

December 2017. Vol. 21, No. 4. – Community Efforts of the Umbrella Festival – Benny Lim; The Kids Arts Festival of Tennessee: Honoring Play, Experiments and Collaborative Experiences in Art – Meaghan Brady Nelson

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[Growing Community Efforts of the Umbrella Festival – Benny Lim](#)

The Kids Arts Festival of Tennessee: Honoring Play, Experiments, and Collaborative Experiences in Art

[Meaghan Brady Nelson](#)



Figure 1: Kids watching other kids perform on stage with the festival behind them.

The Event

[The Kids Arts Festival of Tennessee](#) (KAFT) is the first arts festival in the state of Tennessee that is fully designed for children and youth. This grassroots community-based event is presented by The City of Franklin Parks Department as a cooperative effort between multiple community non-profits, including the Williamson County Cultural Arts Commission (WCCAC),

Williamson County Parks and Recreation, and many other community sponsors. The annual festival is held on the first Saturday in June at Pinkerton Park, in Franklin Tennessee, about twenty miles south of Nashville.

Thirty-four acres in size, Pinkerton Park is the most highly used park in the Franklin Park system. It is composed of multiple play grounds, a one-mile paved pedestrian track that encompasses the entire park, three pavilions that community members may use and also reserve for celebrations, and a walking bridge that spans over the Harpeth River in order to connect the park with historic downtown Franklin.

When you enter KAFT, you are first welcomed with a smile by parks employees and festival volunteers who offer you a map showing the many areas to experience art. The festival inhabits the heart of the park on a large open grassy field, allowing you to quickly take in the scope of the festival visually (see figure 1). You can smell the different flavors from one of the many food trucks, and sounds from kids performing on stage amplify the day. As you begin to explore the festival, you see kids ranging in age from pre-school to high-school creating with a variety of colors and media, individually and collaboratively. It does not take long to notice that parents are also fully engaged, either actively with their own hands, or by watching with curiosity and pride as their child explores and plays with the artmaking process. When you make your way to the exhibit tent, you watch kids beam with pride as they stand in front of their displayed artwork. The collective energy of the festival is contagious among community attendees, as KAFT is an example of what Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh and Vidal (2001) defined as Community Capacity:

The interaction of human capital, organizational resources, and social capital existing within a given community that can be leverage to solve collective problems and improve or maintain the well-being of that community. It may operate through informal social processes and/or organized efforts by individuals, organizations, and social networks that exist among them and between them and the larger systems of which the community is a part. (p. 7)

KAFT takes place in the community of Franklin, which *Money Magazine* designated as the fourth best place to live in America in 2017. Franklin's Main Street is designated as a "Great American Main Street" by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Williamson county schools are the highest ranked in the state and "ranks fourth in the nation when compared with public school districts with more than 10,000 students and first in the nation when compared with school districts with more than 20,000 students." The KAFT takes place in a community of privilege. There are multiple events aimed at families that celebrate the seasons, music, and what Franklin calls "americana." There is also a First Friday Art Scene for adults, but no direct art event aimed at kids offered by this privileged community. The KAFT is the interaction of Franklin's human capital, organizational resources, and social capital being leveraged to solve this problem and improve the well-being of our community through a festival that celebrates the power of creation and imagination in our community's kids. The KAFT builds community capacity in Middle Tennessee by celebrating the arts through performance, artmaking processes, harnessing the collective power of community based-arts.

Work on the festival began in 2014 with the first event happening in June of 2015. As an Art Education professor working with teacher candidates, I have been able to solicit additional support through grants and student-volunteers from Middle Tennessee State University. These volunteers and funding mechanisms have been integral to the success of the festival. In the event's inaugural year, it attracted over 4,000 attendees. The now annual event has registered increased funding and volunteer support allowing it to remain free to attendees. Recently, in its third year, attendance reached over 6,000.

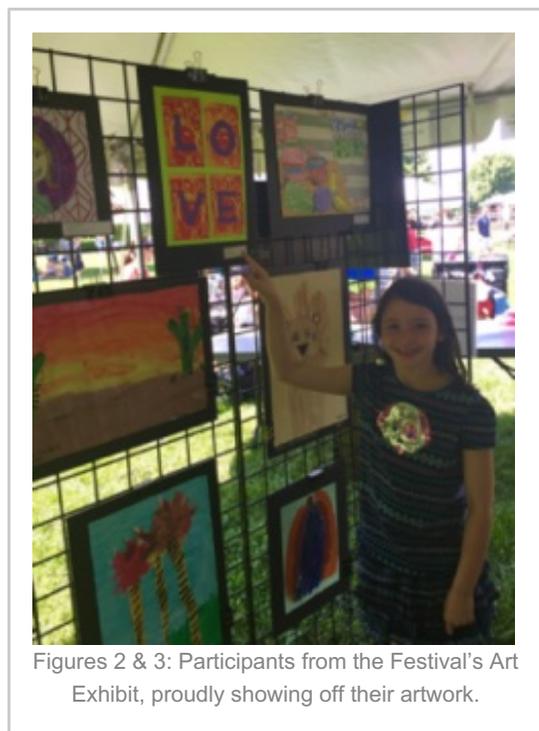
As the number of community sponsors has grown, the scope of the event has also grown.

The most recent festival featured over 150 talented visual youth artists who presented their juried original multi-media artwork with prizes and recognition given (see figures 2 and 3). Live performances including theater, dance, and music provide non-stop entertainment while offering performance opportunities for young artists to showcase their talents. An Art Vendor Sale offers kids the opportunity to sell their creations to attendees. Each year there are multiple areas for art making experiences at one of the many Art Stops (see figure 4).



Each Art Stop provides kids and their family members the opportunity to experiment and play with a different medium of art. These artmaking experiences range from book making, printmaking, origami (see figure 5), textile manipulation, painting, sculpture, drawing, and more. Each Art Stop is designed to provide kids and their family members a hands-on artmaking experience where they enjoy the art making process together.

The culminating celebration is a public art installation designed by kids and created by the community of festival attendees. In 2015, we created a mural (see figure 6) that is now installed at Pinkerton Park where the festival is held (see figure 7). In 2016, we created mosaic tiles that are now installed at the local YMCA. At the most recent festival in 2017, we created more mosaic tiles that will be installed at the Williamson County Arts Enrichment Center (see figure 8).



Figures 2 & 3: Participants from the Festival's Art Exhibit, proudly showing off their artwork.

In 2018, we will expand this public art into the baseball fields that are visited by over forty-

thousand community members each year. Due to a public service grant I received from Middle Tennessee State University, KAFT attendees will help to create sun shade sails that I will have installed above the bleachers of the baseball fields in Franklin. This will carry art into a space that is less frequently considered in regards to public art. They will provide numerous people with relief from the hot summer sun while also reminding families of the power of creativity.

Creating and Sustaining

The KAFT was conceptualized and then implemented relatively quickly for an event of its size and initial success. It began with a ground-up approach, or as Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh and Vidal (2001) defined it, the first step towards building community capacity – the individual level of social agency. The parks programmer wanted an arts festival aimed toward kids on the [Franklin TN Parks Department program schedule](#) and was able to identify and involve active members of the regional art education community.

The core active planners were myself, an Art Education professor, who is also a mom of children in the area the festival serves; a public-school art teacher, who at the time was the President of the William County Cultural Arts Commission and mother of an art education student; and members from the parks programming division. This committee was able to utilize the Franklin Park's structure and facilities while then drawing on my University's Art Education and Education student base as volunteers for the people power necessary to implement the event.

Each member of the Collaborative Executive Team (see figure 9) is driven to sustain and improve the festival because of our individually unique experience and interests for community-based events that promote inclusive collaboration. The festival was created and is successfully sustained because of its interdependent collaborative processes. Leadership is shared and delegated towards our strengths. We are also tied to the festival's success because it benefits areas of our professional success. The parks division is invested in sustaining events that support their mission and commitment to "bringing exciting and valuable



Figure 4: Four festival attendees, who had moments before been performing on the main stage, experimenting with art at one of the many Art Stops offered at the festival.



Figure 5: Kids experimenting and playing with the artmaking process of origami with their family members.

activities to all their residents” as stated on the [Franklin Parks Department website](#). The KAFT rounds out the parks division calendar of events while offering a unique opportunity for kids. As one mom (personal communication) stated to me at this year’s festival, “thank you for providing a festival that honors the arts – my child is not athletic and we are always looking for ways to help him participate with his peers outside of sports.” For the public-school art educator on our planning team this event honors the importance, pride, and accomplishment of students and their artwork through the opportunity to exhibit their work in a public venue.



Figure 6: Kids and their family members collaboratively painting the mural at the 2015 festival.

For myself, as an assistant tenure-track professor of art education, I am evaluated in the areas of teaching, research, and service. As the previous president of the Community Arts Caucus, a special interest group of the National Art Education Association, community-based art is my area of expertise. Community-based arts are where my strengths in research and service interests intersect. This festival also provides me the unique opportunity to provide my students with the practicum experience of creating and teaching art curriculum in a community-based venue. My university views this service as successful for myself and for the university. I make great attempts to involve students as master teachers and volunteers, therefore, gaining the university name recognition at the event and providing another venue for student teachers to learn. I am also a mother of two young kids (see figure 10), and Franklin is our hometown. As a “Mothering-ArtAdemic” (Nelson & Combe, 2017), I am constantly challenged with balancing motherhood, my artmaking, and academia. My work on The Kids Arts Festival is work I truly enjoy, and do well at, because it is one of the only areas in my life where I can perform as a mother, artist, and academic in successful unity.



Figure 7: The completed mural at Pinkerton Park with a festival attendee celebrating its installation.

The Impact and A Call to Action

As defined by the Ontario Arts Council (2002),

Community Arts is an art process that involves professional artists and community members in a collaborative creative process resulting in collective experience and public expression. It provides a way for communities to express themselves; enables artists, through financial or other supports, to engage in creative activity with communities; and is collaborative – the creative process is equally important as the artistic outcome.

The KAFT has impacted the awareness of the arts in the Middle Tennessee community through its collaborative creative processes and collective experiences. In 2018 the festival will continue to grow through a grant received from the Tennessee Arts Commission. This grant will allow us to bring in professional artists who will lead collaborative hands-on workshops for kids and their parents to experience the artists' artmaking processes first hand. These professional artmaking experiences will continue to expand the ways in which festival attendees can engage in community-based creative activity.

Each art stop is designed to provide kids and their family members a hands-on artmaking experience that provides parents the opportunity to watch and enjoy their child playing and experimenting with the artmaking process. This strengthens the importance of art education by welcoming community members to experience art together. When families collaboratively work through the artmaking process, it challenges parents to experience the learning processes that occur in these moments – that of

curiosity, questioning, exploring – processes that are vital to growth and learning. As McClure (2011) stated, "it is essential for the field of art education to contribute to a repositioning of young children's art and visual culture and the education and social spaces where children consume and make it as legitimate sites of cultural and knowledge production" (p.128). Instead of only seeing the final art project that comes home and is hung on the fridge or perhaps



Figure 8: Mosaic tiles created by kids and their family members at the festival.



Figure 9: The Collaborative Executive Team. Left to right: Kelly Selfe, a public-school art educator in Franklin Special School District; Meaghan Brady Nelson, Assistant Professor of Art Education at Middle Tennessee State University; Dylan Wright, Program Specialist; and Suzanne Carter, Recreation Foreman, The Franklin Parks Department.

framed on the wall, parents are exposed to the knowledge building processes their child experiences within the artmaking process, processes that positively affect their student's knowledge building in core subjects such as reading, writing, math, and science.

The KAFT is one example of how community-based arts events can build community capacity through the interaction of Franklin's human and social capital, and organizational resources. The KAFT calls for others to look for areas they can build community capacity in their hometown through their individual capabilities as community-based activists. If there is already a kids' arts festival or similar event in your area, offer your support, and make an impact through your time and unique expertise. If there is not, research the necessary community members needed to

collaboratively create a venue that draws people together through the arts who would otherwise not be engaged in this type of social activity. Events that honor the arts can become a source of pride for a community as it increases a sense of connection to the community for its residents. As a resident of your community, search for the ways you can use your knowledge and talents to increase pride through the arts in your own hometown. Festivals have always been a cultural phenomenon (Smith 2009). By actively engaging in this phenomenon, we all have the opportunity to create cultural capital by building community capacity through creativity.

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Figure 10: Nelson kids enjoying the annual KAFT.

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