Annual Report FY2015

Fiscal 2015 was a year of transitions culminating in a celebration of our 50th birthday with a 60’s themed party on Audubon Street in June. Audubon Street was the focus of the vision for an arts district that led to the creation of the Arts Council.

We bid farewell to an Arts Council veteran, Finance Director Soonil Chun, who retired after 30 years, and two other staff who moved on to new chapters in their lives. And we welcomed newcomers, Kyle Hamilton as finance director and Matt Reiniger as communications manager.

In marking our half-century, we began thinking about how to best position the Arts Council for our next 50 years. Over the last 8 months, we enlisted the Harvard Business School Community Partners program to help us create a sustainability plan for the Arts Council. The HBS team of five individuals put in an enormous amount of work. They began by interviewing stakeholders - members, funders, and community leaders - about their perceptions of the Council; and gained more feedback on the Arts Council through an online survey sent out to our entire membership list. Workgroups comprised of HBS team members and board members further explored four areas: a financial analysis of programs, board development, fundraising and membership, and The Arts Paper and our other arts promotion efforts. Recommendations from these groups will be shared with the entire board next month and form the basis of a work plan for the coming year.

Our advocacy endeavors were critically important during a difficult state budget session. Beginning with our legislative luncheon in the fall, we maintained communication with our state delegation, reminding them of the importance of continued investment in the arts. During the session, we hosted a breakfast meeting with line item recipients and legislative leadership, participated in Tourism Day and organized the arts participation for New Haven Day at the State Capital. In the final budget, arts funding was reduced, but at a much smaller percentage than originally proposed by the governor.

In February, in conjunction with the City of New Haven’s Valentine Tribute to the Arts, I had the privilege of hosting National Endowment for the Arts Chair Jane Chu for the day; accompanying her on a marvelous site visit to Music Haven and hosting a luncheon with a group of arts leaders who are NEA grant recipients. Over lunch, we had the opportunity to hear Jane’s vision for the federal agency and discussed ideas for ways the Endowment could better serve the arts field.
We know that art is powerful, that creative expression can build self-confidence and assist in healing. Our cross-sector work with other non-profits provides access and opportunities in the arts. Over the past year, Debbie Hesse organized artist-led workshops at several social service organizations working with the staff of these agencies to plan arts activities meaningful to their clients. With the support of the Carolyn Foundation, we’ve presented workshops at Liberty Services, Junta, IRIS, Tower One and Stetson Library. We’ve had very positive feedback from the host organizations and participants, many of whom had not previously made artwork.

For the second year, we issued an invitation for artists and arts organizations to submit proposals for projects that engage people in arts experiences outside traditional arts venues. We selected four projects including: *Inspired Songs of New Haven*, a song-writing project with youth, adults with mental illness, and veterans dealing with PTSD; an intergenerational drawing project led by the Free Artists of New Haven to create murals of Latino leaders in Fair Haven; a project inviting the public to create symbolic healing objects for children at Yale New Haven Children’s Hospital; and a series of workshops at neighborhood libraries with the artist Krikko, where community members created portraits of their neighborhoods that will be displayed together as a neighborhood mosaic in his new Hill Museum.

Our *Make.Art.Work.* program, teaching business and entrepreneurial skills to visual artists, is administered jointly with two other arts agencies, the Greater Hartford Arts Council and Cultural Alliance of Fairfield County. In 2015 we wanted to strengthen the program by doing more in-depth training; so we restructured the program, moving from a series of workshops by guest presenters to a six-month intensive training for a cohort of artists in each of the three communities. We selected 14 artists for our New Haven artist cohort. This year’s program of talks, coaching and peer support had a strong emphasis on goal setting and helping artists take appropriate steps to meet their career goals, which proved extremely beneficial to the artists. The artist evaluations from the recently concluded program, strongly affirmed the value of the curriculum and guidance. Several artists cited tangible career accomplishments resulting from the lessons learned and encouragement received.

Our other efforts to support artists include the exhibits that Debbie Hesse curates at our in-house Crosby Gallery and the Whitney Center. The Whitney Center collaboration has continued to develop, as each show features artist talks and other programming. For example, at the reception for *On the Spiritual in Art*, students from Albertus Magnus’ Art Therapy Program led a mandala-making workshop for residents and visitors.
Our monthly Writers’ Circle has continues to grow in attendance. These gatherings bring together writers and those who enjoy writing, to hear writers of different genres talking about their craft and careers. Matt Reiniger organizes these events as well as our monthly radio program “Arts on Air” on WPKN Radio. He’s moderated shows on a wide range of topics from political art, to art therapy, featuring artists and art leaders as guest speakers.

As we wind down FY2015 and begin 2016, we have a couple of exciting new initiatives on the calendar. For over a year, we’ve been in discussions with the state Office of the Arts about a new regional re-grant program to be administered by nine regional arts agencies around the state. The Regional Arts Initiative grants are launching this year. Each Designated Regional Service Organization will disburse $30,000 in grants to small arts organizations, libraries, schools and artists doing community projects. We’re excited about this new funding opportunity for our region and hoping the grant pool will grow in future years.

We also look forward to participating in Americans for the Arts’ Economic Impact study beginning in January 2016. The state participated in the last study in 2012, but this will be the first time we will have statistics specific to our region in addition to statewide data. While the value of the arts is by no means limited to economic activity, the number of jobs and dollars spent related to arts activity underscores the importance of the arts to our region and the state of Connecticut.

As we come to the close of another year, I want to thank our staff. We do a lot with a small group of people. My thanks to Debbie, Kyle, Matt, Winter, and our Arts Paper team of David and Amanda. Thank you to Bob Dannies for his leadership these past four years and our board of directors who give of their time and talent to guide us. We’re grateful for all those who support our work financially, our members and donors, foundations, businesses, corporations and the state of Connecticut.

-Cynthia B. Clair
Executive Director