

The Arts Angle in Social Justice Grantmaking

Results-Oriented Foundation World Takes on the Challenge and Unpredictability of Art's Creativity and Innovation

By Heidi K. Rettig

WALKING TALL IN MIAMI: A CASE STUDY OF ART AS COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

The Walking Tall Circus in Miami isn't just an ordinary circus. As part of its community outreach initiative, the Miami Performing Arts Center gathers more than 100 children from numerous Miami neighborhoods to rehearse for eight weeks and produce the circus.

Using physical theater and folk traditions like storytelling, puppetry, circus arts and public spectacle as a means to "change the world," Wise Fool partners with the Miami Performing Arts Center and local clinics and social service organizations on Walking Tall Circus, a physical theater program for children attending after-school programs at community centers in some of Miami's poorest neighborhoods. For the past three years, the partners, led by the center, have squeezed their limited budgets to pay for Walking Tall Circus. "Even though it was a challenge for the partners to piece the resources together, it was worth it," says Kim Walsh, recreation superintendent at North Miami Parks and Recreation. "Circus develops aerobic capacity and agility. After eight weeks ... in Walking Tall, the kids notice that their bodies are stronger, and this is a big boost to their self-esteem," says Justin Macdonnell, artistic director of Miami Performing Arts Center. "But the best thing they get out of it is an 'I can' feeling. So many of them feel defeated by their family's economic status; this program gives them the opportunity to really blow the top off the expectations that many of these kids have set for themselves."

NCRP defines social justice philanthropy as "grantmaking that attempts to create a more equitable distribution of social, economic, and political power—to truly reform society's institutions so that they are better able to meet existing needs, and eliminate or at least reduce reliance on short-term and emergency service provisioning or representation."¹ Though arts-based social justice projects like Walking Tall

often produce professional quality visual or performance material, more often than not they survive only as "labors of love" with a minimum amount of support from private philanthropy. Historically, arts-based social justice projects have been the work of smaller community-based organizations, many of which have a cultural heritage focus or serve minority populations. While projects like the Walking Tall Circus struggle to survive, there is evidence of a steady increase in foundation support for arts and culture program activities with social justice outcomes. More private philanthropies are now focusing grant guidelines to heighten the impact of investments in arts and culture programs—a trend most often observed among large, independent foundations with significant assets. Foundation Center data indicates that the number of organizations receiving grant money for social justice-related projects² grew about 31 percent between 1998 and 2002.

KNIGHT & CUMMINGS: A COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL JUSTICE ARTS FUNDING

The Foundation Center's *Social Justice Grantmaking* report suggests that now, more than ever, major funders are extending support to community-based arts and culture organizations with deep neighborhood-level connections. The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation has always been a major funder of arts, culture, and media, but a new strategic plan encouraged the foundation to seek new connections between the arts and priority outcomes in other program areas. Through the Community Partners Program, Knight aims to improve the quality of life in 26 U.S. communities where the Knight brothers owned newspapers by establishing community advisory committees to advise program officers of local priorities and needs. The local committees also help Knight develop a set of tightly focused desired outcomes for multiyear community investment plans.

Knight's community advisory committee in

Miami makes grants in two of the city's economically depressed neighborhoods: East Little Havana and Overtown. The foundation's five-year community investment plan seeks increased community development and civic engagement in both neighborhoods. Suzette L. Harvey, community liaison program officer for the Knight Foundation says, "Knight Foundation wanted to increase participation of neighborhood residents in East Little Havana and build the capacity of local nonprofits to engage residents in meaningful community improvement activities. Many of the families living in the area are recent immigrants who may not know of services and programs that are available to them for low or no cost." In 2002, Knight made a grant to the Rafael Peñalver Clinic in East Little Havana to support three community art fairs (The Clinic is also a partner of the Walking Tall Circus program). Through its distinctive service model, *"The Arts, Your Health, and You,"* implemented in 1999, the clinic seeks to connect residents of Little Havana to free or affordable health care and social services, as well as family-friendly cultural programs offered at the clinic. It was an instant success in a community that needed affordable medical services and craved affordable artistic activities suited to its cultural diversity. Each fair uses the arts to build awareness of health concerns of the community and also offers performances and visual arts exhibits by professional artists. Average attendance at the fairs is 1,200, composed mainly of families. "We think participation in the arts is an important part of a healthy lifestyle," says Sergio Fiallo, executive director of the clinic, "and we want to integrate arts experiences into the lives of working people. At the same time, we try to connect them to the clinic and encourage them to use the free or low-cost health care services at our site."

Harvey says that the Knight Foundation knew that the Rafael Peñalver Clinic has a strong connection to the neighborhood, and the arts were an integral part of that connection. "We saw the grant not only as a way to encourage access to services that led to positive health outcomes for individuals, but as a potential catalyst for community engagement," says Harvey. "The clinic's art fairs are an invitation to families to participate in a positive community event, bringing new residents into the conversation about the social, civic and cultur-

al issues critical to East Little Havana."

In 2001, the Nathan Cummings Foundation expanded its grantmaking guidelines to include arts and social justice. The foundation, which has always been a strong advocate for small and mid-sized arts institutions that are culturally specific and community based, now funds four types of organizations under the new arts and social justice guidelines: universities that have community-based art programs that train artists to work with and be accountable to the communities they serve; membership organizations or service organizations that regrant to individual artists engaged in community-based work; arts groups with a long history of community-based work; and social justice organizations that work with artists to distribute a message. The program also includes policy practitioners that engage constituents on the ground. Claudine Brown, arts director for the foundation says, "We support policy practitioners who talk to the constituents. We really are not interested in supporting policy think tanks where the really smart people talk to each other. We are interested in think tanks that are developing case studies and confer with those who are on the ground doing the work. The theory and practice must be connected."³

THE CONUNDRUM OF GRANTS GUIDELINES IN THE ART WORLD

While Knight Foundation and Nathan Cummings have grasped the connections between the arts and social justice and community empowerment, there still remains the challenge of remedying inherent gaps and disconnects among foundations and arts nonprofits.

According to the Urban Institute, about 70 percent of large foundations participating in a recent study reported that it was "very impor-

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—Suzette Harvey of the Knight Foundation, on a grant made to the Rafael Peñalver Clinic for three community art fairs



These aerial acrobats from the Dr. Rafael A. Peñalver Clinic in Little Havana spent five weeks learning their craft in preparation for this trapeze performance during the Walking Tall Circus.

Photo Courtesy of Miami Performing Arts Center.

tant” for the foundation to establish focused and limited grantmaking areas. About half said that the presence of measurable outcomes was a “very important criterion” in grantmaking decisions.⁴ How do “focused and limited grantmaking areas” affect the funding stream going to arts organizations?

Residual Funding Gaps

Arts organizations say that as foundations become more strategic in their grantmaking, specific gaps in support deepen or emerge. Funds available for general operating support, grants to individual artists and support for the creation of new work are three such areas, and all are considered critical for maintaining and renewing a vibrant cultural sector.

Tunnel Vision

A key concern is that grantmaking guidelines limit foundation flexibility to act beyond the priorities stated by the donor or executive staff and that this approach will lead to “tunnel vision” in grantmaking, distancing the foundation from the needs of arts nonprofits. Artists also believe that the resulting administrative process prevents program officers from connecting to and understanding the quality and content of proposed programs. “Filling out an online grant application can never be a proper relationship between an artist and foundation,” asserts Justin Macdonnell, artistic director at the Miami Performing Arts Center. “The performing arts are social activities; they mean the most in a social context—in front of a live audience. When you reduce them to a piece of paper or electronic form, you compromise some of the most important elements of the work. There is a real maturity when you can come face-to-face in a conversation with an artist,” says Macdonnell, “to learn about how they conceived of their idea and then give

them honest feedback about their work samples—there is no better way for funders to find out what artists really do.” Peggy Amsterdam, president of the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, argues that nonprofits also have a responsibility to meet funders halfway: “To be fair, we must agree that grantees have a serious responsibility. They need to think more broadly about how specific grants will impact their organization and prepare grant applications that include realistic budgets and thoughtful program plans.”

Arts and cultural organizations recognize the importance and potential value of evaluation for more tangible outcomes, but wish they had the resources to develop plans designed to include more meaningful qualitative measurements that track the creative *process* rather than just focusing on the end *product*. Many artists feel that the elements of surprise and chance during the creative process will lead to their best work. For artists, this is the critical difference between the arts and health or social welfare projects directed at the same goals. In the classroom, a teaching artist’s interactions with students will often steer projects in unanticipated directions. “Some of the most rewarding experiences I’ve had in the classroom grew out of ideas that children brought into the art studio,” says Debra Tomson, a visual artist based in Pittsburgh. “Those are the positive outcomes worth noting and the outcomes most difficult to predict.”

Occasionally, narrowly focused grant guidelines may not even be able to connect the foundation to the board’s desired outcomes. The kinds of arts activities supported through program grants may not lead to intended benefits for targeted populations. Ruby Lerner, executive director of Creative Capital, went to a large foundation on behalf of an artist who had written a fictional screenplay about young women of color. Creative Capital is a New York City-based nonprofit that supports innovative work in the performing and visual arts, film and video, and emerging fields. “I knew that the foundation was interested in reaching youth and that the resulting film would speak to young people in a unique and powerful way,” says Lerner, “but the funder declined the application, noting that they only supported documentaries.” Foundations can make arts and culture grants without compromising the impact of the pro-

Students of the Walking Tall program from North Miami Parks and Recreation perform on stilts in the Walking Tall Circus. The Miami Performing Arts Center partners with the community on Walking Tall Circus, a physical theater program for children attending after-school programs at community centers in some of Miami’s poorest neighborhoods.

Photo Courtesy of Miami Performing Arts Center.



gram, but not unless they clearly understand the needs of their target population. “Is a non-fiction documentary the best way to engage the attention of teenagers?” says Lerner.

Though arts program officers are almost always advocates for a diverse range of work, it remains a challenge to communicate the more ambiguous outcomes of arts and cultural programs to conservative boards. Lerner adds, “If you have a foundation supporting social justice in the community, how can the program officer articulate anticipated outcomes of an artist’s piece without compromising the creativity of their work? Program officers face this dilemma every day,” says Lerner. “They wind up stretching grantees into pretzels trying to make it work or are forced to disregard imaginative projects that are just too difficult to sell.”

Program Support Versus Core Operating Support

General operating support gives nonprofits flexibility to deliver programs effectively and respond to change. Most foundations do not support administrative costs or overhead, which leaves organizations of all sizes scrambling to cover the costs of rent, salaries, and employee benefits. “The pressure to make ends meet has backed some larger institutions into the corner,” says Beth Boone, artistic director of the Miami Light Project. “I have heard about organizations that create new programs just to get grant money to survive. You need to be nimble and creative to grow with the times,” she says, “but changing core programming to continue to receive funding from an entity that has clearly changed direction is unwise. It also dilutes the quality of arts and cultural programs that are truly issue or community-based.”

Funding an Individual Artist

Individual artists are often the catalyst behind new ideas—experimenting with forms and materials, developing concepts, and forming collaborations that build networks of creative innovation. They also may work in ways that are vastly different from creatives working within formal institutions. Because most private foundations do not make grants to individuals, awards are heavily weighted toward projects that encourage collaboration with a 501(c)3 arts organization. While these collaborations can be rich and productive, they

Resources

Creative Capital www.creative-capital.org

John S. and James L. Knight Foundation
www.knightfdn.org

Miami Performing Arts Center
www.miamipac.org

Nathan Cummings Foundation
www.nathancummings.org

Rafael Penalver Clinic
www.um-jmh.org/body.cfm?id=102

Urban Institute: www.urban.org

Wise Fool: www.wisefoolnm.org

are most effective when they arise out of organic creative needs rather than financial pressures. “There is an issue of equity here, and funders should balance their support between artists and organizations,” says Macdonnell. “Individual artists shouldn’t be left out of the funding stream because they don’t have access to organizational resources like grant writers, public relations experts, and accountants.”

Funding New Work

New and controversial ideas have driven the success of the commercial entertainment industry in the United States. Hollywood isn’t afraid of controversy, and networks are constantly challenging popular assumptions and making those ideas broadly accessible to the general public through the media. Similarly, the creation of new work is critical to the ongoing renewal of the arts sector, but it is rather difficult for nonprofits to leverage support for this kind of work. In its most recent Arts Funding Update, the Foundation Center reports that just one-tenth of grants reported in the sample were for the creation of new work. The long-term future of arts nonprofits is dependent on engaging new audiences. Nonprofit arts and culture organizations need some financial flexibility to experiment without being tethered to exhaustive social outcomes. “Many of the large foundations like Rockefeller and Carnegie were started by visionary, innovative leaders who didn’t always do what was popular,” says the Miami Light Project’s

Boone. "We shouldn't be afraid to embrace what artists have to say." Not all new ventures will be popular or commercially successful, but artists argue that there is a great deal of learning in the creative process retained within the organization.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the many challenges, most arts organizations believe that shifts in funding priorities have been very positive for organizations whose mission extends beyond "art for art's sake." Historically, issue-based projects have been the work of community-based arts, ethnic and cultural heritage organizations operating on shoestring budgets with few paid staff. Private philanthropy's growing interest in supporting social justice initiatives means that these organizations are seeing greater support. As foundations extend funding initiatives beyond the symphony, opera, and ballet, the pool of grantees has diversified to include more organizations with a minority-ethnic or cultural heritage focus. "There is room for everyone at the table," says Ruby Lerner, executive director of Creative Capital.

"These organizations do important work and haven't always gotten the recognition they deserve. Artists who make work that is socially engaged can be influenced by those who work in more 'traditional' fields of practice and vice versa. The movement between public community-based art and more traditional art forms has greatly enhanced the cultural community." ○

Notes

1. *Social Justice Philanthropy: The Latest Trend or a Lasting Lens in Grantmaking?*, NCRP, April 2005.
2. *Social Justice Grantmaking: A Report on Foundation Trends*, Independent Sector and The Foundation Center, 2005. Page 2.
3. Ibid.
4. *Attitudes and Practices Concerning Effective Philanthropy*, Francie Ostrower, Ph.D., Urban Institute: 2004.

Heidi K. Rettig is an independent consultant specializing in program design and evaluation for nonprofit arts and culture organizations. Questions and comments can be directed to: heidirettig@yahoo.com.

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www.ncrp.org/publications/index.asp

All NCRP publications have now been reorganized under recognizable themes and issue areas, including but not limited to: conservative philanthropy, core operating support, local research, and social justice philanthropy. Also our secure Verisign-powered store catalogue makes ordering publications easy and worry free.

RESPONSIVE PHILANTHROPY

www.ncrp.org/rparticles.asp

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BILLS ON THE HILL

www.ncrp.org/legislation.asp

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