

January 2016. Vol. 20, No. 1. — Advocacy in “Interesting” Times — Anne Katz

Advocates lead, champion, and proselytize causes or policies for the public good. We consider them the spokespeople and guides upholding the fight on behalf of others, including ourselves. But what if we flip that notion? What if we consider that each and every one of us directing, designing, marketing, fundraising, researching, teaching, and creating in arts and culture sectors are the proponents and promoters of arts for the public good each and every day? That we individually, as well as collectively, advocate for the importance of the arts broadly? Specifically, advocating through our pre-show talks with our audience members, through the pastry and cup of tea we enjoy with our business colleagues at the Chamber of Commerce, through the messaging we send via social media outlets, or by encouraging our students to talk to their school board about their desires for more arts specialists in their classrooms? Anne Katz, Executive Director of Arts Wisconsin, explores these questions in the current issue of *CultureWork: A Periodic Broadside for Arts and Culture Workers*. We encourage you to read, comment, and share ways in which we each advocate for the arts.

Best,

Julie Voelker-Morris

Robert Voelker-Morris

Editors

Advocacy in “Interesting” Times

[Anne Katz](#)

[The below links will open in a new browser tab or window.]

The idea that advocacy should be a daily activity, and not just something that is reserved for once-a-year visits to the State Capitol, hit home for me a few years ago. An enthusiastic constituent made the trek to Madison, Wisconsin from a small town on the Mississippi River, a trip of at least four hours each way, to attend Arts Day. At the end of the day, she told me that she had had a great time, hearing new ideas and meeting people from all over the state but didn't get a chance to visit with her legislator. She said, "I'll come back to Madison one of these days to meet with him." My response was, "Well, he'll be home this weekend, and every weekend, so why don't you just call him up and meet for coffee at a local café sometime soon?" That's when I realized...there's a misconception out there that advocacy is something separate from life, that you have to make a special effort and get dressed up and drive a long way to meet with your legislator to be part of the civic discourse.



Anne on Arts Day 2011, Madison, WI

That's when I made a vow to preach the gospel of advocacy as something that doesn't need to be dressed up as a special occasion or treated with kid gloves, but something that is an everyday activity, one that is all about human relationships, opportunities, and ongoing activism. True, effective advocacy is a daily activity, and it's most effective when it comes from the local level and from the heart. Wisconsin is pretty good at this, with our progressive traditions and collaborative

history. Since elected officials usually rise through the ranks, starting as members of the village board or city council, they are people we know from way back. (And that means we know ALL about them, of course.) Getting to know people as fellow humans, getting to know what's important to them, and getting to a point of mutual benefit, is key to successful advocacy.

[Arts Wisconsin](#) is Wisconsin's independent statewide community cultural development organization that analyzes and advances the arts in economic, educational, and civic infrastructure systems. We are guided by Wisconsin's progressive traditions and the [Wisconsin Idea](#), the century-old philosophy that the benefits and resources of the great University of Wisconsin should be available to all in the state. The arts have been as much a part of that heritage as any other sector. [Editor Note: Please see former *CultureWork* articles about Wisconsin's influence in the arts nationwide via the [Cooperative Extension Service](#) and [Community Arts Councils](#) .] Wisconsin is proud of its incredibly creative people, exemplary arts institutions in communities of all sizes, and a history of involvement in the arts on the local level. Wisconsinites are resourceful and resilient. No budget cuts can stop the creative process, although at times the local and global forces of change do seem to get in the way.

Arts Wisconsin helps people involved in the arts, business, education, government, political, and civic worlds lead and speak up for their work, their organizations and businesses, and their communities. We do our work in many ways: produce major conferences such as the annual statewide legislative day at the State Capitol attended by hundreds of people from around the state as well as local and regional meetings such as Creative Summits in communities throughout Wisconsin; provide research to help define the power and benefits of the arts and creativity statewide; and provide information, resources, trainings, and encouragement to empower people as advocates every day.

The fundamental shifts in the United States and global economies—let's all agree that we're not in a recession any longer, we're in a new economy—have brought systemic change that affects us all. In response to those changes, what's happening on the local level in arts and cultural development throughout Wisconsin, with myriad possibilities on the state level, is profound and exciting. Everyone—arts leaders, business people, elected officials, educators—cares about their community well being and seeks for new ideas and new methods. The arts—bringing creativity, imagination, innovation, and entrepreneurship—are what we are all looking for.

As the politics in our state have changed and become more polarized, finding common ground and continuing to move forward has been critical. There's good news and bad news in Wisconsin, where the successes and failures of the global shifts are intermingled in equal measure. State politics seems to have become a blood sport in the past few years, and debate and action around important issues have become more partisan, not only in the halls of the Capitol, but for families, friends, and neighbors. Our state's historic major industries— manufacturing and agriculture—have been hit hard by forces outside our borders; our population is diversifying and aging; our communities are looking for ways to remain vibrant and healthy. There are stark financial and racial disparities, and fundamental philosophical disagreements about how to steward our environmental, educational and civic heritage, and achieve prosperity for all.



Latino Strings, Milwaukee, WI

All of these socio-economic factors resonate in the arts in Wisconsin as much as in any sector. Over the past five years, policy changes and budget cuts on the state level have meant a decline in public funding for arts and other programs. These include a dramatic reduction in the [Wisconsin Arts Board](#)'s budget starting in 2011, historic cuts to K-12 education and the University of Wisconsin system, and increased strain on public services and private support. Wisconsin has creative assets galore but does not yet have a coordinated strategy or investment plan to grow its creative economy. Other states are pulling ahead in creative infrastructure investment. Louisiana and Colorado have established creative development agencies that are directly connected to their states' economic growth strategies. Oklahoma calls itself a "[State of Creativity](#)", and has hosted major international conferences such as the Creativity World Forum. "[Iowa Brag](#)" celebrates creativity and innovation in that state. In 2008, Minnesota taxpayers voted to support conservation, clean water and the arts through the [Legacy Amendment](#), which designates a percentage of the state sales tax to support conservation, clean water and the arts. This means that approximately \$25 million annually supports arts, arts education, and creative economy programs statewide.

Wisconsin's investment in the arts and creativity can be greater to realize the power of the arts for the state's success. Arts Wisconsin is working in the Wisconsin State Legislature to establish the [Creative Economy Development Initiative](#), a new state program to invest in Wisconsin's creative industries. There is exciting support statewide for this new direction and we're optimistic about our chances for success in this year's legislative session.

And, we're leading to change the way Wisconsin views "the arts" as an issue. Our message is that the arts are not something separate from the rest of life, and that everyone is involved in the arts in some way. Misconceptions about how to relate the arts to other issues are rampant. When people tell me "my legislator doesn't care about the arts," my response is, "your legislator is probably involved in the arts, because everyone is involved in some kind of creative endeavor. So find out what that endeavor is, and weave that into your stories of economic, educational and civic progress through the arts. That will get your legislator's attention."

Advocacy in a complicated environment (or really, in any environment) is not linear, quick, easy, or painless. Systemic change is messy, slow, multi-layered, dynamic, fluid, and often confusing, because personalities, politics and power shape

human interaction and outcomes. There's not much that can be done to speed things up or make it easier, but that applies to life in general, right? The Chinese curse, "May you live in interesting times," defines the way we live now. The good and inspiring news is that the passion and can-do spirit that I see throughout the state means that people are paying attention and working as advocates for the arts and creativity in their communities.



"Arts on Parade," Students from the Pecatonica Educational Charitable Foundation in Hollandale, WI.

These are some of the ways Arts Wisconsin is encouraging advocacy activism to infuse our work and on the local level:

- **The 21st century world demands new ways of thinking and doing.** With great change comes great opportunity. It's a very exciting time, because if there ever was a time that we needed the arts and creativity, it's now. Creativity, innovation, imagination, and entrepreneurship—all qualities inherent to the arts—are what we need to move our economy, educational systems, and civic infrastructure forward. The arts are important because creative expression is fundamental to the human condition. And the arts are important because creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship will move us, locally and globally, to grow the economy; create locally-based, sustainable jobs; educate our children for the 21st century world and workforce; enliven our communities large and small and bring diverse communities together; enhance and strengthen a community's competitive edge. The arts and creativity should be recognized in strategic economic, educational, and civic plans.
- **Don't assume that leaders already know about and support the ways in which the arts are a force for their communities.** Even if they are supportive, they are faced with difficult budget and civic choices every minute of the day. It's critically important to build and sustain relationships on all levels. You can and should provide ongoing information about your work, and about the public value of the arts, arts education, and creative economy locally and globally. Remember that budgets and viewpoints can be changed if enough people speak up and show that they care.
- **Say thank you if you've received public funding in any form.** For that matter, say thank you if anyone or any institution supports you and your work. Make sure decision makers know that investment in the arts is an investment in human and civic infrastructure.
- **The number of people involved in a cause speaks volumes about value, and success is directly proportional to the numbers of persons involved.** The more people speaking up for the arts in your state, the more it will be understood that the arts are valued in and important to everyone, everywhere. If you don't speak up for your cause, then others will speak up for their causes. Those are the causes that will get attention and resources...and then you will wonder why no one cares about or invests in your cause.
- **Involvement and leadership will help get others involved.** Patrons, audiences, parents of your students, business community, educators, and the public at large will only be as committed as you are. Don't expect others to do the work for you. Advocacy doesn't happen by itself. Commitment, persistence, and passion inspire others.

- **None of us can sit back and stay uninvolved.** If you care at all about your community's future, it is your duty and your opportunity, and in your best interest, to speak up for the arts and creativity and believe that change can happen.

I feel privileged to work with people who care deeply and work passionately, to know and appreciate the state's strengths and opportunities, and to help Wisconsin continue to move forward. I know that changes happen when people make the commitment to speak up and take action. Margaret Mead's statement, "*never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has,*" is more true and more important than ever before. Thanks for being an advocate for the arts.

[\[Back to Top\]](#)



Wisconsin Concrete Park, Phillips, WI

Author:

Anne Katz is Executive Director of Arts Wisconsin, Wisconsin's non-profit statewide community arts action, service, and development organization. Arts Wisconsin's mission is to nurture, serve, promote and speak up for the arts in Wisconsin and all of its communities. Under her leadership, Arts Wisconsin received the 2004 Governor's Award in Support of the Arts from the Wisconsin Foundation for the Arts, and she received the Alene Valkanas State Arts Advocacy Award from Americans for the Arts in June 2010. Anne has worked with arts organizations in Madison and across the country, including the Madison Civic Center, Madison Committee for the Arts, Madison Repertory Theatre, O'Neill Theatre Center in Waterford, CT; and The Big Apple Circus, New Dramatists, Inc., and The Feld Ballet in NYC. She is a graduate of Brandeis University, with a B.A. degree in Theater Arts, and studied drama at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, England.

[\[Back to Top\]](#)