



The Lexington Art League, Central Kentucky Youth Orchestra, and Lexington Ballet Company receive funding or grants from LexArts.

# MAKING ART HAPPEN

LexArts seeks to integrate the arts into the life of the city

By Rena Baer

**N**an Plummer searches for the right words to describe exactly what role LexArts plays in the community. “We are the food for the yeast,” says the organization’s new president and CEO, getting warmed up. “Or ... maybe we are the yeast ... or the mixing bowl ... or, even, the oven.”

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LexArts president and CEO Nan Plummer

“We’re almost never the bread,” she finishes, fairly sure she has hit the metaphorical nail on the head.

Maury Sparrow, who has been LexArts’ communications director for several years, chimes in. “Once in a while we are the project, but not without a cadre of artists behind us,” he said.

Such is the task of describing what LexArts does, its role often morphing from project to project and group to individual. What’s readily apparent, though, is that LexArts is an integral part of making art happen in Lexington. It can be seen and heard everywhere, from the burgeoning number of colorful murals brightening the city streets to an initiative that not only exposes under-served kids to orchestral music but also gives them the chance to play it.

As Central Kentucky’s United Arts Fund, LexArts is the single largest contributor to six major arts organizations: Lexington Philharmonic, Lexington

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– Allison Kaiser, executive director of the Lexington Philharmonic



RICHIE WIREMAN

As one of six LexArts partners, the Lexington Philharmonic receives funding for general operations.

Children’s Theatre, Living Arts & Science Center, Lexington Art League, Central Kentucky Youth Orchestras, and Balagula Theatre. These six “partners” receive funding for general operations rather than specific programs.

For the Lexington Philharmonic Orchestra, LexArts’ support has been about a lot more than money, said Allison Kaiser, executive director of the philharmonic.

“LexArts brings attention to the arts in a focused manner with workplace and corporate giving in a way arts organizations can’t that offers

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tremendous value and raises the profile of all the arts,” she said.

All funding applicants, even LexArts’ partners, must go through a rigorous adjudication and competitive process to receive funding. “It gives full transparency and deep information for the donors so they understand what they are supporting and exactly how the money is being used,” Kaiser said.

LexArts’ close scrutiny and demands for excellence have done a lot to raise the artistic bar because organizations have to take a closer look at themselves and make improvements, she said. For the philharmonic the result has been building a culture of curiosity around live orchestral music and becoming more accessible to a broader audience.

LexArts also awards program and project grants to 20 or so smaller organizations and individual artists and is the force behind the familiar names of Arts-Place, Gallery Hop, the Lexington Mural

Project, Lexington Youth Arts Council, and other programming initiatives, including those of Lexington Ballet Company.

“Our grant allows us to put on all of our shows,” said Lexington Ballet’s interim chair, Marilee Varner. “We appreciate them immensely and the wonderful job they do supporting and promoting the arts.

“A thriving arts community is good for businesses, residents, and tourism; it makes for a healthier community all around.”



Another role played by LexArts is that of fiscal sponsor or fiscal agent. For Jeff Day and his production partner, Bo List, having a financial umbrella to work under has enabled them to take their Actors’ Equity theatre company, Athens West, from a business plan to its first production, *Doubt*.

“We are not a 501(c)(3) yet, so they are handling all our finances; everything goes through LexArts,” said Day, who is

the theatre and cinema performance program coordinator at Asbury University and owner of film company Lucky Day Productions. “They are also helping us get the word out.”

Day said he had put together a business plan three years ago for an Actors’ Equity theatre company, but it had languished until he met John Long, then-chairman of LexArts’ board of directors, who introduced Day to the staff at LexArts.

“We needed the support to make this fly,” said Day. “This venture needed the leadership of the arts community behind it, and LexArts is that here in Lexington. They have smoothed the way.”

In the role of “fiscal agent” for NoLi CDC (North Limestone Community Development Corporation), LexArts is helping renovate more than 20 shotgun houses on York and Eddie streets into an arts colony, where artists can live and sell their work.

“We encouraged an application to ArtPlace America, which funds creative place-making initiatives, filled out forms, and got them in on time,” said Sparrow. The result was a \$425,000 grant for the project.



The Lexington Ballet Company stages its productions with a grant from LexArts.

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The Central Kentucky Youth Orchestra performs at Keeneland's 2014 fall race meet.

"It's not usually what an arts foundation does, but it's what the community does," said Sparrow.

"We have a small, but bright and experienced staff that can respond to ideas and evaluate them," said Plummer, an art and development executive who came here from Little Rock, Ark., to lead LexArts. "We are always thinking 'where do we serve next?'"

LexArts plots its moves from ArtsPlace in downtown Lexington, which was built in 1904 as a YMCA. The organization doesn't own the building but rents and manages the space for many arts organizations, including Lexington Ballet, Central Kentucky Youth Orchestras, and the Lexington Philharmonic. Sparrow said he wishes they could wrap the building in a huge canvas painted with the scenes of all that goes on inside.

"We need to let people know the exciting things that go on in here," he said.

Plummer admits the fundraising and administrative roles of LexArts don't sound as glamorous as the results they bring, but

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there's no underplaying their importance.

"We dare to be boring to keep that support coming," she said.

"We are administrators who create narratives that bring together artists, audiences, and resources. We spend a lot of time in meetings, taking care of the details so that artists can create art."

Lexington's cultural identity has been growing in the past decade, even through the recession, said Sparrow. "We had made such great strides that we did not want to have to pull grants when the recession hit. And we didn't have to; the community and businesses continued to contribute."

Sparrow touted support from organizations such as Keeneland, which often sets the pace for other businesses and groups to contribute. Lexington Mayor Jim Gray is



RICK SAMUELS

ArtsPlace regularly hosts exhibits.

also a big supporter of the arts, he said. "He understands they are an economic driver, a \$20 million industry," said Sparrow.

The prosperity of the arts spreads far beyond dollars, though, said Plummer. "Money is important to what we do, but it's not why we do it. We do it for our hearts and our minds."

Plummer, who joined LexArts in November, said her goal is to re-create opportunities continually for the awe and the excitement of possibility she felt as a youngster when her mother would volunteer at Columbus Museum of Art and take her along.

"I had the run of the place and could explore when she was in meetings," said Plummer. "And it felt like my world expand-

ed. My first person enlarged to 'we.' And that 'we' has been permanent. "I remember feeling it in my body. It was a great feeling

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... like flying ... but inside my head. I want everyone to feel that, especially children.

"I think the everyday person we are trying to reach is a kid," she said. "We build audiences by getting children interested in the arts. It's a way for them to feel they have a place in the world."

When bassoon instructor Matt Schuler heard that Central Kentucky Youth Orchestra's repertory orchestra was one bassoon short, he suggested his newest student try out. The 13-year-old had only been playing four months but was picking it up quickly. Excited about the opportunity, the eighth-grader auditioned the very first night of fall season rehearsals. After his audition, music director Daniel Chetel and conductor Lois Wiggins welcomed him to CKYO and invited him to stay for rehearsal. That night, when his parents picked him up and asked how it went, he said: "I've found my home."

"We get back 100-fold what a child gets from the arts," said Plummer. "It keeps kids safe; it keeps them engaged. They flourish from a sense of being part of something bigger than themselves."

Plummer has been delighted to find Lexington also filled with adults who are discovering themselves through the arts. "There's already a fabulous level of engagement, but there is also the potential for more and deeper engagement," she said. "It's an exciting time to be here."

Sparrow said Plummer's arrival has heralded a new era. "There's a sense of renewal with a new set of eyes and experience in the arts and fundraising," he said.

"Whenever someone new comes on board, they have to work with what we have, and what we have is a very healthy arts community," Kaiser said. "Nan brings a fresh skill set that will help us continue to evolve and grow."

Whether it's a mixing bowl, the yeast, the oven, or even the bread, LexArts keeps on cooking. **KM**

## ART OUT LOUD

LexArts kicked off its Fund for the Arts drive in March and it continues through June. Each dollar donated to LexArts goes back into the community to groups such as the Lexington Children's Theatre, Lexington Philharmonic, Lexington Art League, the Living Arts & Science Center, Central Kentucky Youth Orchestras, Balagula Theatre, and many more.

Groups selected to receive funding through the LexArts grant program are audited to ensure that donations are well invested. The LexArts Grants Committee examines artistic plans, financial records, and organizational leadership ensuring these groups are held to high standards of management and community service.

For more information, go to [www.lexarts.org/invest/arts-campaign](http://www.lexarts.org/invest/arts-campaign).