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Arts Incubator

Arlington, Virginia's Award Winning Model to Create a Vital Arts Presence in Your Community

The Arlington County Arts Incubator is a winner of a 1996 Innovations in American Government Award, a program of the Ford Foundation administered by the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. The County gratefully acknowledges the support of the awards program in producing this brochure.

In an era when governments and artists often eye each other with suspicion, Arlington County, Va., developed an award-winning program for nurturing its arts community without a significant increase in funding.

How?

How? By using old spaces in new ways, by centralizing the use of these spaces and other resources, by cultivating local talent and by attracting first-rate artists to the area.

Creatively using its status as a government body to secure resources for the arts, the County demonstrated that artists and government can work together, and transformed its own cultural landscape in the process. Moreover, the program led *The Washington Post* to call Arlington's government "hip," surely an unprecedented adjective for a local bureaucracy.

Can this program be adapted for non-government local arts agencies?

Yes, certainly. An eminently adaptable model of arts support for both public and private nonprofit arts agencies, the Arts Incubator is transferable to any community interested in expanding its arts activity in spite of limited resources. Arts advocates, whether public or private, board or staff, must connect to schools, economic development, recreation, urban planning, zoning, private sector partners, or any local resources available to forge the strategic alliances necessary to implement an incubator program.

What follows is the **story** of the first six years of Arlington's own Arts Incubator, and the six essential **principles** upon which you can build your Arts Incubator

The Arts Incubator Story

LIKE MANY OTHERS, THE COMMUNITY SERVED BY THE ARTS INCUBATOR —the Northern Virginia suburb of Arlington County—has undergone a transformation over the last 20 years. Once the population was largely homogeneous, now one in four residents is foreign-born; there are more than 30 languages spoken in the area. Yet before the project's inception, this onetime Washington, D.C., bedroom community was a changing metropolis with an unchanging arts program, one that had remained essentially the same since the 1960s.

Photo by Current Rutledge

A County government reorganization in 1986 established a Cultural Affairs Division as part of the newly created Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Resources. A year later, the County appointed a citizens' advisory committee to help division staff determine the direction of arts development in the County; a modest investment in cultural facility renovation was made and a Commission for the Arts was formed. A new policy was developed that made it possible for any Arlington artist or arts organization—amateur or professional—to be supported by the County through a competitive grants process.

The Division's mandate was changed from serving the needs of a small number of non-professional artists and arts organizations to serving the cultural needs and interests of the entire community. By adding professional artists to the mix, the new Division's administrators sought to bring higher quality, greater quantity and a wider range of arts offerings to the area. They hoped to shape a program that would attract artists—from inside and outside the community—who could respond more effectively to the interests of Arlington's diverse population.

In 1990, an Arts Incubator utilizing the new policies and facilities was established. A cost-effective strategy for providing what artists and arts organizations need to create and present their work, the program centers on a way of thinking rather than a way of spending, on reimagining an assortment of untapped government resources such as underused public and private sector space. This approach yields substantial dividends: although the County's grants program is small—$98,000 in 1997—the annual savings in rent to organizations using county-subsidized spaces exceeds $400,000.

"As a result of the Arts Incubator program, the number of arts groups in Arlington grew from 11 to 25 between 1990 and 1996."

As a result of the Arts Incubator program, the number of arts groups in Arlington grew from 11 to 25 between 1990 and 1996. The number of arts events increased over 500 percent—from 200 to 1,300—during the same period, while the area's arts audiences increased threefold. (The County's annual arts audience is now almost twice its population.) It is estimated that the arts have grown from a $1 million to $5 million industry.

Not all of the program's achievements, however, are quantifiable. Unlike other jurisdictions of its size, Arlington can boast a professional symphony orchestra, a resident opera company and numerous theatre, dance and choral groups. Arlington artists and craftspeople show and sell their work on a con-

tinuing basis. Arts activities in the area receive extensive media coverage and positive reviews. The County has become known regionally as a place to go for quality arts experiences.

Washington City Paper theatre critic Bob Mondello, an early champion of the program, recalls the first show he saw at Arlington's Gunston Arts Center. "Quite literally, I had never been to Virginia for a show," he says. "It was mind-blowing, and it was this little tiny company." Arlington's theatrical troupes have received over 70 Helen Hayes Award nominations (the equivalent of Broadway's Tonys) since 1990; they had received none before.

"The Arts Incubator has accomplished a multiplicity of goals," says David Briggs, chairman of the Arlington Commission for the Arts, "most notably expanding the number and diversity of arts available in Arlington and improving outreach to and services for visual artists. These days," says Briggs, who has been on the Commission since its inception in 1990, many of Arlington's performing arts offerings "are as good or better than many across the river in D.C.—and for a significantly lower price." More important, many of these artists and arts organizations are closely involved with the community through their work with at-risk populations in the County's schools, recreation and senior centers and residential programs.

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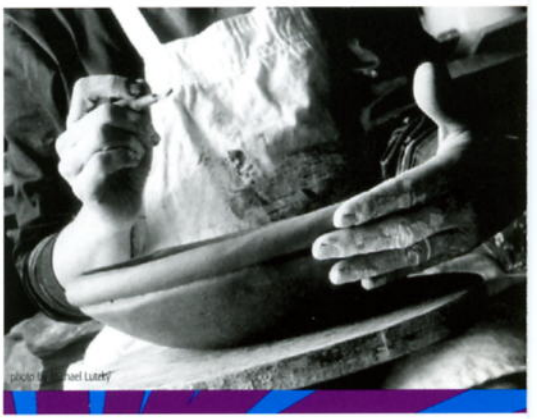


In December 1996, the Arts Incubator program was one of 10 winners nationwide of the "Innovations in American Government" award given each year by the Ford Foundation and the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. It is the first arts organization to receive the award, which singles out programs that have conceived innovative ways of "enhancing the operations and processes of American government."

The Principles

I. Generate Support for the Arts

II. Seek Out Untapped Resources

III. Connect Arts Support to Community Benefit

IV. Maximize Resources Through Creative Sharing

V. Adopt a Flexible Approach to Arts Support

VI. Enable Artistic Risk-Taking

I. Generate Support for the Arts

For programs like the Arts Incubator to succeed, their administrators must convince citizens and local government officials that a healthy arts presence is a vital part of community infrastructure. The Arts Incubator seeks to change the way government thinks about the arts, to redefine the relationship between the two entities, not only procedurally but conceptually. The program's underlying assumption is simply that the arts make places better, that they should be cultivated as assiduously as any other community good. "There is no cost to an arts-friendly attitude," explains an Arts Incubator staffer. "Any community can have it."

Adopting such an attitude necessitates taking an active rather than reactive approach to developing a local arts presence. The Arts Incubator staff pursues artists in much the same way that chambers of commerce pursue businesses. In addition to assisting individuals and groups who wish to launch new arts ventures in the area, and expanding the scope of those organizations already in place, the program strategically courts arts groups and individual artists who have something to offer the community.

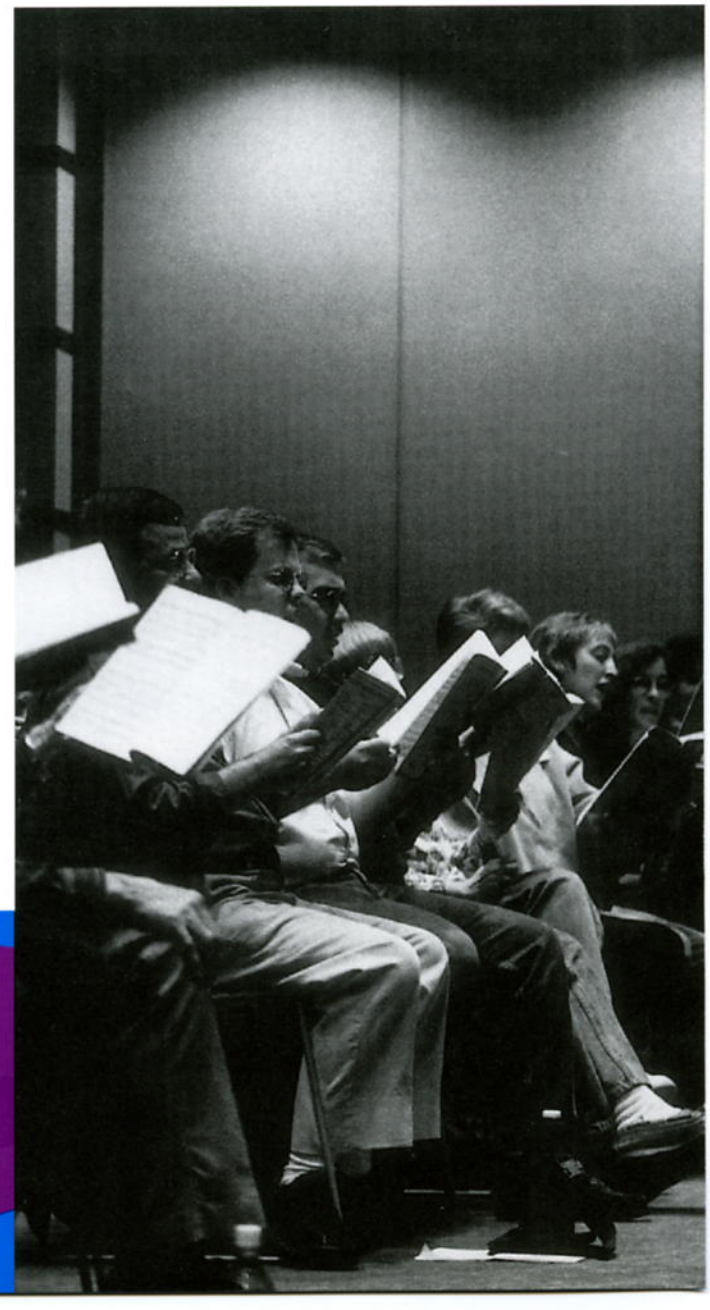
The Washington Shakespeare Company is one such group. Despite its name, the company is located in Arlington. "The Company was producing theatre in the District and in Maryland, and the expense of renting rehearsal and performance space was bankrupting us," explains founding artistic director TJ Edwards. "We were about to go out of business when Arlington County offered free rehearsal and performance space, as well as technical support and the use of a costume shop. The result is that after five years and 36 shows in Arlington County, the WSC still provides an avenue for metropolitan theatregoers to see the classics of theatre at an affordable price."

Seek Out

II. Seek Out Untapped Resources

LIMITED RESOURCES ARE NOT AN EXCUSE FOR LACKLUSTER ARTS SUPPORT. Local government has many more assets than cash at its disposal, and making good use of these assets requires a flexible and often opportunistic approach to problem-solving. What Arts Incubator administrators call "government-plus-arts arithmetic" can yield many unexpected resources when participants are open to possibility.

For example, the Arts Incubator secures rent-free facilities from a variety of sources—school classrooms and auditoriums, commercial warehouses, conference centers or vacant retail spaces—whose use requires ingenuity rather than capital. This can be done by creating partnerships with businesses, schools and nonprofit entities. In Arlington, County staff negotiated gallery space as part of an office development project. Performance and rehearsal spaces are housed in school buildings. A converted single-screen movie house will operate as a conference center during the day and a theatre at night. Low-cost resources of this kind enable the County to provide facilities and services to artists for free or for a negligible fee.



The Arlington Metropolitan Chorus is one of many groups to benefit from this kind of creative space-sharing. A year ago, the chorus began holding rehearsals at the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, a private organization that represents small power facilities and electric companies around the country. "At that point, we didn't have rehearsal space," recalls artistic director Barry Hemphill. "The NRECA has a big conference room that has been made available to us, and in turn we've given two concerts there. It's a wonderful place to rehearse."

photo by Jason Horowitz

Ellen Bozman, chairman *of the Arlington County Board, calls the arts both "an economic developer" and a "promoter of community." Both concepts, she says, have gained recognition in the last 20 years. "The arts reach out and touch individuals and groups of people who would not enter into community activities through any other route," she explains.*

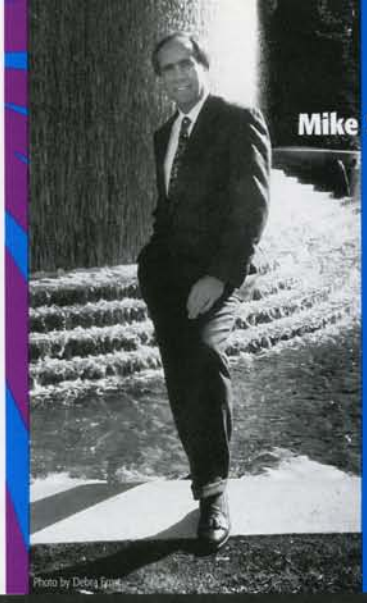


Photo by Debra Tate

Mike Shehadi, *an executive with the Charles E. Smith Co., a major area real estate company, helped craft a split-use deal for an Arlington area facility that will operate as a conference center by day and a theatre by night. "We're finding a complementary use for a project we were anxious to do anyway," he explains. "We are business people–it was a matter of putting two and two together."*

photo by Michael Lutzi

III. Connect Arts Support to Community Benefit

When allocating arts support, arts agencies traditionally respond to the needs of the artist or arts organization rather than the needs of the community. In contrast, the Arts Incubator focuses first on the health and vitality of the community, and encourages artists to play an active role in its development.

Applicants' proposed means of giving back to the community play a role in decisions about which artists and groups receive assistance. For this reason, the Arts Incubator does not offer so-called "buying time" fellowships. Instead, artists are required to exhibit or perform within the community and to engage it through outreach activities. Individuals and groups must include public activities as part of proposed projects in order to be considered for assistance. Likewise, inclusion of community service in proposed projects is significant in evaluating whether an organization will receive Arts Incubator support.

The County supports artists because they provide a service to the community, not because they have efficient management practices or a prominent board of directors—often the standard set by government agencies in determining which artists and activities get funded. Four years ago, Arlington supported the emergence of a black theatre company. One year later, it presented its first performance; two years later it folded. While not a success in the conventional sense, the company allowed the Arts Incubator to provide relevant programming for an underserved portion of the population.

photo by Michael Lutzki

However, the Arts Incubator philosophy holds that participating groups who become healthier will themselves, in turn, become community resources. (To this end, the County now provides proactive workshops on subjects like marketing and management in addition to its other offerings.) Rather than dependence, the Arts Incubator aims to create a kind of positive synergy.

Teatro de la Luna, a Spanish-language theatre company, holds its performances in the County's Gunston Arts Center. "It's a big, big help," says managing director Nucky Walder. "We don't own a space, but our theatre has found a home there." The company, whose works are performed in Spanish but available to English-speaking audiences through simultaneous translation, is working with the County to develop ways to attract the area's lower-income Latino audiences; recent initiatives include discounting ticket prices for some performances and offering on-site child care.

oto by Debra Ernst

In 1995, muralist *Faylinda Kodis invited women from a substance abuse treatment facility to work with her on a mural project. The finished work was exhibited in the Arlington Arts Center gallery space. "It really demonstrated the hidden talent within the community," she says, "and it gave the women a chance to see their work in a professional setting."*

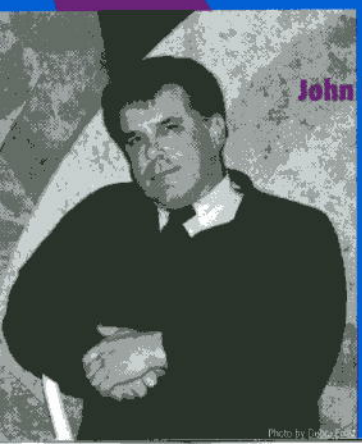
Maximize

IV. Maximize Resources Through Creative Sharing

THE CENTRALIZATION OF FACILITIES AND resources is a significant factor in the success of the Arts Incubator. Providing one scene shop that 20 arts organization can use is more cost-effective than providing funding to 20 separate groups which must then each rent the space and equipment to make their own sets. The same is true of gallery, rehearsal and office space. Centralizing management of such resources and encouraging efficient sharing makes the most of County resources.

County facilities represent a wide range of approaches to acquiring and sharing space. They include the Gunston Arts Center, a performing arts complex carved out of a middle school that the County renovated in the late-1980s, housing two theatres, a scene shop, and costume shop featuring a 5,000-piece costume library. A former school building also accommodates the Lee Arts Center Studios, a multi-use County facility that includes ceramics, printmaking and tile studios as well as a community center for preschoolers and seniors. The Ellipse Arts Center, a gallery space acquired by the County in exchange for granting the developer a zoning variance, is the site of six annual exhibitions and numerous lectures, workshops and small-scale performances.

All of these facilities cost a minimal amount to acquire, equip and manage due to the use of County positioning and in-house resources. The Ellipse Craft Shop, for example, is a County-run artists' cooperative that shares donated retail space in a local mall with the Arlington Symphony. The store, which had its most successful sales year to date in 1996, provides a much-needed retail showcase for the work of local artisans, who volunteer their time to staff it. "It really gets your work out there," says stained glass artist Donna McClain. "Each of us has a following, but we're all in it together—pretty unusual for a group of people in this day and age."



John Edward Niles, *artistic director of the Opera Theatre of Northern Virginia, says the County's resources are invaluable. "The set and costume shop do great things for us," he says. "They deliver more than you would ever expect. If they sometimes aren't able to deliver as much as they'd like to, it's because there's only 24 hours in a day." How long does Niles expect the company's association with the County to last? "Until they throw us out in the snow."*

Photo by Debra Ernst

Tile artist Marcella *Noriega calls the arts facilities at Lee Arts Center "a lifesaver." She first came to Lee when, after finishing graduate school, she found herself without access to affordable studio space. "It's a great thing for Arlington artists who work with ceramics or printmaking," she says. "There are two electric kilns and one gas kiln and we keep them all very, very busy."*

V. Adopt a Flexible Approach to Arts Support

Those who hope to implement an Arts Incubator program of their own will find it necessary to "de-bureaucratize" the way that governments and other agencies respond to artists and arts organizations. Each artist and group is different and needs different kinds of assistance and support. Rather than applying a single formula to disparate applicants, the Arts Incubator responds to each artist and group individually, providing each a customized menu of facilities, services and funding.

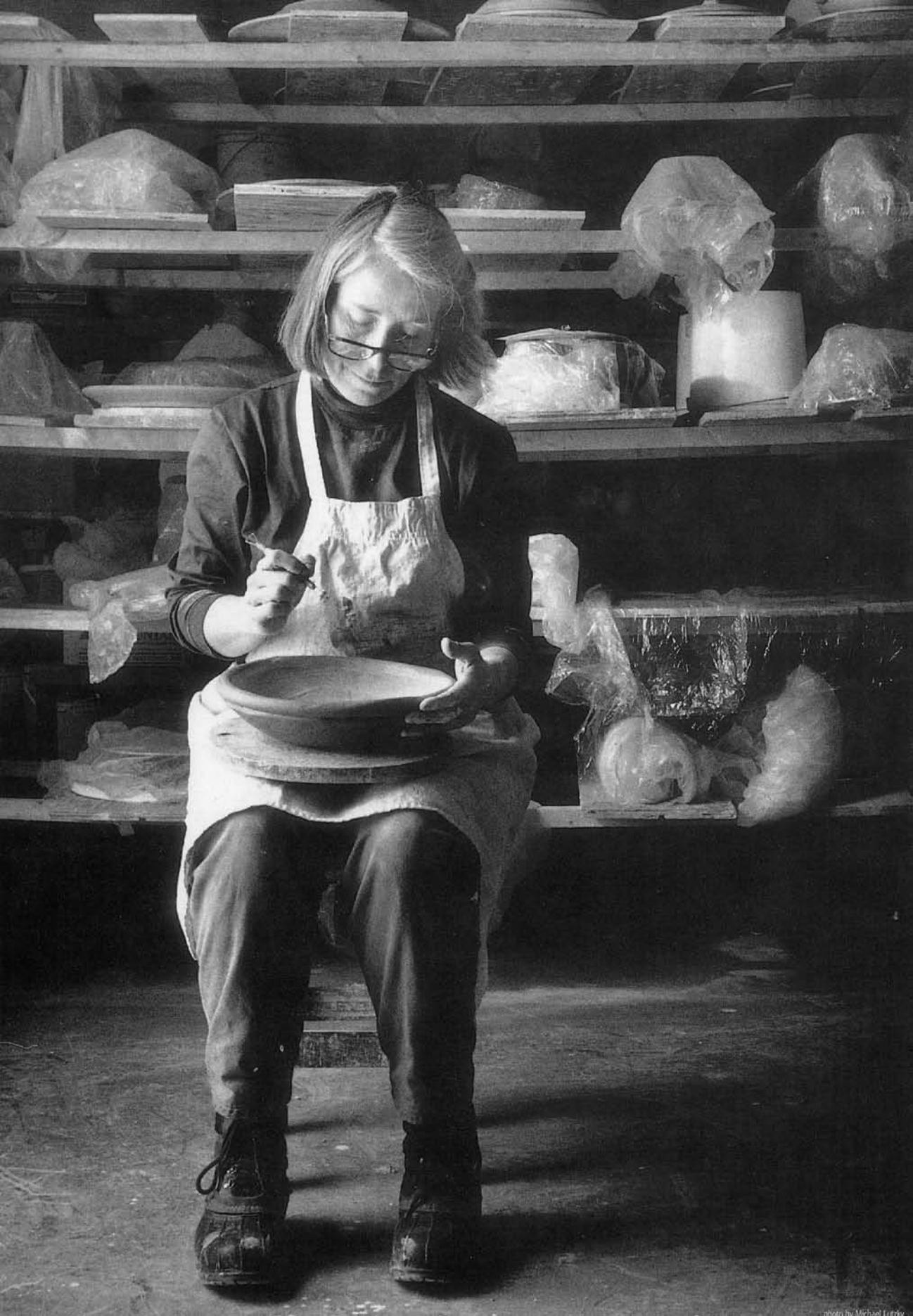
Administering the Arts Incubator model—which responds to participant needs on a case-by-case basis—requires a fluidity not often associated with government bodies. This kind of institutional flexibility turns conventional bureaucratic thinking inside out. For such a program to be effective, local governments must be willing to act spontaneously and take risks—not always easy undertakings for a bureaucracy set in its ways or politicians seeking re-election.

Because they are in different stages of development, the needs of artists and groups can vary greatly. Horizons Theatre, a 20-year-old company dedicated to drama that explores women's issues, recently resumed operations after a near-closing and subsequent internal restructuring. "The County helped us identify areas that we needed to change and helped us find the energy to begin again," says artistic director Leslie Jacobson. "I'm not sure we would have come together again if they had not stepped in."

A low-risk exchange dubbed the "75/25 split" allows an interested group with little more than an intriguing idea to mount productions without waiting to become a supported organization. The County takes 25 percent of the box office in exchange for use of its performance facilities, scene shop and costume collection. This arrangement not only creates an unofficial screening process outside of the grant's cycle, but makes a far wider range of arts activity available to the public.

Dancer and choreographer Lucy Bowen McCauley has gone from producing "75/25" events to launching her own company, Bowen McCauley Dance, with assistance from the Arts Incubator. "They call me the little egg," she laughs, "and I'm happy to be an egg. I don't think I would have done this without knowing that I lived in Arlington County and had this kind of support available to me. I never thought I'd have my own company."

Photo by Michael Lutzky



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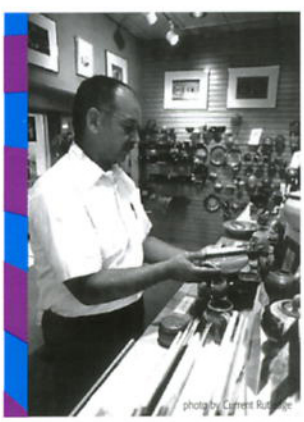
The Arts Incubator has the dexterity to support artists simply because they have good ideas. Jack Marshall is the artistic director of American Century Theatre, a company dedicated to resurrecting forgotten classics by 20th-century American playwrights. "I can't think of a better example of the invaluable nature of the Arts Incubator than our experience." says Marshall. "We want to rescue pieces before they fall through the cultural cracks...it's a generally non-commercial enterprise and it's very important to have some margin for error. They've given us a chance to make the magic happen and that's all we can ask for."

By following this principle, public agencies can set the stage, so to speak, to "make magic happen," and change the community's perception of government. As government changes its relationship to the arts, the community changes its relationship to government. When local officials come to be considered what one administrator calls "stewards of the human spirit," a true reinterpretation has taken place.

In Arlington

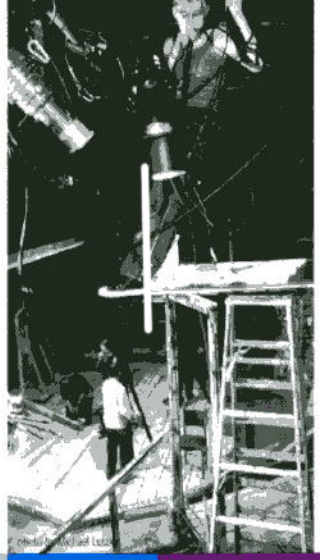
In Arlington, the Arts Incubator transformed

an unchanging arts program focused on serving the needs of a few participants into a dynamic, nationally recognized arts-funding model that serves the County's diverse population. It can do the same in your community. This model of arts support is infinitely adaptable, and can be replicated by any locality willing to adopt an approach to arts funding that relies as much on creativity and inspiration as art itself.



"This combination of resources and space...has proved a magnet. Clearly the Arlington Arts Incubator is on the right track."

Bob Mondello, Washington City Paper



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The Arts Incubator is a program of the Cultural Affairs Division of the Arlington County Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Resources. For additional information contact the Cultural Affairs Division at:

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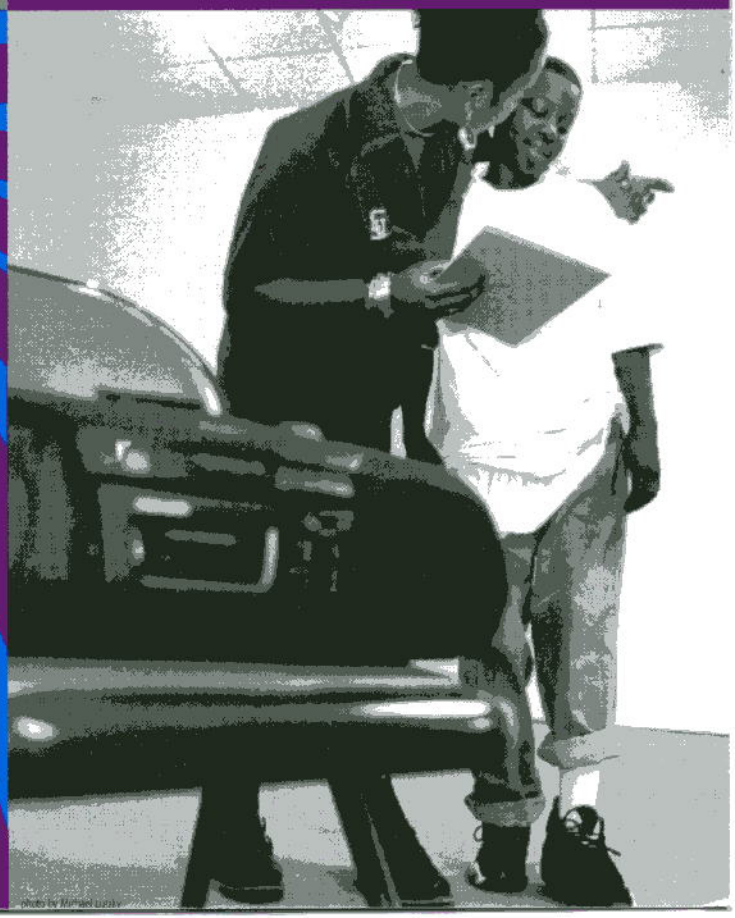
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