



PATHWAYS TO ENGAGEMENT

Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation has a deep commitment to engaging the people who live in this area year-round, helping ensure that their skills and experiences are central in creating more vibrant, just communities. We also know that arts and culture are vital assets for our region – providing the means to bridge divides, enrich lives and fuel economic growth. In 2017, with support from the Barr Foundation and local donors, we launched the Arts Build Community initiative to advance ways that arts and the creative process could include more people throughout Berkshire County.

Our premise is that a region steeped in world-class arts institutions holds unlimited potential to engage all residents in ways that can build connections, create understanding and bring forward inclusive approaches that improve community life.

To better understand local perceptions we recruited, in partnership with community-based organizations, a diverse group of year-round residents to conduct research into the experiences, realities, and aspirations of people who live in Pittsfield. More than 450 year-round residents contributed to the study. They reported feeling little connection to the arts and named social discomfort as a major obstacle to participating in Berkshire arts and cultural offerings. People cited specific barriers to participation: not feeling welcome in arts venues, not seeing their lived experience reflected in content presented, facing challenges due to language access, finding too few programs that were family friendly, and encountering limited audience diversity. Race and class tensions between year-round and part-time residents also surfaced; some permanent residents reported feeling on the outside of their own community, especially during the summer season.

Nearly 80% of Pittsfield residents expressed a desire to have the arts or creative expression be more a part of their lives, despite barriers and the lack of a strong sense of connection to the arts.

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Shaping a long-term initiative

These findings informed the design of Arts Build Community, which launched with a dynamic grants program for arts nonprofits, a yearlong learning series for seven arts and culture nonprofits, a new community-led vision for arts education in schools. The ABC grants program continually evolves based on learning and dialogue between grantee organizations and BTCF staff, as well as independent evaluation.

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To date, Arts Build Community has invested over \$420,000 in grants to support nearly 50 local organizations with a range of activities – piloting new ways to reach and involve diverse audiences, deepening equitable and inclusive practices within their organizations, accessing experts able to help strengthen their business models, forming collaborations, sharing engagement strategies and much more. Resident advisors work with BTCF staff to assess grant proposals. Local donors are joining in to advance this work; ABC has already attracted more than \$100,000 in new contributions to support the Berkshire arts sector.



The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a profound effect on area arts nonprofits. As facilities closed and performances were canceled, the sharp loss of revenue caused many to shrink operations and shift to virtual or outdoor programming. The uprising for racial justice after the killing of George Floyd also led nonprofits throughout the region to further examine and address racism and inequity in their organizational structures and artistic approaches. Grantee reporting and evaluation show that through ABC support, many organizations are better positioned today to address social isolation and accelerate the building of inclusive and equitable community life.

In 2021 and beyond, BTCF will continue investing in the development of arts nonprofits that are relevant to Berkshire communities, as well as resilient in the face of inevitable future disruptions. This includes development within the boards that govern these organizations. All ABC programs will remain anchored in our belief in the power of resident engagement. This grantmaking will adapt to community needs and opportunities – for example, this year ABC is launching a program supporting the growth of resident leaders drawn from the many population groups that make up this county. support for leadership

Gaining Perspective

Since initiating Arts Build Community in 2017, we have made strides in understanding the local ecosystem for arts and culture, and how it is evolving to engage historically underserved communities. We have also gained insight into the ways our organization is best able to join with residents and arts organizations to make a difference. Today, we know that:

Berkshire County residents want to be connected to, and through, local arts and culture.

They seek the personal enrichment that comes from participation in artistic experiences, as well as the ability to share these experiences and form new relationships.

Arts nonprofits have the desire and ability to engage all residents.

These organizations are working to involve full-time and seasonal residents, welcome people of all income levels, ages, races and ethnicities, languages spoken and abilities, and serve immigrants as well as those born here.

Berkshire Taconic can add value to this equation.

Through Arts Build Community, we can help: 1) Fund more resilient and relevant arts organizations addressing barriers to participation, 2) Connect arts nonprofits and support their collaborations, and 3) Encourage more donors to invest in arts and creativity as means to deeper resident engagement and stronger communities.

As the arts sector prepares to move beyond the losses and hardships of this pandemic, and centers equity as the driving force for its practices and programs, the foundation commits to continued learning and purposeful improvement of the Arts Build Community initiative. We want to be responsive and strategic as a partner for arts nonprofits and all residents, testing new approaches to engagement, spurring more vibrant communities through the arts and supporting the growth of an arts sector that draws on and contributes to the unique abilities of the people who call Berkshire County home.

I AM: POSSIBILITY

Strengthening Youth Identity at the Christian Center

Opportunity. The Christian Center collaborated with the I AM: International Foundation to help young people on Pittsfield's Westside explore their identity through art. Titled "I AM: Possibility," this 2019 program was funded through an Arts Build Community grant of \$10,000. It involved 22 attendees, most ages 12 to 18, from an area with barriers to participating in arts that include lack of education, prejudice, limited resources and opportunities, and a shortage of positive role models. More than half of families on the Westside have incomes of \$25,000 or less and the area has high incidences of violence, drug addiction and unemployment.

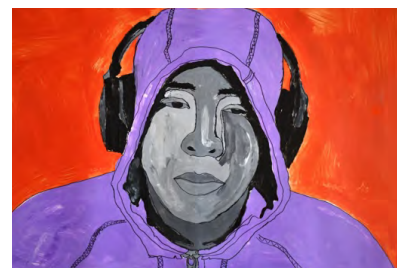
Approach. I AM: Possibility featured arts-based learning to inspire and help young people envision possibilities and options for their future. Across four days, each participant explored their identity by creating two self-portraits – one a collage and the other mixing photography with paint. They also wrote poetry and created a video showcasing the talents and interests of the group. Workshop leader Sasha Sicurella, from the I AM: International Foundation, returned after two weeks for a fifth day on which attendees finalized their art and considered placement options. Their work was then exhibited in a range of community settings, gaining wide visibility.

*"I am from a neighborhood. From boys who want to be thugs, and
places where kids can't play outside without fear.
I am from dirty needles, drugs, and guns. . . .
At the end of the day, I still smile anyway.
I am a girl going through changes. "*

I AM: POSSIBILITY PARTICIPANT
POEM EXCERPT

*"I am from parents who tried their hardest.
From addiction and the struggles of teen pregnancy. . .
I am from hope and faith and the desire to be more than I am. . .
I am from a cold world and the power to overcome all obstacles. "*

I AM: POSSIBILITY PARTICIPANT
POEM EXCERPT



Impact. The workshop advanced four youth participant goals identified by the Christian Center: developing a positive self-image; developing skills to be independent thinkers, group problem solvers, and collaborators; gaining new perspectives about their identities; and understanding the power of artmaking as a form of communication.

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RURAL OUTREACH AND TRANSPORTATION

Expanding Engagement in Williamstown Theatre Festival

Opportunity. Williamstown Theatre Festival (WTF) sought to increase community engagement among residents of rural towns in Berkshire County, and to help more Pittsfield residents join in theatre through its COMMUNITY WORKS program. An Arts Build Community grant of \$9,500 supported this 2019 project, which recognized that residents faced barriers to arts participation that include a lack of affordable, accessible transportation as well as social discomfort in attending cultural and arts events.

Approach. Rural outreach focused on the cities of Cheshire and Windsor. An exercise held in Cheshire introduced residents to opportunities to participate in theatre and encouraged attendance at an upcoming production of Summer's Soldier. WTF staff facilitated transportation for many interested parties and their relatives, while others attended on their own. Through COMMUNITY WORKS, staff also recruited and arranged transportation for a dozen Pittsfield adult cast members as well as a middle school contingent of cast members; these participants otherwise would not have been able to make rehearsals and perform in Summer's Soldier.

*“Something like this can
change a person's life.
I know it's changing
my life.”*

SUMMER'S SOLDIER CAST MEMBER

*“COMMUNITY WORKS
to me is all about
meeting new people
and making new friends.
It's like my new home.”*

SUMMER'S SOLDIER CAST MEMBER



Impact. Williamstown Theatre Festival made marked progress on each of its goals for this project: forming partnerships with priority towns; conducting acting, playwriting, or story-circle workshops in these locales; recruiting participants to participate in future COMMUNITY WORKS productions; expanding WTF's audience; and providing transportation to attract new Pittsfield cast members. Through this effort, the COMMUNITY WORKS program also introduced new practices that elevate WTF's ability to reach audiences representing diversity in race, ethnicity, gender identity, income, age and ability.

We believe that a region steeped in world-class arts institutions holds unlimited potential to engage all residents in ways that build connections, create understanding and bring forward inclusive approaches that improve community life. This is the premise behind Arts Build Community, an initiative of Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation launched in 2017 with support from the Barr Foundation and local donors. Initiative partners embrace diversity and enrich places through arts.

RAPID RESPONSE GRANTS

Experiments in Arts Engagement

Rapid Response grants help Berkshire County arts nonprofits test ideas for engaging more year-round residents in creative experiences. These grants feature a short decision-making timeline with awards determined three weeks following application. Proposals are reviewed by BTCF staff in tandem with a panel of community members drawn from Pittsfield.

In 2020, about \$40,000 in grants were distributed to support experiments by eight organizations: Arts in Recovery for Youth, Berkshire Opera, Berkshire South Regional Community Center, Chesterwood/National Trust for Historic Preservation, Downtown Pittsfield Inc., ISI83 Art School of the Berkshires, Tamarack Hollow Nature & Cultural Center and WAM Theatre.

What we studied. NASH Insights, an independent evaluator, reviewed initial grant applications alongside final grantee reports to compare intended goals with actual outcomes. Grantees also reflected on progress made and lessons gained as they implemented new approaches.

What we learned. Grantees drew on Rapid Response funding to pivot to virtual offerings and outdoor venues with social distancing during COVID-19. Each organization successfully piloted ways to engage more residents, demonstrating that experimentation can be a useful and affordable means for expanding involvement. Their collective efforts reached families and youth, seniors, immigrants, people of color and low-income households. All grantees increased their understanding of barriers to resident engagement and learned through testing strategies for reaching new audiences.

REACHING DIVERSE RESIDENT GROUPS



200

New Program Participants

465

New Audience Members

8

Community Organizations

better understand barriers
and means for involvement

*“(Engaging in art)
nourishes my soul
and allows me to
express myself.”*

PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

*“I’m happiest when
creating art. This is
especially important
during this very
difficult time.”*

PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

What’s next. The Rapid Response grants program is continuing for a fourth year in 2022. Evaluation findings inform continued improvement of these grants as well as the overall Arts Build Community initiative. Examples and lessons learned by Rapid Response grantees are being shared to inform arts nonprofits throughout the region as they seek deeper engagement of all residents.

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ORGANIZATIONAL GRANTS

Expanding Arts Engagement

Organizational grants help nonprofits launch new projects or broaden existing programs to increase community engagement in the arts and creative process. These grants aim to address the most significant barriers to cultural participation among youth, people of color, people with lower incomes and immigrants. Proposals are reviewed by BTCF staff, community volunteers and resident researchers who have helped identify barriers to involvement.

In 2019, six nonprofits were funded through grants totaling \$55,500: Berkshire Museum, the Christian Center, ISI83 Art School of the Berkshires, Jacob's Pillow, MASS MoCA and Williamstown Theatre Festival.

What we studied. NASH Insights, an independent evaluator, reviewed initial grant applications alongside grantee reports to compare intended goals with actual outcomes. Evaluation emphasized the learning process experienced by each grantee as they tried different strategies, gained insight into what worked best and adapted to the severe constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic during grant implementation.

What we learned. All grantees generated ways to continue reaching their intended audience despite the pandemic's challenges. All engaged a lower income audience, most reached youth, two thirds reached communities of color, and one-third reached immigrants. Most created collaborations with community partners to involve residents. Each grantee stated commitment to sustaining this work. Findings demonstrate that a moderate investment can go a long way toward supporting more inclusive engagement of residents.

GROWING RESIDENT INVOLVEMENT



900

Direct New Audience Members

450

Additional Audience Members
reached through grantee partners

6

Arts Nonprofits
with sustained commitment
to engagement

“We are developing relationships with a group of people who have historically been isolated, and creating a space to experience empowerment, to be culturally aware and accepted for who you are, and to explore and engage with dance.”

ARTS ORGANIZATION LEADER

What's next. Organizational grants are continuing for a fourth year in 2022. Evaluation findings inform continued improvement of this program as well as the overall Arts Build Community initiative. Examples and lessons learned through Organizational Grants are being shared to inform arts nonprofits across the region as they seek deeper engagement of all residents.