



NASAA President and CEO Report to Members September 19, 2019

Pam Breaux

Good morning, everyone. It always warms my heart to be in your presence. Two months ago, I marked my fourth anniversary of serving our association as your president and CEO, and I'm as excited and jazzed and optimistic about our collective work today as I was in 2015.

I'd like to mark and commemorate our time here today by celebrating a particular artist. This summer, poet, writer and musician Joy Harjo, a member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, was selected as our country's 23rd poet laureate. When the librarian of Congress made the announcement, Joy became the first Native American poet to serve in the position.

Accepting the honor, she said to the good folks at National Public Radio, "It's such an honoring for Native people in this country, when we've been so disappeared and disregarded. And yet we're the root cultures, over 500-something tribes and I don't know how many [there were] at first contact. But it's quite an honor...I bear that honor on behalf of the people and my ancestors."

Joy lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She is also the first Oklahoma poet to be named U.S. poet laureate. Today is a particularly special day for her because, back in Washington, D.C., at the Library of Congress, Joy's inaugural poetry reading will take place this evening, and she'll become the nation's official poet. In her honor, I'd like to share a few lines of her poetry. This is called "[An American Sunrise](#)."

We were running out of breath, as we ran out to meet ourselves. We were surfacing the edge of our ancestors' fights, and ready to strike. It was difficult to lose days in the Indian bar if you were straight. Easy if you played pool and drank to remember to forget. We made plans to be professional—and did. And some of us could sing so we drummed a fire-lit pathway up to those starry stars. Sin was invented by the Christians, as was the Devil, we sang. We were the heathens, but needed to be saved from them—thin chance. We knew we were all related in this story, a little gin will clarify the dark and make us all feel like dancing. We had something to do with the origins of blues and jazz I argued with a Pueblo as I filled the jukebox with dimes in June, forty years later and we still want justice. We are still America. We know the rumors of our demise. We spit them out. They die soon.

[[Listen to Joy Harjo read a version of "An American Sunrise."](#)] I'm incredibly proud of Joy Harjo today and of the Library of Congress for her appointment.

And as I consider you and the work you're doing at state arts agencies [SAAs], I'm even more proud.

You know, there are days when I'm occasionally tested. Do you have those days? I'm tested by occasional random bloggers, for example. There are those who push a tired old narrative about government agencies in general, and sometimes about state arts agencies in particular. Perhaps you've heard the narratives too. They claim: State arts agencies aren't nimble enough; they're not relevant enough, or they're not powerful enough to effect change.

Well, I'm having none of that, and neither should you. Please allow me a moment to hold up a mirror to ensure that you really see yourselves. The old narrative about government certainly isn't reflected back. When I see you, I see state arts agencies not only modeling good government, you're even reinventing what that means.

I see the South Carolina Arts Commission advancing the art of community by working with rural communities and placing *them* in the driver's seat and in leadership. The arts commission is centering the people of rural communities by serving as their facilitator. Community members are addressing blight, health, literacy, economic development, the need for community gathering spaces and local pride, with the state arts agency helping them apply creative and asset based approaches to their work. This isn't the ivory tower approach to public service we see from many government agencies outside our sector. This is a state arts agency walking in community with constituents and helping to facilitate their success. This pushes the envelope and the very definition of good government. Later today, SAA executive directors will continue pushing this particular envelope by discussing how to further democratize state arts agencies.

I also see the Wyoming Arts Council's Health and Wellness through the Arts program connecting artists, arts organizations and health service providers to deliver creative opportunities to constituents managing declining health, living with physical or cognitive disabilities or seeking to improve overall well-being and quality of life. The Council has also established a health and wellness network to support and ensure the continuation of this important movement. This is very relevant work.

Also focused on community wellness, I see the Minnesota State Arts Board, who joined forces with Aroha Philanthropies, to cosponsor creative aging training for Minnesota teaching artists. As a result, 50 teaching artists are now ready to design and implement high-quality arts education programs for older adults. Brilliantly, this program has a great foundation to pay forward to the citizens of Minnesota.

Recognizing the increasing diversity of Massachusetts as an important asset for the state, I see the Massachusetts Cultural Council's adoption of a comprehensive diversity, equity and inclusion plan to guide their efforts to honor the many dimensions of diversity. Action steps will include consciously adopting more inclusive language, revising personnel policies, changing hiring practices, training staff and constituents, reducing barriers in grant applications and review practices, all while seeking continuous feedback. We know that bureaucracies across all forms of government have enabled inequities, and this state arts agency is taking a serious systems approach to disrupting systemic inequity. Bravo, Massachusetts!

I also see that Kansas Creative Arts Industries Commission and its partners are supporting collaborative, mentorship based programming designed to foster the creative and professional growth of emerging indigenous artists. Through this work, our colleagues in

Kansas, along with their University of Kansas partners, seek to strengthen ties between Kansas and indigenous communities, and enhance Native American leadership at the intersection of artistic and community practice. All this with a staff of one; it's clear that Peter Jasso's superpowers are intact!

Colorado Creative Industries is advancing arts in society by supporting social-practice arts projects that work with the medium of interpersonal interactivity to strengthen community relationships through dialogue, inclusive action and additional forms of social engagement. This is timely work in direct response to community needs. Frankly, it's also in direct response to what our country needs.

And in direct response to disasters across communities, the Nebraska Strong Creative Relief Partnership between the Nebraska Arts Council and the state library commission uses the arts to bring people together and affirm resourcefulness, civic cohesion, grit and community pride. Having personally been through the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and others, I can attest to the fact that these are all essential to recovery for the regions of Nebraska damaged by this year's record-breaking floods. This is powerful work happening at Nebraska Strong.

Just as relevant to the people of Puerto Rico, our colleagues at the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture mounted *Cultura Rodante*, or culture on wheels, providing arts experiences at more than 75 sites, holding 164 events that reached over 35,000 people. These programs helped participants come to terms with their experiences with the epic Hurricane Maria. The programs helped people cope with displacement, as well as reinforce community cohesion and pride in their resolve, all critical to a comeback.

I could go on telling your stories of good government, of relevance to the people you serve, and your stories of empowering the people of your states. There are many such stories to be told because today, state arts agencies are advancing meaningful agendas and connecting communities to the many benefits the arts bring.

And not resting on your laurels, I see you facing forward, as you work to improve tomorrow. I see your commitment to advance diversity, equity and inclusion because you're dedicated to your agencies benefitting all the people of your states. You're also focused on the future of our field by working on our arts management pipeline, like the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. They're building the pipeline through the diversity in arts leadership internship, working to strengthen and advance diversity in the arts management field and helping to foster New Jersey's next generation of creative leaders.

All of your programs. All of your initiatives. And the stories of your resilience. (Yes, I see you too, Alaska, and your triumphant comeback!) These are the narratives of the state arts agency field. These narratives define who you are. They demonstrate your relevance. They also chronicle the change you're making in your states each day, and the change you're working toward for tomorrow. THIS is our field, and I'm so proud and honored to be a part of it. As you look closely in the mirror to see state arts agencies, I know you'll experience that pride as well.

And remember, for every naysayer or random blogger who tests you, who challenges the value you bring to the people of your states, please remember there are hundreds, and possibly thousands of others, who really see you. They see you like I see you. And we're all grateful that you're here and that you serve the people of your states and territories through your state arts agencies.