STATE SPOTLIGHT

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Engaging Washington Communities through the Arts

The small town of Wapato in southern central Washington State is experiencing a renaissance. The local main street, which had half of its storefronts closed six months ago, now has only a handful of vacancies. Quarterly community festivals and events are being organized; a new garden is being planted; and the Chamber of Commerce is looking into opening a visitors' center.

At the epicenter of this rejuvenation is a former vacant lot on Wapato's main street. The space was converted into a central city park when five metalwork sculptures—representing the unique cultural heritage of Wapato's Hispanic, Native American, Japanese, Filipino and Anglo residents—were installed by the Northwest Learning and Achievement (NLA) Group, a local nonprofit that organizes youth activities. The artwork is the product of a three-year program, which involved 200 Wapato students and five professional artists. The children provided the images of local life and history; the artists provided the technical know-how of concrete sculpture, bronze casting and metal fabrication; and the Washington State Arts Commission (WSAC) provided training and financial support through the Arts Participation Initiative.

The NLA Group's project didn't just enliven a vacant lot on Wapato's main street; it brought people together, illuminated the town's potential and acted as a spark plug for other revitalization efforts. "People are downtown. This is a destination," says Barbara Peterson, co-director of NLA Group. "We have positive pride, all of us, in this town because the students gave voice to it. In a highly diversified ethnic community, five competing cultures came together in a collaborative effort. Somehow the art spoke."

Reaching Underserved Communities

Beginning in 2002, WSAC's Arts Participation Initiative brought the NLA Group together with 14 other organizations from across the state. Some were arts organizations, some were not. Some were well-established businesses, and some were just starting out. Perhaps the only thing that every organization had in common was that they all provided arts programming to underserved communities: the geographically isolated, the economically disadvantaged, the ethnic and the disabled populations of Washington State.

Charged with using the arts to enrich underserved communities, the organizations undertook such diverse projects as teaching mariachi music and performance to Latino residents in Yakima, realigning organizational goals with community needs at an African-American performance center in Seattle, and introducing audio description services to eastern Washington theatres and audiences.

Learning to Innovate

Central to WSAC's initiative is a creative approach to training grantee organizations. In tandem with providing project funds, the initiative includes in-depth education that helps grantees find new strategies for involving constituents

These five metalwork medallions were created by NLA Group youth participants to represent Wapato's diverse cultural heritage. The images have been adopted as official images of the city. (Photos by Barbara Peterson)

in their work. Grantees become a learning community, sharing ideas and co-creating a curriculum to explore topics such as evaluation, arts management, public value and behavioral science.

Such an interdisciplinary approach helps grantee organizations understand how citizens experience the arts as part of everyday life. It also reveals how community dynamics, personal experience and grantees' management decisions all shape individual participation choices. This broader understanding helps organizations reduce barriers to public engagement in the arts and civic life.

Each year, the Arts Participation Initiative grantees share their insights at the Washington Cultural Congress, an annual meeting of more than 150 arts leaders. In this way, the Arts Participation Initiative learning community expands, and participation-building strategies spread across the state. "We can use the grantees' skills to teach others," says program manager Mayumi Tsutakawa. "Our goal is to document this success and to show that government agencies can work with community-based organizations to be responsive to traditionally underserved communities in ways that are knowledgeable, sensitive and appropriate."

Over three years, the first 15 Arts Participation Initiative projects engaged an estimated 150,000 people in the arts. The initiative was initially financed through The Wallace Foundation's State Arts Partnerships for Cultural Participation program and National Endowment for the Arts Challenge America funds. Building on this success, WSAC secured funding from the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation to continue the initiative with 10 new organizations for another two years.

Arts Leaders as Community Assets

According to WSAC Executive Director Kristin Tucker, the Arts Participation Initiative not only creates meaningful arts participation experiences for individuals but also builds the leadership capacity of arts providers, helping them act as catalysts for civic renewal. Says Tucker, "A community benefits hugely by having competent, big-picture thinking arts leaders who have a way to connect with community values."

This is true in Wapato, where WSAC's initiative motivated both the NLA Group and the community. "The initiative made us work harder and harder on the public art element of the project," says Peterson. A program that began with students and artists ultimately created a stronger and more energized community in Wapato. When the artwork was unveiled in October 2005, visitors crowded the once vacant lot. Adults, children, business leaders, tourists, the mayor and the Chamber of Commerce all celebrated together. According to Peterson, "It would be crazy to say it was the art that rejuvenated the town, but the art was the first thing that arrived and now the rest is in place. That little bit of investment in the arts goes forever." ■

For More Information

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www.arts.wa.gov
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Also funded by The Wallace Foundation:

A New Framework for Building Participation in the Arts
The RAND Corporation (www.rand.org)

Arts and Culture: Community Connections
The Urban Institute (www.urban.org)

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