

Guest Commentary

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The arts are the foundation for everything

In the last issue of *Continuance*, former Montana Governor Marc Racicot referred to service as a key ingredient in stopping the erosion of community in our society. He used barn raising as a symbol of rekindling community service and civic duty. And throughout our lives, the arts too give us a vehicle for service and for giving back to the community. I remember attending local gatherings as a child. We would go to the little red schoolhouse along the Snake River in Oregon. Everyone—from young babies to the great-grandparents— would be there. These events are still strong in my memory because of the sense of belonging, the inclusiveness for all cultures, backgrounds, and religions, and the teaching and learning that were always part of the gatherings. One family would play music, and women made lace, quilted, embroidered, and others would whittle, tell stories, and engage in folk arts that were a traditional part of such gatherings.

From the day we are born, the arts are a part of our lives. Little children move to the sound of music. They pick up a crayon to scribble. We dance, sing, read, write, create shapes with clay; later, as students, we attend school plays, listen to our favorite music, and dance whatever style is

popular. We are surrounded by architecture and arts every minute of every day throughout our lives. The arts tell world history, strengthen our economy through partnerships and community building, and provide a vehicle for giving back to the community.

More than that, the arts are the basic building blocks for a child's education. Children learn through the arts even when traditional ways of teaching don't work. According to the research on early childhood learning, brain development, and socialization, the arts give children a greater chance to reach their potential. The arts take young teens from violence to constructive use of their energies. And after a lifetime's experience, older people find that it is the arts that continue to have meaning. People 80, 90, and 100 are still learning, still teaching, and their creativity is fostered by the arts.

Revitalizing neighborhood theaters is the modern-day barn raising. It happens at the grassroots level with people coming together and realizing "We can do this." Such community service involves individuals of all ages giving back to the community—working for common goals and the common good.

The arts aren't just beauty and enrichment in our lives. The arts are



the steel that forms the foundation for every person and every community. The arts can and should be part of every economic and social development strategy, of every community-building effort, and as with barnraising and service learning, help to reverse the erosion of community in our society.

The Illinois Arts Council is a state agency responsible for encouraging development of the arts throughout Illinois. The Illinois Arts Council assists artists, arts organizations and other community organizations that present arts programming by providing financial and technical assistance. The IAC has developed effective partnerships with the Office of the Governor, the Office of the First Lady, the Department of Commerce and Community Affairs, Illinois Main Street Program, Juvenile Justice, Illinois State Board of Education, Illinois Library Association, the Illinois Association of Park Districts and other local groups and organizations that encourage the development of arts programming throughout the state. The Arts in Literacy Program, a partnership with the Secretary of State, supports the interaction between professional Illinois artists and the public, and the Youth Employment Program provides high school students an opportunity to participate in job internships to prepare for future job opportunities.