

NEA ARTS

Number 3, 2017

FOSTERING AND SUPPORTING *ACCESS TO THE ARTS*



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This issue

For many of us, we take it for granted that we can visit a museum on the weekends, purchase tickets to a performance, or register ourselves or our children for an art class. But for many communities in the United States, options for participating in the arts are limited at best, whether because of scarce economic resources, geographic isolation, or, as is the case for people living in institutions or homeless shelters, general marginalization from society.

But the National Endowment for the Arts is committed to ensuring all Americans have access to the arts, no matter who they are or where they live. For example, nearly 14 percent of our annual grants are awarded to rural, non-metropolitan areas. Forty-three percent of NEA grants serve high-poverty neighborhoods. Over the past ten years, we've also awarded nearly \$5 million to organizations that provide healing arts services to military service members, older adults, and youth with physical or mental challenges. Programs such as Creative Forces and the Citizens' Institute on Rural Design allow us to reach additional Americans, in these cases military service members and residents of rural areas, respectively.

In this issue of *NEA Arts*, we'll look at how the NEA provides arts access to various audiences that other funders might not reach, from homeless women and teens with mental health issues, to rural communities and Native Americans living on reservations.

"Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens," decreed the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965, which created the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. "It must therefore foster and support a form of education, and access to the arts and humanities..." These are opportunities that no American should be denied, and the NEA will continue working to ensure the arts are indeed available to all.

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About the cover:

First Peoples Fund's Rolling Rez Arts bus brings workshops and training in the arts, business, and finance to remote areas of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. Photo courtesy of First Peoples Fund



OPENING EYES, OPENING HEARTS

Georgia College Brings the Arts

BY GRACE SCHaub



When Karen Berman arrived at Georgia College to chair its department of theater and dance, it was something of a shock to her system. She had arrived from Washington, DC, where she said the arts “are everywhere... It’s in the air, it’s in the wind.” But in the small town of Milledgeville, Georgia, the college is one of the few providers of theater and dance throughout a multicounty area, a region largely made up of low-income, rural communities.

Needless to say, when the school invited Ayikodans, considered Haiti’s premier dance troupe, to serve a residency at the college in April 2016, it was a rare opportunity for students and Milledgeville residents to experience international dance. In fact, staff believe that the dance company was the first international guest artist ever to perform at the school, allowing the community to experience an art form that they may not otherwise have had access to. “I’ve seen Baryshnikov; I’ve seen Nureyev; I’ve seen Alvin Ailey,” said Berman. “For these students

▲ Jeanguy Saintus and Ayikodans lead an assembly at Trinity Christian School in Dublin, Georgia, as part of their artist residency at Georgia College. Photo by Paul Accettura

to be able to watch this caliber of dance here in Milledgeville, Georgia, was just incredible.”

The school received funding from a 2016 National Endowment for the Arts Challenge America grant to arrange the dance residency as part of a multidisciplinary symposium titled “The Symposium on Performance of the African Diaspora as Social Change.” It was one of four grants the NEA has awarded to Georgia College

since 2010, which have supported projects that provide better access to dance in this rural area.

The symposium included various panels, workshops, and performances, and commenced with a presentation from Atlanta-based author and playwright Pearl Cleage. Cleage helped introduce the symposium’s theme of how the arts can be used as a catalyst for social change in diversifying and culturally enhancing a

▼ Ayikodans perform *Initiation*, choreographed by Jeanguy Saintus. Photo by Carl Juste



community. “The outcome of this was all about diversity of culture and learning and experiencing something we never have before,” said Berman.

Ayikodans made the symposium’s themes tangible through master classes for Georgia College students, a public performance, a matinee for local students in grades K through 12, and yoga and improv workshops, all of which were free of charge. Founded in Port-au-Prince,

Haiti, in 1988, the contemporary dance company is rooted in tradition, and was established to allow both men and women the opportunity to express themselves. Esteemed choreographer and Founding Artistic Director Jeanguy Saintus Riché was “delighted” to participate in the Georgia College residency, and described how it gave his company the chance to share real Haitian culture with the rural Georgia community.

“The information [people] usually have about a little country like Haiti—we’re talking about poverty, misery,” he said, referencing the hurricanes, earthquakes, and political upheaval that have garnered international headlines over the past decades. “They don’t know that we have artists, we have great dancers, we have choreographers, and we have dreams like people have anywhere else.” Thanks to the residency, he said, “People have better information about Haiti, about dance, about artists, and how we should enter art with each other as human beings.”

Berman agreed, noting that the residency helped reveal the humanity beneath the headlines. “When you watch Ayikodans, you see the struggle in Haitian history,” she said. “They bring that to life. It rips and tears at you. You see their history and their culture, and their joy and sorrow. It’s a new way of teaching history, a new way of teaching culture. It’s a way to reach young people that’s different from sitting in a class and reading about something. It’s very affecting and kind of life-changing.”

But even as residency audiences gained new appreciation for Haitian culture, light was also shed on commonalities between Haiti and Milledgeville, said Kristi Papailler, the grant’s project director and former assistant director of acting and directing at Georgia College. For instance, she noted the tight-knit families, economic hardship, and strong work ethic commonly found in rural communities, as well as a shared appreciation for the arts.

“In these rural communities [in Georgia], we have this really rich tradition of storytelling, as well as creating art that also helps to tell the story,” she said. “Haiti has a very rich culture of those things as well, like dance, storytelling, and visual art—being able to communicate in a very particular stylized way.” These commonalities, along with Georgia’s sizeable Haitian population, allowed Milledgeville residents “to make some connections around socio-economic status and see that the material wealth one might have does not define who you are or the value of your expressions,” said Papailler.



Saintus noted that the arts provide another cultural necessity for both communities: a means to keep dreaming. “Underserved communities—they don’t have hope,” he said. To counteract this, he established a scholarship program at the Ayikodans’ affiliate dance school that allows Haitian youth to enjoy free dance training, while Georgia College has a strong focus on community engagement, providing free performances and dance and theater classes to area youth.

But providing access to Ayikodans helped create another level of possibility for Milledgeville students, and encouraged them to imagine what they could achieve. “It allows youth in our communities in middle Georgia that may not otherwise have had access to this international dance company to start dreaming,” said Papailler. “You know, ‘I can do this dance right here in Georgia,’ or ‘Maybe one day, I will be able to travel around the world through dance.’”

Berman agreed. “The importance of having a professional company come to raise the bar, to give us new expectations and insights for our

students—it’s just an incredible and inspiring opportunity,” she said.

Regardless of dance aspirations however, Papailler said that experiencing Ayikodans was empowering for the community-at-large. “It was particularly impactful to the audience because of the mastery and the beauty, just the excellence of what Ayikodans does on a stage,” she said. “You are able to watch part of the human experience that connects you to the present moment as well as affirms the possibilities for your own personal [experience and] the collective human experience.”

Although affirming cross-cultural, collective human ties was the wider goal, the residency also connected audience members with people who were much more familiar: their neighbors. “You have community members seated together that may not necessarily be sitting together otherwise,” said Papailler. “You have a community that’s then united in sharing space and appreciating this artistic expression that’s new to everybody in the room. That becomes powerful.”

▼ Sephora Germain and Emmanuel Gerant in Jeanguy Saintus’ *Rencontres*. Photo by Carl Juste





It can also become infectious. Berman described one of the shows Ayikodans performed for elementary school children, which Saintus concluded by calling all 450 students down from the bleachers. With singers, dancers, and drummers creating what Berman described as a Carnival atmosphere, the children participated in a call-and-response dance and snaked through the gym in conga line fashion. “One little child, a first-grader, came up to me and looked in my face and said, ‘This is the best field trip I’ve ever gone on!’” remembered Berman. “She wasn’t even on a field trip! She was in her own auditorium! But she had been swept away. They were swept away to another world, to this Haitian Mardi Gras.”

Although Georgia College’s plans to establish a study abroad program in Haiti were canceled following Hurricane Matthew in October 2016, the school instead launched a fundraising drive to provide aid for the country. It was the type of gesture that seems to suggest the compassion and connection that the residency set out to accomplish. Berman is hopeful that arts experiences such as these will continue to have profound effects.

“We’re trying to open eyes, open doors, open hearts. We’re living in a world where there is prejudice and bias,” she said. “What I want my students to walk away with is, first of all, empathy. I want them to have understanding. I want them to embrace all races and genders and religions and have an appreciation for other cultures. I’m trying to bridge cultures, bridge communities, give people new insights, break down barriers.”



Grace Schaub was an intern in the NEA Office of Public Affairs in summer 2017.

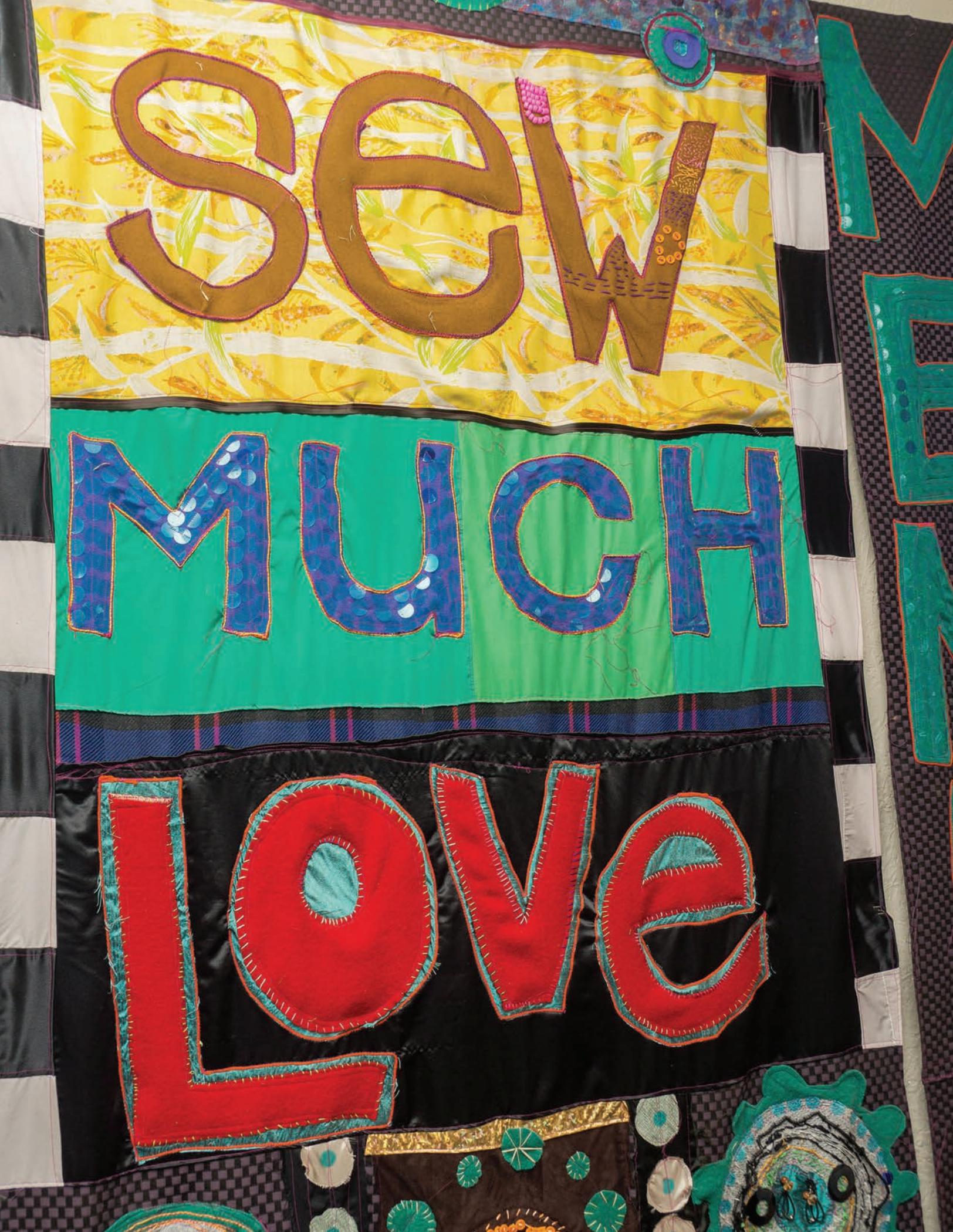
▲ Students at Trinity Christian School in Dublin, Georgia, get up and dance with Ayikodans. Photo by Paul Accettura

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STITCHING LIVES TOGETHER

BLUES CITY CULTURAL CENTER'S SEW MUCH LOVE PROJECT

BY REBECCA SUTTON

All photos by Nellgene Hardwick, courtesy of Last Dream Productions

“How can we expect a woman to navigate her life in 90 days?” asked Deborah Frazier, executive director of Blues City Cultural Center, a Memphis nonprofit she co-founded with her husband Levi in 1979. She was referring to the maximum stay of many of the nation’s emergency homeless shelters, which are designed to offer short-term housing for women who find themselves unexpectedly homeless. “You have to find a job. You have to find a place to live. You have to put your children in school—all those things in 90 days.”

To help address the issue, three years ago Blues City Cultural Center launched the program Sew Much Love, which advances the organization’s mission to empower lives through the arts, particularly among communities that have been traditionally marginalized. Memphis has a homeless population of roughly 1,800 individuals, 500 of whom are women at any given time.

In partnership with the nearby Salvation Army and Missionaries of Charity shelters, Sew Much Love engages multidisciplinary artists to guide homeless women through creative projects such as writing poetry, making masks, and sewing dolls, quilts, and costumes. The program also provides a stipend and daily

meal, which together create a safe, supportive refuge during daytime hours when both shelters require residents to vacate the premises. The program received its first NEA grant this year.

At its most basic, Sew Much Love allows women to momentarily escape their burdens, and enjoy a few hours when they are free to “dream and play and create,” said Frazier, a release that she believes is a necessity. But its deeper, longer-term goals are to help women transform creatively, emotionally, and even economically, as they learn about the possibilities of creative entrepreneurship.

It is a journey that the women undertake together. “One of the things we try to establish in the beginning is that this is a community, much like times of old when women created sewing circles and quilting bees,” said poet Carolyn Matthews, project coordinator for Sew Much Love. “Usually we’ll open up in the morning and ask, ‘How are you feeling? Do you want to check in? Do you need anything from us? How can we serve you?’”

For women who have been turned out by husbands or families, who have escaped abusive relationships or are dealing with the lonely struggle of addiction or mental health issues, even simple questions such as these imply a support system to which they might be unaccustomed. Positive feedback is constant,

◀ A quilt created by participants in Blues City Cultural Center’s Sew Much Love program.



▲ A Sew Much Love participant creates a doll.

and no judgments are passed. Sew Much Love also provides occasional cooking lessons, visits from life coaches, and help with obtaining proper identification and establishing bank accounts, all of which deepens this sense of support.

As they accept Sew Much Love as a safe space, women often find themselves revealing their emotions and experiences through their art. For example, when Sew Much Love participants make dolls, they are encouraged to give them a name. “So you come up with a name like Nameless Faceless,” said Matthews. “That’s powerful for a person to be able to verbalize that the reason they’re naming their doll this is because this is the way they feel.

They feel invisible. To get to the point where you can release something that vulnerable into the world—it’s freeing. You feel safe enough to do that. You are releasing that in a group of people who understand that, and are willing to hear you.”

Frazier agreed. “A lot of what we do is just have [women] recognize that what they say has merit and is important.”

Carol, 52, a program participant, said this camaraderie is part of the reason she has participated in Sew Much Love for the past year, after finding herself homeless following a divorce. “Knowing that there’s somebody you can become friends with and talk to, that has your back and has gone through the same kinds of circumstances you have—it’s a very enjoyable environment,” she said.

Matthews is careful to note, however, that while the program might provide a sense of healing, it is not designed to be art therapy. But even so, gentle questioning about projects women have made provides plenty of opportunities for them to engage with the motivations behind their creative choices. “It’s frivolous and irresponsible to have art-making without taking advantage of meaning-making as well,” she said. “Meaning-making itself is cathartic because you’re providing a venue to release expression verbally and creatively about what’s going on inside you. They have an opportunity—if they want it—to express that and build through it.”

By identifying their patterns of negative self-talk, possibly for the first time, women begin the process of learning how to break the cycle. Paired with the discovery of their own creative powers, they see something in themselves that they might not have before: value.

“[Sew Much Love] makes you feel like you have some worth—that I do have some worth in the world,” said Carol.

Matthews said Carol’s experience is not uncommon among Sew Much Love participants. “Art-making is almost unparalleled in helping people see they have something of value in themselves,” said Matthews. “Making art is a place of reflection. It’s intentional. It’s organic at the same time. It’s spontaneous. It’s a whole process that brings [these women] to life, enlivens them, and opens them to new possibilities.”

One of these new possibilities that the program introduces is economic independence and financial stability. Annual exhibitions offer

showcases where visitors can purchase artwork made by program participants, which not only provides women with income but validates their talent and creativity. In August, Sew Much Love also ran a two-week pop-up shop on North Main Street thanks to funding from the Downtown Memphis Commission. Before the shop opened, women worked with retail professionals to learn about customer service and sales, providing valuable experience as they prepare to enter or re-enter the job market. Frazier also dreams of one day establishing a drop-in sewing enterprise, where Sew Much Love participants could make on-the-spot fabric repairs or alterations for clients.

These public-facing events also introduce the wider Memphis community to the individual stories that make up Memphis's homeless population—a population that is generally thought of as an abstract problem rather than in personal terms. “There’s something about being in close proximity and hearing a person’s story firsthand that impacts [people] in such a way that it will cause them to think twice about their preconceived notions,” said Matthews.

But Frazier stressed that changing public perception is more of a byproduct than a goal; the main priority has always been to change women’s perceptions of themselves. She noted that women are often too ashamed or afraid to come to presentations or receptions at Blues City Cultural Center’s offices where members of the general public might be. But last April, with support from the NEA, the women created costumes and puppets that they displayed in a parade and fashion show as part of the Taste of Memphis festival. “When we said ‘fashion show,’ everything changed,” said Frazier. “They became models. So it’s not so much that the community has a different idea of who they are. But *they* have a different idea of who they are.”

In a way, said Frazier, the emotional, social, and financial changes that Sew Much Love participants undergo are not so different from the creative process itself. “We have a lot of materials that have been donated to us—things that basically have been thrown away,” said Frazier. “What we’re saying is we’re repurposing not only [these materials], but we’re repurposing our lives.”

▼ Sew Much Love provides art-making opportunities for homeless women in Memphis, Tennessee.



Patrick Joel Pulliam
(Oglala Lakota)
leads a watercolor
workshop through
Rolling Rez Arts.



WEAVING THE SWEETGRASS BRAID

Rolling Rez Arts at Pine Ridge

BY VICTORIA HUTTER

All photos courtesy of First Peoples Fund

The Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in southwest South Dakota is big. At 3,469 square miles, the reservation is more than three times the size of Rhode Island's land mass with only 16 percent of the population of that state's capital, Providence, spread across the reservation's expanse. Eighty percent of residents are unemployed with 98 percent living below the federal poverty line. To say it is underserved is as vast an understatement as the breadth and beauty of the land.

And yet, the reservation has abundant artistic resources. A force in nurturing those resources is First Peoples Fund (FPF) based near Pine Ridge in Rapid City. Founded in 1995, the organization is committed to supporting Native-American artists, showcasing their work in all its variety, and channeling their creativity towards economic and social empowerment. Since 2007, FPF has been a regular NEA grantee.

Patrick Baker, director of the South Dakota Arts Council, cites the value of FPF in the council's efforts to serve those on Pine Ridge. "First Peoples Fund has become an effective and reliable way for the South Dakota Arts Council to help support some of the most underserved artists and communities in the entire state. It is heartening to know that the council's investment in First Peoples Fund will ultimately advance the interests of Native artists living on the Pine Ridge Reservation."

ENTER ROLLING REZ ARTS

One way of advancing the interests of Native artists in such remote places is to bring services to them instead of having artists travel to the services. Enter Rolling Rez Arts, a mobile artist studio, classroom, bank, and marketplace that travels across the reservation. A tricked-out airport shuttle bus, it features contemporary

images of charging buffalo on its exterior, created by FPF artist alumni and teacher Don Montileaux, a member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe. Inside the bus are tables for workshops, computers with design and film editing software, cameras, a cash register, a safe, and, very important in the summer, air conditioning. Lakota Federal Credit Union and ArtSpace Projects are partners with First Peoples Fund in Rolling Rez Arts. The Bush Foundation and ArtPlace America supported its creation while two NEA grants totaling \$160,000 have helped fund its programs.

The impetus for Rolling Rez Arts came from a 2013 position paper reporting on an earlier study that examined the economic viability of developing the art of Lakota artists as a means to financially sustain them and their communities.

The paper, *Establishing A Creative Economy: Art as an Economic Engine in Native Communities*, stated, "Native art has been indispensable in both preserving and perpetuating cultural practices through very challenging times as an inseparable element of life. Because of this long tradition of viewing art and culture holistically, modern day art has not been seen as a commodity that can evolve into an income-generating occupation." In other words, when art and culture have always been bound together, separating out art as an economic tool can be difficult for Native peoples to recognize and put into practice.

The study also revealed that 30 percent of those on Pine Ridge are artists (as compared to 1.5 percent nationally); 50 percent of Native households on Pine Ridge have a business that is based in the home and participates in an informal, trade-and-barter economy; and 79 percent of those home businesses are in the arts.

"I always say it's not really an informal sector economy," said FPF President Lori Lea Pourier (Oglala Lakota). "It's actually a thriving

economy. It's just not a 'viable' business in a Western way of thinking in terms of capitalism and entrepreneurship."

The study concluded, "The creative production of art and artistic expression are, today, among the most promising ways to expand the market economy in rural and urban Native communities."

WHAT'S ON THE BUS

Rolling Rez Arts has an impressive array of offerings that touch all aspects of building a successful career from the artistic as well as business perspectives. The bus embarked on its first drive in March 2016, and as of July 2017 has given 67 classes to more than 350 people, reaching across Pine Ridge and onto the neighboring Cheyenne River and Standing Rock Reservations.

Among the critical services it offers are "buying days." For artists from around the reservation who can't afford the time or gas to drive to retail outlets to sell their artwork, the bus provides access to markets. A buyer from the Heritage Center at the Red Cloud Indian School hosts buying days to purchase work that is then resold in the center's gift shop, with a small markup to cover expenses. The center is a key support within the reservation's creative community, selling art from more than 250 Lakota artists each year through its retail shop and website.

Pourier tells the story of Tony Richards, an Oglala Lakota jewelry maker. One day this spring, he couldn't make the drive to the Heritage Center to sell his work because his horses were foaling and he had to tend to the colts. So he was grateful he could take advantage of the bus's arrival and sold several bone chokers and beaded necklaces.

On the business side, the bus has banking services through a partnership with Lakota Funds and the Lakota Federal Credit Union. Established in 1986, Lakota Funds makes business loans and offers technical assistance, as well as financial management training, for families and businesses on Pine Ridge.

When Lakota Funds started, 85 percent of its clients had never used a checking or savings account and 75 percent had never received a loan. Today, Lakota Funds has made more than 900 loans totaling \$7.2 million, creating 1,415 jobs and 500 new businesses on Pine Ridge. Lakota Funds sponsored the Lakota Federal Credit Union in 2012 as the first and only federally insured financial institution serving the reservation. By having a mobile banking unit in the form of Rolling Rez Arts, the credit union gains more customers while far-flung artists have access to personal financial services.

In addition to banking, Rolling Rez Arts is a classroom for business courses such as FPF's Native Artist Professional Development curriculum, which covers how to write a business plan, create a budget, develop a pricing strategy, and other topics.

Bryan Parker (White Mountain Apache/Muscogee Creek/Mississippi Choctaw) is the arts coordinator and driver for Rolling Rez Arts, and a working artist specializing in multimedia. He said, "For some of the classes that Rolling Rez Arts offers, we contract local Native artists. Many of them are FPF fellow alumni from both the Cultural Capital and Artist in Business Leadership programs, and are award-winning artists nationally. They are important mentors to the emerging artists on Pine Ridge who are equally talented in their art medium."

Speaking of how he programs the art classes, which range from traditional practices such as ledger art and beadwork to comic illustrations and video editing, Parker said, "What I try to do is keep it more culturally relevant with the traditional art. But also, I like to bring on some artists who have more experience in the contemporary world and who are more hands-on with technology."

▼ Filmmaker and First Peoples Fund Artist in Business Leadership Fellow Razelle Benally (Oglala Lakota) teaches a youth filmmaking class aboard Rolling Rez Arts on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.



Parker's wife Molina is an Oglala Lakota beadworker who also teaches classes on the bus. Her career has been boosted by her connection with First Peoples Fund and the opportunities afforded by Rolling Rez Arts. Parker said, "We moved back here in about 2011 and we struggled for a few years. Then we heard about First Peoples Fund and I encouraged Molina to apply to the Artist in Business Leadership program, and she got it. It's opened up so many doors for her. I can't say it enough, but it's just amazing how far this has taken her in her professional career."

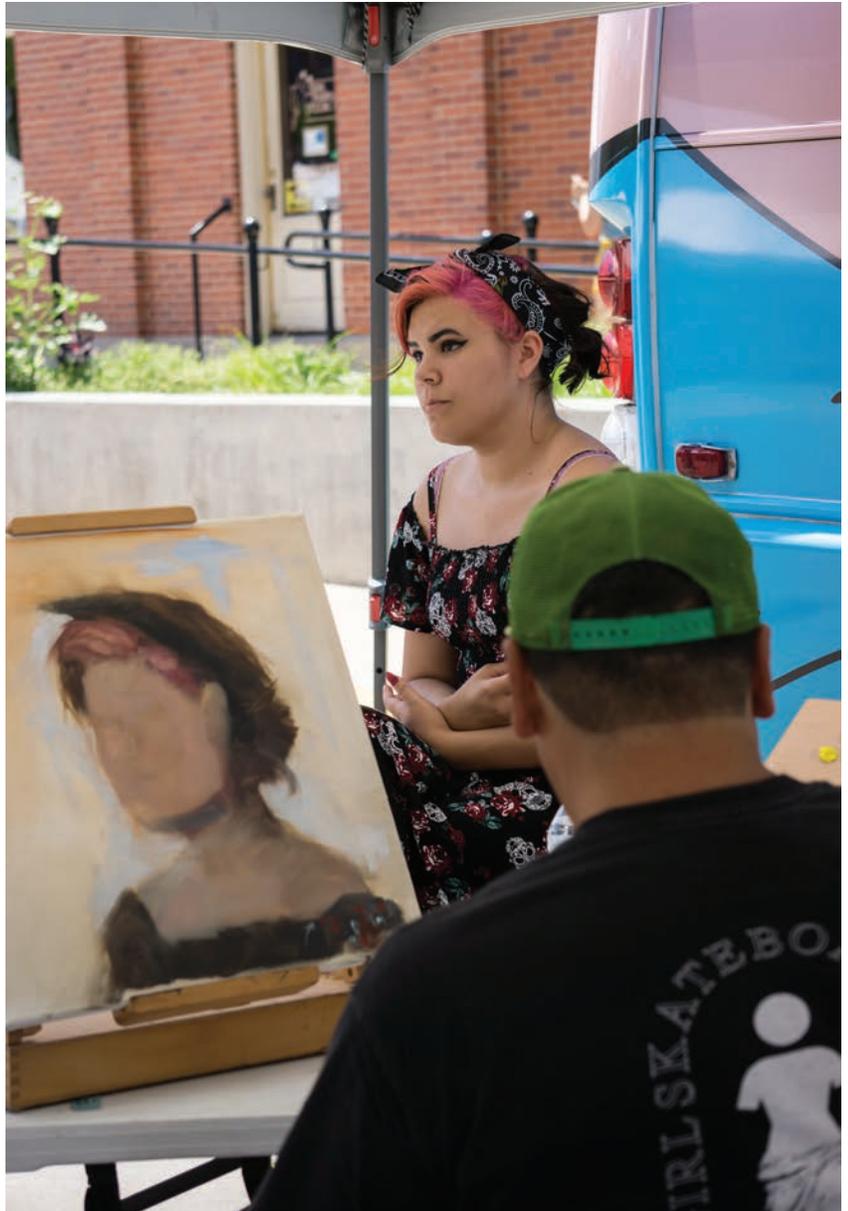
RIPPLES

At the opening ceremony for Rolling Rez Arts in October 2015, First Peoples Fund founder Jennifer Easton, who passed away in August, described it as one of the ripples that extended out from the pebble she dropped in 1995 when she started the organization. Another ripple is starting now, reaching out beyond Rolling Rez Arts to continue encouraging economic sustainability through the arts. An arts and business incubator, the Oglala Lakota Artspace is coming to Pine Ridge in 2018. The 8,500-square-foot facility will occupy five acres within the Lakota Prairie Ranch Resort property below the Oglala Lakota College campus.

The facility will include artist studios, a co-working space for business training and networking, a computer lab, gallery, recording studio, and administrative offices. Rolling Rez Arts and its programs will be managed from the incubator with the bus in an adjoining garage. Neighboring Oglala Lakota College will refer students, provide instructors, and spread the word across its campuses in all nine reservation districts.

What augurs well for the incubator's success is its strong undergirding of smart business—it is a limited liability corporation among FPF, Lakota Funds, and ArtSpace—plus extensive outreach to the community and to reservation and non-reservation organizations. This approach has already attracted interest and funding from the Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration as well as local and national foundations, not to mention the NEA. FPF recently received a \$150,000 Our Town grant to support the project.

With NEA funds, FPF is hiring a design consultant, architect Tammy Eagle Bull (Oglala Lakota) from Encompass Architects in Lincoln, Nebraska. Eagle Bull is working on architectural drawings that will be shared with reservation



residents from the nine districts for their feedback via Rolling Rez Arts. The project team hopes to break ground this fall before the ground freezes, with construction starting in the spring of 2018. Pourier said, "This is not a business incubator first. It's an artist space first and foremost."

And in that artist space, creativity, connection, and possibilities will grow. The bonds that form when artists have the chance to work together is reflected in the strengthening of First Peoples Fund's network of nonprofit partners and regional and national funders. "At FPF, we always talk about tightening that weave," said Pourier. "And as we weave, our work is growing in the region into what will result in a tightly woven sweetgrass braid." 🌀

▲ Cloud Medicine Crow (Hidatsa) teaches a portraiture class from Rolling Rez Arts at the Native POP art market and cultural celebration in Rapid City, South Dakota.



An Invitation to Create

Washington Center for the Performing Arts/ Avanti High School Partnership

BY ELIJAH LEVINE

▲ BodyVox's Eric Skinner leads a dance workshop at Avanti High School in Olympia, Washington. Photo courtesy of the Washington Center for the Performing Arts

If you walk by Chris Sogn's science class during the Earth sciences unit at Avanti High School in Olympia, Washington, you'll be greeted not only by wide-eyed, engaged students, but also by a hallway-turned-cavern, complete with stalagmites and stalactites. Venture down to Todd Thedell's math class and you might be struck by the student-made posters and fractals adorning every possible surface, as well as the ukuleles that the musical math teacher introduced into the robust curriculum. And

every October, John Hamby's English students create a haunted house during their study of macabre literature, and have an opportunity to share their own stories on the stage.

Avanti High School's arts-integrated curriculum reflects the school's capacity for thinking outside traditional teaching norms in order to better fit the unique needs of its students. Upwards of 97 percent of Avanti students have an anxiety disorder, and the school community of 150 endured 24 suicide attempts last year.

But the arts have been shown to have positive emotional effects. For example, they have been shown to reduce depression and anxiety, and can help people confront and process difficult emotions like frustration, grief, and anger. In conjunction with traditional academic subjects, Avanti's creative curriculum aims to create spaces that promote healing, boost confidence, and cultivate success.

So when Avanti guidance counselor Claire McGibbon was approached by Jill Barnes, executive director of the Washington Center for the Performing Arts, about a programming partnership, it seemed tailor-made for Avanti's uniquely gifted student population and arts-rich curriculum. Although McGibbon had previously served on the education committee of the Washington Center, which is just a ten-minute walk down the road from Avanti, it would be the first time the two entities officially collaborated.

Once the Washington Center and Avanti teamed up for the venture, Barnes called on BodyVox, a Portland-based dance troupe with whom the organization has cultivated a performance-based relationship, as well as Black

Violin, a Florida-based hip-hop and classical music act. With the support of a \$10,000 Challenge America grant from the NEA, BodyVox worked with Avanti students during a three-month residency last winter, with culminating performances by both BodyVox and Black Violin. Challenge America grants are intended to reach underserved populations, such as those with mental health challenges. Between 2004 and 2016, \$36.2 million in Challenge America grants have been awarded to organizations with the express intent of bringing the arts to places and communities where they are traditionally lacking.

For this particular project, all dance workshops were voluntary; both Barnes and McGibbon agreed that the program would work best if students self-selected to participate. Still, they were both surprised by the capacity for the dance classes to overcome many of the students' inhibitions.

"There were some that were standoffish, or just observing and not participating straight away with the first workshop," said Barnes. "But it was not long before they jumped in. That speaks to Eric [Skinner], the dancer who was facilitating

▼ "I would just like to encourage anybody that is nervous about dancing...just dance," noted one participant. Photo courtesy of the Washington Center for the Performing Arts



it—he’s very approachable and accessible. But it also speaks to the nature of the school culture at Avanti.”

McGibbon stressed the extent to which dance was able to overcome neurological barriers that could not be traversed verbally in a traditional academic setting. By connecting their brains to making a particular movement, the students were able to relate to dancing on a fundamental level.

McGibbon described it as a “playful, childlike connection. Non-judgmental. One of the students was autistic, and he’s like, ‘I just can’t believe it didn’t matter! I wasn’t judged! It didn’t matter about my body! I just got to move it. And I didn’t care whether I was moving the same as everybody else.’”

“I would just like to encourage anybody that is nervous about dancing or thinks that they’re too fat to be able to be graceful, just dance,” said Spencer Beadle, an Avanti student who was part of a video the Washington Center made about the workshop series.

Personal experience and becoming comfortable in their own bodies was central to the dance workshops. BodyVox’s hands-on approach also fostered the type of environment in which Avanti students could thrive.

“Ninety percent of our population [has a] primarily kinesthetic learning style,” said McGibbon, who also has a background in brain theory and was named 2015-16 Olympia School District Teacher of the Year. “It’s [based on] experience, and the arts are essential to

▼ The musical group Black Violin also performed for Avanti High School students as part of the school’s partnership with the Washington Center for the Performing Arts. Photo by Colin Brennan



the experience. In that experience, there's expression, and in that expression there's personal development, there's authorship of life. And there's creation. It's that invitation to create and go beyond the sum of your parts."

She noted how dramatic this act of creation can be for Avanti students. "When you have kids who have left traditional high school because they can't express themselves perform[ing] publicly and feeling confident about it? That's a miracle!"

Black Violin's performance continued the trend of unforgettable experiences that the Washington Center provided for Avanti's students. The hip-hop/classical fusion duo is comprised of Kevin Sylvester and Wilner Baptiste, who go by the stage names Kev Marcus and Wil B. They performed a show that was, all at once, inspiring, educational, and wildly entertaining.

Their style pushed the boundaries of conventional musical performance, a methodology that clearly resonated with the students.

Observing from the back of the theater, Barnes noted that, "Black Violin shared an amazing message to the students of, 'We learned how to play, and then we made it our own.' It was basically, 'Trust yourself, follow your own path, and you can do whatever you want.' They were really encouraging that way."

It was clear that Black Violin's message had a significant impact on those in attendance. For example, on the day of the concert, McGibbon found one of her students, a fifth-year senior on the verge of completing his last credits, hanging back. At this point the public evening show was

long sold-out and her student, also a musician, didn't have a ticket. So McGibbon gave him her ticket instead. "He came back in tears. It gave him the motivation to finish [school]," she said. "To sit and look at him and have him say, 'Thank you. This changed my awareness and my life and it has engaged me on a level that I know I can put what's inside me in motion.' It was one of those profound moments." The student graduated this spring and will begin at Evergreen State College in Olympia this fall, with full funding.

The NEA's Challenge America grant provided the Washington Center and Avanti the opportunity to enhance students' interaction with the arts. For McGibbon, the reactions of her students demonstrated her belief that the arts can unlock their potential and provide the answers that cannot be explained in words. "I'm deeply grateful for these kids who wouldn't have had this opportunity," she said of the workshops and performances. "[They'll] have something inside them that they'll come back to because of the experience. This is what the arts are about!"



Elijah Levine was an intern in the NEA Office of Public Affairs in summer 2017.





Artists-in-residence
on the deck of the
Alaska Marine
Highway ferry as
part of the Island
Institute's Tidelines
Journey program.

TOWARD A MORE CREATIVE FUTURE

SOUTHEAST ALASKA'S TIDELINES JOURNEY ARTIST RESIDENCY

BY PAULETTE BEETE

All photos by Peter Bradley



outheast Alaska comprises 600 miles of coastline and hundreds of islands collectively known as the Alexander Archipelago. Given its terrain of dense forests and mountains, Southeast Alaska, which includes Sitka, Ketchikan, and Alaska's capital city of Juneau, finds itself geographically isolated in a state that's already geographically isolated from the U.S. mainland. Despite the relative isolation of the region's many small communities—most are reachable only by air or water—they share common concerns with the larger world, such as domestic violence, drug and substance abuse, gentrification, and the environment, among other issues.

These Alaskan communities also have something else of significance in common: the Alaska Marine Highway, a series of waterways stretching 3,500 miles and traversed by a fleet

of ferries. The ferry system regularly transports tourists, cars, and cargo to various points in Southeast Alaska. Thanks to the ingenuity of Sitka-based arts organization Island Institute, the Alaska Marine Highway is now also unique in another way: each spring it boasts a group of artists participating in Tidelines Journey, a unique, seafaring artist residency that offers artists and residents of the region a way to think about and discuss the area's pressing questions.

The idea of a nomadic residency first occurred to Island Institute Executive Director Peter Bradley during his initial visit to the Alliance of Artist Communities conference in October 2015. As he learned about the varied shapes and forms an artist residency could take, he realized that the Marine Highway offered an opportunity to create a roving residency that was different from the residency experience the institute already offered for visiting artists.

▼ Tidelines Journey artists hold a discussion with residents on a Gustavus beach.





▲ Artist Nina Elder reads through some of the background material for her residency on the ferry from Bellingham to Ketchikan.

For the new residency he envisioned, Bradley wanted to do more than provide idyllic workspace for artists. He also wanted to create an environment that fostered conversation, and created what he called “a reciprocal learning opportunity” not only among the artists, but also between the artists and the region’s residents.

“There are all these very fascinating communities in Southeast Alaska of people that have this incredible eloquence about their sense of belonging... people that I thought have a lot to teach the artists but also who have a lot of curiosity for what the artists may bring,” he explained.

The Island Institute has a long history of creating just these types of creative collisions. Established in 1984, its original mission was to facilitate conversation around ideas of community, such as how to foster shared values or live symbiotically with the natural world. In recent years, the institute’s goals have become more reflective of the local region, with a focus on engaging the area’s residents in communal storytelling about their lives in Southeast Alaska as well as around significant events, such as a devastating landslide that struck the area in August 2015. The organization’s offerings also include youth workshops, a bookmaking studio, and traditional, fixed-location artist residencies.

Tidelines Journey, the traveling residency dreamed up by Bradley, launched in 2016 with five artists signing on to visit eight communities over a month, via the Marine Highway. The journey was equal parts communal living onboard

a ferry and homestays at each community stop. Environmental concerns were the focus of that first journey, which comprised community events where the artists presented and talked about work they had created in response to the issue. Residents in turn also made their own presentations to the assembled artists and their neighbors during those community gatherings. In addition, the visiting artists worked with the schools and students in each community.

Bradley believed that environmental issues could provide common ground for both the residents and the visiting artists, and indeed the topic was fruitful for all involved. “Everybody responded differently to [artist talks], and then the community conversations that followed carried this amazing sense of catharsis. It was really important to people to have a chance to just open up and talk about what they’re seeing and thinking about as they watch the landscape around them shift,” said Bradley. “It was clear on that trip that art was doing its job in terms of opening up new lenses of understanding for ideas that we’re all trying to find our way through.”

Bradley believes it’s especially important to have these kinds of artistic disruptions in isolated areas as a way to spark curiosity in places that might have gotten used to doing things a certain way. “For anything to change requires curiosity, and for new ideas to be sparked requires curiosity,” he said. “Art’s ultimate role is to weird the ways that we see the world, and offer [opportunities] to see through different lenses.”

Nina Elder, an artist and arts educator, helped Bradley to plan and facilitate the 2017 iteration of Tidelines Journey, which was supported by the National Endowment for the Arts. For this year's month-long residency, which took place last April, four artists and roughly 500 residents participated around the theme of "Signal to Noise," in terms of which voices are being heard and which are overpowered in conversations regarding the environment.

Elder agrees that curiosity is an important part of the project, both as a starting point and as an outcome. "I know a lot of the people that we talked to said that they often feel misunderstood or like they are this fringe of the United States," she said. "To have [artists] show up who are truly curious and want to learn about them helped reinvigorate their own curiosity about themselves and what they do and the poignancy and the power of how they're living. Everyone from a schoolteacher to a fisherman to the garbage man, their lives are different in Southeast Alaska than they would be in the lower 48."

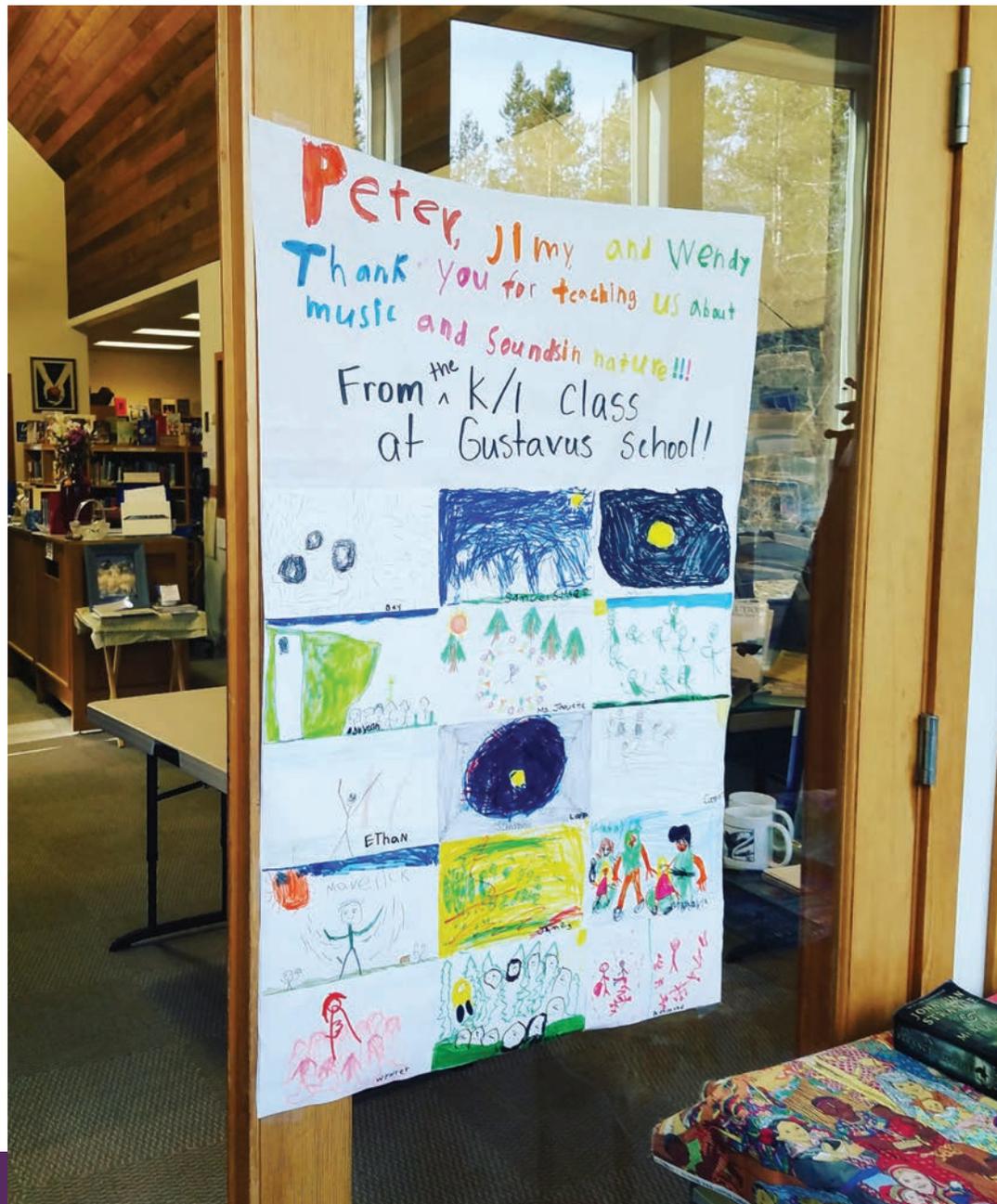
She added that she was told by residents that they appreciated the artists' visit as a focal point for building community cohesion, which in turn made them feel more comfortable and confident about tackling difficult issues. "People that were living in these towns were getting to know each other in new and meaningful ways because we were asking them to talk about and present themselves," she said. "Small towns can always get to know each other better, we realized. Seeing how artists can address challenging issues was very inspiring to them as a community."

While the first two Tidelines Journey residencies were by many accounts successful, the question remains of whether or not the interactions between artists and communities will have a lasting resonance. Bradley admitted that as the program is only two years old, it's hard to say with certainty what change will come in the wake of the residency. Still, he hoped "that we could plant the seeds through

this tour that would reverberate a while after we visited, and that people would be able to take the stuff of the tour and the ideas of the group from the conversations generated and use it how they wanted."

Elder is equally optimistic about the residency's ultimate outcome for the communities that participated. "I think just by being there and by modeling curiosity and by saying 'Show me your town, show me what you love, show me what's problematic, how do you townspeople creatively engage with this, what inspired you,' [it will help] people then to amplify the future that they want to see in these places where they're living. So it helps them see a more cohesive future or a more creative future." 🌀

▼ Students from Gustavus thank the artists for visiting.



**NEA PROJECT-FUNDING DISTRIBUTION MIRRORS THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE US POPULATION
AND EXCEEDS IN ITS SUPPORT FOR LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES**

Small, Metropolitan Communities

9%

of NEA-funded projects

9%

of US population

Rural, Nonmetropolitan Areas

13.8%

of NEA-funded projects

14%

of US population

High-Poverty Neighborhoods

43%

of NEA-funded projects

31%

of US neighborhoods



FROM THE NEA'S ARTS IN SMALL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES INFOGRAPHIC

“The arts and the humanities

belong to all the people of the United States,” is the first line of the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965, the legislation that created the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities. Since the act was passed 50 years ago, the National Endowment for the Arts has striven to fulfill this belief by providing access to the arts to

all communities of the nation. We have especially supported arts activities in places where they are hard to come by, and for people who have few opportunities to participate in the arts, as the information above demonstrates. As President Lyndon B. Johnson noted at the signing of the legislation in September 1965, “It is in the neighborhoods of each community that a nation’s art is born.”



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