

MICHAEL WARLUM REFLECTS ON "THE ARTS IN THE SMALL COMMUNITY," FIFTY YEARS LATER

Creative expression is a basic human right. It is, in fact, the trait that makes us human. This philosophy motivated everything Professor Robert E. Gard did. The concept is so profound and innately logical that when I came to work with him in 1963 I adopted it without question.

Growing up in a small rural community, I had little access to the arts. There were no established arts organizations in my town. The internet did not exist. Television consisted of fuzzy images from three networks and their affiliates, if you could get a signal at all. The arts were looked upon as something for the elite in big cities, not for us rustic folk. Everything I could learn about them and how to practice them came with great struggle. Yet I knew from the beginning that I had to have the arts as an essential component of my life.

I was a graduate student when I met the Professor and was immediately hooked on his philosophy and the way he practiced it. I never questioned the fact that the arts were the legacy of all citizens regardless of where they lived or whether or not they had formal training, and that it was important to help all of them to realize their full creative potential.

Before long, I discovered that others did not feel the same way. Often in our work, we encountered individuals and institutions who believed that the arts belonged to a self-selected elite, who sought to dole them out in small doses like medicine to the poor and huddled masses. In theory, this procedure was supposed to magically create enthusiastic audiences for professional artists. The idea that said masses should be encouraged to practice the arts themselves did not appear to enter in.

Gard's approach was entirely different. He was single-mindedly devoted to his work. He barnstormed throughout Wisconsin, encouraging, cajoling, supporting people who wanted an arts life for their communities. He had no qualms about approaching the rich and powerful to enlist their participation in and support for his cause. He possessed prodigious energy and kept dozens of projects going at once with a minimum of funding.

In the six years I worked with him, he stimulated and assisted in a myriad of community arts projects, often on the road three or four nights a week. At the same time, he published at least two books a year, was active in his church to the point where he became an Episcopal priest, carried out the duties required of a faculty member of one of the great universities in the world, and, I discovered only recently, ghost-wrote speeches for the state governor.

Lest I give the impression that the Professor was some sort of demigod, I hasten to add that he had his foibles. He steadfastly refused to concern himself with budgets or institutional procedures. He could not abide confrontation and avoided it, sometimes to the detriment of his programs. He had zero interest in sartorial splendor and would show up in the same suit for weeks in a row. The jacket lining had come loose and hung an inch below the hem. He was the stereotypical absentminded professor. We would wander around the faculty parking lot in search of his automobile, while he muttered, "I'm sure I brought a car today." In other words, Robert E. Gard was completely human.

The Professor applied for and received a three year grant from the nascent National Endowment for the Arts, and asked me to join the faculty as coordinator. Having just earned the first PhD degree granted in community arts development, I jumped at the chance.

In those days, the staff at the NEA was small, the budget equal to seven and a half miles of federal highway. Roger Stevens was chairman, and we dealt principally with Charlie Mark, who handled state and community programs.

We experimented in five small towns, helping them to form arts councils, encouraging them to involve various components of their communities in the arts, and aiding them to create programs that reflected their regions. During the third year of the project, we constructed and distributed well over 20,000 copies of *The Arts in the Small Community: A National Plan*. Free. We wanted people to use it, and they did. We wanted people to quote it freely, and they did.

I wish I could say the Plan was supported with enthusiasm. But by the time it was published, the NEA had shifted direction. Roger Stevens had resigned and become director of the Kennedy Center. Charlie Mark was gone. Our project was suddenly “persona-non-grata;” our funding was not renewed. Some state arts council directors expressed opposition to it as well. They contended that they could have spent the grant money more effectively. At the same time, other directors embraced and distributed our manual.

I cannot help wondering what the American scene would be like today had the Endowment built on our work immediately and placed major emphasis on the community arts, although today, in 2016, its funding is far-reaching with such programs as Fast-Track awards, Challenge America, or Our Town.

I left Wisconsin to become founding executive director of the Indiana State Arts Commission. I used our book extensively throughout the state. After three years, many new arts councils were flourishing. Then, while working at Michigan Council on the Arts, I encountered a woman visiting from a community arts council in New York State. When I mentioned my collaboration on the National Plan, she said "Oh, the Bible." It was then I realized that, despite opposition and lack of support, this little book was playing a vital role in the development of the community arts movement across America.

I have no grasp of how many people and groups have derived inspiration from it and Gard's other writings over all these years. I do know that helping construct the National Plan may be the most significant thing I have had a part in creating. Its influence is proof that true ideas, great ideas, will prevail and thrive because they make sense and fill a need. Filling the need for artistic expression across America is what Robert E. Gard was all about.

He, we, and you can indeed alter the face and heart of America.

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*Note: The Gard Foundation conducted a lengthy interview with Dr. Michael Warlum, including additional information about *The Arts in the Small Community* program, and the interview is at <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1793/70389>.*