

ADVOCACY FOR THE ARTS. WHY?

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Advocacy for the Arts. Why?

By Norma P. Munn

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After sixteen years of working as an advocate for the arts and cultural sector, I still encounter people working in this field who question the need for advocacy, as well as some who see the work as distasteful. The latter make no distinction between advocacy and lobbying and the former appear to believe that the obvious value of the arts to society ensures their financial support from elected officials. The first is incorrect; the second, while admirable, is akin to believing in the tooth fairy after age four.

Advocacy, unlike lobbying, is first and foremost about educating and informing -and not just elected officials, but the public and the media.

Those of us in the arts believe we are essential to a civilized society, but equally essential is food, housing and medical care. The arts do not have a constitutional right to public taxpayer funds, and if we want to keep those funds, we have to talk to and meet with those who control them. We have to explain how we make their community a better place to live, and secondly how we benefit the city or state. And, we have to do it every month of every year. Why? Because very few public officials will admit to disliking the arts, but real understanding is not the same as benign indulgence.

In fact, it is almost too commonplace to hear from elected officials or their staffs how wonderful the arts are. The problem for us is turning that benign indulgence into genuine understanding and commitment, and doing so in the face of competing needs and agendas. That effort by all of us working together is an absolute necessity if we want to maintain public funding for the arts in this state, city and nation.

It is not an accident that despite severe cuts at a state level during the budget crises of the early '90s, we have received annual increases most years since then that exceed the overall growth of the State budget. It is not an accident that despite eight straight years of efforts by the former Giuliani administration to cut the arts severely, we have maintained funding and received some small increases. The united effort that exists in New York City to advocate for the entire arts and cultural community at the state and city level has worked. More can and should be done, but arts groups and those leading them have to accept the responsibility for being part of the advocacy effort, not just for themselves, but for the arts and cultural sector.

Norma Munn has been involved in the cultural community for over three decades. Her professional experience includes the management of modern dance companies, as well as serving as Executive Director for the national service organization for professional nonprofit dance companies. She is the former Executive Director of The Foundation for the Community of Artists, a national membership organization for individual artists.

Ms. Munn is one of the founders of the New York City Arts Coalition, a citywide arts advocacy group dealing with public policy, First Amendment concerns, and budget issues at the City and State level, and currently serves as its Chair - a position she has held since its inception sixteen years ago.

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