



**Williamsburg Area Arts Commission Forum
A Full House: Building Audiences for the Arts”
February 9, 2023, at the Stryker Center**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Williamsburg Area Arts Commission (WAAC) hosted its annual forum, A Full House: Building Audiences for the Arts, on February 9, 2023. Using a panel format, the object of the forum was to share ideas on building audience participation in this post covid environment.

The panelists were Arts for Learning Virginia’s CEO Christine Everly, Williamsburg Symphony’s President and CEO Carolyn Keurajian, Virginia Stage Company’s Managing Director Jeff Ryder, and Jamestown-Youngtown Foundation’s senior director of marketing Glenda Turner. The event was moderated by WAAC Chair Tom Phelps, formerly of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Vice Mayor Pat Dent welcomed the 72 attendees and commented on creativity shown by local arts organizations to bring patrons back to live performances. Margaret Hancock, Executive Director of the Virginia Commission for the Arts (VCA) also addressed the group and explained the Commission’s recently restructured grant program now to include an un-restricted funding option. She encouraged attendees to apply for these funds, as a VCA grant tells corporations and philanthropies you have been vetted by the State of Virginia.

During their remarks the four panelists shared their organization’s efforts during covid and adaptations to their service model in the current post-covid environment:

Arts for Learning – Christine Everly

- Turned offices into a recording studio in March 2020 and have since created over 100 10-minute video segments. Now our video library has eliminated many travel expenses.
- Integrated K-12 school’s “Clever,” a single sign-on digital learning app into our ARL platform.

Virginia Stage Company – Jeff Ryder

- Staged works like “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” and “The Hobbit” rather than risk-taking choices.
- Focused on hospitality and creating a welcoming environment for theatre goers.
- Trained and recruited ushers who will reinforce this concept.
- Streamlined the ticketing process and making discount programs available in advance.
- Worked with Access Virginia to accommodate needs of people with disabilities.
- Added more audience engagement opportunities like Young People’s Night, Talkbacks-a behind the curtain series, and Hampton Roads Pride.
- Showed a touring production about mental health entitled “Every Brilliant Thing”.
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Zoom theatre was ineffective during covid and audience not yet fully re-covered. The generous support of donors, local, and federal relief programs kept the Company alive, Ryder concluded.

Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation – Glenda Turner

- Immediately after the shutdown, JYF provided virtual access to our museums.
- Ramped up virtual visits, blogs, videos, curriculum. and training for teachers.
- Created history lessons disguised as interactive games or tests, so students didn't realize they were learning.
- Targeted outreach and advertising by monitoring web traffic.
- Developed "personas" based on web traffic to appeal to various groups they wanted reach including multi-generational families, nuclear families, older kids in family groups, and "Gen Z" visitors.
- Alerted schools to JYF resources when in-person classes resumed.
- Partnered with or collaborated with organizations, one was the Williamsburg Symphony, whose members may not have been to the JYF Museums for years.
- Marketed the JYF Museums as wedding venues, as the photos shared bring awareness to the various sites.
- Benefited from Williamsburg being "a drive destination.

Williamsburg Symphony – Carolyn Keurajian

- Took care of current subscribers. During the pandemic, WSO board members called each subscriber twice to ask how are you and thank each for subscribing.
- Made each event attendee feel welcome and wanting to come again. Keurajian estimates it costs 20% of a \$54 ticket to bring someone back to a second concert. Using a chart titled the "Evolution of a Patron" showed the far greater financial impact of "loyalists" over single ticket buyers.
- Collaborated with other organizations. The WSO does concerts with Williamsburg Youth Orchestra and recruited the historically Black First Baptist Church for a performance that required a choir.
- Reached out to non-traditional audiences.
- Made certain Board was representative of the entire community.

The three main successful behaviors identified to re-engage and attract new audiences were taking care of loyal patrons, expanding collaboration to reach new audiences, and including personal interactions in marketing efforts whenever possible.

Audience interaction was lively during the question-and-answer session, demonstrating attendees were fully engaged and interested in the ideas presented. They also added their own experiences in re-engaging audiences. The forum ended with a great deal of networking during the lengthy reception.

WAAC Chair received several positive phone calls expressing appreciation for the forum subject. The panelist format appeared highly effective and well received and will be used in future forums whenever appropriate to the content.