



**Williamsburg Area Arts Commission**  
**"A Full House: Building Audiences for the Arts"**  
**February 9, 2023 | At the Stryker Center**

On February 9th, 2023, the Williamsburg Area Arts Commission (WAAC) hosted its 2023 forum, A Full House: Building Audiences for the Arts, for representatives of interested arts organizations and members of the community. The Forum's focus was audience engagement featuring a panel of some of the area's top leaders in the arts community. Panelists were Glenda Turner of the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, Christine Everly of Arts for Learning Virginia, Carolyn Keurajian of the Williamsburg Symphony Orchestra, and Jeff Ryder of the Virginia Stage Company. The forum was well attended and provided opportunities for networking with colleagues and discussion with panelists.

Moderated by WAAC Chair Thomas Phelps, formerly with the National Endowment for the Humanities, the event was organized to hear from a panel of specialists with discussion to follow. In his introduction Phelps said "The arts community suffered through the years of the pandemic. Audiences drifted away, and some did not come back. Audience development became a major concern, resulting so this year the Williamsburg Area Arts Commission decided to present a forum to address the issues surrounding audience building and development. It features a panel selected for their expertise and experience and includes representatives of organizations who have already aggressively addressed these issues."

"The pandemic brought our world to a halt, and it impacted the arts as well as the rest of the world," Williamsburg Vice Mayor Pat Dent said in opening the WAAC's annual forum. "We look at all the negatives from the pandemic, but when you look at all the people in this room, we came up with a lot of creative ways to get around it," Dent continued.

Phelps introduced Margaret Hancock, Executive Director of the Virginia Commission for the Arts, who explained the recent restructuring of its grant program into "three buckets", one of which is unrestricted funding. She encouraged attendees to apply for VCA funding. "It's the stamp of approval," she said. "A VCA grant tells corporations and philanthropies you have been invested in and vetted by the state of Virginia. It is also a great way to leverage one grant to get another."

Phelps continued introducing the panelists and outlining the goals of the forum: outlining ways to attract new and nontraditional audiences, to improve accessibility, and to bring back our live audiences.

Christine Everly, the CEO of Arts for Learning Virginia, said her organization addressed pandemic-era challenges by adapting their service model. Eleven days after the March 2020 shutdown, Arts for Learning turned their offices into a recording studio, creating more than 100 10-minute segments that could be delivered electronically to students at home. Staff had no experience in production and had to learn on the fly how to put together video offerings.

“It’s now a permanent part of our service model,” Everly said, adding that shifting to recording performances has allowed them to actually increase the number of students reached. “We now have a growing digital library of work and have reduced costs by eliminating many travel expenses.” In efforts to improve accessibility for students, the staff integrated the K-12 schools’ Clever app, a single sign-on digital learning app, into the Arts for Learning platform.

Jeff Ryder, Managing Director of the Virginia Stage Company, said the theater is continuing to recover from the COVID-19 shutdown. “We tried to do Zoom theater without being trained or skilled in being a recording studio,” he said, “but there was much lower attendance for virtual performances than traditional in-person theater. Attendance has still not fully recovered since we’ve resumed live performances, while at the same time labor expectations and costs have increased. In almost every aspect, it is more expensive to do now than what we were doing before. Those budget challenges,” Ryder continued, “create a greater imperative for building audiences and retaining subscribers. Our organization could not have survived without the generous support of State donors, local, federal, and relief programs.”

The Virginia Stage Company’s response has been to work toward creating an environment where live theater is actively celebrated. “We want it to be an experience you could only have by coming to the Wells Theatre,” Ryder said. In reopening its doors, the Company chose *The Hobbit*, a work that celebrates theater magic, and a familiar classic, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, rather than riskier choices.

The Stage Company’s mission is focused on hospitality and creating a “welcoming environment” for theatergoers. This has included recruiting and training ushers who will reinforce that concept. The Company is also working with Access Virginia so the Wells Theatre can better accommodate the needs of people with disabilities with ASL interpreters, open captioning, and assisted listening devices. Ryder said we have also streamlined the ticketing process, so buying a ticket is easy and changed our discount programs; students can now buy rush tickets in advance rather than only on the day of a performance. Discounts are offered through Norfolk’s Power Up Program which makes free or discounted admission available to low-income residents. “Overall, the goal is to be the community’s living room: comfortable and welcoming,” Ryder continued. “We have also added more audience engagement opportunities like Young People’s Night, Hampton Roads Pride, and Talkbacks, a behind the curtain series.” They also undertook a major outreach effort with a touring production about mental health entitled “Every Brilliant Thing” which Ryder called “an important piece of theater.” “We want to remove all the barriers for people to come to see us,” Ryder said.

At the Jamestown Yorktown Foundation, “adaptation” has been the order of the day, said Glenda Turner, the senior director of marketing. “We closed our doors on March 14, 2020, and we had

“History at Home” with virtual access to our museums available the following week. With schools closed, there was a concerted emphasis on providing history lessons disguised as interactive games or tests. “Students were actually learning but they didn’t know they were learning,” Turner said.

The foundation runs both Jamestown Settlement and the American Revolution Museum at Yorktown. Retooling to compensate for closing their buildings involved ramping up virtual visits, blogs, videos, curricula, and training for teachers.

The upside, Turner said, “is a better understanding of our audience.” Monitoring web traffic to their sites helped the JYF fine-tune its outreach. “You find out who your audience is by learning who’s using your website.” That helped target advertising. The Foundation developed “personas” based on web traffic to visualize different groups they wanted to reach, like multi-generational families, nuclear families, older kids in the family group, and “Gen Z” visitors.

After being closed for three months, museum staff got ready for re-opening by conducting what Turner called “speed dating,” so when “schools did start planning trips again, JYF would be foremost in educators’ minds. Once restrictions eased, JYF benefited from Williamsburg being what the tourism industry calls “a drive destination.” “Families were packing up their cars and doing road trips,” she said.

Turner noted another aspect to staying afloat during the pandemic was collaboration. One example she cited was a concert featuring the Williamsburg Symphony Orchestra and bassist Xavier Foley staged at Jamestown Settlement and limited to just 60 attendees. “The symphony has an audience, and we have an audience,” Turner said. “Some of the people who attended were symphony people who had not been to Jamestown Settlement in years. Partnership and collaboration have made a vast improvement to our visitor numbers.”

Marketing the museums as wedding venues helped. “These are private events, but the photos are shared, bringing awareness that our museums are beautiful places,” Turner said.

The concluding panelist was Carolyn Keurajian, President and CEO of the Williamsburg Symphony Orchestra. She declared that the key to attracting and retaining audiences is to deliver each attendee “a big love bomb.” “This is how I want people to feel when they’re buying a ticket,” she said. “Taking them from a first date, to being in a relationship with us, to engagement, marriage, anniversary. Once they become a donor, that means they’re in love.” Keurajian estimates it costs twenty percent of a \$54 ticket to bring in a new buyer but only three percent to bring someone back to a second concert. “This is why the lifeblood of an arts organization is taking care of the people you’ve already got. They (the audience) are what’s keeping you alive, she said.

She showed a chart titled “Evolution of a Patron,” outlining the progress from a non-patron to a loyal patron; followed by a chart showing the far greater financial impact “loyalists” have over single-sale ticket buyers. “The sweet spot is when you have a re-newer donor,” she continued, “Take care of your loyalists. Make sure they feel welcome.” During the pandemic, the symphony board

called each subscriber twice – just to check in. “Not to ask for anything,” said Keurajian, “but just to ask if they were okay and to thank them for subscribing.”

Like Turner, Keurajian also stressed collaboration is key and even better, if you can collaborate with an organization who will reach people you have not yet engaged – like adding young performers of diverse backgrounds. The WSO does concerts with the Williamsburg Youth Orchestra and recruited the historically Black First Baptist Church for a performance that required a choir. She also reminded attendees to look at their boards of directors. “Is your board diverse? She asked.

That combination – appealing to non-traditional audiences and cultivating new partnerships – led to the symphony’s highest-grossing Masterworks season yet.

Audience discussion was lively during the question-answer session, showing that attendees were fully engaged, interested in learning from the information presented, and adding their own perspectives from their experiences during the audience engagement.

The participants left with many conclusions that created a greater sense of hope and enthusiasm in the group. Their engagement was evident during the lengthy reception and networking following the program.

Big takeaways from the event included newly-identified behaviors identified to include taking care of your loyal patrons, expand collaboration to inform new audience membership, and marketing efforts should include personal interactions whenever possible. This gives a sense of ownership to the product they are investing in. The WAAC Chair received several positive phone calls after the event, expressing appreciation. The panelist format was highly effective and well received and will likely be used again in future forums whenever appropriate to the content.