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Firsts

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Firsts

Marete Wester

There are few moments in life when you get to experience a series of “firsts.” That thought occurred to me in the Albuquerque airport as a first-time visitor to New Mexico, as well as a first-time attendee to both the GFE and GIA conferences.

Though Americans for the Arts, where I am director of arts policy, has been a member and attendee of GIA for over fifteen years, this would be our first time at GFE. For our membership of over 3,000 public and local nonprofit arts grantmaking agencies with total funding budgets of over \$1 billion, education is a growing priority. Collectively about 35 percent of them make grants either directly to local nonprofit arts education organizations or to projects involving school districts and their cultural partners.

Yet, GFE would represent new terrain. It appeared quite fitting then, for the GFE conference theme to be “Crossing Borders and Boundaries: Re-envisioning education philanthropy for a new era”— an appropriate place to start the adventure.

Sporting a conference badge blazing “Americans for the Arts” on it, it was hard for me to hide the fact that I was one of those “artsy” types. This proved to be a plus, and sort of a protective cloak for many education funders to approach me after sessions and in social events, to talk about what their foundation was thinking about doing in arts education. Many whom I talked with had no prior history of funding the arts; yet, the discussion about the arts as a means of creating change and influencing systemic reform had somehow found its way into their board policy discussions.

This experience underscored for me the essentialness of one of the outcomes of the Arts and Education Weekend — that GIA and GFE work together to exchange information on policy, programs, and practice. Perhaps because we were in the “Land of Enchantment” or being embraced by the natural splendor of the grounds at the Tamaya Resort, I more than once felt these conversations to be part of a greater awakening taking place. The receptivity to bringing the arts into the discussion is genuine.

One of the striking things about the GFE conference to a first-timer was its sheer scale. The complexity of working in this environment is inescapable — yet one can find arts

connections in all of the focus areas, including Early Education, K-12 Education, Out of School Time, and Higher Education. In the sessions I attended on topics as diverse as building global knowledge in school and out, or how technology is breaking down the traditional classroom walls, the arts were acknowledged as one of the strategies that can meet these educational challenges.

However, the message that the arts not only “fit” into the larger education reform agenda, but in some cases can drive it, is not as widespread as we might hope it would be. The session conducted by the Ford and Wallace foundations, discussing their large-scale local education reform initiatives in the arts demonstrated why creating this awareness should be a priority for all concerned. The issues being addressed are universal— promoting whole child learning in an environment dominated by accountability and testing; remedying equity and access for all students; and engaging school leaders, business, parents, and others in creating sustainable change. In these local districts, the arts are providing solutions.

Not surprisingly, bridging the gaps between the believers and non-believers was a refrain throughout the Arts and Education Weekend. There was much to be learned from the refreshingly frank discussions on why the arts have not yet been fully embraced within the larger education realm — and much to be optimistic about in the solutions that were being explored. Being cut off from the larger revolutions in education has in part limited the progress of the arts. Yet, the imaginative properties of the arts are what education needs now more than ever. We have the opportunity to make clear the natural connections between arts education and current reform movements, including twenty-first century skills and whole child learning— and thus build new partnerships and alliances.

The opportunities to include the arts in the discussions about rethinking education will be missed however, if we don’t continue to attempt to cross the boundaries that still exist. The title of Rafe Esquith’s essay “The Journey Is Everything” and the prelude to the Arts and Education Weekend, sums it up best: The journey is everything — and in many ways, the journey has just begun.

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