

Wesley O. Brustad

Executive Director of South Carolina from July 1971 until January 1974

Interviewer: Susan Neumann

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1. Think back on those early days of SAA's, when you were new in your job and the whole "field" was in formation.

A. What was the "big idea" behind the formation of the NEA and SAA's?

The big idea. I think it really came down to that, because we were going to enjoy so much growing free time as a citizenry, the idea was to make the arts accessible for creative stimulation and use and that's both the product of the professional arts and the process of making art so I think it all came down to the fact that we all thought there was going to be so much more free time for people and so we came into being to facilitate their creativity.

B. What was your "big idea" when you took your job – what was the situation in your state, and where were you hoping to go?

Now, I'm going to reference most of this in South Carolina; is that OK? My big idea was that I needed to upgrade professionalism and standards especially in the performing arts in the state because we had no professional companies of any kind. That was one and secondly I had to provide delivery systems for the arts to the underserved areas like the rural and especially the African-American communities. They had nothing. So those were the two things. Along that line how we went about doing it is we developed first of all residencies where we brought professional companies from outside the state in to work with local and state organizations. Probably the most fun thing we did and the best model was I used the Atlanta Symphony to come in and work with the four or five local orchestras in South Carolina. They did week-long or half-week residencies which was pretty novel at that time and I don't know if it's been duplicated since where they'd do side-by-side rehearsals; they'd do a performance together at the end of the week; they did workshops. We even brought board members over to do board governance workshops so that was kind of the first step. The second step...this is all under upgrading professionalism...was to introduce, initiate the concept of professional state performing arts companies and we started with theatre. The first theatre company that we put up was called the South Carolina Open Road Ensemble, SCORE for short, the acronym. That migrated eventually after I left into State South. So that was the first thing and then we had on the books looking at dance next but I left and never got that one going. So that was the idea behind upgrading professionalism and standards. On the delivery systems, we took a totally different tack and there we concluded that the best way to do that was to build our own fleet of semi-trucks and we called it Arts Fleet. The first one that we

actually put up and put on the road was the visual arts truck. This truck would roll into a community and unfold and it would turn into a gallery where we had works from our state art collection on view. We had a pottery studio on board. We had a full darkroom so we had photographic, motion picture; everything to do with the arts. We had an artist traveling with the truck. We had painting classes: watercolor, oil, sculpture. It just unfolded like in front of a community center or at a school and became this huge art complex. Then we were going to follow that up with...we had seven vehicles all in line total and we initiated the idea of a theatre vehicle next. We took a small company around and began to test that and then again I left so I couldn't follow that through but that was the idea on these two initiatives, delivering services through these vehicles. In addition to that, we did all of the other stuff arts councils do which is work through local organizations and artists and studios and everything but in these underserved communities, they didn't exist so that's why we took the trucks in there.

C. When you left your job, do you think you had made progress in achieving your "big idea"? Or did you change your mind about what was needed?

I think upon leaving, very much yes, and over time I grew much more convinced of the ideas but they needed somebody to drive them to full realization or they weren't going to happen and I don't know what the situation in South Carolina is today so I can't comment; but I think that the ideas were probably right at that time.

D. What were you proudest of having achieved during your time in office?

I would say a positive relationship with the governor and the legislature because that elevated the arts to really an equal status in government. We were on par with public television or even the departments of corrections, transportation; all those state agencies. We were treated at that time as a legit state agency that had real value in serving people and meeting needs in the state. Eventually I was accorded the same status as agency director meetings with the governor as the big huge ones. So I thought, "Hey, maybe we have made some impact here." So I think that's probably what I would be most proud of.

E. What was most frustrating to you?

I would say the arts constituents' resistance to artistic and outreach growth. There was a little too much satisfied with the status quo and, as you start to push, they start to push back because you're stretching them artistically; you're asking for a higher level of standards and you're asking for a further reach. In some cases it was absolutely wonderful to see people respond to that. I remember one arts council. I was so concerned about including African-Americans because it was a "white only" deal and they made a breakthrough; they really did and that was exciting because they took off but in other cases you felt resistance to that. So that was probably frustrating.

F. What was most surprising to you?

Actually the most surprising was the government's acceptance of the importance of the arts in a southern state. That really surprised me but they really did buy in.

G. What was your agency's relationship with the NEA like? With other SAA's? With ACA? With local arts agencies?

NEA – Very good. It was very positive. It was collaborative. I was probably in Washington, D.C. monthly working with the NEA program directors. I mean it was a great time because I could pop in unannounced, wander around...you know, you didn't have to go through 30 guards...and sit down and have conversations with all the people including Nancy Hanks. That was a great time because it was so collaborative so it was very positive.

SAA's - I'd say the same thing; very collaborative. We were all in it together; even ACA. I don't think that exists anymore; the Associated Councils of the Arts. And even the local arts councils which were just starting to happen. Very, very collaborative because we had this kind of "we're all in it together" collegial kind of feeling and we were all missionaries.

ACA and LAA's – (see above)

H. (this can be a probe question from g above) What was the single biggest issue or challenge the SAA field had vis a vis the federal government, the regionals, other states, the local arts agencies?

I'll tell you in South Carolina we had no issue. We were very collaborative and we had no big issue. But thinking back to Ohio when I was there for a year, it was different and I would guess in states with large professional arts organizations, there was an issue and the issue was always that the states wanted the feds to work through them and let the states make the decisions for funding. I know that edge existed in Ohio and elsewhere but in South Carolina I didn't have it because we didn't have those big professional organizations. So I would say that was probably the issue overall in all the states; probably still is.

I. Can you think of an anecdote that tells us something about the arts in the political climate of your state at that time? Can you tell us who – if anyone – was a special political ally to you in those days (the governor? A legislator?)

Yes, my ally was the governor. The man was just incredible. He and I just hit it off and our wives so we were at the mansion a lot; just a neat guy. I think he died not too long ago. John West was his name. That really was the key because through him I had such access to the legislature and all of state government. The chairmen of the Ways and Means Committees in both houses were colleagues, were friends. I was very young but they took me in so I had full access to them and with their staffs so when I was going through appropriation hearings, it wasn't like I was fighting to be heard. I would say a couple of anecdotes that just kind of showed you how it worked. One is the state agency directors would have retreats that the governor would call and I was, of course, involved in that and I think just because of his interest in me it kind of elevated me way beyond the meager status of my agency with other directors so they accepted me as one of them. I'll never forget those retreats because they were really fun. We dealt with non-art issues but I was part of the team. Then one other little thing I'll never forget is at a Ways and Means Committee hearing, I was trying to make the point of our Poetry in Schools Program so I asked the chairman if I could; bring in a student to demonstrate how this is changing their lives and he said, "Sure, go on. Do it." So I brought in this cute little girl...she must have been about eight years old...had this great poem and she starts reading it and nobody can see her because she was so small so he picked her up and put

her on the table and she stood up there and I mean it was like, you know, you dream of that kind of television. That's the kind of relationships we had.

J. How did you use your time?

1. Can you describe a prototypical day?

I'll tell you I either was traveling all day long. Usually would start leaving about 7 in the morning to get to somewhere in the state and then I would be lucky to be back by midnight because I would be meeting all day and then seeing somebody's show at night or an opening in a gallery. So I'd either take a day for travel like that or, if I stayed in town, I would start in the office, of course, meeting with people or planning and doing whatever and then using that when the legislature was in session to meet with legislators in their offices. The evening was probably almost always devoted to paperwork if I wasn't on the road. That's when I had a chance to kind of get caught up on that. It was all time consuming. We just ran very hard.

2. In a typical year at the beginning, can you give a general idea of how your time divided (in percents, roughly):

10%___ Grant administration

25%___ advocacy/lobbying with public officials

25%___ field /constituency communication

10%___ agency strategic planning

15%___ program development

5%___ fundraising - that wasn't our focus at that point

10%___ partnership building (with other government agencies, with other types of nonprofits, with private sector, with arts/cultural agencies at other levels of government)

That's my best shot at it.

3. Did your time use change in any noticeable way from the beginning to the end of your time at the SAA?

Yes, when I started it was heavy on the planning and program development and grants administration and then it started segueing into where it got much more involved in the advocacy and lobbying and the field communication. *So the percentages you gave me, were those more towards the beginning or end of your career?* I would say overall, over the whole period, they're probably right. Towards the end I was probably heavier into the advocacy and the field.

K. What else - information, stories - can you tell us that you think people in the future ought to know about your agency, or the SAA world in general?

At that time it was I think we had a wonderful period of hope there, you know. We were so zealous. We had a commitment to public funding and public involvement in the arts that has probably waned since then. We were incredible idealists and, as I said before, missionaries. I think that's the best word. We were bringing the gospel of art to people who just didn't have access. And we really believed in our mission and that made everyone around us really believe in the value of what we did. It wasn't a show; it was real for us. I find it's quite a bit different now. I think now it's in the hands of

bureaucrats who talk and behave like every other bureaucrat. I mean I just think it's gotten governmental and in those early days it wasn't.

II. Have you stayed in touch with the state arts agency field since you left your position as Executive Director?

No, not really. I certainly watch it because being in this business you getting grants from these arts councils so in that respect I've certainly had to stay in touch in terms of the grants process but in terms of real collegial relationships with directors and councils, no.

A. If so,

1. From your experience, how has the role and the activities of SAAs changed since you began your career?

I think that they are much more grants oriented and focused on grants coordination. There doesn't really seem to be as far as I can see a desire to collaborate with those of us who are running these organizations to solve delivery or qualitative or funding problems. I think instead what I see are blue ribbon committees or state arts council boards kind of go hand and glove with the staff which is a bureaucracy and they make pronouncements and they offer initiatives. I find it all very unsettling. I just don't think they're in tune with those of us who are trying to make this thing run and make art.

2. From your experience, what skills/competencies do you think are most important to incoming SAA staff? To SAA leadership?

Stay in touch with the citizenry; stay in touch with arts organizations; don't be afraid to take a stand for quality something we don't see that much anymore. Your job is not to perpetuate mediocrity. And also in this regard I think that it's important that they know the difference between product and process and that's often confused.

3. Would you pursue a career in SAAs/public arts management today if you were starting out?

No. I guess because I know, from what I see today. It's too pedantic, too bureaucratic.

4. Has the field lived up to its promise? Why or why not?

No, I think it's wimped out. I don't think it took a serious stand for the arts. Back in the day when we were fighting and slugging it out, we didn't mince words. We were really direct and I think people respected us for it. The best thing I can recall is Joseph Papp, Shakespeare Festival. Back in those days I know he had a big thing coming up with the New York City Council and they turned him down. I don't remember what it was, if it was Shakespeare in Central Park or whatever it was, but it was a major deal for public funding for his operation which he needed and when they told him in the hearing, "no," instead of him being very polite and saying "thank you for your time," as people would do today, he just looked at the Council and said, "Fuck you," and turned around and walked out. That's what I miss. It's that passion that we seem to lack.

B. If you have NOT stayed in touch with the field, why not?

I don't find the state arts council people to be the leaders in the arts. I think they're coming behind.

III. Think about the time when you were starting your work with SAAs. What have you changed your mind about, if anything, from then to now?

I guess if I had to do it all over again, I would have worked more with the arts constituents, you know, those doing it, to secure buy in for a consensual plan to solve the issues that we were all facing. I think I went out at some times a little bit too much on my own so I would change my mind in that regard just in how to do it.

IV. Do you have a single piece of advice for a young person entering the field of public sector arts administration today?

I think the most important thing is that they have to know at least one art form intimately, intellectually, viscerally; they need to be an arts practitioner number one. They can't be an accountant that likes the arts. They have to have that passion about it and then have stand to by the arts no matter the adversity they encounter. Stick with it. Clearly understand their role of as a steward of public funds and of public authority for that matter. They answer to the citizens of the state, no one else. And if they can get those three concepts, those three things in place, they can have an enormous impact but I am just so tired of accountants and lawyers running...I mean that's what they're doing in the movie business and the record business and now it's the same thing happening in the arts business.

V. Information about you:

SEE RESUME

A. Education

- 1. Educational level (hs, ba, some grad, ma, Phd)*
- 2. Major/field*

B. What skills/competencies did you have/did you bring to your leadership position at an SAA? How had you acquired these skills? (experience, professional development training, formal degree education)

I learned most of my stuff by the seat of my pants. I had been in the Air Force prior to going there. I was an officer in the Air Force and the management training that I received in the Air Force probably was significant for me. Also I was a director in the theatre. I spent years directing even before and after that job but when you direct in the theatre you quickly learn how to mobilize quite a force of people. That's the only thing I can think of that those two things probably were the only thing that really helped me because all of my university work was strictly in the art discipline of theatre. I didn't really learn any management skills there. I just learned it by doing.

C. Work Experience

1. Specific arts management experience vs non-arts management experience

2. Did you work for a SAA either before or after your time as Executive Director?

Ohio Arts Council as Associate Director; I was involved with them on the lay side, not the professional staff. I founded the Minneapolis Arts Commission and I worked a lot with Minnesota Arts Council. No, I take that back. I did work when I took over the

Tennessee Performing Arts Center, I was actually a staff member of the Tennessee Arts Commission because it was under their aegis when it first started so for a year I was on staff of the Tennessee Arts Commission and then we moved into nonprofit private organization. I believe that was '75 or '76. I went there in '75 and for the first year we worked out of there and then we went to the Tennessee Arts Foundation after that.

3. Did you work for a public sector agency – not an SAA – either before or after your time as Executive Director?

Worked for the Lane County Fair Board when I got burned up with the arts and decided to leave the field in Eugene, Oregon; ran 4 businesses for them: I ran the convention center there in town; I ran a large equestrian show pavilion; an ice skating venue; and the mid-state fair; it was so un-governmental; we were kind of for-profit businesses but they owned us

4. It may be necessary for us to just ask them to make a list of their work experience in chronological order – no need for years – including the SAA, and then for us to categorize – jotting one of these categories after they have named the job:

- private sector management
- government agency management
- gallery/performance group
- fundraising/grant administration
- performer/critic/writer
- lobbyist/advocate
- nonprofit sector experience
- elected office holder
- arts education/teacher
- academic
- service organization experience: national or other

Work Chronology
SEE RESUME

D. Do you pursue any art form? Which?

I write a lot; I hadn't written for years; I write screen plays, plays, novels, non-fiction; I do have a show in production or in development at this point so still involved in the theatre; emphasis would be theatre and music; play for the fun of it now

E. Demographic information:

1. Gender - Male
2. Age range now - over 60
3. geographic region he or she lives now - New Brunswick (Milltown)
4. political/partisan identification - I think the best way to describe me is a fiscal conservative because I don't seem to fit into any of the categories that are there

The thing that resonates with me is the lack of passion today and how I'd love to see that come back into it especially in government because I think if it was, the funding would change a lot. All of us guys in early movement when all this started were arts practitioners; we were not managers; we were not administrators; we learned how to manage as we went and we made mistakes but I still think it's better than what I see today. I sound like an old guy longing for the good old days.