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Chair and Council Member Peer Session

***Engaged and Disengaged:
Tales from the Board of the Wyoming Arts Council***

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I think I was asked to talk here today in part because The Wyoming Arts Council has been on a rocket ship of budget increases over the last three years. The legislature and governor of Wyoming have chosen to use part of the abundant surplus of taxes from coal, gas and oil to build a cultural trust fund, provide an endowment to provide a nearly free college education to qualified residents, and almost double the budget of the Wyoming Arts Council. We're a happy bunch right now!

My first question is what part has the Arts Council Board played in these budget decisions and more generally how engaged and effective is the board. My talk will have three parts. First, I will tell some stories about useful and effective board members. These stories will focus on the range of ways and different places where boards can advocate and emphasize the importance of personal connections and long-term relationships for effective advocacy. Second, I will tell some stories about ineffective, disengaged and disruptive board members with comments on what, if anything, a board chair can do about these people. Third, I'll list several things we do in Wyoming to enhance the board's engagement and effectiveness.

Tales of Engagement

1. The Newspaper

We are panicking! The Wyoming Arts Summit and 40th Birthday Party are five weeks away and only 50 people have signed up and the Birthday dinner and celebration are being held in an 8,000 seat arena in Casper. This could be bad! We have the board and staff calling all over the state, using personal persuasion, any kind of persuasion to get people there. One by one people sign up. All is not lost.

On a Monday, I get a call from the Summit organizer down at the Arts Council offices in Cheyenne. *The Casper Star-Tribune*, our one state-wide newspaper is cool to the Summit and its topic of arts and creative economies. Can I get over to the paper and rouse up their interests. I

know some reporters over there, but not the editor or publisher. I call Susan, the other arts council board member from Casper.

“Do you know Nathan or Clark, Susan? Can you get them excited about the Summit?” Yes, says Susan, a bundle of energy on a calm day, and excited as can be about the Summit. One hour later I get a call from a reporter to interview me for a story the next day. On Saturday, the paper publishes a full column from our division director, Milward Simpson, about the Summit and creative economies. The week of the Summit, the paper runs a long editorial titled “Wyoming Arts Summit Can Spark a Renaissance in the State.” Susan also arranged some TV spots and went on the radio as well. Her energy, articulateness, charisma, and her personal connections had done some significant work for us. In his talk with us, Dana Gioia cited the press as a significant obstacle to promoting the arts in the U.S. We all know about advocacy with our elected officials, but perhaps we need to go after the press, including TV, and board members with personal connections or who work in media themselves can help a lot in this effort.

2. The City Manager

Over the years I have gotten to know the City Manager of Casper, who started his term about the same time I began teaching English here for The University of Wyoming 23 years ago. His wife was a student of mine in Technical Writing and over the last years his daughter has been taking my literature classes. I have had some long talks with Tom about her. He has a regular list of fatherly concerns about his daughter, including how her love of creative writing can be turned into a career. This dovetails, I think, with his persistent skepticism about the City of Casper supporting the arts—in particular the art museum and the various attempts to build a performing arts hall, one of which was floundering—just as the Summit—a big conference on arts and community development-- approached.

Before the Summit we had a dinner with Dana Gioia and others from the NEA. I invited Tom and the Mayor of Casper; both were excited to come and very interested in what the Chairman had to say about art and civic life. Tom was at all of the Summit plenary sessions. During one lunch he asked me about an idea—for the city to cooperate with the private effort to build a performance hall and to manage the building. I was shocked and delighted. Ideas and discussions about this whipped up and down the halls of the Summit and a week later the City Council and the Citizens Group promoting the project started meeting to figure out how to make it happen.

I would not claim cause and effect, but I think the invitation to the Arts Summit, the dinner with Chairman Gioia, and my personal connections to the City Manager all played some role in pushing this arts project forward. As our Council moves into arts-based development, we will need a board connected to local efforts and with the personal ties to help projects along and use Council resources for that.

3. The Governor

The Manager of the Arts Council is defending an aggressive budget increase to Gov Dave, who masks his sophistication and knowledge of policy and politics with a folksy manner. Milward likes to remind the Governor, who has built a sheep wagon while in office, that he's an artist. Milward has two other aces: the First Lady, Nancy, loves the arts and the wife of the Head of the Wyoming Senate is the chair of the Wyoming Arts Council.

Before Milward can get started Gov Dave says, "Well, I guess I have to support this budget or I'll never hear the end of it from Nancy and Nancy." The meeting was over, the increase was approved and it passed the Senate and the House. It's not just her spouse that makes Nancy so effective in advocating for the arts. She's a dynamic, charming, humorous person who is friends with most all of the legislature and can joke with them about their children and all manner of local doings. These kind of close connections are normal in sparsely populated Wyoming—about 500,000 people—and make it likely that board members will have significant contacts. Also, in Wyoming two or three contacts to a legislator are taken as a tidal wave and get attention. Even a small board—ours is ten—can make a difference in these circumstances.

Some Discouraging Words

1. The Miscreant

I was surprised to see a particular board member at a meeting of the Folklife Coalition in Cheyenne. She had missed the last two board meetings and also the Arts Summit and, though high-spirited and a lot of fun, contributed little to the meetings she did attend. So why the long drive to this optional event? Ah, she's with her good friend from Cheyenne. Ah, I have a theory. Our sociable board member attended events when she had a friend in that town and missed the others. The taxpayers were subsidizing her social life.

What to do about attendance? We have only four meetings a year and our written guidelines say that board members are expected to be at all of them as well as grant review sessions and other activities as assigned. What are the consequences of ignoring these guidelines? Nothing, really. We are all appointees of the governor and cannot be disciplined or removed for non-performance of duties. The board chair can certainly discuss attendance and other matters with board members, can encourage participation, can use shame—though in this case that does not work—can decline to support reappointment, and other such things. I prefer positive reinforcement and modeling good behavior, but, of course, that does not always work and certainly not in this case.

2. Engaged, but Absent

Two other board members also have problems with attendance, though for good reasons. Sally is a bank president in Jackson, a significant arts town and Judy, a member of the city council in Cheyenne, the capitol city. Both are good advocates, know their communities and state politics very well, have great judgment and outgoing personalities. They are also very busy and have conflicts that prevent them from attending some meetings. Both also missed the arts summit. Nonetheless, they are such valuable board members, the rest of us want them as colleagues.

So here is the paradox. The people who can be your best board members because they are so engaged and busy cannot fully participate as board members. We have a chance to add a prominent mayor and leader in public arts. I am eager to get him on the board, but recognize that we will compete for his time with his business work and work as mayor.

3. Running Amuck

A new governor is unhappy with the Arts Council. He sees it as a sleepy agency providing some service to some artists, but no leadership to the state as a whole and little value to the public. So the director is out and Milward is hired and to rev up the board the governor appoints some aggressive business people. Judson has a startling agenda: eliminate the Arts Council as a government agency and reconstitute it as a private entity supported by donations and grants. Though the board does not agree, they do set up an account to collect donations and Judson promises he can raise a lot of money on his own. In the meantime, he advocates his case privately with the Governor and First Lady. Board meetings turn into shouting matches which end when Judson, unable to win support for his project and failing to bring in the promised donations, withdraws from board activities. In the wake of this, the Board adopts a code of conduct—voluntary, of course—discouraging separate lobbying apart from the board as a whole.

What to do about this sort of thing? Our voluntary code may be of some help, but really, vetting of board candidates and creating a cooperative culture on the board may be the best we can do.

Building a Healthy Culture of Engagement

How do you get a vital, engaged and effective board? All of you will have different ideas and experiences. I will mention three things that we do in Wyoming, two of which are emerging right now.

1. Be sociable

During each of our four board meetings we have a dinner, usually at a prominent local place, lunches together and attend or participate in local arts activities, oftentimes including a reception sponsored by local arts supporters. All of this connects the board and does some of our work in connecting to the state. These receptions are a good chance to also learn about advocacy. The town of Thermopolis, a small place built around hot springs, arranged an event featuring performances and artwork stimulated by Arts Council grants. A big sign—“Thank You Arts Council”—greeted us and the people there were relentless in seeking us out and thanking the Council for its programs. They were lobbying us and teaching us how to do it.

Events such as this create a little common culture for the board as well as giving us strong experiences together. Most of the board went out to Jackson for the opening of a new arts hall in a wonderful downtown building with space for all the arts groups. Gov Dave and Nancy came along and joined us for a jolly dinner followed by a dance concert funded with American Masterpieces money and introduced by Nancy. The whole evening, delicious food, thick wine,

robust conversation, humor and shared love of the arts have cast a warm glow over the board that makes our work together rich and meaningful.

2. Board Education

I am a convert to the Carver approach to board activity. Central to that is ongoing board education. For each of my meetings, I am including reading and discussion sessions about advocacy, sometimes visitors, sometimes arts activities—all things to enrich us and make us better able to do our work. Our Arts Summit—with sessions on arts-based economic development, arts and civic life and arts advocacy—was a terrific event and valuable board education as well. Our sessions with community groups work that way as well.

3. Culture of Tasks

Board turnover, otherwise known as “churn,” creates a need to keep up the education, activities and social life of boards. One way to give some strength in the midst of churn is to create a set of traditions—tasks that the board does as a matter of course. Our current effort is to document and publicize good advocacy activities and make them part of the standard behavior of each board member. Each meeting, board members must report on one advocacy activity and discuss its results. This focuses us on this crucial part of our work and also models for board members the ways that they can do this work. I am expecting to incorporate a list of regular activities that we expect from each board member and to get out information on what we are doing. I want to build this into part of the stories, the narrative of the Art Council Board, so new board members feel they are stepping into an ongoing narrative and they know how to pick up their part in keeping the story going.

Summary

Engaged boards are treasures to be nurtured and used. The personal connections, knowledge and skills of the board, if focused in the right places, are a great tool to enhance the standing and effectiveness of the state arts agency. How to get these?

The tales above are about individual talents and energies and connections being used for better or worse. Make sure the board is given important work to do and ideas on how to do it. Make sure to share individual tales of advocacy and success. Circulate information—lively, current information—about arts advocacy and what people are doing around the country. Keep the board work and connections positive, fun, stimulating and connected to arts. And take your lumps when they come. Difficult board members are a given, but a culture of positive work and achievement can, I optimistically hope, marginalize their impact and keep the board valuable to the agency and the arts across the state.