



Thriving culture yields dividends

By SWANEE HUNT
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Smiles from proud parents. Excited giggles from children molding clay. A thundering ovation after a symphony performance.

Cultural activity inspires communities across the nation.

Painter Marc Chagall said art may be "a state of soul more than anything else." But the creative environment matters. Thriving cultural institutions bring sizable financial and spiritual returns: they build neighborhood identities, lift local economies, boost student achievement and bridge social divides.

Still, countless museums, theaters and community art centers struggle with leaking roofs, cracked walls and antiquated technology. The conditions discourage many who might otherwise relish watching a puppet show or painting on a Saturday afternoon.

Preserving cultural facilities requires financial investments that dwarf most organizations' revenues. Some nonprofits face the challenges and come out on top.

The Dance Institute of Washington, for example, helps kids develop critical life skills: commitment, follow-through and teamwork. Fabian Barnes, a principal dancer at the Dance Theatre of Harlem, founded the institute to give some of Washington's poorest children arts-education and performance opportunities.

In 1999, they moved into state-of-the-art dance studios. Barnes celebrated by starting a year-round dance program and more summer activities for kids, when they need structure most. In July, the Dance Institute of Washington will move into a 16,000-square-foot facility that includes four studios, education-outreach classrooms, a dance supply store and child-care center. The school's enrollment will double—from 350 to 700—and expose a whole new cohort of kids to the power of art. The Dance Institute is lucky: more than a third of the support for its projects has come from public funding in the form of grants and loans.

In South Boston, Artists for Humanity proves that art is a powerful force for social change by empowering youth. Artist Susan Rodgerson and a few kids joined forces in 1991 to create collaborative paintings reflecting their communities' voices, visions and cultural diversity. They marketed their work to local businesses and founded Artists for Humanity so kids could express themselves and earn some money, too. The organization now employs about 120 young artists through a four-year paid-apprenticeship program. The kids—mostly from low-income immigrant families—see their own value as their work is valued. Ninety-five percent of them have gone to four-

year colleges, compared to about 47 percent of their public-school peers.

Rodgerson believes space predicts success. For years, they rented a warehouse riddled with holes in the ceiling and broken windows. Then they had to move three times in three years, and lost income. It was time for a permanent home. Rodgerson hired Carlo Lewis, one of her young co-founders, who had graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design. The son of Jamaican immigrants, Carlo mentored a new generation of artists, who built models and studied light infiltration and material use. The spectacular 23,500-square-foot space has an open design with stunning views of Boston's skyline and several floors for artists to fulfill their creative visions.

"A beautiful, state-of-the-art space fulfills the kids in a way they may not be in their own communities," Rodgerson insists.

Enthusiasm didn't offset the project's price tag: \$6.8 million. Despite two lead gifts totaling more than \$1 million, fund-raising was a slog. Massive cuts in state arts funding made public dollars scarce. According to the Boston Foundation, cultural organizations in Massachusetts need \$1.1 billion for maintenance and necessary expansions.

In recent years, 43 of 56 state and regional arts agencies have reported significant funding declines, often by more than 50 percent.

But it's not all bad news. Many cities and states have prioritized the arts. New York City and the state of New Jersey have committed hundreds of millions of dollars to support cultural institutions. San Francisco earmarks 2 percent of its massive construction budget for projects with artistic components. The city's artsy airport is a world-renowned example, but residents enjoy artwork throughout the city, even in civic buildings and public parks.

As former New Jersey Gov. Christine Todd Whitman noted: "I'm not speaking of things we can touch, like roads, bridges and buildings. I'm talking about things that touch us. Tony Award-winning theaters. First-class museums. Kids who pick up a paintbrush or a pen and realize that they can learn and achieve."

I'd be hard-pressed to find a better return on our investment.

Swanee Hunt, a former ambassador to Austria, is also president of Hunt Alternatives Fund. She can be reached at [response\(at\)swaneehunt.org](mailto:response(at)swaneehunt.org).