

Even larger cities  
envy the effective Arts &  
Science Council of  
Charlotte/Mecklenburg  
County.

# Queen City Culture

**P**lanners plot. Artists create. Yet the worlds of earthly practicality and ethereal artistry intertwine in the Arts & Science Council (ASC) of Charlotte/Mecklenburg County. Through its wide-ranging reach, the nonprofit, 29-year-old umbrella organization plans, oversees, and funds 37 arts and science organizations.

"The first rule in fund-raising is to ask people their advice before you ask them for money," says president Michael Marsicano. "It's a community trust." The council embraces nearly every area nonprofit organization and individual connected to music, theater, art, and science.

"[The cultural action plan] is a very Charlotte thing to do," says ASC vice president of development Lauren Batten about the community forums, town meetings, phone surveys, interviews, and focus groups that guide the organization.

Opinions come from the art savvy—connoisseurs intimate with lyrics, lines, and librettos—and the uninitiated—locals unfamiliar with opera, octaves, or *Oliver!* The council responds to both camps and all those that fall in between, which earns it a



ABOVE: The Arts & Science Council staff includes (left to right) Laura Smith, Anne Porges, Scott Belford, Lauren Batten, and Hellena Tidwell.

RIGHT: ASC president Michael Marsicano



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reputation as one of the most effective arts councils in the nation.

The council and its affiliates operate with a \$43 million annual budget raised from private, corporate, and government backers. Between 1993 and 1995, an endowment campaign led by NationsBank CEO and chairman Hugh McColl raised \$26.7 million, setting a new national standard for local private arts and science fundraising. The corporate community turned out in droves to back the ASC's endowment plan, convinced that combined arts budgets and arts events play a major role in an area's business success. The same bottom-line premise works its magic during annual campaigns. Already this year, Charlotte fundraisers garnered \$5.2 million from private and corporate patrons, placing the Charlotte/Mecklenberg area in the same field as much larger arts-conscious metropolises such as Atlanta, Dallas, and Cincinnati.

"Many people are moving in from larger cities where arts and

### ASC COUNCIL AFFILIATES\*

- Actor's Theatre of Charlotte
- Afro-American Children's Theatre
- Afro-American Cultural Center
- Carolina Raptor Center
- Charlotte Children's Choir
- Charlotte Choral Society
- Charlotte Repertory Orchestra
- Charlotte Repertory Theatre
- Charlotte Symphony Orchestra
- Children's Theatre of Charlotte
- Community School of the Arts
- Discovery Place
- The Light Factory
- Mint Museum of Art
- North Carolina Blumenthal Performing Arts Center
- North Carolina Dance Theatre
- Opera Carolina
- Spirit Square Center for Arts & Education
- Theatre Charlotte

\*Affiliates receiving basic operating grants

# "I love working with artists and helping them take an abstract idea and make it reality."

.....  
Anne Porges

science opportunities are prevalent," Michael says, explaining the importance of arts to the area. "The biggest issue for many employees when they move is, 'What are we going to do there?' They are very impressed with the quality and quantity of what we have."

Support from The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) provides critical funding as well, most notably a \$1 million challenge grant, which council fundraisers matched 9 to 1, and an \$800,000 grant for the endowment campaign. The NEA also honored Charlotte in 1996 when it selected the city as one of only six national community forum sites to discuss how arts can transform communities.

But controversy also plagues funding issues. This past April, the Mecklenburg County Commission Board voted 5 to 4 to eliminate its \$2.5 million contribution to the council's annual budget. At issue was the Charlotte Repertory Theatre production *Angels in America*, which included brief nudity and homosexual characters. The theater is partially funded by the ASC.

"We as a public have a definite interest in the arts," said commission board member Tom Bush in an April *Charlotte Observer* article. Tom, who cast the deciding vote, continued, "On the other hand, do we give money to the arts and say, 'Spend it as you desire'? Do we not have a duty to be a steward of the public's money?" Still, the county board awarded \$1.2 million to the multi-arts complex Spirit Square. Although Charlotte's city council voted 9 to 2 to continue contributing to the council, the county cuts caused many ASC plans to be curtailed.

But the council's past achievements and support of quality programs will no doubt help its affiliates weather this current financial maelstrom.

For instance, ticket sales contin-

ue to increase. "A couple of years ago, 43% of the \$43 million ASC budget would have been earned revenue [i.e., ticket sales]," explains Michael. "Now, 53% of it is earned revenue. From 1991 to 1996, the

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audience head count went from 1.1 million to more than 2 million."

Grant programs establish Charlotte as a haven for artists. "I love working with artists and helping them take an abstract idea and make it reality," says grants officer Anne Porges, who with senior vice president resource management Hellena Tidwell, oversees the grants programs. For Charlotte artist Joyce Honrath, the ASC grant allowed her to work with cancer patients and their families, creating a healing collage that is now on display at Presbyterian Hospital's Cancer Center. And Fred Kessler of Mount Pleasant, a licensed sea captain and folk artist, used his grant to design a floating art barge to take artists on inspirational journeys on North Carolina's waterways.

Charlotte boasts magnificent cultural facilities, too, in which the council's affiliates are housed. The

North Carolina Blumenthal Performing Arts Center, where the theater, opera, and symphony perform, draws people downtown. The Afro-American Cultural Center is also a point of pride. The city's Discovery Place museum ranks in the top 10 of the nation's science museums. And this summer, the multi-arts facility Spirit Square became the home of the council's new Cultural Education Center.

"Children are the common denominator of all that we do," says Laura Smith, senior vice president administration/finance. Arts in education is the top priority. The council's uniting strength gives more visibility, resources, and collaborations to affiliates that are already weaving arts and science into school objectives.

"Could any one group thrive more than they have under the umbrella of the Arts & Science Coun-

cil? Perhaps so," says Michael. "But would *all* that are thriving be thriving without the council? I don't think they would be."

### The Art and Science Of Violence Prevention

"We are on the cutting edge of a lot of programs that the Arts & Science Council feels are the appropriate way to go," says Children's Theatre of Charlotte executive director Bruce LaRowe. For decades, the ASC affiliate has used theater to teach area schoolchildren. One relatively new program works on preventing violence.

Prior to a staged conflict, actors/instructors ask students to list reasons that fights start, options to avoid or diffuse them, and the pros and cons of physical confrontation. Then they are asked to write down their dreams.

Bryan, an eighth grader at Wil-

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son Middle School, hands over his dream to a workshop leader. "If Bryan can get out of this situation without fighting or provoking Clare to fight, he keeps his dream alive," the instructor tells the class. "If he can't get out of this situation without fighting, his dream gets torn."

Most, like Bryan, fail the first time, giving the arms-up signal that indicates they'd be trading blows in real life. "How many think Bryan should lose his dream?" the teacher asks. The children argue—no one wants to see their friend's dream torn asunder—but the instructor goes back to the board where the children have listed fighting pros and cons. They even volunteered "death" as one of the possibilities.

Students like Bryan are given a second chance to re-enact the scene. Most of them get through the repeat performance nonviolently, using quiet voices, less body language, apologies, even humor. They get to keep their dreams.

"People have always said you shouldn't fight in school but they never broke it down to me like you did," wrote one child after a similar workshop. "I have always been a person who listens to 'he said/she said,' and then I would be ready to fight. Thanks to you I am now smart enough to ignore it. You have really changed the way I look at things." *Nancy Dorman-Hickson*

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