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The 'Wave of the Future

By expanding its mission, will arts booster ArtsWave spread itself too thin?

By Jane Durrell

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Now in the middle of its first fund-raising campaign under the new name ArtsWave, the organization formerly known as the Fine Arts Fund wants to pioneer a new approach to valuing the role of the arts in our community. But with that might come controversy. Some worry that in trying to broaden its mission, ArtsWave will be spreading its dollars thin.

The nonprofit Fine Arts Fund was founded in 1949 to raise money for Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati Opera, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and Taft Museum. In 1978, it added Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati Ballet, Playhouse in the Park and the May Festival. It has been increasing its reach, even as it fights to raise money during the recession, and last year collected just under \$11.1 million on behalf of 100 groups. That includes the traditional arts giants, but also groups like the Lebanon Symphony Orchestra and Oxford Community Arts Center.

ArtsWave officials are proud of their outreach.

"We're at the head of the curve — we were the only locally based organization invited to participate in a meeting the National Endowment for the Arts held in Washington last June," says Mary McCullough-Hudson, longtime head of the Fine Arts Fund and now ArtsWave CEO/president. The meeting considered means of measuring the impact of arts and culture on communities.

"National bloggers are paying attention to what we're doing," she adds, an indication of new media's role in the new ArtsWave. "We are on the leading edge nationally in showing how the arts make a community more livable, more exciting," says Margy Waller, who left her Washington, D.C., job two years ago to return to her hometown as Fine Arts Fund's vice president for strategic communications and research. Work already was underway in revamping the Fund's approach; the name change was announced last September.

Some people still ask why.

McCullough-Hudson says the impetus came five years ago when the Greater Cincinnati Foundation convened a group of leaders from various sectors to consider a two-pronged question. It was this, she says: "Who is really paying attention to sustainability for the extraordinary array of arts in this community? And are we doing enough to leverage it in attracting visitors, in aligning with corporations to attract and retain the 21st-century worker?"

The Fine Arts Fund eventually decided to take the lead in exploring these issues.

"We had been very focused and successful (as a fund-raiser)," McCullough-Hudson says. "We could have continued doing that and let somebody else take on the broader role. But the leaders (at the meeting) felt the stature of the Fine Arts Fund made it the choice. In the fall of 2007 the board agreed we should explore what the community wants from arts and culture."

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Two years of research followed, examining the feelings and needs of current donors, corporate leaders and, most importantly, those who had interacted with the Fund and arts-providing institutions.

"The key learning was recognition of the role of arts and culture beyond what they supply to consumers and participants — that they make a more vibrant community," McCullough says. "There was an 'a-ha' moment. We need to put arts in the 'necessary' column, not just in the 'nice' column. The work we are doing now is to prove and measure arts' impact."

In 2009 Fine Arts Fund made a significant move from its longtime offices in Hyde Park to Central Parkway, on the southern edge of Over-the-Rhine and just north of downtown. And this year, for the first time, the organization appointed an African American as chairman for the annual campaign. Edgar L. Smith, CEO of Roselawn-based World Pac Paper, was not a newcomer to the organization or to the arts. He had carried a heavy course load at Atlanta's Morehouse College, he says, to accommodate theater study along with his marketing major. Upon moving to Cincinnati in 1994, he fondly recalls discovering Playhouse in the Park. Since college, he's been a theater audience member rather than participant but has served on the Playhouse's board and also on the FAF board.

"Arts are a tremendous connector," Smith says. "I'm proud to be part of that."

Most ArtsWave-supported institutions have been trying to widen their audience base on their own.

"Many are way ahead of us, frankly," McCullough-Hudson says.

At the Cincinnati Art Museum (CAM) last summer, 264 public programs presented under the "See America" umbrella encouraged visitors to "look beyond special exhibitions," says CAM Director Aaron Betsky, who adds that the small core of patrons who have always supported the city's cultural climate "can't continue to do it alone."

The Art Museum Reaches Out With 'Family First' Days

Betsky serves on one of the exploratory committees for ArtsWave. Along with the May Festival, CAM will be featured during ArtsWave's March 26 Sampler Weekend.

"Here at the Art Museum we want to be more flexible and unexpected; our mission is to bring people and art together," he says.

The Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) has instituted expanded, lively programming because "our job is to provide avenues, to



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open up the art we show," says Director Raphaela Platow. CAC's new-exhibition opening nights begin with members-only activities, but midway through the public is allowed into the events, which have acquired reputations as great parties.

The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra makes regular special offers to encourage attendance, such as offering coupons via www.livingsocial.com, and adds discussions to programming. The Taft Museum, through the Duncanson Society that was founded in 1986, sponsors African-American artists. In what was probably a local first, bilingual labels (English and Spanish) appeared the Taft's recent exhibit of Goya etchings.

Still, some believe spreading the mission wider could mean spreading ArtsWave funds thinner.

"They can't make promises now," Platow says. "New measures are being developed to determine funding. The main change is that we have a bigger base to draw from."

The CAC recently announced the addition of two development staff positions, an indication it might not plan on depending so much on future ArtsWave money.

Another institution head, who requested not to be identified, said, "We've been told to expect 2 to 3 percent cuts." It's also rumored that in 2013 all funding will be reconsidered.

At the Taft Museum of Art, where the roots of what became ArtsWave began in 1927 with the establishment of the Cincinnati Institute of Fine Arts by Charles and Anna Taft, Director Deborah Emont Scott says, "We know the original intentions of the Tafts and are sure ArtsWave won't forget them. An institution can't become too dependent on any one source for funds, though. We are constantly trying to broaden."

Across the city, arts supporters who might not be sure the name change was a great idea agree that perpetuating the arts is key. East-sider Gloria Giannestras, who has been on the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music board and many symphony committees, says that "whatever they want to call it, we can't afford to let the arts go. They're so important."

West-sider Jane Veite, an art museum patron and supporter, says, "Anything that makes people look at things in a different way is good."

Laure Quinlivan, chair of City Council's Quality of Life Committee, likes the new ArtsWave name for its "broader appeal" and cites the importance of the arts as a major component of Cincinnati's image.

Former Cincinnati city councilman Jim Tarbell, head of the council's Arts and Culture Committee during his time in office, is an active proponent of thinking regionally about arts support. But he wants to be sure Cincinnati's core, urban, professional arts institutions don't suffer if ArtsWave does more to foster regional arts activities.

"It's critical to have people in outlying districts looking to Cincinnati for arts rather than creating their own, of probably lesser quality, and not supporting what's here," he says.

Tarbell says he would also like to see a mass transport system connecting outlying areas with downtown more efficiently. And he does encourage neighborhood arts centers. Tarbell helped to establish, among others, Kennedy Heights Arts Center, where programming today is thriving.

At Kennedy Heights Arts Center, which has benefited from ArtsWave's/Fine Arts Fund's outreach, the funding assistance is important.

"The dollar amount from ArtsWave is not large, about \$6,500 per year, but gives us significant operational support," says Ellen Muse-Lindeman, who became Kennedy Heights' first paid director in 2008.

Often unglamorous operational support is always the hardest to find, Muse-Lindeman explains. But, she adds, "ArtsWave's value to us extends beyond the dollars. Practical tools, connections to business professionals, are really important. For example: ArtsWave connected us with an architect who provided pro bono services in developing a master plan for improvements and expansion. If we'd had to hire someone we never could have afforded it."

The Kennedy Heights Arts Center will be part of the March 26 Sampler Weekend, with gallery tours of a newly opened fiber arts exhibition, hands-on artist demonstrations, art-making activities and an inter-generational drum workshop led by Baba Charles Miller, director of a weekly drum workshop there.

Baba Charles Miller: Drumming in Kennedy Heights

"We use the arts as a way to create relationships between neighbors in our very diverse community," Muse-Lindeman says. "We bring these different folks together."

There are so many regional arts organizations that it's a problem for any one to raise desired funds. But that's not the only challenge.

"The next generation audience is the question," Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park's Producing Artistic Director Ed Stern told a University of Cincinnati non-credit class on Cincinnati arts recently. "The young will not subscribe. It affects everything."

Meanwhile, questions have been raised over ArtsWave's lack of funding for individual artists, particularly with the 2009 demise of the city's long-established individual artists grant program. Waller, who has organized such showy ArtsWave events as "Splash Dance" ("flash mobs" of dancers performing unannounced on Fountain Square and elsewhere) and "Paint the Street" (where around 1,500 locals painted the pavement on 12th Street in Over-the-Rhine), points out that, while non-professionals carried out these projects, they were trained or advised by artists ArtsWave hired. Kathy Stockman, who writes the Cincinnati Art Snob blog (www.cincy-artsnob.blogspot.com), responded by saying that these artists are doing ArtsWave's work, not their own.

Cincinnati is not alone in trying to make the arts more inclusive. Last month, *The New York Times* writer Randy Kennedy wrote that the Metropolitan Museum is undergoing "philosophical change" under its new director, Thomas P. Campbell, who wants to make it "a more open and understandable museum, largely by rethinking the way it uses technology." And, Kennedy points out, the Brooklyn Museum and London's Victoria and Albert Museum, are also struggling to use more technology, become more entertaining and to reach wider audiences.

"All art museums ... compete against pop culture," he writes.

ArtsWave is intent on breaking down barriers that make the arts off-putting, in the process developing innovative criteria to measure the arts' impact.

"It's hard work to tackle these difficult problems, to work with the theory of change," McCullough-Hudson says. "There's a reason it's not done elsewhere. But here in Cincinnati we have the brainpower, the bandwidth, to do it. The sense of working together is really remarkable."

This year's \$11 million fund-raising goal is the same as last year's, but the hope is for a 5 percent increase in the number of donors. That will enlarge the number of people with a tangible commitment to Cincinnati arts. ArtsWave plans to continue to hold an annual community campaign for the arts, give grants and fund Cincinnati's anchor arts institutions along with many smaller organizations, campaign literature explains. But what will change, according to that literature, is that ArtsWave "will define the success of (the) grants based on their impact: whether organizations are bringing more people together with/around art, and creating and sustaining vibrant neighborhoods."

Daniel Brown, editor of the local online art journal *Aeqai* (a publication I also write for) and frequent gallery curator, understands that in times of government cutbacks in arts funding, ArtsWave needs to expand its contributor base and the number of institutions it serves. But he hopes it will avoid, in its search for concrete means to measure its reach, succumbing to "inappropriate populism — a potential over-emphasis on numbers of people participating and attending. Small but choice exhibitions or performances may be left in the lurch."

ARTSWAVE's next "Sampler Weekend" is March 26, featuring free arts-related events and activities throughout the city. The last two "Sampler Weekends" of 2011's campaign are April 10 and 23. For a full schedule of events and more on ArtsWave, visit www.theartswave.org.

