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Arkansas Arts Center celebrates milestones in an unprecedented year

With the new building under construction in MacArthur Park, Arts Center continues to offer innovative and engaging programming

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. – The Arkansas Arts Center reached milestones in its building project while continuing to deliver vibrant and accessible programming in a year of historic transition and unexpected challenges, leaders announced at the September 21 virtual Annual Meeting.

Little Rock Mayor Frank D. Scott, Jr. joined AAC Board of Trustees President Van Tilbury, AAC Foundation Chair Warren Stephens, Building Committee Chair Harriet Stephens, and Executive Director Victoria Ramirez in congratulating the board, foundation, staff and community on a year of remarkable accomplishments, including a balanced budget for the 11th consecutive year the Arts Center has ended in the black.

“This past year has been filled with remarkable learning opportunities,” Ramirez said. “As we look toward opening the new Arkansas Arts Center in 2022, we are reflecting on the work we have done in the past to chart our course into the future.”

The year was unlike any other in the Arts Center’s 57-year history. The Arts Center moved out of the old MacArthur Park building while launching programs with partners throughout the community to remain vibrant, accessible and community oriented while the new building is under construction. In October, the Arts Center broke ground on a transformational new building in MacArthur Park and welcomed Ramirez as executive director. When COVID-19 remade programming and outreach plans, the center launched Arkansas Arts Center Amplified to host online classes, digital exhibitions and virtual events.

Little Rock Mayor Frank Scott, Jr. recognized the work of the Capital Campaign Committee, Board of Trustees, Foundation Board and Arts Center staff during the past year. Scott also thanked the residents of Little Rock and the City Board of Director for their continued support of the Arts and the Arkansas Arts Center.

“Your support of this project marks one of the most successful public-private partnerships in our community,” Scott said. “When the new Arts Center opens in 2022, it will be a place that will welcome all of us – a place for every Central Arkansan.”

Arkansas Arts Center Board of Trustees President Van Tilbury congratulated the Arkansas Arts Center on a year of remarkable accomplishments, noting that the Board of Trustees continues its initiative to broaden support for the Arts Center and engage with the community.

Tilbury also recognized outgoing trustees Merritt Dyke, Dale Ronnel, Ashley Merriman and Patrick O’Sullivan, along with outgoing ex-officio officers Heather Wardle, Shantea Nelson and Jim Gorman. He

also introduced incoming trustees Le’Kita Brown, Khayyam M. Eddings, Cathy Mayton and Larry Middleton and incoming ex-officio officers Melanie Buchanan, Ruby Ben and Paul Bash.

AAC Foundation Chair and Capital Campaign co-chair Warren Stephens recognized the service of the outgoing Foundation Chair Bobby Tucker and noted that works from the Arkansas Arts Center Foundation Collection traveled far and wide this year – a drawing by Edgar Degas was featured at the Musée d’Orsay in Paris and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Stephens also discussed the Foundation’s ongoing efforts to conserve collection works, making it possible to show the works in the new Arkansas Arts Center while preserving them for the enjoyment of future generations.

“I would like to personally thank all of the annual donors and members who support the Arts Center,” Stephens said. “Your support helps preserve the endowment and allows for future growth.”

Building Committee Chair and Capital Campaign co-chair Harriet Stephens provided an update on the progress on the new Arkansas Arts Center in MacArthur Park. Despite the many challenges presented by Covid-19 and weather this summer, construction is on schedule and on budget, she said. The project, which has employed the services of more than 50 Arkansas companies, also serves to boost the Central Arkansas economy amidst a global pandemic.

The Capital Campaign continues on schedule, Stephens reported, having raised \$122.7 million of its \$128 million goal. The campaign will also provide transition and opening support, while strengthening the Arkansas Arts Center Foundation endowment, yielding support for operations, exhibitions, acquisitions, and education and outreach programming in the new building.

“The new Arts Center is more than a building,” Stephens said. “It is an investment in the quality of life of everyone in Little Rock. When we open, the Arts Center will be an economic driver that promotes tourism and raises the profile of our city.”

Stephens also provided a construction update on the new Arkansas Arts Center. Noting that construction is progressing rapidly, Stephens walked through some of the key spaces in the building – the spine drawing an axis through the building and opening up in a blossom toward downtown Little Rock at the north and MacArthur Park at the south, the glass-enclosed Cultural Living Room, the spacious galleries, state-of-the-art theater and lecture hall, art studios equipped to teach drawing, painting, ceramics, printmaking, wood working and more, and six acres of the landscaping around the building.

Executive Director Victoria Ramirez outlined the milestones reached for the Arkansas Arts Center over the past year.

“This has been a year unlike any other in the Arts Center’s history – even before we began to grapple with the challenges of a global pandemic,” Ramirez said. “I would like to commend the Arkansas Arts Center board, staff, members and supporters on their tenacity, creativity and innovation in continuing to build an Arts Center that is a treasure for our community and region.”

This year, the Arkansas Arts Center moved out of the old MacArthur Park building – the oldest parts of which had been in use for more than 80 years – relocating to the Riverdale Shopping Center for two years while the new Arkansas Arts Centers is under construction. The temporary location – about three miles from MacArthur Park – was renovated to include studio space for art classes, design and rehearsal

space for performing arts, and fully-stocked shop, as well as flexible spaces for staff, facilities storage and educational programs.

While moving to Riverdale, the Arkansas Arts Center invested in partnerships with cultural organizations throughout the community, state and world. The Arkansas Arts Center partnered with the Central Arkansas Library System, building deeper connections between the two Central Arkansas cultural institutions. More than 100 works from the Arkansas Arts Center's extensive collection of contemporary craft objects were on view at 15 CALS locations, with each installation carefully curated to the environment, history and mission of each library branch. Educational programs – for young people and adults – were hosted at neighborhood libraries.

Works from the Arkansas Arts Center Foundation Collection were loaned to museums and arts institutions around the world – from Paris, France to Washington, D.C., Cleveland, Ohio to Columbia, SC, and Jonesboro to Pine Bluff, Ark.

The Arkansas Arts Center partnered with Historic Arkansas Museum in downtown Little Rock and Thea Foundation, ACANSA Gallery and the Argenta Branch of the William F. Laman Library in the Argenta Arts District in North Little Rock to host the *62nd Annual Delta Exhibition*. Expanding the *Delta Exhibition* out into the community was part of the Arts Center's commitment to continuing to provide accessible arts experiences while the MacArthur Park building is under construction.

Back in the 15,000 square-foot Museum School studios in the Arkansas Arts Center's temporary Riverdale location, more than 1,500 students took classes in painting, drawing, ceramics, printmaking, metals, glass, jewelry and woodworking.

On October 1, 2019, the Arkansas Arts Center broke ground on the reimagined Arkansas Arts Center designed by Studio Gang and SCAPE. At the event, Capital Campaign co-chair Harriet Stephens announced that the campaign had raised more than \$122.7 million of its \$128 million goal. Studio Gang Founder and Principal Jeanne Gang and SCAPE Founder and Principal Kate Orff spoke at the event, along with AAC Board of Trustees President Merritt Dyke, and Little Rock Mayor Frank Scott, Jr.

With construction officially underway on the new building, the Arts Center launched 22&You, a special membership program for those committed to maintaining their memberships through the opening of the new Arkansas Arts Center in 2022. More than a third of Arkansas Arts Center members enrolled in the program – and benefits include 22&You member events, a membership card featuring the reimagined Arkansas Arts Center, and a 22&You email newsletter with exclusive updates on the building project and Arts Center happenings.

As COVID-19 swept through the country in mid-March, the Arkansas Arts Center swiftly remade plans to keep the community connected to the arts, offering creative and engaging arts experiences online. "Arkansas Arts Center Amplified" began as a Facebook group to feature artist demonstrations, highlights of artworks from the Arkansas Arts Center Foundation Collection, Children's Theatre performances and episodes of "Our Work Continues," an original web series developed by the center. Within a few weeks, more than 1,000 people joined the group – and Arkansas Arts Center Amplified grew to encompass an innovative slate of virtual programming, including digital exhibitions, online classes and virtual events. Since March, Amplified programs have reached more than 83,000 people in Arkansas and beyond.

In the Museum School, a team of creative artists and instructors reinvented their classes to be taught via Zoom. The virtual art-making and learning opportunities they created included the business of art, color theory, found-object sculpture, figure drawing, art and social justice, ceramics, theatre for youth and adults and more. Virtual classes opened new learning opportunities for students – instructors were able to use works from the Arkansas Arts Center Foundation Collection, explore new digital communities for students, and illustrate new artistic techniques.

Online classes also made an impact outside of Central Arkansas – students joined classes from all over the country to learn from the expertise and experience of Arkansas Arts Center instructors. Students from California, Colorado, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Tennessee and Washington participated in online Museum School classes.

The Arkansas Arts Center developed and hosted two virtual exhibitions, expanding access to two of the Arts Center’s most popular exhibitions. The *59th Young Arkansas Artists Exhibition* showcased 65 artworks by elementary and secondary students from across Arkansas. The exhibition was viewed by visitors from 71 cities and towns throughout Arkansas.

Elevating artistic voices from the American South and beyond, the *62nd Annual Delta Exhibition* featured 63 artworks addressing identity, place, history, heritage and power. The *Delta* was organized by the Arkansas Arts Center in collaboration with Historic Arkansas Museum, Thea Foundation, ACANSA Gallery and the Argenta Branch of the William F. Laman Library – and partner organization was able to curate a selection of works from the exhibition exploring a theme related to the mission of their institution. Visitors from 40 states and Washington, D.C. – as well as 16 countries around the world – viewed the virtual *62nd Annual Delta Exhibition*. Events around the *Delta* also allowed the Arts Center to expand its reach. Virtually gallery talks and studio tours featured artists living and working across the country – from New York to North Carolina to Arkansas.

Virtual programming through Arkansas Arts Center Amplified is also scheduled to continue this fall, Ramirez reported, providing accessible arts programming to people throughout Arkansas and beyond.

“Today’s Annual Meeting celebrates a year unlike any other,” Ramirez said. “It was a year of unexpected challenges and a year that looks to the future. But, as we plan for the future, we always consider the past and our institution’s legacy in our community and state. The truth is – as forward as we might be looking – it is our history and traditions that brought us this point.”

Ramirez also presented the “Winthrop Rockefeller Memorial Award” to Michael Mayton. The award, presented each year, honors those who serve and support the arts and the Arkansas Arts Center above and beyond the normal call of duty, as demonstrated by the late Winthrop Rockefeller, for whom the award is named. The awardees are selected by a committee of past recipients, who are – by definition – experts in public service through the arts.

Arkansas Arts Center programs are supported in part by: Arkansas Arts Center Foundation; City of Little Rock; City of North Little Rock; Little Rock Convention and Visitors Bureau; and the Arkansas Arts Council, a division of Arkansas Heritage, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

GENERAL INFORMATION

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