochat, to help pulmonary patients with their recovery. Each session includes mindfulness work, gentle movement, and breathing exercises, as well as the singing of simple songs such as nursery rhymes.

"The more that we learn about the human body, the brain and disease and healing, the more that we are realizing that it's not just about medicine, that music and art and dance...help us down regulate the nervous system and help increase serotonin and feeling good," said Sinha. She added, "Singing is not for special occasions only. It's a part of nervous system reset. It's a part of mental health. It's a part of physical health."

Through *Connects*, LA Opera also convenes arts and civic leaders, medical practitioners, teaching artists, arts and music therapists, and others for an annual Los Angeles County Arts and Health Week Summit aimed at building connections among those working at the intersection of arts and health and sharing knowledge. NEA Chair Maria Rosario Jackson participated in the 2023 summit this past June; the summit focused on creative aging and included participants such as Renée Fleming and Christopher Bailey of the World Health Organization.

As Fowler-Chapman described, "So many people, not just in Los Angeles but in the country, practice forms of music in therapy and arts in therapy and arts as therapy. But we rarely meet together to talk about the shared challenges and opportunities that exist. Arts and Health Week was more or less created to actually bring people into the room to share ideas, to talk about both

[theory and practice] so that we can all walk away from this feeling as though we are gaining new knowledge, gaining new contacts, having the ability to make the world that we exist in a little bit smaller but in a way that we can expand on the impact that we provide through these programs."

He also said that the summit can help redefine what falls under the mantle of the healing arts. For example, at the most recent summit, a martial arts practitioner made the point that while the martial arts are considered a sport, they also include mindfulness and healing elements. Fowler-Chapman noted, "As an asthmatic but also a black belt in Taekwondo, I recognized that there are meditative practices through the art of movement. Tai Chi is all about centering and mindfulness."

It goes without saying that investing in community-focused activities has the added benefit of helping the company to build its audience. Still, Fowler-Chapman said that there's much more at stake than ticket sales. "There's always going to be a need for us to sell tickets, but I think the bigger part of when we're talking about being a nonprofit organization, we're talking about being a cultural institution," he said. "There is the importance of filling the need of the community because that is where I believe nonprofits are meant to exist, where the needs are."

*Paulette Beete is the social media manager in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.*

▼ LEFT: A patient engages in a remote music therapy workshop at Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center.

RIGHT: Nani Sinha conducts a workshop as part of LA Opera's *Connects* program.



# Check out our online-only material!

We feature an audio piece on City Lore's From Heritage to Health program that highlights the ways in which storytelling and the arts can inform the diverse practices of medical professionals, and a video piece on Dance Exchange's Climate Initiative, which uses dance and community-based performance projects to strengthen and advance equity and community well-being.



▲ Grandpa's Hand by Soren Glassen, from City Lore's program From Heritage to Health: An Art-Centered Approach to Cultural Competence (H2H). Courtesy of Soren Glassen and City Lore