

REFLECTIONS ON ARTS IN THE SMALL COMMUNITIES INTERVIEWS

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Background

In the summer and fall of 2004, I conducted 21 interviews with residents of five small Wisconsin towns: Adams-Friendship, Portage, Rhinelander, Spring Green, and Waupun. The people I talked to represented a variety of age groups, lengths of stay in their respective towns, and roles within the community, but they had two things in common. First, they each had a unique perspective on the cultural and arts scene in their town. Second, whether they realized it or not, they all lived in a community that had in the mid-1960s been targeted by NEA funding to help develop community arts in rural areas—the first initiative of its kind.

The project, called the “Arts in the Small Community,” originated with Wisconsin visionary Robert Gard, who has attained the status of folk hero within the state for his tireless work as champion of community arts. As a faculty member at the University of Wisconsin, Gard established arts development as a functional area of the University Extension, and helped found the Wisconsin Arts Foundation and Council, the first of its kind in America.¹ He also founded statewide projects such as the Wisconsin Idea Theater, the Wisconsin Institute of Nationalities, and the Wisconsin Regional Writers Association. But in spite of these impressive accomplishments, Gard never retreated from his interest in common people and their creative work.

In 1966, Gard approached the National Endowment for the Arts with a proposal to develop arts participation in small towns in Wisconsin, which led to a three-year project that focused on creating and strengthening arts councils in the five towns mentioned above. During this period, local leaders were identified, outreach programs were implemented, and a number of projects and organizations were launched. At the end of the project, observations from the successful aspects of the initiative were compiled in “The Arts in the Small Community: A National Plan,” published by the Office of Community Arts Development, University Extension in 1969 (affectionately known as the “Windmill book” based on its cover design), along with a series of supplementary booklets, which became standard resources for community arts development. These materials were supplemented in the early 1970s by an arts participation survey in the five original towns plus four “comparison” communities that had no formal arts program (Highland, Baraboo, Antigo, and Wautoma). The results of this research appeared in a 1975 article in *Arts in Society*, offering several important insights into rural arts work.

In 2004, the Arts in the Small Community project was revived, still under the auspices of the UW Extension, and guided by Maryo Gard Ewell, Robert Gard’s daughter. In this

¹ Robert E. Gard Wisconsin Idea Foundation website, <http://wisconsinacademy.org/gard/Biography.htm>, accessed 15 February 2005.

new phase, the project would revisit the five original towns to re-administer the arts participation survey. In addition, I was hired to conduct a series of in-depth interviews in each town. The purpose of my interviews was twofold: to assess the long-term impact of the “Arts in the Small Community” initiative, and to see if the stories of these communities could suggest, some 30 years later, any practical approaches to arts development for present-day community leaders.

In July, August, and September, I met with people in their homes, workplaces, and local cafes. Some of my subjects had known Robert Gard and were involved with the original project in the 1960s. Others had been active in one or more aspects of community cultural life after the 1960s, and still others were not directly involved with arts organizing but were considered “observers” of community life through their positions at local newspapers or other civic organizations.

I immediately grasped the good fortune that had befallen me. I got to spend hours in conversation with some of the most passionate, visionary, well-rounded people I had ever met, as well as nurturing my own interests in community arts. I was at the time halfway through the masters program in Arts Administration at UW-Madison, but my interest in community arts development was by no means purely academic. I had spent many years working for a variety of small and informal arts organizations, as an artist, teacher, and administrator. What interested me was how ordinary people integrate creative expression and the arts into their lives. I have spent my entire life in the Midwest, and while the cities I have lived in are bigger than the towns I visited for the interviews, the idea of being part of a small community has always resonated with me. Perhaps it’s because every arts organization I’ve been a part of has felt like a small town.

What follows is a collection of observations gleaned over the course of twenty-one conversations, informed by my own experiences as an artist and organizer. I don’t attempt to reduce the rich and varied content of these conversations to a simplified “blueprint” for action. Instead, I highlight here some recurring themes that begin to sketch the landscape for the arts in small communities.

Themes

Theme 1: The cultural life of small towns includes all kinds of creative endeavor.

In the course of these conversations, I heard a lot about theater, music, painting, sculpture, poetry, and dance in small towns. I also heard about figure skating, rug hooking, dress making, birch bark canoe building, clock repair, blacksmithing, antique collecting, and botanical gardening. When asked which venues were central to the arts in their community, people named the public library, county fairgrounds, local book store, church, school, hospital, park, and the bank lobby or café walls where the work of local artists appeared. Local cultural organizations mentioned included churches, 4H clubs, civic organizations, retirement associations, and historical societies.

This variety speaks to the way that the arts and culture are woven into many layers of community life. The arts aren’t necessarily separated into their own programs, buildings,

and organizations. Instead, the arts are integrated into every corner of the community, in plain sight when we take a broad view of creative activity.

Theme 2: Community arts have their own life cycles.

There are times when communities are active and cultural organizations thrive, there are periods when nothing seems to gel, and then there are the transitions into or out of one of those states. Each of the towns that I visited was experiencing its own acceleration or decline in arts activity, but no matter how things seemed to be working in the present, the people I interviewed who had lived in their town long enough could remember times when their community was in a different part of the cycle.

The waxing and waning of cultural activity seems to happen at the community level, not just within individual organizations. This is partly because the same people tend to get involved in a variety of projects and groups. Creative energy feeds itself and can quickly build, fostering enthusiasm within the community, which nurtures growth and increased activity. Just as quickly, the departure of a key leader or the eruption of a political dispute can send arts activity spiraling in the other direction, as projects fall apart and groups dissolve. This leaves a void to be filled by the next inspired leader or innovative idea that comes along.

Theme 3: Key leaders drive those cycles.

While many factors drive these cycles of activity and lethargy, leadership tends to be the element that tips the scales. A visionary leader who knows how to inspire people and has the knowledge and skill to move projects forward can overcome any number of barriers when launching and sustaining an initiative. On the other hand, the departure of a key leader can deplete the hardiest of projects. The original project of the 1960s was largely remembered by current residents through the personalities of its leaders. By the same token, the failure of project initiatives was most often attributed to a disruption of leadership, often because someone left town.

Interestingly, a large measure of arts leadership comes from women. A number of interviewees specifically advised current arts organizers to seek out women because they are the people who get things done. Interviewees observed a higher rate of volunteerism among women than among men, perhaps because of traditional roles that placed men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. Sometimes this observation was tied to past experience, with the note that with more women working outside the home, it was harder to find good volunteers and leaders for the arts. Other observers remarked that women were better diplomats, more skillful fundraisers, or generally more adept at maneuvering in small town social networks.

Theme 4: The schools play an important role.

The school system is one of the primary nurturing grounds for creative and arts activity in the small community. Schools often provide the meeting and performing space where much activity takes place (conversely, the lack of adequate space—particularly theater space—within a school district can seriously hamper the development of arts activity in a given community). Arts leaders often work for the school district, which provides a stable

professional job and the time and resources to pursue community work. Therefore, the health of the school system and the health of the arts community often go hand in hand. The workings of the school district and the presence of arts infrastructure are indicators of what a community values and how successful it is in carrying out civic projects. Often, the relationship between support for education and the arts is painfully direct. As rural school districts face crushing financial pressure, many are jettisoning their arts programs, with long reaching consequences for the whole community.

One tangible way that the connection between the arts and education plays out is in decisions surrounding the construction and expansion of school buildings. Three of the communities I visited had a story to tell about this exact situation. In one town, a new high school had been built without a theater, effectively destroying the school drama program. The lack of a community-based theater group seemed by one observer to further reflect the community's negligence of the performing arts. In another town, the community had pitched in to add a performing arts wing to the high school. The new theater reflected the pride and effort of many and was used not only by the school but by traveling acts and community groups. The school's struggle to rescue its choir and band programs from declining enrollment, however, pointed to a troubling divide between the hopes and realities of arts development in the town. In yet a third town, a community group was advocating for a performing arts complex to be annexed to the school. Leaders felt that it would be impossible for the arts to develop and grow until there was adequate space to house them.

Theme 5: Rural communities exist in a larger cultural and artistic context.

If I thought that by venturing into the small towns of Wisconsin, I would be leaving life as I knew it behind, I was quickly divested of that notion. Rural small towns are neither backwoods outposts nor idyllic oases, existing in isolation from modernity and all its benefits and challenges. Both the interstate highway and the information highway provide ready connection between rural towns and the world beyond them. The people I talked to were not creating or commenting on art in a cultural vacuum. Many of them were frequent travelers to destinations including Madison, Milwaukee, Chicago, and New York. They were members of professional organizations, social networks, and artistic interest groups with regional and national networks. Through e-mail, the web, newsletters, conferences, and magazine subscriptions, they kept in touch with friends and colleagues in these networks.

In other words, I discovered that small town residents are influenced by the same cultural forces that impact urban dwellers. Their tastes and preferences are just as varied and informed as their counterparts' in larger communities. I met small town arts advocates who dream big; their challenge lies in connecting that big idea with the relatively constrained resources of a small town. Size does matter; the distance between a dream and its realization is measured in part by the availability of resources. Many of the people I met showed impressive creativity and persistence in identifying and developing resources that might be disregarded by others.

Theme 6: Effective leaders use both “local” and “outsider” strategies to get the job done.

Although small towns are connected through networks visible and unseen to the larger world, the interviews I conducted revealed that people think carefully about the geographic and social boundaries of their community. The concepts of “local” and “outsider” made a common refrain in many of my conversations. By applying these terms to themselves and others, interviewees revealed much about how they understand the community social network. These terms say less about how long someone has lived in a place (sometimes an “outsider” had been in town for over fifty years) than about how they get things done. “Local” and “outsider” are strategies, not identities.

The “local” strategy at its best embodies a passion for community, in spite of sometimes glaring deficiencies. “Local” implies a long-term commitment with the patience to develop trust by really getting to know the community and the people in it. “Outsider,” on the other hand, implies a fresh influx of ideas and perspective. While this strategy is sometimes perceived as an unwelcome intrusion from a source disconnected from a sense of place, it can also provide a healthy disruption of the status quo. The “outsider” strategy looks for unrealized possibilities in the community and pulls in ideas and resources from other places, sometimes allowing someone to “get away with” actions that would be rejected in the “local” context. The most successful small town leaders can move fluidly between these two strategies, using whichever is best suited to completing the task at hand.

Action Ideas

Through the course of twenty one conversations, I saw how these themes were moved into action in creative ways. Here are just a few of the many ideas presented in the interviews and drawn from my own experience.

Creativity Inventory

This is an exercise for an arts council, chamber of commerce or task force that wants to assess the current level of creative activity in the town and explore ways to foster creative partnerships.

- Take a “creativity” inventory of your town by listing all the individuals, organizations and venues that support creative and cultural activity. Include non-profit organizations, businesses, civic organizations, schools, and religious institutions. Think as broadly as possible, including both formal and informal groups and individuals of all ages.
- Now transfer each item from your list to a post-it note. Arrange post-it notes on the wall, creating groups that seem to have some kind of affinity. Try to arrange everything in 5-8 broad categories. For example, you might end up with different categories of “arts” that are represented (visual, performing, literary, historical, culinary, horticultural). Or your categories might represent groups of people who tend to work together on projects. Or you might group activities according to the venues where they are held. What does the emerging picture tell you about the strengths of your community? Where are there strong connections? Where are there gaps?

- Now brainstorm creative ways to encourage communication and collaboration across groups. For example:
 - Pull together a local chef and the community theater group for an evening of dinner theater featuring produce from local gardens.
 - Have the historical society and the photography club team up to interview and photograph the local quilters guild as they share stories about the quilts they collect and make. Include stories of antique quilts that have been handed down, as well as more contemporary work. Publish a booklet to accompany the next quilt show.
 - Host a walking tour of historic sites within your town. Have local writers and theater enthusiasts team up to write a script and conduct the tour. Could the tour be hosted by a local historic figure played by a local actor? Offer the tours in conjunction with a local festival or community event.

Celebration

Pulling people together to celebrate accomplishments and to show appreciation for their contributions is one of the simplest and most gratifying ways to keep leaders and volunteers energized. Here are some ways to celebrate success and show appreciation for the veteran and emerging leaders who make things happen in your community.

- Create a humorous award. In Portage, one local leader created the “Egatrop” award which could be awarded as thanks for hard work. Using a hand stenciled design and good measure of comically flowery language, this scroll of paper could be conferred on the awaiting “dignitary” with all the pomp and circumstance that the occasion allowed. With more than a dash of humor, this award was a fun way to show heartfelt appreciation.
- Document the process. It was wonderful when the person I was interviewing could pull out a scrap book and share photos, newspaper clippings, and memorabilia from past projects. Find a volunteer to take photos during the creation stages of an event. Later, these images can be presented in an album to the director or organizer. Simple shots taken with a disposable or digital camera and affixed to folded card stock also make great thank you cards for dedicated volunteers or cast and crew members. The candid shots are a reminder of everyone’s personal involvement in the process. If the local paper is willing to publish a photo or two, that can be a big boost for everyone involved in the project.
- Maintain connections with those who leave. More than one small town where I conducted interviews had produced a local resident who had gone on to achieve professional success in the arts in another place. I heard about “local boys” who grew up to become concert pianists or theater professors or leaders at the Kennedy Center. These stories were a source of great pride—they connected the community with a larger world of artistic achievement and demonstrated the value of a small-town education in the arts. This connection was strengthened when artists returned home to perform or teach.