

Executive Summary of The Association of Performing Arts Presenters /MetLife Arts Access Awards Case Studies

Introduction

Since 2005, The Association of Performing Arts Presenters and MetLife Foundation have recognized performing arts presenters and venues that have demonstrated innovation, leadership and a commitment to arts accessibility. The Arts Presenters/MetLife Foundation Awards for Arts Access honors arts organizations who demonstrate full integration of older adults, immigrants, people with disabilities and underserved communities as equal partners in the performing arts. Award recipients receive a \$10,000 cash award, presented at the APAP Conference Awards Ceremony Luncheon.

The awards not only honor the outstanding commitment of the awardees, but serve as inspiration for the broader arts community. Recipients participate in arts access professional development sessions at the APAP Conference and other Arts Presenters seminars and forums, and their programs are featured in various Arts Presenters publications. Leading by example, the award recipients provide tools and strategies that can help other organizations increase their own access to the arts.

Awards and Recipients

Award for Excellence and Innovation in Arts Access: This award honors organizations that have been consistently dedicated to the implementation and evolution of its arts access strategies for older adults and people with disabilities.

Recipients:

Straz Center for the Performing Arts
(2011 and 2010)

Flynn Center for the Performing Arts
(2011 and 2005)

Quest Visual Theatre (formerly Quest: Arts for
Everyone) (2010)

Paper Mill Playhouse (2009)

Victory Gardens Theater (2008)

Mixed Blood Theatre Company (2007)

Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (2006)

The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing
Arts (2006)

The Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts
(2005)

Award for Increasing Arts Access in Underserved Communities: This award honors organizations dedicated to innovative strategies resulting in the implementation of practices and programs that have increased access to the arts for people in underserved communities, whether they are in rural, inner-city, communities in transition or new communities.

Recipients:

University of California, Santa Barbara Arts &
Lectures (2011)

John Michael Kohler Arts Center (2011)

University of Florida Performing Arts (2010)

The Wooden Floor (formerly Saint Joseph
Ballet) (2010)

Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción (2009)

ASU Gammage (2009)

Myrna Loy Center/Helena Presents (2008)

Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra (2008)

University Musical Society (2007)

Lessons from the Field

Challenges

Though recipients noted issues specific to their individual programs and communities, certain challenges were common to many organizations.

Explaining the Importance of Access and Inclusion: Potential partner organizations and upper management within recipient organizations sometimes failed to see the importance of access or the number of people who benefited. Large organizations faced even more difficulty communicating the value of access due to large numbers of staff and turnover. Innovative programs were also difficult to explain. “The biggest challenge dealt with needing to explain what we were doing and why,” said Elizabeth Auer of the University of Florida. “It (the university’s AIM Together Project) was not the easiest idea for people to grasp and wrap their heads around, because so few others were doing similar programs. We had to determine the most logical way to present our plan and get participants who came forward with a general understanding.”

Maintaining Support for Access and Inclusion: Even when an organization understood the value of access, program managers needed to be aware of any changes in institutional attitude. Michael Mooney of Paper Mill Playhouse, echoed the words of other award recipients when he said, “Keeping an access program fresh, maintaining consistency, and ensuring it remains a priority—all of this requires constant vigilance.”

Building Audiences: Though audience-building is a typical challenge for all arts organizations, engaging underserved communities proved especially difficult. Though many organizations reported on the general difficulty of reaching their intended audiences, the Kennedy Center’s Accessibility Program noted two specific issues:

- Marketing to older adults, because some don’t self-identify as having a disability.
- Marketing to people with disabilities, as an increasing number are not affiliated with any service organization.

Keeping Pace with Change: Changes in technology were a trial for some arts organizations. Some mentioned the need to keep abreast of new access services, like open-captioning. Others noted the changes in marketing and customer interactions brought about by the shift to web-based and digital communication. Though a boon in many ways, these changes carried with them a need for education, experimentation and feedback from patrons, all of which took precious time and resources.

Finding Quality Performers with Disabilities: Theaters noted that they had difficulty locating excellent performers with disabilities and quality works about disability issues.

Securing Funding: Many awardees lamented the lack of funds available for programs. This lack of funds not only impacted the organizations’ ability to present work, but specifically affected audience outreach, as many underserved populations and educational groups needed financial assistance in order to attend performances.

Effective Practices

Successful programs also shared some common elements.

Filling in the Gaps: Funds secured and distributed by arts organizations helped engage schools that had been hit with decreases in arts education funding. The Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra (KSO) offered transportation stipends to rural schools to compensate for the elimination of funding for field trip transportation, along with offering free concerts and complimentary curricular materials.

As noted in the previous section, obtaining funding was a challenge. The University Musical Society (UMS), though, found new donors through community engagement. After collaborating with UMS on an Arab music festival, several of the original organizers established a foundation to promote and financially support the presentation of Arab artists at UMS. Other committee members became annual donors, either as individuals or through their corporations.

Engaging the community: Involving the communities being served provided benefits beyond new patronage. Organizations engaged community members in several ways. Many used advisory committees, who not only monitored access, as noted above, but served the programs by:

- Engaging the local community and providing input about the community's needs and desires.
- Assuming leadership roles in planning and programming.
- Creating and evaluating activities.

Several organizations took the concept of inclusion further, involving underserved communities (including people with disabilities) in every facet of their programs. "Engaging people with diverse disabilities on stage, behind the scenes and in the audience, and investing the necessary time, energy and resources into the effort, has fostered a deeper relationship and level of trust with various communities than would be possible if the company had only pursued audience accessibility," reported Mixed Blood Theatre. "Administrative and artistic staff have also learned much more about how to collaborate with and accommodate diverse individuals as a result of 'walking the walk.'"

Organizations recruited potential community advisors at community centers and festivals, places of worship, and schools. Others collaborated with artists from underserved populations. The Straz Center for the Performing Arts found advisors within their organization and the local arts community by inviting seniors who actively volunteered at arts and cultural organizations throughout the region to discuss perceived barriers to older adult participation.

By engaging the community, arts organizations learned that "one-size does not fit all," that within the disability community, for example, there were many other communities with specific desire and needs. By truly understanding the needs of the communities they wanted to serve, organizations were able to uncover and remove specific barriers to participation. Mixed Blood Theatre, for instance, publicized run times for those needing transportation arrangements.

Creating Partnerships and Collaborations: Every recipient indicated that partnerships and collaborations were integral to the success of their programs. Partners included:

Professional producing theaters
Presenting theatres
Community-based arts centers

Universities
Assisted living facilities
Regional tourism bureaus

Consulates	Schools
Community groups and neighborhood organizations	Parent groups
Disability organizations	Arts and disability organizations (such as VSA affiliates)
Marketing firms	Medical organizations and hospitals
ADA liaisons and education centers	
Government departments, such as the Department of Aging Services	

Partners helped to identify audiences, promote events, secure funding, implement activities, and organize festivals. Some provided education and information so that organizations could benefit from the experience of successful access programs before implementing new services or purchasing additional technology.

It was noted that partnerships had to be truly collaborative in order to be successful. The Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra expanded their program, even in a challenging economic environment, by working closely with community partners to secure organizational and financial resources and by agreeing to assist communities financially if grants were put under a moratorium. The University Musical Society, who enjoys a long-term relationship with the local Arab community, gave back by volunteering at Arab community events.

Impact

All recipients of these awards have bettered their communities through exposure to and participation in the arts. Schools and community centers were most often served and the effect on some communities was long-lasting. Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra (KSO) community partners reported increased community interest in music and strengthening of school music programs. Two rural communities started string programs because of involvement with KSO.

The impact of the winning arts programs went beyond offering arts experiences. They also provided their communities and the larger arts world with:

Support: Many organizations supported and produced other organizations' work. Others hosted, sponsored and/or participated in forums on Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities.

Advocacy: Some organizations participated as advocates and leaders in the communities they served. Quest assisted in forming the Maryland Governor's Committee on Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities, and Victory Gardens Theater played a role in creating a disability council within the League of Chicago Theatres and in the launch of a national disability arts festival.

Connection: Award recipients helped establish groups with like interests in order to share resources and information. The Kentucky Center helped create Arts Access Forum (AAF) in the Louisville Metro Community, the Kennedy Center was a founding member of Audio Description International, and Paper Mill and New Jersey Theater Alliance created a statewide initiative that provided professional theatres with the resources and support needed to improve the quality and use of audio-described performances.

The University Musical Society also helped to create connections for their partners by introducing key business, civic, and government leaders from the Ann Arbor Arab American community to their counterparts in Dearborn and Detroit, thus strengthening community ties and providing a region-wide forum for people sharing an interest in Arab American culture.

Education and Inspiration: Organizations spread the word about access programs, providing information in the form of:

- **Publications:** These included regular newsletters, specific reports and guides, and tip sheets on a variety of topics for Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)/504 coordinators, accessibility managers or other cultural arts professionals interested in making their facilities and programming more accessible to people with disabilities.
- **Knowledge Centers:** Several arts centers became primary resources for ADA and 504 information for arts organizations in their area.
- **Training:** Awardees presented trainings and performed site surveys for other arts organizations.
- **Forums and Conferences:** Recipients hosted local and statewide educational meetings. The Kennedy Center Accessibility Program established the Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability (LEAD) network for ADA/504 coordinators and accessibility managers in the arts, which draws participant as far away as Australia.

Artists and arts professionals also received education. Through internships and trainings, they learned skills that they could employ in other areas, organizations, and communities.

Recommendations

For arts organizations wishing to fully integrate older adults, immigrants, people with disabilities and underserved communities as equal partners in their programs, the award recipients gave the following advice:

Engage the community personally: Direct, personal engagements are important for developing relationships and trust in communities that have been traditionally excluded from the artistic process. Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción increases youth participation by having youth leaders recruit peers and organize arts events.

Know the community you seek to serve: By understanding the community, organizations can avoid faux pas and remove barriers. The Flynn Center offered this specific advice: Find out the schedule for other events that might be of interest to the disability community and schedule your ASL-interpreted or audio-described performances—or other events targeted to the disability community—accordingly.

Include the community in everything: Several organizations reinforced the vital necessity of including members of the community within the creation and design of all services. The Kentucky Center noted that “it is always wise to include knowledgeable people with disabilities in an advisory capacity.”

Make art inclusive: Quest director Tim McCarty advises organizations to stop thinking in terms of “accessibility.” Instead, he suggests, consider the community, and then ensure that all can share in the arts experience. As a result, everything becomes accessible.

Diversify funding: In an environment of diminishing support for arts-based programming, funding must be diversified in order to offset variables that might affect revenue from ticket sales and support from organizations that are susceptible to cyclical variation in the economy. ASU Gammage uses strategic community and campus partnerships to ensure the continuity of programming.

Raise the bar: Use professionals if at all possible.

Don't be modest: "Tell everyone about your access program, its successes, and the number of people you serve," advises Michael Mooney of Paper Mill Playhouse.

Address the future: Train future leaders. The Kennedy Center instills the importance of access and inclusion in students attending arts administration programs. Other organizations are devising training and networking opportunities for performing artists with disabilities.

Spread the word: "Grass-roots promotional efforts, including social events and word-of-mouth endorsements, have proved successful with past initiatives involving culturally specific groups," reports the University Musical Society. The Myrna Loy Center has strong relationships with regional and rural newspapers, newsletters, and media outlets.

Commit to access, institution-wide: Nearly all awardees noted that institutional buy-in, marketing, staff and volunteer training, and community engagement are essential to the success of any accessibility program.

Create long-term, collaborative partnerships: As noted in the "Effective Practices" section, all awards recipients believed that partnership were integral to their success. The University Musical Society (UMS) and the Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra (KSO) offered the following tips on building strong, long-lasting relationships:

"Use Sharon King's four principles of partnership: communication, cooperation, vulnerability, and reciprocity. The last two are the most important and most challenging because they require good listening, humility and making sure your partner benefits as much or more than you do from the relationship." - UMS

- Develop a clear set of goals for the program that supports the interests and needs of the partner community as well as the mission of the arts organization.
- Have an outline of a program in mind, then listen to your partners to discover what is important to their communities.
- Find dynamo leaders in partner communities and give them all the support they need for implementation.
- Make meaningful connections with the partner community.
- Create art together – not "for," but "with."
- Make no assumptions; communicate clearly, enthusiastically, and frequently.
- Build something larger than either partner could accomplish on its own. - KSO

Be patient: "Programs don't develop overnight," noted Elizabeth Auer of the University of Florida, "so spend time developing a plan and revisit that plan after each project you do. Don't try to do too much at once; as the momentum builds, so will your success."

Conclusion

The efforts of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters and MetLife Foundation to recognize arts organizations that have developed and are running model programs for the inclusion of people with disabilities and underserved populations have far-reaching effects. The national standing of both organizations provides a unique platform on which to tout the efforts of the recipients and allows the Association to emphasize the value of such programs to their membership. For the recipients themselves, the Awards affirm the value of their programs, renewing their institutional commitment and strengthening buy-in from levels of upper management, as well as provide financial support that can be used to sustain the efforts into the future. By collecting advice and distilling best practices from the examples set by the recipients, APAP not only highlights the importance of these initiatives but provides its membership with tools and contacts to help seed similar programs in arts organizations across the country.