

A Case for the Arts

By Ardell F. Brede

The arts—what is their value, especially during tough economic times? Can we afford them? And what *are* the arts anyway? These are all pertinent questions for our times and for generations and centuries gone by.

For most of us, the *arts* means theater, dance, paintings, and music. But it may also be the design of a building, like our state Capitol building, designed by architect Cass Gilbert. The arts are defined and enjoyed differently by different individuals. There are no rules.

The arts provide entertainment, yes, but they also have an economic impact. They provide jobs for the artists, and they promote a variety of spending by those who attend arts events. In fact, according to a study by Americans for the Arts, nationally, the nonprofit arts and culture industry generates \$166.2 billion in economic activity every year—\$63.1 billion in spending by organizations and an additional \$103.1 billion in event-related spending by their audiences.

This economic activity has a significant impact, generating the following:

- 5.7 million full-time equivalent jobs.
- \$104.2 billion in household income.
- \$7.9 billion in local government tax revenues.
- \$9.1 billion in state government tax revenues.
- \$12.6 billion in federal income tax revenues.

As you can see from these numbers, the arts aren't just nice to have—they are essential for every city. That's why I've made the arts the focus of my presidential year. In difficult budget times, it's tempting to see the arts as an easy target for cuts, but I would argue we should do everything we can to preserve the arts.

In addition to an economic impact, the arts truly enrich the lives of individuals. We all benefit from the uplift we get from hearing our favorite song,

or seeing it performed by national or local artists. We get a thrill not only from the circus clowns who make us smile (or laugh out loud), but also from the high-wire artists who cause us to hold our breath.

On a recent trip I was privileged to take to Saudi Arabia, I saw two benefits of the arts:

- Rehabilitation of extremists/terrorists. Painting was therapeutic for these individuals, allowing them to express and release their hostility.
- Treatment of children with mental/emotional disabilities. The act of drawing pictures had a calming effect on these children.

I know our city leaders also understand the value of the arts. Most of our state's 854 cities have festivals to celebrate seasons and/or significant events of their city. These festivals, and the various arts exhibited in them, identify the character of the community and make it a better place to live.

In my city, Rochester, one way we experience the arts is by offering seven free outdoor concerts on Sunday nights in July and August. The series, called "Down by the Riverside" (DBR), showcases a variety of musical talent. The DBR series draws 5,000 to 15,000 attendees per concert. The series brings people from all walks of life together to enjoy these concerts. The DBR series also brings many economic benefits to our business community. Many people go to dinner at a local restaurant before the show. Afterwards, concert-goers stop by a nearby establishment for cocktails or dessert.

To promote the arts this year, the League will partner with Twin Cities Public Television to produce a program about the role of the arts in building a sense of community for cities, even in tough economic times. The program will explore the ties between the arts, mayors, and community vitality—

focusing the mayor's role as community cheerleader; public funding for the arts during the Great Depression; what smaller or less-funded communities can do to keep the arts alive; why the arts are sometimes perceived as a frivolous use of public dollars; and how the arts help in building a sense of community among city residents.

While the arts may seem like a luxury, I believe they are vitally important to every city. Not only do they benefit communities from an economic standpoint, but they also define the identity of a community, bring vitality, and increase the quality of life for residents. I hope all city leaders see the value in the arts and work to continue and increase their presence in every community. ■

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About Ardell F. Brede



Ardell F. Brede has been the mayor of Rochester since 2003, and is a former employee of the Mayo Clinic. Prior

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