



BARRIE MAGUIRE

## Soul Of The City

### Investing In Hartford's Arts: Big Bang, Not Fluff

KEN KAHN

With so much emphasis on standardized test scores and national education mandates, it might be tempting to think that arts and music in the classroom are merely nice extras to be put to the side. And with society's ills making headlines every day, it also might be easy to say that all of our energy should be directed to fixing problems while we let what's right with the world take care of itself. Why should we invest in a theater, a symphony, a museum or arts center, some would argue, when so much else needs attention?

There's no denying that society's needs deserve focus and support. But to those who would contend that assets such as arts and heritage don't, I would offer a stiff argument.

Arts, heritage, music, dance, theater, all contribute to our society — and especially our community in Greater Hartford — in very real and powerful ways. They boost our economy. They draw tourism dollars. They backstop our school systems. They help businesses attract and retain young professionals. They give our children productive and creative ways to learn. And underlying all of this, they greatly enhance the quality of life we enjoy in this region.

If you wonder if this is true, give it the "It's a Wonderful Life" test: What would Greater Hartford be like if our 300 arts and heritage organizations never existed? What would the holidays be without the Hartford Festival of Light, "A Christmas Carol" or First Night? What would our summers be without Riverfest, a ride on the Bushnell Park Carousel or a concert under the stars?

Where would we take out-of-town

guests if not to the Mark Twain House or Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum of Art? How would we entertain young professionals if not at a Creative Cocktail Hour at Real Art Ways or comedy night at The Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts? How would we learn about our history if not for the Noah Webster House, Amistad Foundation and Connecticut Jewish Film Festival? How would we talk about deep societal issues if not through a TheaterWorks production of "The Laramie Project"?

How would hundreds of kids in the North End and Sheldon/Charter Oak neighborhoods spend their afternoons without drumming or dance classes at the Artists Collective or Charter Oak Cultural Center? Would towns like New Britain be poorer without the New Britain Museum of American Art, Manchester without Cheney Hall or East Hartford without the Podunk Bluegrass Music Festival? You bet they would.

The fact is, the whole of Greater Hartford would be markedly poorer, in pocketbook and in spirit, without our extraordinary array of arts and heritage organizations.

A new study by Americans for the Arts, a national nonprofit group, shows that the arts contribute to Greater Hartford's economy to the tune of more than \$250 million each year — and that's just direct spending, without any ripple effect factored in. Nearly 5 million people attend arts and heritage events here each year, and more than a quarter of those are children.

Research by the Greater Hart-

ford Arts Council shows that arts groups in our community spend \$6.5 million on education each year, dramatically subsidizing local school systems' stretched budgets. They bring artists into the classroom, bring school kids to museums and theaters, and teach them such important lessons as history, creativity and confidence. They also strengthen core curriculums, using dance to reinforce math lessons and music to bring scientific theories to life. And increasingly, they tend to the basic needs of these children, often providing meals and adult role models.

We are very fortunate in Greater Hartford. Our community ranks in the top 6 percent for arts and culture among all metropolitan areas in North America, according to "Places Rated Almanac." That's something to be proud of. That's also something to support. These vital assets can remain strong contributors to our economy and quality of life only if we continue to invest in them. To underscore this point, performer Maurice Hines and Randy Cohen of Americans for the Arts will speak about "The Big Bang of the Arts" at a Rising Star Breakfast Tuesday at the Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts.

Hartford's great philanthropist Millard Pryor, who passed away last month, put it this way: Giving to social-purpose organizations supports a community's needs; giving to arts and heritage organizations supports its assets. Great communities do both.

*Ken Kahn is executive director of the Greater Hartford Arts Council.*