

# NEA ARTS

NUMBER 4 2010

*Fresno*



*Kankakee*



*Providence*



## *In the Neighborhood*

ARTS & COMMUNITY



*Houston*



*New Orleans*



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### ABOUT THIS ISSUE

We took the title of this issue from an old Tom Waits song because it fit so well: in the neighborhood is where arts and community congregate, dance, sing, recite poetry, or just sit and watch. It's where a public library can lead to the revitalization of a city's downtown, as happened in Kankakee, Illinois; it's where a summer festival can bring together diverse cultures as the Tamejavi Festival in California has; it's where arts organizations can get together to provide much-needed arts programs for urban youth, as has happened in Providence, Rhode Island; it's where a community orchestra made up of health-care professionals gives back to its community by providing free concerts at the local hospital, as happens in Houston, Texas; it's where a city devastated by natural disasters rises up and redefines its culture as New Orleans did; it's where a community of poets try and better connect with their audiences, as is happening in New York City.

In this issue we look at the impact of artists and arts organizations on the communities in which they live and work to examine questions such as, What is the role of the artist in the community? How do the arts engage the community, and how do communities engage the arts?

Join us at [arts.gov](http://arts.gov) as well to find web-only stories, such as Art Works podcasts with Bert Crenca and Sebastian Ruth, who run two very different arts organizations in Providence, Rhode Island, and a video on the WorldDeaf Cinema Festival that was held at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. Also, visit our Art Works blog to comment on this issue or to share information on arts in your community.





Schuyler Avenue in downtown Kankakee is closed for the Fall Arts Stroll.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF KANKAKEE PUBLIC LIBRARY

# A Community Rewritten

*A Public Library Gives a City New Life* | BY MICHAEL GALLANT

“WHEN I STARTED WORKING IN 1997 as a reference librarian, we were known as the armpit of the area’s library system,” said Steve Bertrand, director of the public library in Kankakee, Illinois. “There was duct tape on the carpet and the phones didn’t work. We had no meeting space and barely enough room to do anything.”

Visitors to the Kankakee Public Library’s current home, a luxurious space that occupies the first four floors of a seven-story office building in the heart of the city’s downtown, would likely never guess that this vibrant center of the community emerged from such humble roots. In addition to its regular visitors, the library frequently welcomes hundreds of local guests for concerts, author readings, and a variety of

other talks and performances. The library also houses study areas, a coffee bar, a computer lab, a dedicated “teen zone,” and a media recording and editing studio. Outside the building’s walls, library staff members organize community music and arts events that draw thousands of visitors to the small city.

The library’s renaissance cannot be separated from that of Kankakee itself, a city that was once widely thought of as the worst place to live in the United States. In fact, it was through the focused cultivation of the library as a center of community and arts programming that city leaders anchored Kankakee’s remarkable rebirth—pulling it back from the brink of economic and social disaster and restoring a strong sense of community pride in the process.



Author Luis Urrea talking about his book *Into the Beautiful North* at the library.

### Community Challenges

Kankakee's dark times began as the 1980s drew to a close. "We experienced a severe economic downturn and lost about two-thirds of our industry," said Bertrand, a Kankakee native who witnessed the shut down of the city's biggest employers: a Roper oven factory and a General Foods dog food plant. "We were a classic industrial midwestern community and our industries consolidated or moved to Mexico."

As businesses left Kankakee, so did many of the residents who could afford to live elsewhere, leaving behind a community saddled with financial stagnation, gang warfare, and rampant crime. Don Green, a native of Kankakee, became mayor in 1993. "It was a bad situation," he said. "The murder rate was higher than the city of Chicago at that time. And when I took over as mayor, the city was operating 1.7 million dollars over an 8 million dollar budget."

Kankakee faced not only financial and public safety challenges, but also a ripening crisis in public relations. "One of our community leaders, the owner of a local newspaper, was kidnapped and buried alive," commented Bertrand. Word of the bizarre incident spread, much to the city's embarrassment. "Kankakee was the city no one wanted to visit and no one wanted to live in."

Further soiling Kankakee's reputation was the 1999 edition of the *Places Rated Almanac*, which named Kankakee County the worst area to live in throughout

the United States and Canada. The city even became the topic of a "Top Ten List" on *The Late Show with David Letterman*, cementing Kankakee's ignominy in public consciousness. "It's hard getting over being a national joke when you're on *David Letterman*," remembered Bertrand.

### New Library, New Community

Once in office, Mayor Green's efforts to revitalize Kankakee began with the creation of a blue ribbon committee made up of local citizens and business leaders. Through a wide range of initiatives—merging debts, consolidating programs, creating a community policing infrastructure, and drastically reinventing the culture of the police department—progress toward a safer city began. "Each year, we saw decreased crime statistics in Kankakee," said Green. "At the same time, we had to rebuild downtown areas of the community."

Under the direction of a young and ambitious director named Cindy Fuerst, the Kankakee Public Library led the way. After seven years of successfully expanding library programs in the cramped space they occupied at the time, the unorthodox decision was made in 2003 to relocate the library to an office building in downtown Kankakee—an area of the city that had been hit particularly hard by crime and economic depression. A special deal, made by city officials and the Heritage Development Corporation that owned the building, established it as a mixed-use structure and the new home for the library.



The main stage at the Kankakee Downtown Music Fest.



Mexican folk dancers perform for area children during Hispanic Heritage Month.

“That was really the moment when things started to turn around for downtown,” said Bertrand, who had been working under Fuerst for seven years at the time. “Because we were able to do it on the cheap, we were able to have a library that was two or three times larger than any community our size could imagine happening.

“When people saw it, their jaws dropped, and it began turning around citizens’ attitudes about themselves,” he continued. “As a community, we were able to give ourselves something that was really first class, something that out-of-towners could come and see, and that we could really be proud of.”

As the library drew more and more visitors hungry for its arts-related programming—including a talk by author Luis Urrea who wrote about Kankakee in his book *Into the Beautiful North*—the local economy responded with new confidence. Banks, restaurants, coffee shops, and even a university migrated back to the downtown area. With the help of downtown business leaders and scores of local volunteers, library staff organized additional arts programs—including the Merchant Street Music Fest and Fall Art Stroll street festival—that stretched beyond library walls. As a result, thousands of visitors from the greater Chicago area gathered in Kankakee on a regular basis, further reinforcing the cycle of revitalization that had begun with the library.

Fuerst, who resigned as director in 2009, credits the arts both with helping to bring community pride to Kankakee and repairing public perception of the city as a whole. “The Kankakee Symphony Orchestra has performances downtown now,” she described. “A few years ago, the library sponsored a poetry slam for

teens. One of the parents of a student who was participating shared with a staffer that this was the first time she had been in downtown Kankakee after dark in 17 years. She was shocked at how nice everything was.”

“The potential was always there,” added Fuerst. “The jewel just had to be dusted off, and people see the beauty and value of Kankakee now.”

Mayor Green shared an equally revealing story. “One day, at the Kankakee library, I was walking out the door and I saw three young men, one black, one white, one Hispanic,” he continued. “We said hello and I asked them, ‘Why are you here?’ They were teenagers and you don’t normally think of teens hanging out at the library. It’s not *cool*.

“But they told me that the library was a place that they felt ownership over, a place where they felt safe.” The conversation affirmed to Green that he and his allies were on the right track. “We invested money in something that gave young people some security, inspiration, and impetus.”

For Green, Kankakee’s arts-based revitalization is indicative of a larger theme. “Without the arts, you don’t have a community,” he said. “It not only deals with your current issues but with the past and your shared history. It’s something that gives confidence and a sense of worth to your community.” ▲

*Michael Gallant is a composer, musician, and writer living in New York. He is the founder and CEO of Gallant Music ([gallantmusic.com](http://gallantmusic.com)).*

# Come Together

## Diverse Communities Celebrate at the Tamejavi Festival

BY LIZ STARK

**TAMEJAVI** is not a word you will find in any English dictionary—or for that matter, a dictionary in any language—but it is a word full of meaning for many in California’s diverse Central Valley where the Tamejavi Festival has become a celebrated cultural and community event.

Tamejavi draws from three words: “Ta” from the Hmong *taj laj tshav puam*, “me” from the Spanish *mercado*, and “javi” from the Mixtec *nunjavi*, all of which translate as “market” or “plaza.” The marketplace is a key feature in many societies—a place that brings people together to share stories, food, and culture. The Tamejavi Festival serves the same purpose—drawing together the Central Valley’s many diverse communities and allowing them the opportunity to express and celebrate their cultural traditions.

The Tamejavi Festival is a program of the Pan Valley Institute (PVI). Founded in 1998 by the American Friends Service Committee, this Fresno-based education center appreciated that immigrants needed their own place where they could both learn from each other and learn about their new society, and acknowledged that these individuals can contribute new and valuable cultural perspectives. “We recognized that immigrants brought with them a cultural and political life and we wanted to create a space for them to express that,” said Myrna Martinez Nateras, PVI program director.

California’s Fresno County has a population of more than 940,000, of which more than 65 percent is an ethnicity other than Caucasian, including Hispanic/

PHOTO BY TUDOR STANLEY



Performances at the Tamejavi Festival in California include Filipino dancing.



A performance of the Latin American Danza de los Diablitos.



The audience enjoys a performance during the 2009 festival.

Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, and African American. The Pan Valley Institute quickly learned that many immigrants to the Central Valley were missing an outlet to practice their native traditions and welcomed the opportunity to share them. As a result of this positive feedback, the institute looked for a way to share this cultural wealth with a larger audience, eventually creating the Tamejavi Festival.

Originally planned as a one-time event, the Tamejavi Festival has since been held biennially in parks and cultural venues around the city of Fresno and is attended by more than 2,000 people, bringing together the diverse communities that live side by side in the Central Valley. Along with music, theater, dance, and poetry presentations, the one-day festival

shape and develop the festival. Given the title of “cultural organizers,” these individuals were identified by PVI as knowledgeable about their communities’ cultural traditions and were given instructions on how to coordinate events and build relationships within the community. “Communities manage to find a way of making and producing art, even if they have no support, because it’s important to them,” said Nateras. “Tamejavi gives value to what they are doing and supports them.”

More than 100 community members volunteer the day of the festival, and many people who have volunteered from the beginning have since engaged their families in putting on the festival. California State University, Fresno has also provided a steady

**"You can see and feel a sense of community unity. At the moment, people are celebrating together that this is who we are."**

also includes discussion groups, a film series, children’s activities, and an outdoor marketplace featuring crafts and a variety of cuisines.

After the first Tamejavi in 2002, the Pan Valley Institute quickly realized that not only was there a positive reaction among community members that attended the event, but that the process of organizing the festival was just as, if not more, meaningful. Members of each of the different ethnic communities form a planning committee that works year-round to

stream of volunteers; faculty became involved and then encouraged their students to help. PVI has received festival support from foundations, such as the Rockefeller, James Irvine, and the Marguerite Casey Foundations, and developed local partnerships with organizations such as the Fresno Art Museum, which, along with Radio Park, was home to the 2007 Tamejavi Festival. This partnership was mutually beneficial as it brought new audiences to both the museum

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Music Director Libi Lebel leads the Texas Medical Center Orchestra in performance.



# Just What the Doctor Ordered

A Community Orchestra Gives Back to the Community

BY CHRISTY CRYTZER PIERCE

PHOTOS BY OKSANA MING

**ARIELA ALPERT LOOKS FORWARD** to Wednesday evenings. She picks up her violin, leaves her social work practice—where she helps people daily with anxiety, grief, and trauma issues—and heads to rehearsal for two hours: “It’s a great outlet...part of my therapy and my stress relief.”

Alpert is board president and one of 80 musicians in the Texas Medical Center Orchestra (TMCO) of Houston, an all-volunteer community orchestra comprised entirely of health-care professionals. Its roster includes doctors, dentists, biomedical scientists, nurses, medical students, and a variety of other professionals in the health-care industry.

Originally called the Doctors Orchestra of Houston, the ensemble was established in 2000 by Juilliard-trained pianist and conductor Libi Lebel. While a student, Lebel had heard of the Philadelphia Doctors’ Chamber Orchestra and remembered thinking that a medical-based orchestra was an interesting concept. After her move to Houston, which houses one of the nation’s largest health-care industries, she decided to start a similar ensemble at the Texas Medical Center.

“At first I was accepting anyone who played an in-



strument just to get volume, but now our auditions are very competitive,” said Lebel. “Most members have played instruments through high school and college, and several were even professional musicians before switching fields. We’ve come a long way.”

A long way, indeed, as the TMCOC was recently invited to perform at Carnegie Hall as part of the 2011-12 DCINY Concert Series. Lebel credits team tenacity and the growing skill level for this achievement: “Sure, we work around pagers and demanding schedules... but I treat them like a professional orchestra.”

A typical TMCOC season includes three to four concerts at the Wortham Center in Houston and one performance at the Round Top Music Festival in Round Top, Texas. The programs integrate accessible, but challenging music, and always include professional soloists. At the orchestra’s November concert, they performed the Houston premiere of Mark O’Connor’s *March of the Gypsy Fiddler*, alongside Tchaikovsky’s Fourth Symphony. “Lubi is not elitist; she wants to please the audience with good performances, good music,” acknowledged concertmaster Dr. Daniel Musher, professor of medicine at Baylor College of Medicine.

Lebel’s programming occasionally reflects the unique ensemble she conducts. In a past season, dancers reenacted five scenes from a doctor’s life, with music performed by the TMCOC. These scenes included an emergency room to the soundtrack of Offenbach’s *Can Can*, a prayer room to Barber’s *Adagio*

for Strings, and a waiting room to Leroy Anderson’s *The Syncopated Clock*. “After 10 years, I haven’t gotten bored yet, because after every program I think ‘how can I top that?’” said Lebel.

In addition to their regular season concerts, the TMCOC also strives to make a broader impact in their community. As a testament to this, each concert is dedicated to a medical charity. In the past, the charity received direct proceeds from the concert. However, due to regranting stipulations from funders, the TMCOC now donates blocks of tickets for the charities’ discretionary use, often for fundraising purposes or as constituent benefits. In addition to the donated tickets, a charity representative has the opportunity to present their cause directly to TMCOC audiences and provide information on how to donate. Featured charities have included the AIDS Foundation of Houston, Eye Care for Kids Foundation, the Shriners Hospital for Children, and Family Services of Greater Houston, among many others.

Each TMCOC concert also sponsors a local, economically disadvantaged school. Students and their families receive free tickets to the concert, and the orchestra tries to incorporate participation from the students, either during the concert or at intermission. In May, for example, the children’s choir from KIPP Sharp College Prep Lower School sang in the TMCOC’s performance of *Carmina Burana*. Principal Alma Salman wrote in a letter to the orchestra: “As you know, the students at our school come from a limited social background...this was without a doubt the best example of excellence in music we have ever had.”

“I really love that students come to our concerts, because it shows them that even though we are not professional musicians, music is still an important part of our lives,” stated Alpert.

TMCOC’s outreach extends beyond concerts through collaborations with the medical community. Each year the ensemble performs a free concert in the lobby space of the Methodist Hospital as part of a concert series hosted by the Center for Performing Arts Medicine (CPAM). “It is extraordinary to see health-care professionals, still in their scrubs and white coats, pick up violins and trumpets to perform great music for patients, their families, staff, nurses, physicians, and visitors,” acknowledged J. Todd Frazier, managing director of CPAM.



The Texas Medical Center Orchestra performs in scrubs at a free concert at the Methodist Hospital.

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# Young at Art

BY VICTORIA HUTTER

## Using the Arts to Build Bridges Between Youth and Their Communities

A STOREFRONT IN A DISTRESSED URBAN neighborhood might seem an odd home for a classical string quartet, but the location's a perfect fit for Providence, Rhode Island's Community MusicWorks (CMW). Founded in 1997 by violinist/violist Sebastian Ruth—a 2010 MacArthur Fellow—CMW is committed to the idea of “music as activism.” That is to say, music not as isolated artistic interventions by outside groups, but rather as a community-rooted venture. The sound of music from CMW's front studio wafting through speakers onto the sidewalk is a perfect metaphor for its mission to integrate itself into the neighborhood it serves.

This philosophy of hands-on community engagement is not unusual among the city's arts groups like CMW, especially those that focus their work on the city's youth. CMW, and other youth-focused organizations like New Urban Arts and AS220 Youth, see young people as the key to cultivating and preserving the community's culture.

All of CMW's programs are connected to the permanent residency of the professional Providence String Quartet. CMW now has 10 professional resi-

dent musicians and more than 100 neighborhood children participating in its programs, which include not only instrument instruction but also leadership development and weekly enrichment classes. The organization also hosts a biannual Institute for Musicianship and Public Service, a gathering in Providence for musicians to learn what is really involved in building community-based programs.

Ruth notes that young people who continue with the program over the years “develop a sense of their place in the community in a deep way.” The students move from a level of involvement defined only by the time they spend in music lessons to a deeper engagement with fellow students and teachers to then performing in paid engagements before city dignitaries. They learn, according to Ruth, that “they have something meaningful to offer their city.”

New Urban Arts, also housed in a Providence storefront, takes a multidisciplinary approach to its programs, many of which center on mentorships. For example, the Youth Mentorship in the Arts Program places artist mentors with small groups of high school students, while the Artist Mentor Professional Development Program prepares artist mentors for their work with young people. Each year, the students

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Founder Sebastian Ruth in front of the Community MusicWorks storefront in Providence, Rhode Island.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MACARTHUR FOUNDATION

# New Orleans Stories

BY PAULETTE BEETE

Whether it's the legendary jazz clubs, magnificent architecture, or literary lineage, the arts are intricately woven into the fabric of New Orleans. To better understand this symbiotic relationship, we spoke with musician Irvin Mayfield, Jr. (also a National Council of the Arts member), Lusher Charter School CEO Kathy Riedlinger, and Arts Council of New Orleans Interim Director Mary Len Costa.

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## *Irvin Mayfield, Jr.*

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Grammy award-winning trumpeter and bandleader Irvin Mayfield, Jr., a New Orleans native, wears many hats, including artistic director of the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra, proprietor of Irvin Mayfield's Jazz Playhouse, and cultural ambassador of the City of New Orleans.

### *On what makes New Orleans New Orleans*

"In New Orleans, we say the holy trinity is architecture, food, and jazz. The architects, musicians, and the culinary folks, we love each other. We talk to each other, and we kind of know what our role is in the community, and it's really serious. What I'm really trying to say is that I think the music and the art are at the center of things in New Orleans, at the core. I don't think it's seen like that in other places."

PHOTO BY EPISCOPAL NEWS SERVICE



Irvin Mayfield, Jr. (second from left) in the "second line" with Reverend Dean David Duplantier in New Orleans.



Lusher Charter School brings in artists—such as NEA Jazz Master Barry Harris (seated at piano)—to mentor the school’s musical ensembles.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LUSHER CHARTER SCHOOL

*On the arts in New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina*

“New Orleans is constantly changing. I don’t think it just has to do with Katrina....[that’s] just one example where we had to take a look and say, okay, everything is different. How do we start over? And then we started saying, well, some of it may have been good but we don’t want to necessarily do that again. And some stuff we absolutely have to make sure we protect because we can’t lose it no matter how high the flood waters are. So I think Katrina, tsunamis, earthquakes, all these things are going to happen, and it’s always going to make you redefine how you live. If you redefine how you live then, of course, you’re redefining the culture and when you do that, art is going to change.”

*On the responsibility of the community to the artist*

“I think the community’s job is to make sure it protects and celebrates its great art because that’s how we grow as a society. That’s how we grow as a group of people. I think it’s something that people can see as being ancillary, but we all know that great societies lose their way when culture gets lost.”

*On fostering deeper connections between community and arts*

“I would say the key is individual investment. A lot of people want to support institutions...but great art is created by individual artists. Support your artists. Support the people.”

**Kathy Riedlinger**

As CEO of Lusher Charter School, an arts-integrated public school, New Orleans native Kathy Riedlinger oversees a diverse population of 1,630 students in grades K-12. With 20 teaching artists on staff, the school’s curriculum includes a range of creative disciplines and the opportunity for students to complete a Certificate of Artistry program.

*On using Georgia O’Keeffe to teach math*

“The arts are not only useful to learn in and of themselves, but also they’re quite useful in learning other content areas. For example, my seventh-grade math class...can study ratio and proportions by using regular math techniques. Or they can study the work of Georgia O’Keeffe, and they study ratio and proportions by taking a good look at her work. And for some kids it really brings [the concepts] to life and gives real life experience to the idea.”

*On the arts in New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina*

“I think that there’s a long history of the arts being a special part of the culture and tradition in New Orleans. Most recently and probably most poignantly for me would be the role that the arts played in our rebirth and comeback.... I think that the arts are used in good times and the arts are used in bad. They’re used in times of great joy and times of great sorrow. I watched

our kids and our staff draw on those strong arts traditions—whether it was their writing, their painting, their music, their acting, their singing—they drew on those emotions and that expression to both grieve the losses they had and to celebrate the joy they felt in...rebuilding the community that they lost. When it comes to feeling the joy of the arts and the value of the arts and the strength of the arts, I don't think I've ever felt it as strong as I feel it now and the meaning of it now and the worth of it now and the strength of it now."

*On the role of the artist in the community*

"I went to the five-year celebration of Hurricane Katrina and what a celebration—of where we have been and where we are going. It was a celebration of sustainability. Without the arts, it would have been people like me standing up and talking; it would have lasted 15 minutes. But because of the arts you could feel it.... You could revisit the past, feel the present, and be hopeful for the future.... The community needs the artist to put feeling and inspiration into what we need to do."

PHOTO COURTESY OF LUSHER CHARTER SCHOOL



Lusher high schoolers can earn a Certificate of Artistry in one of several artistic disciplines including theater/musical theater/stagecraft.

*On how the arts build culture*

"[The arts] build tradition; they build culture. It's hard to build culture around algebra and geometry. I mean those traditional academic subjects are wonderful, but for me I'm really happy that we build culture around the arts. When you think about building a culture what better way to get community together than through the arts."

**Mary Len Costa**

Arts administrator Mary Len Costa is not a New Orleans native, but she might as well be. Costa, a textile designer, moved to New Orleans from Memphis more than 40 years ago. As she explains, "I came for the history of the arts." She currently serves as the interim director of the Arts Council of New Orleans. Here's Costa's take on the arts in New Orleans.

*On the arts in New Orleans post-Katrina*

"Before the storm we had an e-mail list that went out to our public art artists that was about 600 artists. That list, since the storm, has grown to 3,000, and it's not



Rashida Ferdinand's *Mandala* is in the foreground as the Saint Augustine Marching Band goes by.

just for public art. I would say at least 50 percent of them are new [to New Orleans].... The Brookings Institute just did an overview of the arts of New Orleans at five years after Katrina, and they said there's an even stronger presence of arts and culture in New Orleans. That's always been the greatest asset of the city, not only in providing for a higher quality of life for those people who are here, but also as a source for tourism. It's what people come to New Orleans for.

A lot of them are new people who've come in who want to be in the Ninth Ward, who want to be in the Lower Ninth Ward, connecting with Musician's Village, which was a Habitat for Humanity project with Branford Marsalis and Harry Connick, Jr. And so they want to be in that neighborhood. They want to be close to those people. Visual artists have come back and established nonprofits. They've opened galleries. They're doing projects. There's one called NoLA Rising, who's just now gotten permission from the Corps of Engineers to start working with communities all down the levee wall, and paint [a mural] on the levee wall."

*On the role of the artist in the community... and vice versa*

"Artists are asking for help with connecting with the city government on the approval process or public process, with finding community leaders so that they'll know who to talk to about doing something in the neighborhood.... I think the artist and the community are both responsible to each other. There's something like 168 neighborhood organizations in New Orleans. And for some of them to join together and create these cultural districts has been remarkable. And I think that really speaks highly of the respect that there is there for one to the other, how the artist is able to contribute to the community and how the community is able to contribute to the artist. You could go to the Freret Street cultural district. There's a theater opening there. There's a glass studio that's open. There's a clay studio that's going to open any day now. There's a neighborhood market once a month. There are other artists who are moving in there, and then there are people who are going in and redoing buildings as work/live spaces.... Seeing that growth, that takes the responsibility of the neighborhood organization to do it." ▲

## Young at Art

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themselves interview and select 20 artist mentors from more than 50 applications for the program. The organization also presents 10 annual public events, such as a fashion show, with clothes designed, sewn, and modeled by the students.

According to Executive Director Jason Yoon, New Urban Arts fosters community by “bringing a diverse group of artists and young people together around artmaking as a social enterprise through hands-on making, learning from one another, and taking risks together.” As that social enterprise develops and strengthens, students assume greater responsibility

"Imagination and curiosity are a way to develop self-agency in whatever you do."

for their own creative practice. Yoon emphasized that the heart of the group's programs is “how imagination and curiosity are a way to develop self-agency in whatever you do.” For Yoon and his staff, the most valuable skill students can take away from their time with New Urban Arts is “the process of learning to think for yourself, and conduct your own learning, not wait for someone else to tell you what you're going to do.”

AS220 Youth, on the other hand, focuses on a community within a community—incarcerated and post-incarcerated youth. Its parent organization—simply called AS220—is a community arts organization that supports live/work facilities for artists and artist residency programs, exhibition and performance spaces, and artmaking workshops and studios. AS220 Youth expands on that mission by creating and managing art programs for the juvenile justice facility at the Rhode Island Training School (RITS); it is the longest-running arts program in a juvenile detention center in the country.

Comprising a blend of arts education and supportive services, AS220 Youth's self-paced arts programs now serve 330 youth at three different sites. Nearly half of the RITS detainees participate in AS220 Youth programs and, in 2009, 60 young people continued with the program after completing their terms at RITS.

AS220 Youth boasts an impressive record of projects: the Rhode Show, AS220's hip-hop group, has toured nationally and produced two full-length CDs; in 2010 youth artists exhibited at seven gallery shows hosted at outside venues; and the Rhode Island Department of Health hired young artists from the program to create a youth-focused, anti-tobacco public service advertising campaign.

When asked why the arts are uniquely positioned to work with this population AS220 Youth Director Anne Kugler said, “We couldn't have the relationships we have with the kids without the arts. It's a way of connecting with very, very disconnected, hard-to-engage youth in a way that doesn't feel like a program with adults telling them what to do.” The young people are able to see in the artist mentors a model for living and a way of being creative. “It is a revelation for them.”

While Community MusicWorks, New Urban Arts, and AS220 Youth make a powerful impact on their own, each organization also appreciates the power of partnership. Along with Everett Dance Theatre, Manton Avenue Project, and Providence CityArts for Youth, they comprise Providence Youth Arts Collaborative (PYAC), a collective formed in 2004 to give the



PHOTO BY LINDA KING

A class at the AS220 Youth Studio on Empire Street in Providence, Rhode Island.





PHOTO BY JESSE BANKS III

**New Urban Arts artist mentor Abel Hernandez working on logo design with a student.**

executive directors of the six member organizations a forum in which to share best practices and collaborate on fundraising and advocacy efforts. Exchanges among the members' teaching artists and students help to inform and inspire them.

The partnership allows students and artists a chance to share their work and broaden conversation around issues of arts and community to include a much larger audience. One example is *Imagining Art + Social Change*, a two-day conference that PYAC co-presented with Community MusicWorks in March 2008. Through panels, group conversations, site visits, performances, and exhibitions, participants examined the intersection of and possibilities for art and social change.

Another event—*Roots and Rituals: A Creative Day for Creative People*—in May 2010 was billed as an opportunity to make cool stuff, learn about local youth arts organizations, and see expressive performances. Created entirely by the PYAC students—and supported

by a 2010 NEA Access to Artistic Excellence grant—the event featured writing, visual arts, dance, and improv workshops as well as a drop-in story booth.

Community MusicWorks, New Urban Arts, and AS220 Youth are also partnering with the City of Providence on a *Transportation Corridors to Livable Communities* project. With the support of a \$910,000 grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the project will focus on placing arts and cultural opportunities along the city's key transportation corridors and into neighborhood-based community hubs.

In reflecting on what these youth arts programs have and continue to accomplish for the City of Providence, Lynne McCormick, executive director of the city's Department of Art, Culture + Tourism noted, "We're just so proud of these organizations and the contributions they are making to the development of our city's youth. They've literally changed the course of young peoples' lives by providing access to exceptional arts learning experiences and cultivating meaningful relationships with artists and mentors." ▲



## Just What the Doctor Ordered

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Remarkably, even with this commitment to outreach and performance, the TMCO remains an all-volunteer orchestra, with Lebel as its only paid staff. Board members typically assist her in all other organizational tasks, including marketing and fundraising. Their budget of \$90,000 primarily pays guest soloists, the music director, and occasional percussion needs. Annual membership dues of \$100 help to cover the costs, as do ticket sales and donations, but funding is tight, confirmed Alpert. “Eventually, though, we would love to bring on a paid administrator.”

While doctors’ orchestras exist around the world, the Texas Medical Center Orchestra is one of the most successful in the United States, and its scope and concentration of medical health professionals is unique. Members benefit from networking and participating in a shared love of music, but being a part of TMCO has other added benefits, as Musher explained: “For me, playing violin is a wonderful escape from the stresses of the everyday learning, teaching, and practicing medicine.”

Lebel agreed. “I believe being a part of something like TMCO makes our health-care professionals much more compassionate...they learn to let go of stress and see the beauty in things.”

As the orchestra elevates in status, it also receives a growing number of inquiries from health-care professionals contemplating a move to Houston. Some-

The Texas Medical Center Orchestra performing at the Wortham Center in Houston.

times an audition takes place in conjunction with an interview for a local health-care job or medical residency. Even orchestra members who had no intention of remaining in Houston have stayed in part because of the TMCO.

This includes Lynn Zechiedrich, TMCO flutist and associate professor of molecular virology and microbiology, biochemistry and molecular biology, and pharmacology at Baylor College of Medicine: “Indeed, when people approach me about other jobs at their institutions, my first thought is, ‘How could I ever find another TMCO?’ For sure, this orchestra is a huge reason for staying in Houston.”

After 10 years leading the TMCO, Lebel also cannot imagine moving on: “I love working with people who play because they have a passion for it, not because they’re getting paid. Many professional musicians don’t even notice the conductors anymore, and they have lost the joy of playing music...I enjoy teaching them to create music out of dry notes and to savor every moment of it.”

“Sure, it might be easier to conduct a professional orchestra, but this group is all heart,” she added. “I love every second of it.” ▲

*Christy Crytzer Pierce is a writer and publicist in Fort Worth, Texas.*

## Come Together

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and the festival. From beginning to end, the Tamejavi Festival is a community-driven event.

When Juan Santiago Ramirez immigrated to the Central Valley from Oaxaca, Mexico, in 2001 at the age of 11, he brought with him knowledge of the beliefs and traditions of the Zapoteco community. While performing with the traditional dance group Grupo Folklorico Se'esavi, Ramirez came to the attention of the Pan Valley Institute and was asked to represent the Zapoteco community on the planning committee and serve as volunteer organizer for the 2006 event, which took place in the city of Madera. "Back then, I never thought it was possible to bring someone together from the Iranian community, Hmong community, African-American community, and the indigenous community to sit around a table and have a dialogue that eventually turned into a festival," said Ramirez. "I learned how to communicate with these other ethnic groups and work toward a common goal."

Ramirez has also seen the effect of the Tamejavi Festival on changing stereotypes about Latinos. He explains that mainstream media often labels Latinos as lazy and taking advantage of social agencies. "But we contribute to the American society with our culture, our food, our language... [this] all contradicts the stereotype." The Tamejavi Festival helps the Central

Valley's diverse populations to feel accepted and valued for such contributions. "Many of the immigrant communities felt that they could not share their cultural traditions, that there was something wrong with that," said Nateras. "I think Tamejavi gave value to that."

As the festival became better known, representatives from other communities became involved in the planning process as organizers so that their cultures could be represented. According to the National Endowment for the Arts' 2010 study *Live from Your Neighborhood: A National Study of Outdoor Arts Festivals*, 83 percent of those who attended the 2009 Tamejavi Festival said they were introduced to a new style of art. Nateras said, "Every time, new groups join. It started with Latinos and Hmongs. Now the Filipino and Persian communities join. That has been the beauty of the event—every year new communities come." Estela Galvan, PVI program associate, echoed Nateras's statement: "Anyone is welcome—it's for all of us. That's what attracts people to it."

The success of Tamejavi encouraged PVI to develop year-round programming, such as film series and workshops with master artists, and to spread its programming to cities outside of Fresno, which in turn has helped to spur interest in the Tamejavi Festival. In addition, the Pan Valley Institute has encouraged cultural exchanges in which specific cultural events, such as the Hmong New Year, are celebrated. Prior to attending the event, the institute will inform participants about the tradition and its significance; after the event, the participants come together to discuss their experience. All of this contributes to PVI's efforts to promote an understanding of different cultures and supports immigrants in their endeavors to become more socially and politically included in society.

In fewer than 10 years, the Tamejavi Festival has become an essential part of life in the Central Valley, bringing to light the rich, diverse culture that makes up this region. As reported in *Live from Your Neighborhood*, these efforts are appreciated: more than 84 percent of participants said that they felt that Tamejavi was an important part of their community life. Galvan said that on the day of the festival, "You can see and feel a sense of community unity. At that moment, people are celebrating together that this is who we are. I'm welcome here. And I'm sharing that with other people." ▲



PHOTO BY TERRY FOSS

A Hmong group playing the traditional instrument, the *qeej*, at the 2004 Tamejavi Festival.

# The UNLONELY POET

Poetry Communities in  
New York City (and Beyond)

BY MATTHEW BURGESS

In his classic essay, “Here Is New York,” E. B. White explains: “A poem compresses much in a small place and adds music, thus heightening its meaning.... The island of Manhattan is without any doubt the greatest human concentrate on earth, the poem whose magic is comprehensible to millions of permanent residents but whose full meaning will always remain elusive.” That the city’s song is inexhaustible is good news for new generations of poets who keep coming to New York, but how does the poet survive in the city?

Fortunately, poets and lovers of poetry have been solving this riddle for years. Lee Briccetti, executive director of Poets House, described her organization’s beginnings. Before its founding in 1985, Stanley Kunitz, two-time U.S. Poet Laureate, and Elizabeth Kray, visionary arts administrator, started talking about ways to encourage writers and readers of poetry. “There was a feeling that poets were very lonely in our culture, so initially Poet’s House was designed to provide nurture for poets and a home where there could be friendship and affiliation and learning. At the same time, [they wanted] a place that would invite the general public to have a different experience of poetry, to encounter it with more pleasure and understanding.”

Clearly the scheme has succeeded. About to celebrate its 25th anniversary, Poet’s House is an ever-expanding organization with more than 200 programs each year, a library with 50,000 volumes of poetry, and the annual Poets House Showcase, an exhibit of all the year’s published poetry books. “There is nowhere else in the country where you can see all the books in one place,” Briccetti noted. “We are a *place*. That’s the thing that makes us different from a lot of other presenters.”

Stephen Motika, the program director, emphasized the significance of place as well. “There is this space for people to come in and interact with poetry. The whole collection is a reading room. It’s a refuge.” And with its immensely successful Poetry in the Branches program, Poets House has extended its reach far beyond its new home in Battery Park City by fostering audiences in local communities nationwide. One current iteration of the program, the Language of Conservation, has poets-in-residence collaborating with biologists at five zoos and four public libraries to explore the connections between poetry, environmental



PHOTO BY MARK WOODS

**Poets House in Battery Park is a national poetry library and literary center dedicated to the living tradition of poetry.**

awareness, and conservation. Some of the work generated through this project is permanently installed in the exhibits, inviting visitors to these institutions to think more deeply about what they encounter.

A frequent collaborator with Poets House, the Poetry Society of America (PSA) has been “putting poetry at the crossroads of American life” for 100 years, making it the oldest poetry organization in the country. Currently celebrating its centennial anniversary, the PSA presents almost 60 programs a year, both in New York and nationwide. In addition to highly visible initiatives such as Poetry in Motion and Poem in Your Pocket, the PSA also sponsors the New Salon at New York University and Queens College, a series of conversations and readings intended to inspire a younger audience. In 2008, the PSA co-hosted State of the Art:

African American Poetry Today, a two-day festival of lectures and readings at Boston University’s Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center. Cosponsored by the *Boston Review* and the not-for-profit Cave Canem, the two-day festival was attended by more than 2,000 people.

The PSA also supports poetry communities in Minneapolis, Atlanta, Boston, Los Angeles, and Washington, DC. “For the PSA it means diving into these various places and bringing a national organization to lift up the local scene and to show that it really matters to the country to have these major enthusiastic audiences for the art,” said PSA Executive Director Alice Quinn. “In a couple of years I hope we’ll have another five.” Addressing the question of how arts organizations create community, Quinn continued, “The

PHOTO BY LAWRENCE SCHWARTZWALD



Poets Charles Simic (l) and Billy Collins at the Poetry Society of America centennial event, *One Hundred Years of American Poetry: 1910-2010*.

biggest problem in poetry has always been ‘how does the audience find the poetry that they are bound to love?’ And it’s all about relying on wonderful teachers and local arts organizations to care about the art and to expose people to it. It’s a big streambed and you’ve got to keep the water flowing.”

Two other loci of New York’s poetry community are the Poetry Project at St. Mark’s Church and the Unterberg Poetry Center at the 92nd Street Y. Located in the East Village, the Poetry Project presents three reading series each week, six to eight workshops per year, a newsletter, a journal, an online archive, and various special events, including the beloved New Year’s Day Marathon Reading. Since its inception in the 1960s, the Poetry Project has prided itself on being an organization run by poets. Artistic Director Stacy Szymaszek explained, “This is very intentional and comes out of a belief that the people who run an organization for poets need to know what it is to be a poet in our society, the set of rewards and problems that come with the investment in life as a poet.” Whereas the PSA is a national institution reaching out to the broadest possible audience, the Poetry Project is decidedly more local.

“I think the Project has maintained an important aspect of its grassroots beginnings in the realm of the social—the reading as a social gathering,” added Szymaszek. “A kid who has been turned on by the work of John Godfrey or Bruce Andrews can come to New York

City, attend a reading, and find themselves out to dinner or at a bar with them afterward.”

Across town, on the Upper East Side, the Unterberg Poetry Center at the 92nd Street Y has been an important part of the city’s literary landscape since 1939. William Carlos Williams was the first poet to read from the podium, and for the last 70 years, the reading series has attracted distinguished writers of all genres, including Dylan Thomas, Langston Hughes, Marianne Moore, Octavio Paz, and Maxine Hong Kingston. The writing program has existed since the Poetry Center’s beginning, and it continues to offer workshops at every level from introductory through master classes taught by poets who appear in the reading series. A literary magazine, *Podium*, features the work of writers selected by their fellow students or their teachers, and each semester culminates in a public reading.

Director Bernard Schwartz explained that the mission of the Poetry Center is “to honor the voice of literature. To create a place where people can come and listen to writers read their work, a place where close attention is expected and rewarded.” One reading

PHOTO BY STAR BLACK



St. Mark’s Church hosts the Poetry Project, which presents readings, workshops, and various special events related to poetry.

Author Junot Diaz reads  
at the 92nd Street Y.



series run by the Poetry Center is The Tenth Muse, which allows an established poet to curate an evening of emerging talent. Another current project is the Virtual Poetry Center, an online archive of digitized audio recordings dating back to the early 1940s. “We are bringing real treasures from our archives to a position that they can be enjoyed by the public,” said Schwartz. “A long term goal is finding a way to really connect with teachers all across the country, and because of the Internet your ambition can be really limitless with regards to geography.”

As Alice Quinn confidently stated, “We know that poetry is popular”—it’s a matter of finding a way to share the art form with the community. And the work of these organizations demonstrates that poetry is alive and well in the streets where the likes of Allen Ginsberg, Hart Crane, Frank O’Hara, Langston Hughes, and Edna St. Vincent Millay once walked. ▲

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**ART WORKS.**

arts.gov

## About the Art Works Logo

As Chairman Rocco Landesman travels around the country, he often states the new philosophy of the NEA in two words: Art works.

- “Art works” first refers to works of art themselves—the performances, objects, and texts that are the creation of artists.
- “Art works” reminds us of the ways that art works on audiences to change, confront, challenge, and inspire us; to allow us to imagine and to aspire to something more.
- “Art works” is a declaration that with two million full-time artists and 5.7 million arts-related jobs in this country, arts jobs are real jobs that are part of the real economy. Art workers pay taxes, and art contributes to economic growth, neighborhood revitalization, and the livability of American towns and cities.

Those three elements—the works of art themselves, the ways art works on audiences, and art as work—together are the intrinsic value of the arts.

As Hoon Kim, the principal designer of Why Not Smile LLC who created the logo, explains, the three triangles are a visual representation of the three meanings of art works, and give a sense of the capital A and W in “Art Works.” The colors are based on the painting by Sol Lewitt, *Isometric Figure*. You can find more on how Kim developed the logo on the NEA website: [arts.gov](https://www.arts.gov).