

Ed Groenhout

Executive Director of *Montana Arts Council 1969-71*

Interviewer: *Maryo Ewell*

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I. 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?

I think, I have no direct information myself but just a sense about things...you first need to know that I was a grad student at the U of MT, the commissioner of fine arts on the campus; they had a commissioner system for the student government, and I worked closely with Charles Bolen, the Dean of the College of Fine Arts at the U of MT. Charlie was very much involved in the development of the NEA, he was one of the national leaders attempting to do something at the federal level, he was just a fantastic person. It was a long time ago. (He left shortly after I became the Ex Dir, he had already been recruited by Illinois). Anyway Charlie had a lot of national contacts and in our state; he was chair of the fledgling MAC. He had a friend at the U of MT who was a retired professor of music; his name was Richmond or Richland, who was the first volunteer Executive Director of the MAC. What happened then is Charlie took me with him to a meeting in Canada in the spring of 1969- he had already tapped me to become the first paid director of the MAC. He took me to Canada, I want to say to Quebec – we did a few trips, and I'm not absolutely positive which one was which any more – He had run my name across what was then the fledgling Montana Arts Council board. I was acceptable to them. So when I graduated from the U of MT, I became the first director on the first of July, 1969.

[Q: Why did you go to Canada?] *He wanted me to see what was going on with the NEA and the interplay between the United States and other countries*

relative to the arts at the time – we were using a lot of examples from Europe. Anyway, Charlie was the Chairman of the MAC. The Vice-Chairman was Dean of the College of Professional Schools at Montana State University, his name was Harold C. Rose - C stood for Cle, everybody called him Cle. Because of the 2 year activity I had, when C was first of all the chairman during 1969, and when Charlie took off to go to IL, the Cle Rose, the Vice-Chair, the Dean of the College of Professional Schools at Montana State in Boseman became the chair. Midway during our experience together when he was the chair, he asked me whether I would consider becoming the assistant dean of a very large college at Montana State University and I consented. So that was my 2 year period of being executive director, basically because he asked me to come – I wanted to be involved in academics, that was basically what my undergraduate and graduate career were about; I wanted to become a university professor someone. So anyway, that's why I spent 2 years, and then that last six months we looked for someone and David Nelson was that person.

We had a very good board of directors, and I can talk more about that later, because the board of directors was carefully selected from areas all across the state. But the principles that were involved such as Blanch Judge, who was the mother of the Gov Thomas Judge, who was a professional dancer and a dance teacher, at that time she was clearly in her 60's, maybe 65 or so, she had the Gov's ear – she really had the Governor's ear! So anything political, Gov Judge was a democrat, so anything political, Blanche took care of, absolutely. She was really something. I didn't have to do lobbying of anybody – Blanche and others, there were some Republicans. I never knew whether Charlie was a democrat or a republican because he played his hand so well; but Cle Rose was clearly a Republican ... nonetheless we were able to dance between the two sides of the issue, we had plenty of representation of both parties on the MAC, but I would have to say, they were carefully selected to represent the ARTS of their area, not the politics of their area. That was such a big deal to us; we wanted to see the arts grow. MT has a very small pop in a huge state, the 4th largest state in the US (people don't know that!), but it only had 750,000 or so, I don't think it has more than 800,000 now. So everything was scattered, very well spread out; so there was a lot of traveling; when you did something in Helena, some people had to travel 300 miles – a long ways!!

It was a wondrous time for the development of the arts in the state, because we did have so many people that really cared and wanted to see things develop.

[Q: where did the idea of MAC getting started come from:] Charlie, Blanche, and certain other dignitaries, people high up in the arts in the state, high up in

the sense that they had been supporting the arts for many, many years both with their money and with their time, went to the Governor. That's really where it came from. If it hadn't been for Charlie, and I think for Blanche, Montana would have kind of been a laggard, the way Arizona was. [Q: did they go straight to the Governor? Or to a legislator?] To the governor. Blanche didn't need to go anyplace else! She was also a schmoozer; she knew every body for a long period of time. She was THE entertainer in the city of Helena. She was a great dance teacher; I mean she just made sure that dance had a seat at the table every time someone opened their mouth.

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?

The big idea was really Charlie's idea, and C's. They wanted the legislature, for the state to embrace the arts, to provide some funding, and of course that did happen over time. It happened reasonably well, given the size of the state and the kind of a budget that they had. If it hadn't been for the well-connected politicians it wouldn't have happened. I would say that the average legislator then is probably not much different than the average legislator in Montana today, and that the arts would be well down the list of things that were going to be supported. [Q: So the idea was a funding idea then?] Funding, and that MT as a state had an equal seat relative to the National Endowment for the arts, they were going to have good representation, and that they were going to be heard. And that DID happen.

I mean, I got really lucky. I can tell you some interesting anecdotes that had to do with Senator Mansfield, Nancy Hanks...

[skip to question J]

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 that my central role was to make sure that I met the needs of the board, but I had to lead them as well. We needed to have some policies about how we were going to operate, and they had to appeal to both side, and I'm the guy who had to write them. I did write all of the early policies, and I got all that stuff passed by the Council. That was my major contribution. I put them on a pretty good financial footing, that is to say, we didn't have any big problems. But how we were going to distribute grants, and how we were going to treat the major institutions for example - the symphonies in Billings, Missoula, Great Falls,

Bozeman, and Helena – these five for the most part were the cities that had community orchestras, they all had dance groups, they had good representation from the visual arts... I had to figure out ways so that everybody could be treated fairly, how we might set up the distribution of funds. And then of course I had to go out to the little communities. We had some stalwart people. They were just believers, you know.

It was just wonderful, really. I had a great two years, a great run. It was fabulous.

We had the Yellowstone Gallery, that David came from, Charles Marion Russell in Great Falls, the two major galleries kinds of places, and there were also the universities in the two cities of Bozeman and Missoula that had quite a bit of gallery function, as did Helena. And Butte. If you could take care of the politics in Butte, you could take care of the politics anywhere.

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

[See above]

E. What was most frustrating to you?

You know, we really didn't have any. We had a kind of a tug of war going on – some people wanted to have offices in Helena – David finally succumbed to that sort of pressure, and had to move it to so a neutral place between the 2 universities, but there wasn't anything I could do about that, it was too early, and we were starting to talk about you'd have to spend money to do that, and we were trying to make sure that most of the money that we could lay our hands on was going to go back to communities somehow, or community organizations. There was always reluctance for individual art awards in the state; this went on for a long time. I think that they felt that culturally institutions could be supported, but individual grants were going to be a tough thing. But we did handle it pretty well. After I got out of office, David had a lot of opportunities to address s were tough. It finally happened, and rightly so, but there was always a little hesitancy toward that.

F. What was most surprising to you?

I was...my surprise had to do with “My god I got a job, and I’m helping the arts!”

I was one of those people in college, I was always pushed forward to talk to the dean, I had an ability to sell things... so my colleagues always pushed me up front and center. When Charlie saw that happen, and he was the Dean, and I had to deal with the Dean quite a bit, that I could run meetings, that I could keep things in order, (I was a little bit older student, by the time I graduated I was 32, I started at 28, did my undergraduate in 3 years, and my graduate degree in two and a half), I always have had the ability to organize things, and now my daughter’s even better than I am. I always got nominated! “Go represent us there, Ed,” so I did. I even got named to represent the states as the federal-state partnership representative at the national council meetings, sat next to Clint, to Rosalyn Russell who was by that time very sick, puffy, James Earl Jones, Robert Morrow (?), Gregory Peck, all those folks were just part of my brief tenure there...it was kind of nice, really interesting.

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

I simply was again tapped on to address things relative to it [national infrastructure]. I cannot tell you why. I didn’t have any political connections outside of Senator Mansfield, if I needed to play the card, and I never really had to play the card, it was played for me because he was a very quiet, dignified, powerful man. When he said something, people listened. That’s basically what it was about. And quite often his only words were “no” and “yes” - he was a man of few words. In any event, I cannot tell you why I got picked to represent [the states] – Clark Mitze could tell you, but I there’s no way I know. It was just a great experience to represent the states, the federal state partnership. [Q: How did that relate to NASAA?]. It grew into that. Again, Clark could tell you, I don’t know.

[Q: What about ACA? Was it significant in the development of the MAC?] *I don’t think so, no. [Because it was too new, too East coast-focused?] It was too East coasty.*

We did have a nice federation of Rocky Mountain States, though. [Q: That led to WESTAF?] Yes. We got together in various cities, Salt Lake, Denver. We were quite often hosted by – do you remember Robert Sheets? He was very not only outgoing but he always had his eyes on developing something, that would make that Rocky Mountain strip to be quite a bit more prominent. I like him. People really revolved around him. [I've heard that the Rocky Mountain Federation was invaluable in helping people figure out what state arts councils were all about. Was that your experience too?] Absolutely, absolutely. There were states that were really struggling. Idaho was really struggling. And Arizona had, in my opinion, kind of a lock on it by the Ruston (?) family. A man and wife who were very conservative, but who pretended to be liberal. So it was kind of a stranglehold for a while, they couldn't get a whole lot of things done until the stranglehold was loosened a bit. [Did the Rocky Mountain Federation help loosen that stranglehold?] Yes, it did. We did our best to try to, what was her name, Louise Tester – we tried to help her as much as possible in coping with various things that she would run into. Of course we did that quietly, whatever we could do to help, and we would try to do so. She didn't have too much leeway.

- 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?

[See above.]

- 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?)

There was a national council meeting, in Washington; I want to say that it was in 1970, it might have been in February of 71. In any event, we had made a proposal to the National Endowment for the Arts for a grant to build the Billings Studio Theater in Billings, Montana. It was not a heck of a lot of money by today's standards, but it was a big deal for us then. The Billings Studio Theater was basically one of the finer little theater troupes in the Western part of the United States. Anyway, Charleton Heston of the National Council said, "I don't want to see a dime spent in a little Podunk city in Montana."

And Clark Mitze who worked for Nancy Hanks at the time, Clark called me up and he said, "Charleton Heston is giving me a bad time over this." And I said, why don't you tell Nancy that Senator Mansfield is gonna be very interested in Charleton Heston calling Billings a Podunk town." I got a call later the same day and he said, "It was passed by the Council." [Q: So Mansfield was crucial to you then?] Oh, yes. Mansfield was powerful. Mansfield had an assistant by the name of Ray Docksteder. Ray Docksteder was one of Mansfield's key people, he was from Montana, and he controlled an awful lot of who could see the Senator and when, he really was his right hand man. And Ray Docksteder was so powerful in terms of being able to talk to other senators' staff. So Mansfield was critical to the National Endowment, in an awful lot of quiet ways. He really made sure the National Endowment was gonna to be taken care of.

[Q: Within the state, I suppose the champion was Blanche and her son.] Her son, the Governor! We didn't do too badly in the following administration, either. The administrations of the Governor's office. We were pretty well taken care of by the democratic party of the time. Not to say that there weren't powerful republicans that had to be convinced as well, but the democrats were in power and they did wield a pretty big stick relative to a number of things, and one of the things was, we just quietly made our way through things. In part it might have been because Mansfield and the other senator, whose name I can't remember just now (I can see him but I can't name him!), he was also a democrat, also in office for a very long time; they were very influential in Washington in a lot of ways that didn't have to do with the arts. But if you messed with the arts, then you were messing with those two senators, so we were just in a very fortunate position relative to representation to Washington, which filtered all the way back to our state.

[That's support is different from what I've heard from the other states.] Yeah, I'm living in one!

J. How did you use your time:

1. Can you describe a prototypical day?

[Was there such a thing?] For me there was. I was either in that office working on writing things that I would have to get approval for later, like guidelines fir

grants, and operating policies, the things that were going to set it up within the confines of state government – I pretty much got that done – it was done by the time that David came in to office. They had to find ways to loosen up some of the rules later on, no question about it, but that is what I spent an awful lot of time doing. I spent a lot of time talking to Washington, talking to, the Federation folks, and then going to out to the smaller communities, not only the small communities, the larger ones too, but the small communities like Anaconda, Miles City on the eastern side, where people were interested in trying to set up local representation and didn't know how to do that, so we helped them do that. We did that all over the state.

[Who is “we?”] *Me and a secretary. Me and a secretary. That was all we had. Name was JoAnne Musselman. [Was that Sister JoAnn?] No, that was JoAnn Daily, from Anaconda. She was a jewel. [Were you making up supporting local groups as you went along] Yup! [or did you have some background?] You got some information of what other states were doing, but still had to help them formulate their concept of what they were doing, and why they were doing it, and then you had to help them do it. Basically, it's what I had to do.*

I would say, it was about ¾ office, ¼ not-office time. Because, again, these were the formulating stages of the development of the arts council. You didn't know what you wanted to do until you had to read it, to figure it out if this is right or wrong.

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

grant administration 15%
advocacy/lobbying with public
field/constituency communication
agency strategic planning 15%
program development 15%
fundraising not much, the politicos in the arts council did it
partnership building (with other government agencies, 25%
with other types of nonprofits, with private sector, with
arts/cultural agencies at other levels of government).

(So many little towns, little places, with no real sense about how they could anything.)

ALSO dealing with members of the Arts Council itself. 30% - A lot of

time spent with members, organizing our meeting, doing an agenda that was followable, talking on the phone, they were so important because of the way in which they represented, and knew about their community.

It was really a good time.

[We chatted about some of the other “old timers...he enjoyed remembering.]

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

I don't think so. It was pretty much standard for me. I have no sense that it changed much.

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?

. We got very good support from the 2 major newspapers in the state, the GF Trib and the Billings Gazette and I would have to say the same thing about the paper in Helena, which was the seat of state government. We got good support. There was a person by the name of Lee, a columnist for the Helena paper.

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

A. If so:

1. From your experience, how has the role and the activities of SAAs changed since you began your career?
2. From your experience, what skills/competencies do you think are most important to incoming SAA staff? To SAA leadership?
3. Would you pursue a career in SAAs/public arts management today if you were starting out?
4. Has the field lived up to its promise? Why or why not?

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

When I first left, I was 17 years in the Dean's office at Montana State University, the Dean for 8 years. So I knew a lot about what was going on with the arts council simply because I knew people. But I had no direct influence, I attempted to stay out of David's business and I pretty well did that. And I knew JoAnne Musselman quite well of course and so from time to time I would talk with her. But as time went on, touch was lost. I've been here for 17 years, so it's been 34 years since I left the arts council.

[Have you gotten involved with the arts council in Arizona?] *When I first got to Arizona I served on a lot of panels, I helped adjudicate who the awards would go to, when I first came, maybe for the first 7-8 years. Then I did other things. I had a lot of other things to do!*

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

From what I experienced, you have to have political sensitivities that were greater than mine. The political sensitivities of my era were really in the hands of the Council itself, it was their job, and they did it well in those early years.

[Now it's shifted to the director?] *Yes, I do. I think it has shifted more. Although some people in AZ, Cohen, he is a democrat. To see him in action, he was a good lawyer, and those lawyer skills of his kept him in touch with an awful lot of the things going on in the state, and I think he was very helpful to the Executive Director over the years. A council member. He has been around so long ... he's probably still around (he has too much audacity to die). He was very central. I think every council has got some of those people, but they don't necessarily handle their power well. I was fortunate enough to have my brief tenure with people who handled their power quite nicely.*

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

The first thing is that you have to NOT be parochial, you can't be parochial relative to your discipline, because most of us were raised to be academics, well several of us anyway, training basically came from being in arts programs in the university – you cannot be parochial relative to your discipline, or relative to the state in general, if you are going to represent a lot of people. You have

to learn how to lead without being directorial, at least in Montana you do – you can't be directive, you have to learn how to pull and push without being pully or pushy you know. I think honesty is still the greatest virtue.

V. Information about you:

A. Education

1. Educational Level (has, ba, some grad, ma, PhD)
MFA
2. Major/field *Painting*

- 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) *Painting, organizational skills (see above)*

C. Work Experience

1. Specific arts management experience vs. non-arts management experience *See chronology below.*
2. Did you work for a SAA either before or after your time as Executive Director? *No*
3. Did you work for a public sector agency – not an SAA – either before or after your time as Executive Director?
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:

BA, MA
Worked for MAC right out of graduate school
Assistant Dean at Montana State
Dean at Montana State
Northern Arizona University, Vice-President for several jobs, but
mostly of policy
Retired, and is teaching painting at NAU

D. Do you pursue any art form? Which?

E. Demographic information:

1. Gender *M*
2. Age range *68*
3. geographic region he or she lives now *Flagstaff, AZ*
4. political/partisan identification *Dem*

Final thoughts: Mansfield and [the other senator – I can see his bushy hair, were the ones who pushed for the small states. To have that kind of power in congress was just remarkable.