



# Arts for All: How philanthropy can make the arts accessible and affordable

THE TAKEAWAY

The power of the arts to inspire and inform should be available to all, regardless of income. Philanthropy can help increase access, nourish the creative spirit, and support Vermont's creative economy at a time when it has not fully rebounded from the COVID-19 pandemic. Charitable individuals can help bring the arts to all by supporting:

- Public art and community performances
- Programs that give children and teens a chance to create and witness art
- Subscriptions and memberships that underwrite arts programming



Photo courtesy of Vermont Arts Council

**LAST MONTH, A DARK RAILROAD UNDERPASS IN A SMALL VERMONT TOWN SPROUTED A NEW PUBLIC ART PROJECT** that has passing motorists honking in approval. The installation called "Passage" brings mirrors and a 72-foot illuminated landscape collage to the cement walls of the early 1900s tunnel on Safford Street in South Royalton.

The artwork is an outcome of a multi-year community effort to beautify a spot that pedestrians and motorists must pass to go from one end of town to the other. The project serves as a reminder that art can and should be accessible to places that are trafficked by the public and available for all to see, no admission fee required. Evie Lovett, part of the trio of Vermont artists who created the piece, said collaborating with the

community about what it wanted was one of the best parts of the project.

"They wanted it to feel safer, they wanted it to feel light," she said. "They wanted it to feel colorful, they wanted it to feel joyful. They wanted a space that they looked forward to passing through, not one they dreaded."

The power of art to inspire, comfort, and stretch the imagination is something all people can benefit from—not just those who can find their way to a museum, pay for a concert ticket, or hire a piano teacher for their children. Charitable individuals can help democratize the arts and strengthen the state's arts economy at a time when many arts and cultural organizations are still recovering from pandemic-related losses.

Here is how charitable individuals can help:

### Support public art and community performances

Vermonters know a good backdrop when they see one. Perhaps that's why silos, bike paths, library walls, and, yes, railroad underpasses, are all sprouting examples of art that observers can enjoy and, in some cases, help create. Public art installations can require multiple funding sources to foot the bill. The good news? Numerous groups are working on this front and philanthropy can help by expanding the reach of nonprofits and other partners that are already actively engaged. For example, funding for the South Royalton project



JUNIPER CREATIVE ARTS AT STOWE MIDDLE SCHOOL  
Photo Courtesy of Vermont Arts Council

included the Vermont Better Places Program, an effort to create inclusive and vibrant public spaces supported by the Vermont Community Foundation and other partners including the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development, Vermont Department of Health, and Patronicity.

Patronicity is a social enterprise that offers a platform for individuals to donate to local projects, often towards a set goal that unlocks matching public dollars, which is the case for the Better Places Program. This helped raise more than \$8,000 for the "Passage" project, for example,

**"Public art has the capacity to lift our spirits, to bring humor, to bring intent."**

and just as important, engaged many residents and businesses in its development. The nonprofit Vermont Arts Council has also helped fund "Passage" through its Animating Infrastructure Grants Program, which has supported public artwork across the state including a sculpture and light installation on a covered bridge in Lyndon, art on the Alexander Twilight Trail in Brownington, and a project in Burlington's South End by artists who have been affected by mental illness or addiction.

There is a growing appetite statewide for art in the public realm. Charitable individuals who lean into this effort help both artists and community. Lovett, the artist who helped created "Passage," finds public work to be deeply rewarding. "I guess there would probably be some artists that wouldn't want to install art in a dark, dripping, unevenly surfaced underpass but my feeling is that's the perfect place for it," she said. "That's the place that needs it most and we need to see people making an effort to make all of our spaces more joyful."

Public art matters, she said. "Public art has the capacity to lift our spirits, to bring humor, to bring intent."



## Support programs that make art accessible to children and teens

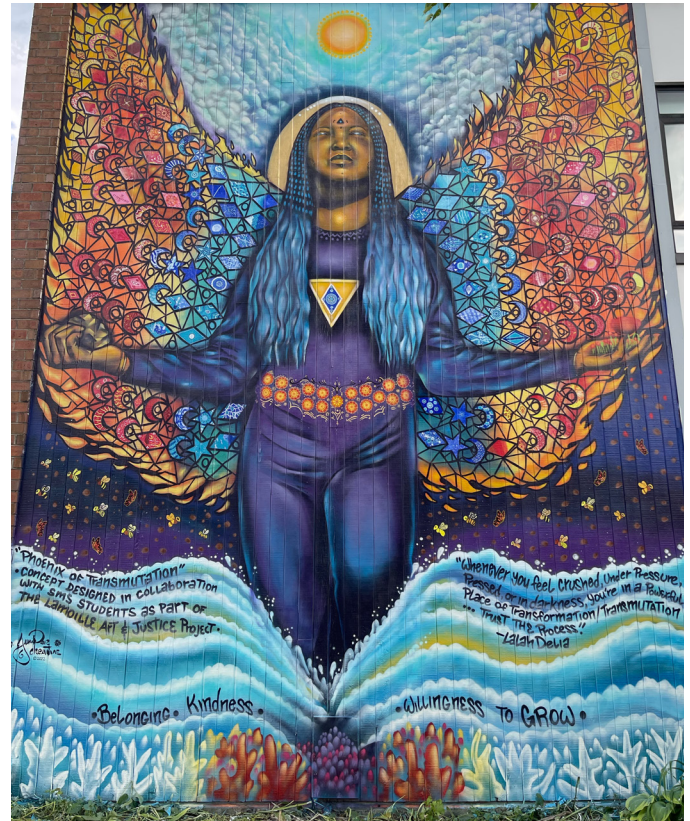
In a time of high inflation and lingering economic uncertainty, it's difficult for many families to cover the cost of groceries, housing, and gas, let alone art experiences for their children. Even in good times, there are many children and teens who would rarely if ever have access to the arts without the help of philanthropic support.

Now is the time to expand this giving. One approach to reach children statewide is to make donations to the Artists in Schools program at the Vermont Arts Council. It helps fund and coordinate multi-day arts residencies featuring a roster of artists who go into the classroom and lead school children in creative endeavors. The artistic work often connects to academic subjects—dance movement that relates to geometry and physics, spoken poetry that builds literacy and public speaking skills, or prop work that teaches carpentry and design.

Burlington artist Trish Denton has done residencies all over the state over the past 14 years. She loves seeing how it pulls kids out of their comfort zone and brings them together to collaborate. It also meets her mission to democratize art. "I grew up outside of Detroit," she said. "Very blue-collar background, and just absolutely did not have access to the arts, so that part is very important to me. That's ultimately the *raison d'être* of this work—economic justice."

**"This is not just making something, it's making memories."**

She's watched kids who prefer video games to live performing experience the thrill of being on stage, and seen introverted children join forces with extroverted ones to collaborate on school art. "To be seen as equal with everyone else in the school in these formats is very therapeutic," Denton said.



**A MURAL AT STOWE MIDDLE SCHOOL**

Photo Courtesy of Juniper Creative Arts and Alexa Herrera Condry

Vermont's rural nature means some schools and families are far from cultural and artistic outlets, so bringing art to them is even more important. "There's this education piece where you are going in and helping them understand the value of this and helping them understand their own value if they are a creative person," said Denton, who is also the founder and artistic director of Burlington-based In Tandem Arts.

After the show or exhibit is wrapped up, children still have plenty to hang onto, she added. "This is not just making something, it's making memories."

Many arts nonprofits that focus on youth rely on donations to bring costs down for participants. The Very Merry Theatre, with its studio in Burlington's Old North End Community Center, relies on donations to help youth participate in local and touring shows. Donations allow the Vermont Youth Orchestra Association (VYOA) to offer financial assistance for music lessons, instrument rentals, orchestra/choral participation, and an afterschool

program called Music Inspires, which partners with schools where students have significant financial need. The program, which offers free group instruction, began in Winooski and with the help of donations has also reached students in Newport, Bakersfield, and next year will be offered in Rutland. Charitable individuals can direct their giving to specific programs at VYOA, understanding that all donations are about removing financial barriers and helping more young people participate. “We really want to help those families that need it,” said Rosina Cannizzaro, executive director of VYOA, based in Colchester.

More than 200 young people statewide participate in VYOA programs, and in the process develop more than just an appreciation for music, she added. “They are building life skills that are transferable,” said Cannizzaro. “Tenacity, drive, commitment, and just learning what teamwork is.”

**“There’s a perception that the pandemic is behind us now, but for a lot of arts organizations it really isn’t.”**



**“PASSAGE”**  
Photo Courtesy of Elizabeth Billings

### **Purchase subscriptions and memberships that underwrite arts programming**

Vermont would not be the same without the array of arts organizations that bring life to all corners of the state. Generous giving helped many of these nonprofits survive the brutal toll of the pandemic when they were forced to go dark and shut down. Theaters have reopened and so have concert halls, but unfortunately ticket sales have not returned to pre-pandemic levels at many venues, said Karen Mittelman, outgoing executive director of the Vermont Arts Council. “I think there’s a perception that the pandemic is behind us now but for a lot of arts organizations, it really isn’t.”

There has been recovery, but some would-be audience members are still worried about sitting inside a theater with hundreds of other people. “The arts sector is still struggling. There are still audiences who are hesitant,” Mittelman said.

Revenues at the Oldcastle Theatre Company in Bennington are off this year, partly because patrons haven’t fully returned to pre-pandemic habits. There are fewer advance sales and more walk-ins, said Jana Lillie, company manager for Oldcastle, which is a program of the Bennington Performing Arts Center. “I think people are wary. Nobody knows if they are going to catch COVID-19, so no one wants to make a reservation anymore.” But the theater is adapting—with a new air filtering system to make patrons feel comfortable inside the downtown venue and a renewed emphasis on listening to what audiences want, Lillie said. In some cases, that’s more matinees for people who don’t



want to drive at night; in others, it's affordable programming such as the theater's \$5 dollar ticket nights or free play reading series. "You can come in and hear a new play that's never been performed be read," Lillie said. Even better: The playwright might be a neighbor and so might the readers because the theater emphasizes community participation.

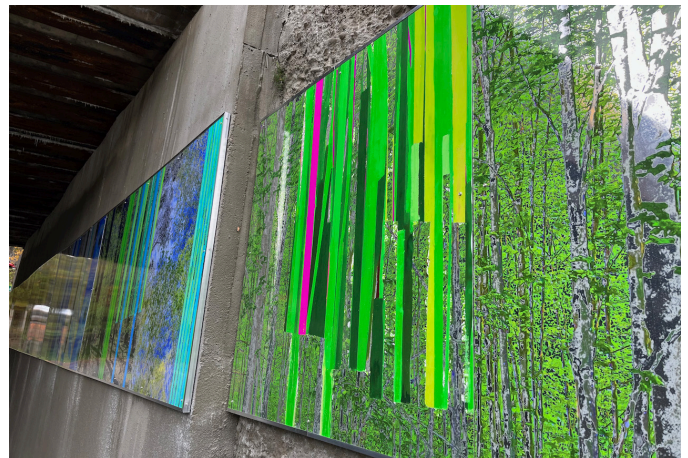
Donors are welcome to identify specific programs of support with their gifts, whether that's school vacation theater camps for children, local amateur theater productions, or Oldcastle's professional theater series. Purchasing gift certificates that support ticket costs for either an entire season or a single show is another way to help, Lillie said. "It puts money in our accounts ahead of time and we know we have a customer that's coming in the future."

Charitable individuals can also contribute to specific programming across Vermont, including that which has a broad community focus such as the Burlington City Arts New Year's Eve Highlight Celebration, or by giving to support new work at a nonprofit such as JAG Productions in White River Junction, which showcases African-American theater.

Giving that broadens access for people who may have physical, visual, auditory, and other challenges is another way to truly support the arts. For example, closed captioning, while much valued, adds to the cost of putting on events and donors can help defray these costs. Moreover, some arts organizations need informed advice on best strategies for access. The nonprofit Inclusive Arts Vermont offers valuable trainings on a range of topics and helps organizations address basic access problems. Ticket prices aren't the only barriers to entry at some venues. "Physical access is also a barrier if a museum doesn't have a ramp or an elevator," Mittelman pointed out.

Charitable individuals can also help by buying season subscriptions to their favorite performing arts and concert series, or memberships to museums and other cultural organizations. Burlington's Flynn Theatre, the Paramount Theatre in Rutland, and the Southern Vermont Arts

Center in Manchester are among nonprofits that offer annual memberships that help underwrite programming and keep admission costs lower for everyone. Just as buying a farm share CSA gives a farm financial security to get through the growing season, arts subscriptions and memberships help sustain organizations with upfront money. "You are reducing uncertainty for that organization because they've got money in the bank," Mittelman said.



**"PASSAGE"**

Photo Courtesy of Elizabeth Billings

### **Deeper Reading:**

[Create VT: Action Plan for Vermont's Creative Sector](#)

[Why Public Art Matters](#)

[Three Things You Can Do To Help Vermont's Arts Scene, 2021](#)

For additional recommendations about giving in Vermont, please reach out to our Philanthropy Team at [philanthropy@vermontcf.org](mailto:philanthropy@vermontcf.org) or 802-388-3355 opt. 5.

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The heart of the Community Foundation's work is closing the opportunity gap—the divide that leaves too many Vermonters struggling to get ahead, no matter how hard they work. Learn more about the Community Foundation's philanthropic advising services or opening a donor advised fund at [vermontcf.org](https://vermontcf.org).