

## KEYNOTE

### ROBERT GARD'S "ARTS IN THE SMALL COMMUNITY" AND WHY IT MATTERS

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We are thrilled that you are here at the beautiful Wingspread conference center to have what we know will be an in-depth conversation about where community arts development is headed. We always mean to take time to reflect, but we are crazy-busy people and it's hard to do that. I know that the next days will be meaningful for our field, and I hope for you personally, too.

I want to acknowledge the board of the Gard Foundation. Each has invested many, many hours in making this gathering happen; thanks also to David O'Fallon who was vital on the symposium planning committee. And finally, thanks in advance to my colleagues who will help me during this presentation.

Janet asked me to say a bit about what the Gard Foundation is, and who Robert E. Gard was, to frame the context for our work in the next couple of days.

The Robert E. Gard Foundation was founded in 1980 by Gard to continue the work he and other artist-visionaries, who worked for University of Wisconsin-Arts Extension, had been doing. The University was changing its direction and its mighty arts outreach efforts – begun in the early 1900's - were being phased out. The Foundation was created in part to fill the resulting gap. The Foundation has always been about personal creative development, exploring community cultures, and strengthening communities. Some of the things they did in their early years included sponsoring a Native American writers conference, commissioning a piece of music that captured the Wisconsin landscape, sponsoring an exhibit in the very early 1980's of the art of southeast Asian refugees, and having a conference right here at Wingspread to talk about the kind of training community arts activists might need. As time passed, the mission of the foundation morphed into today's mission, "fostering healthy communities through arts based development." Here are the things we value, which were also Gard's values:

- The arts spring from the commonplace and celebrate our essential humanity.
- Everyone should have the opportunity to participate in arts and cultural experiences.
- Each of us has the capacity to "alter the face and the heart of America."
- The arts have the power to ignite change.
- The arts are an essential part of building healthy communities and meaningful lives.
- The arts play a vital role in placemaking.

Gard had said:

**GERRY MCKENNA:** "I happen to think the expression of creativity is the most precious thing in the world. That's the reason I'm interested in it. I believe individuals who develop their creativity can make an impression upon society." [*To Change the Face & Heart of America*]

That's the wellspring.

We were having a board retreat in 2012 and realized that in 2016, Gard's Arts in the Small Community project would be 50 years old. So 2016 became a sort of beacon for us, and we wanted to create some good products by the end of 2016. We've revised the website, bringing

new content to the public; we completed a 20-interview Oral History series which captures the already-forgotten story of arts outreach in Wisconsin. Thanks to Clay Lord's leadership, Americans for the Arts worked with us on a book of Gard's writings this past summer – *To Change the Face & Heart of America*. We redesigned the Gard Award. We produced a commemorative print-on-demand book of writings the Small Communities project spawned. And this symposium.

We identified these as things that posterity might find useful. I say "posterity," because a hallmark of this board has been looking ahead. It is true that we invoke the name of Robert E. Gard; but it is not to enshrine him. Instead, it's to put forth his vision and his work as a symbol of what is possible if you believe that American life can be improved for every human being, singly and collectively, if the creative voice is nurtured. Big ideas are timeless. In *The Arts in the Small Community* Gard wrote:

**JENNIFER ARMSTRONG:** "In terms of American democracy, the arts are for everyone. They are not reserved for the wealthy, or for the well-endowed museum, the gallery, or the ever-subsidized regional professional theatre. As America emerges into a different understanding of her strength, it becomes clear that her strength is in the people and in the places where the people live. The people, if shown the way, can create art in and of themselves.

**CAROLINE BEADLE:** "The springs of the American spirit are at the grass roots. Opportunities must exist in places where they never have existed before. A consciousness of the people, a knowledge of their power to generate and nourish art, and a provision of ways in which they may do so are essential for our time.

**JENNIFER:** "If we are seeking in America, let it be a seeking for the reality of democracy in art. Let art begin at home, and let it spread through the children and their parents, and through the schools, the institutions, and through government.

**CAROLINE:** "And let us start by acceptance, not negation--acceptance that the arts are important everywhere, and that they can exist and flourish in small places as well as in large; with money, or without, according to the will of the people. Let us put firmly and permanently aside as a cliché of an expired moment in time that art is a frill. Let us accept the goodness of art where we are now, and expand its worth in the places where people live."

Who was Gard? Well, he was a Kansas kid, born on a dairy farm in 1910. He was proud of his skill at milking cows, and he liked writing poetry and stories in high school. He became a drifter during the Depression for a time, doing farmwork here and there across the Midwest. Ultimately, he went to the University of Kansas, and one of his part-time jobs was as a stagehand in the university theater. He was hooked. He went to grad school at Cornell and studied with Alexander Drummond who was a curiously bifurcated character – one of the luminaries of the American theater at the time, but, since Cornell was a land grant university, he also believed that he had a direct responsibility to the folks of upstate New York. Drummond was disgusted with the plays considered "suitable for rural production" by Samuel French, seeing them as largely trivial, disrespectful and denigrating to the people, and felt that plays written by people about their own lives was the answer. Gard was intrigued and together they developed the New York State Plays project where farm family members were encouraged to conceive, write and produce their own plays, with the help of Cornell University. Gard took these ideas with him to Alberta in the early 1940's, and then to Wisconsin in 1945. He had the proactive encouragement of David Stevens, the Vice President for Humanities at the Rockefeller

Foundation, who believed that in a democracy, ordinary people have a responsibility to capture, interpret and transmit their stories, weaving a beautiful cultural fabric for the nation. Gard began to articulate the notion that together, brilliant professional artists, skilled facilitator-teachers, and Everyman could make the promise of America real and meaningful to everyone. In *Grassroots Theater* Gard wrote,

**DENISE ROBERTS MCKEE:** “There must be plays that grow from all the countrysides of America, fabricated by the people themselves, born of their happiness and sorrow, born of toiling hands and free minds, born of music and love and reason.”

In Wisconsin, Gard found a spiritual home. In the early 1900s the upper Midwest was the cradle of progressive populist thinking. Governor Fighting Bob LaFollette of Wisconsin, Charles Van Hise, the president of the University of Wisconsin, hatched a vision that came to be called the Wisconsin Idea. Its slogan was “the boundaries of the campus are the boundaries of the state,” and it had some key elements.

- The first: that the biggest, newest ideas researched and understood by the faculty should directly serve all the communities of Wisconsin
- Next: That the university should help every person in Wisconsin discover their particular talent.
- And finally, the result of this commitment by the University & State would be an increasingly educated, wise and curious body of Wisconsinians to step up and participate in local and state government, and to help to grow a state that would be the exemplar of democracy in action. In the arts, in the 19-teens, then, we see Prof. Edgar Gordon crisscrossing Wisconsin by train to create singing societies. The idea was good music, yes, but he also believed that singing together would help people of different backgrounds better understand one another. The rural Sauk City Pageant of 1912, directed by the head of the Bureau of Community Drama, was intended to be both excellent theater and an exploration of the tenets of democracy. Indeed, it raised questions in such a way that Harper’s Magazine called tiny Sauk City “the most democratic town in America.”

This kind of thinking wasn’t taught in his college or graduate training! Indeed, in *Grassroots Theater*, Gard said,

**ANNE KATZ:** “The old security I used to find in old established principles of aesthetics and ethics has now gone astray. For a time I was bereft and sought solace in the company of other bereft persons who were likewise without much bearing. Then I began to discern that I could again believe in the glory, not the degradation of man. I found that I was not alone in the hope that it was still possible to believe that there were verities, that there was truth in human aspiration. That a humanism for our time was essential and that it included a definite possibility of aspiration, of hope, of striving and search with purpose.”

Gard’s Wisconsin Idea theater attempted to help make the Wisconsin Idea a creative reality. He saw latent talent everywhere. He saw stages in barns and basements and fields and living rooms. (Let me digress, and say that it impacted family life, as well; on my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday, I had my best friends over, and I desperately wanted a normal birthday party. To my horror, my dad led us into the back yard where there were 3 big signs: Act 1, Act 2, Act 3. We were given a box of old clothes and a piece of quartz. We were told that the name of the play was to be “The Diamond in the Corn” and that by the way our parents would be over in 2 hours to see our play...) From the 1940’s to his retirement in 1980, Gard travelled Wisconsin, helping people

uncover their talents in creative writing and drama, as did other artists on the extension faculties – 28 of them by 1973. Choreographers were helping people tell their story through dance. Musicians were facilitating exploration of African music in Milwaukee and working with rural church organists. An actress, nearly blind, rode the Greyhound to countless small towns to help them build youth theater into their 4H programs. Visual artists got involved in rural economic development. Writers were helping give voice to incarcerated people. Gard's Wisconsin Regional Writers Association, founded in 1948, had, quite literally, thousands of members in every county of the state who met monthly in local chapters to critique one another's writing. Here's how Gard tells of the conception of the WRWA in his book, *Grassroots Theater*. He'd led a workshop for 4-H leaders on creative writing, and it was a profound experience for everyone. One of the women said, when she left,

**BARBARA STRAUSS:** "... there must be a great, free expression. If the people of Wisconsin knew that someone would encourage them to express themselves in any way they chose, if they knew that someone would back them and help them when they wanted help, it was her opinion that there would be such a rising of creative expression as is yet unheard of in Wisconsin, and it would really all be a part of the kind of theater we had had these past three days, for the whole expression would be of and about ourselves."

After my dad's death, as I was going through his library, I found scores of books – from novels to anthologies of stories to chapbooks of poetry - inscribed, "If it hadn't been for you, I would never have written this."

Gard also did his own work. I remember a 1957 endeavor called "Man and His God." Gard had written that, because Madison, Wisconsin, where we lived, was such a divided community, perhaps a big pageant, collectively designed, produced and presented, could help. Sponsored by the Women's Club, all 24 faith groups in town at the time, from the Baptists to the Baha'i, did just that. Once again – and this I think is important to the conversation of the next few days – the aim was not only sociological; it was about a simultaneous commitment to evolving the art of theater. Indeed, the art critic of the *Milwaukee Journal* said that it was "Not a play, not a pageant in the usual sense; 'Man and His God' is something new in modern theater."

Well. There was a lot of creative activity going on in Wisconsin! And then, in 1965, the National Endowment for the Arts was created. Gard – whose office was now called The Office of Community Arts Development, and was housed in the College of Agriculture – figured that since the NEA was created by the people's representatives in Congress, and supported by the people's tax dollars, well then, the NEA would surely respond to a proposal that would be arts of, by and for the people. He and his colleagues submitted a proposal that had several parts. They would choose 5 towns in Wisconsin, each with fewer than 10,000 people. They would provide access to fine professional arts experiences to people right there at home (remember, rural towns were terribly isolated then; there were no interstate highways, no HBO, no internet, relatively few professional arts groups and they certainly weren't in small towns, and very few community arts centers.) Gard's team would provide opportunities for people to experience and explore art forms for themselves, in classes and workshops. They would help people to form a local arts council that would continue this work after the 3 year grant period was up. What was significant is that the power would be in the hands of the people to decide what was right for their town. How democratic, yes? Well, it wasn't so easy. From a history of the early days of the NEA, called *Reluctant Bureaucrats*, author staff member Charles Christopher Mark observed that in its first year, the National Council's focus had been "on the survival of national institutions such as American Ballet Theatre, Metropolitan Opera, and the resident theatres across the country." The National Council allowed the fledgling state arts councils to take care of rural

America; so when the proposal from Wisconsin came before them, “the reaction was completely negative. Some of the Council members were amused that we should even propose to spend \$58,000 a year for three years on such a project.” It was clear that the project would be voted down. The discussion was heated, and Chairman Roger Stevens called a lunch break. Leonard Bernstein was on the National Council; he had missed the morning session, but arrived during the break. Said Charles Mark,

**HILARY AMNAH:** “When I told him the rural arts project had been tabled, he told me that that was one reason why he wanted to come to the meeting. I thought he was another negative vote, but he said he read the full proposal and he thought it important. When the session resumed, Bernstein listened to me debating with most of the Council and then raised his hand to speak. After a dramatic pause he said, ‘This project has ... everything to do with why we are sitting here.’ He then went on most eloquently to describe the need to break out of the elite image the arts now hold and to make the arts available to all our citizens wherever they reside. In short, this man who represented art in its highest form was an unexpected and effective ally of Bob Gard’s concept of developing the inherent need for a creative outlet in all people. When he finished, the attitude of the Council had been reversed and the project was passed unanimously. In the long run, it became one of our more sustaining accomplishments.”

So, thank you Leonard Bernstein, for enabling the NEA’s first “access” award. Big things happened in those towns. At the end of the 3 years, Gard and his colleagues wrote *The Arts in the Small Community: A National Plan*, drawing from what they had observed and learned in this grand experiment. 40,000 copies were printed. They were given away free to anyone who wanted them. State arts councils asked for 100, even 500, copies. Rural arts councils nationwide, using the plan, began to thrive alongside their urban counterparts.

The ideas were simple, but elegant and profound. You’ll find them here and throughout Gard’s writing. First, that each person has a creative voice, and it must be nurtured and that listening to one another is vital:

**GERRY:** “Let us believe in each other, remembering each has tasted bitter with sweet, sorrow with gladness, toil with rest. Let us believe in ourselves and our talents. Let us believe in the worth of the individual and seek to understand him, for from sympathy and understanding will our writings grow.” [*Creed of the WI Regional Writers Association*]

Another is that people have connections to their histories and to their cultures, to their homeplaces. Understanding and interpreting the past, exploring and then sharing cultural expression, builds collective life.

**DENISE:** “I have watched America’s more recent arrivals gathered in Milwaukee  
Under high beams in a great hall,  
Stricken into moving pools of color  
By immense shafts of vibrating light.  
No native son, I, a visitor,  
But exposed early to a power of thought  
That raced through time and left  
A newer thrilling impress on America;  
To give an insight to the soul of freedom  
And the better life. Man restless,  
And great minds fermenting expansive ideas  
That had sources in progressive struggles

**And star-aspiring ideals.”** [*Wisconsin Sketches*]

Another is that from an exploration of the meaning of place can spring great ideas:

**HILARY:** “I awoke one clear morning and said  
I will certainly do something great today  
I will move a mountain  
Or at least cause a bell to chime  
Celebrating some minor victory.  
Instead, near Spring Green,  
I crossed a star-flowered prairie,  
Sat down in the middle of tall grass  
And simply stared upward  
At white clouds in a spring sky.  
A Wisconsin meadow  
In spring  
With shooting stars  
And sweet star grasses  
Can make a fulfilled astronomer  
Of any earthbound, astral  
Day seeker.” [*Wisconsin Sketches*]

Another of has to do with excellence, for Gard was clear that arts development and community development went hand-in-hand, that mediocrity was no one’s birthright, and that excellence should not be subordinated to community development:

**ANNE** “There is a vast and noticeable difference between letting a thousand flowers bloom and permitting everything to come up in weeds. But if arts councils encourage and foster genuineness of expression among amateur artists and honor authenticity of product among professionals, they will set standards and refurbish the instinct for what is real.” [*Arts in the Small Community*]

Well, now it’s 50 years later, and we revisit *The Arts in the Small Community*. Why dust it off, now? Perhaps its real function is just as a good historical snapshot of how people were beginning to think at that time? Certainly, its case studies are very dated as is some of its language, and some ideas – like arts and business working together – seem so obvious now that we forget that they were ever radical. And certainly, in Wisconsin at the time, cultural diversity was dramatically different than it is today.

But here’s what the Gard Foundation believes to be true about the project and Gard’s thinking, and why they frame our time together.

First, while other authors were writing at the time about building arts councils as institutions to help arts organizations and artists garner broader public support, Gard suggested that the arts could serve communities, and both the boundaries of the arts and the boundaries of possibility in collective life would be expanded.

Second, it expressed a belief in the value of each human life and of the need for each person to uncover and explore his or her creative voice.

Third, it recognized that the more creatively fulfilled individuals were, the more they could contribute to meaningful public life.

Fourth, it recognized creativity as a cornerstone of democracy.

Fifth, it linked meaningful public life to the history and histories of a place and asserted that exploring history and place could be a force to bring people together.

Sixth, it recognized that every cultural group has a vital part to play in the maturing of America.

Seventh, it recognized that through the simultaneous exploring of the arts and local needs, new and vibrant communities could emerge.

Eighth, it acknowledged the extraordinary partnerships that could be relevant for meeting a community's needs – arts working with health groups, or religious groups, or environmental groups, or economic development groups.

And finally, it was unabashedly optimistic and hopeful, seeing local arts development as part of something very big:

**BARBARA:** “And our dream must now be this: of so implanting the seed of a thrilling art movement that this seed will grow from ourselves. The dream must be one that will begin in the narrowness of American doorways and that will become as wide as an internationalized and peaceful and tolerant world.” [*A Search: Story of the Wisconsin Idea Theater*]

The people in this room are the right people to talk about these things. May our next few days be full of the excitement of new ideas and possibilities, soul-searching analysis, fearless recognition of things that just aren't jelling, and most of all, the big ideas that drive us. How do these ideas play out in 2016? How could they play out in 2026, 2036, 2056?

I suspect many of you have heard this quote, which is the last page of the *Arts in the Small Community*, but it is timeless: as Clay Lord of Americans for the Arts says, it is both our benediction and our challenge:

*If you try, what may you expect?  
First a community  
Welded through art to a new consciousness of self:  
A new being, perhaps a new appearance –  
A people proud  
Of achievements which lift them through the creative  
Above the ordinary –  
A new opportunity for children  
To find exciting experiences in art  
And to carry this excitement on  
Throughout their lives –  
A mixing of peoples and backgrounds  
Through art; a new view  
Of hope for mankind and an elevation  
Of man – not degradation.  
New values for individual and community  
Life, and a sense  
That here, in our place  
We are contributing to the maturity  
Of a great nation.  
If you try, you can indeed*

***Alter the face and the heart  
Of America.***

Thank you.