

John B. Hightower

Executive Director of New York from 1963 to 1970

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?

Let's anchor it with the budget. It was \$450,000 when I became executive director and John MacFadyen had very brilliantly established a series of loan exhibitions with New York city museums, the Whitney probably being the most agreeable to send works throughout the state. He had done the same for a touring section of the Metropolitan Opera, I think, the New York City Ballet and maybe the Buffalo Symphony. The strategy of the program was predicated on getting the arts out of the major metropolitan centers and into the entire state. The first couple of years under MacFadyen the emphasis was on working with individual organizations in Buffalo and New York City especially to pay them to take units of their organizations into places throughout the state and the state arts council worked with local representatives who the members of the Council helped identify because the geographical spread of the members of the council was pretty good. That worked out quite well, I think, primarily in terms of identifying the state arts council as a source of funding for a specific program. The state arts council paid, in most instances, for all of the costs of those tours on not a very big budget. Then it shifted just prior to my getting there. John MacFadyen hired an absolutely marvelous fellow. I think he may be still alive with the improbable name of Omar Khayyam Lerman. His brother was by the way who was a physicist was named Leonardo DiVinci. I asked him how that happened and he said, "The short answer is my mother was a nut." Omar had put together a very inventive package which was predicated on, in some cases, starting arts councils and others working with organizations that had a performing arts component or a visual arts component. I've forgotten....is it the name of the marvelous institution in Binghamton and then the Everson and Syracuse....anyway getting those organizations essentially to work as community arts councils who would match funding provided by the state arts council. That exploded the program dramatically and got a lot of different organizations involved and a lot more performing arts organizations particularly in New York City interested and available and getting income for touring. The names of those organizations are now legendary. *So this was all before the NEA was created?* This is all before the NEA was created, yes. So the New York State Arts Council had an automatic

not only entree into the NEA but the NEA was very interested in looking at the New York State Arts Council as a model because we'd had two or three years of experience and in many ways some of the NEA programs were shaped after the state arts council programs. This goes back to something that Nelson Rockefeller was absolutely dedicated and that was making the arts available to as many people as possible. That was the big idea. It sounds simple but it was a huge leap for government and getting way beyond the conservative restrictions of what government services should be provided. It's a battle that continues today but he was very insistent about it and had been since his days when he was in his 30's as Latin American Inter-America Affairs Coordinator in the Roosevelt administration. He managed to get a bill before Congress for support of the arts and it was laughed out of Congress as the Violin Bill. So he brought it with him when he became governor of New York. This was something he wanted to initiate, always had and essentially, when he was elected with a pretty convincing mandate, the legislators sort of rolled their eyes and let him get on with it and let him have it as a courtesy. Of course, once it began touching fairly significant numbers of communities throughout the state and fairly significant numbers of people who visited museums and attended performances, it began to establish its own political constituent. I would guess that probably the biggest contribution I made was to identify that constituency in those terms. In 1969, when the governor was still governor and decided to increase the state arts council budget from what had become about \$2 million to \$26-28 million, I orchestrated that constituency under the instruction of the governor who said, "I'll put this appropriation request in." It had grown to \$2 million and this was just a gigantic leap. The governor said, "I'll put this request in my budget but you have to make sure it's approved by the legislature" which I knew exactly what that mean. Every single performance in the state that had any kind of support from the state arts council had to have a plea to the constituents of the organization, not just the board members but also the people in the seats to write letters to their local legislators, the senators and delegates and it worked. One of the things I always remember was quite thrilling. It was the first year that abortion became a political issue. There was a marvelous guy named Blumenthal who was a very courageous legislator who was leading the charge for essentially making abortions legal, not the legislature could do that at that time. Evidently the number of letters pro and con for support of the arts significantly outnumbered letters pro and con on his abortion issue.

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 insistently making events of the arts available for audiences throughout the state no matter how small the community might be and it was somewhat compounded in the mid 60's when every major city of the state blew up with race riots. So we used essentially the same principle thinking that...well, it's best said by a marvelous woman who worked for us at the state arts council Vanette Carol who was an actress and went on to produce a couple of Broadway plays, "Your Arms Too Short to Box with God," and "Don't Bother Me; I Can't Cope." When we put this program together with another magic man who I can barely talk about; every time I think about him, I just choke up. Ken Dewey was his name. He was a performance artist and came from a quite well-to-do family. He was just a magical fellow and he died in a plane crash piloting his own plane.

He and Vanette were the sparkplugs for this and her great phrase was: "This is not a program of poverty. This is a program of riches and we want people to play on the gentler strings of the human experience." Not a bad group to be working with. That was kind of interesting, too, how we went about getting acceptance in the Black sections of the cities when they were so volatile and there was a lot of music and there's some marvelous pictures from those days with people leaning out of tenement houses. We set up an entirely separate telephone for her because the constituents for her program which was called by the way "The Ghetto Arts Program" didn't trust the main switchboard. There was a line straight to Vanette. The reason we called it "The Ghetto Arts Program" was a Jules Pfeiffer cartoon which was essentially a guy sitting in a chair and he's saying, "Years ago I used to be poor. Then I became needy. Then I became disadvantaged. Now I'm underprivileged. I still don't have a nickel to my name but, boy, do I have a great vocabulary." So we decided, okay, let's not screw around; let's call it The Ghetto Arts Program. Would never fly today.

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?

No, I thought, when I left it, it was just an incredibly vibrant organization and an incredibly vibrant concept for the arts. In its grandest terms it was essentially what Nelson Rockefeller was wanting to do; make the arts available to all of the people of the state of New York or certainly as many as possible.

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

I think the Ghetto Arts Program was really marvelously effective both in human terms as well as political terms. We were very, very conscious, the members of the council and the staff, of the political implications of the state arts council; that it could be tremendously positive but we also knew that government and the arts did not always work particularly well because of the arts' insistency on reinventing themselves and frequently going through shock waves or shocking waves to unsettle the status quo. There was very careful balancing act that we were constantly aware of. I think I still to this day am so outraged at Frohnmeyer's inability to understand that and put the whole NEA into such a lousy kettle of soup that I can't see straight. I will tell you I was probably much more...I mean the people who know me certainly would never call me a conservative. However, when it came to situations at the arts council, I was remarkably conservative. One of the plays that we wanted to send around the state or make available to arts councils throughout the state when we were doing all this stuff was "Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolfe?" and I thought, "Oh, boy, that is such a big thing. I mean the language, I'll have all sorts of problems," so as I recall we didn't tour the theatre piece and about two months later "Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolfe?" opened in all of the movies around the state of New York. Oh, boy, did I get that wrong but I think the caution was probably better and I must say that I felt the same way when we ultimately started a program called the CAPS program, Creative Artists for Public Service. Essentially what we did was to make...this was sort of toward the end of my period of time there and this was also a program engineered by this fellow Ken Dewey. We figured out a way to provide support for individual artists and we did it on the basis of a contract in which they would perform a service for the public. It wasn't a grant to

support a lifestyle in other words or produce a work of art. That could be the outcome of it but the idea was to shape it in a way that we were providing direct support for artists and poets and people that would provide the state with works that the state would not necessarily own but it was essentially a way of stimulate artistic activity through grant money from the state. I was particularly proud of that. I will also say the other program that doesn't often get mentioned is essentially consultancies, people that would be paid by the state arts council to work with smaller organizations throughout the state. I can't remember the name of it. *Like a technical assistance program?* Bingo, that's exactly what it is and enormously effective and enormously inexpensive.

E. What was most frustrating to you?

Looking back on it from this many years, nothing. Having been humbled so much, how could I have thought anything at the state arts council was a problem. But the one concern I had and wrote about it in a couple of annual reports was the bureaucracy. I thought the bureaucracy of state government was going to be more of a diminishing factor on the effectiveness of the agency and limiting to the arts and artistic expression than anything else and I think I wasn't wrong. A couple of things again Ken Dewey said, "We think of ourselves as an enclave of the arts in the government. When government becomes an enclave into the arts, then it's time to fold up and go someplace else." I think that was a credo that I think began to play itself out years later. I don't know and I've lost track and went elsewhere. The other person who said it in a different way and powerfully effectively was Charles Eans who was my culture hero of all times and he was giving a talk to a group of state arts agency people...can't remember where it was now...but he said essentially, "You're all arts administrators which is a term I've never heard before but I just want to remind you that the passion of the primitive church was taken over by bishops and you have the capacity of being the bishops in the arts."

F. What was most surprising to you?

This is another one of those questions; I'm sure it was surprising to me at the time but it doesn't seem surprising to me now. I was amazed at how we were trying to keep the arts protected from politics and that was at the governor's insistence and also the insistence of the constituency of the arts. It was amazing how quickly arts organizations could figure out how to get a political advantage which, I think, is more human nature than anything else and I don't know why that came as a surprise to me but occasionally it was.

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

NEA – It could not possibly have been better but, of course, I think the New York State Arts Council was in a privileged position. I was executive director when Rodger Stevens was chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts and I just thought he was fabulous; a truly great man. At first, a horrible speaker and I thought, "I really wish there was somebody like Andre Malraux who could carry our banner for us." Rodger Stevens was a deadly speaker but he was a giant of a fellow and he could really get things done so that was a very good relationship. And then, of course, that was supported in Congress by a couple of wonderful people not the least of whom was Senator Javitts at the senatorial level and John Lindsay in the House.

SAA's – Pretty good. The state arts council, in fact; was very instrumental in getting the National Endowment for the Arts to put up an amount of money that would be an incentive to do a study to establish a state arts council and so we worked with just about all of the state arts councils because they would come to us for, you know, what do you say in your by-laws, how do you put this legislation together; all of the stuff that we had gone through so that relationship was very strong and as well with the what is now the American Council for the Arts.

ACA – Extremely good. It fell apart when I became president of ACA. Then we had trouble with, well, state arts agencies. It was going through a whole other thing.

LAA's – That was pretty good. It was particularly good in New York State but, of course, we had the money and it was important for them to be nice to us so they were nice to us. After I left, there was a shift in the direction of the agency and the community arts councils wanted more representation in how they were dealt with. I wasn't involved in that. I remember thinking, "I don't know why it's necessary but a new direction for a new day," and I didn't follow it too carefully. I had my own problems about that time.

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 think that became a little bit more clear when I did go to ACA although I could see it happening. With ACA particularly Ralph Burgard and Howard Adams the state arts council was trying to put state arts councils together and we had seminars for them and everything else and it was very heady. And those two guys Ralph Burgard and Howard Adams were just terrific guys to work with. and what became evident as that went along was that the executive directors of the state arts agencies I think weren't politically savvy enough and they got into that terrible trap of seeking professional status with their peers at conferences away from the state capitals they were from rather than paying more attention to making their state arts councils more effective with more money. There were definitely exceptions to that but all too few and one of the great ones was not an exception at all but was the leadership of somebody like Irma Lazarus who brought real clout to the position of chairman. There were others in North Carolina with the Haynes and California to a certain extent. It was uneven but I thought a number of the state arts councils directors didn't know how to really build a base of support for the arts. The other challenge and the other issue and where I go bananas about Frohnmeyer is that I just think his....there is a real sensitivity between politics and the arts. It's not an easy fit and yet it can be extremely potent if the state arts council, at least as I viewed it, had a sensitivity towards politics and didn't try to exacerbate the politics of the arts; didn't try to rub people's nose in the fact that Robert Mapplethorpe is a great photographer; you should get on board. There are certain sensitivities that the body politics has and, if you force a confrontation, you'll get badly smacked and lose your support in Congress even from Congressmen and women who prefer to provide support to the arts. And anybody who hasn't read about the Federal Theatre Project to find out what a couple of Virginia Congressmen did to that shouldn't be a state arts agency executive director.

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?)

The special political ally was the governor; that's not a bad lobbyist to have in the capital. I can't say enough about Nelson Rockefeller but I did have an amazing conversation with the president of a Catholic university on the far western end of the state and it was during the time when the Vietnam protests were beginning to bubble up; that would have been '68, '69, something like that. There was a reading that was going to take place on the campus of this small college by Alan Ginsburg and the president called me up and said, "I'm going to have to cancel this reading of Ginsburg." And I said, "Why is that?" "My campus is very volatile and I'm afraid that this will create a terrible situation, an explosive situation." And I said, "I can guarantee you one thing. If you tell everybody on campus that you have pulled the plug on Alan Ginsburg, it sure will blow up your campus." And he said essentially maybe you have a point. Before that I received a call from the Terry Durayeh(?) who was the speaker of the house. I never spoke to the man but he called me up and he said that there was this situation brewing and I want you to say that the state arts council is withdrawing its support for the Ginsburg performance or reading at this campus. And I said, "No, I can't do that. They've signed a contract. I don't have any legal way out of it." And I told essentially the same thing to him that it would really become a mess if we did that. And that about the war in Vietnam and what to do and what not to do and how to contain protests, that followed me to the Museum of Modern Art.

J. How did you use your time:

1. Can you describe a prototypical day?

Well, I can tell you I have never had so much fun working anywhere as I did at the state arts council. It was a great bunch of people and we had so much fun doing what we were doing, it was unimaginable. So that means that there was a terrific kind of rapport with everyone. This is a little off from the specifics of the question but it sets the mood of the place. There were a couple of marvelous young women on the staff who would put on a Christmas pageant every year and the song I remember most vividly from one of the pageants was "Oh, Batavia, We're gonna save ya because we gave ya so much gravy-ya." It was very difficult not to have a good time. I can remember another person saying, "My god, can you imagine, we're handing out all this money and there's not a single person in here who's over 35." It was true so the atmosphere was wonderful and, of course, we all had some kind of connection or grew to have some kind of connection with the arts and felt like it was a new religion but better than that because it didn't take itself so seriously. I think that a typical day wasn't so much the typical days but was the days of having meetings with the panels that included Ozzie Davis, Ruby Dee, Merce Cunningham, John Cage, Paul Taylor, Beverly Sills; all these wonderful people and it was very, very heady. I don't remember very many low points at the state arts council and the members of council were also terrific. We had wonderful retreats every year in which we reviewed the programs and the strategies, which was a word we never used then and always use now, about what was working and what wasn't working. We're going to lose the mechanism to send poets around the state because the Jewish Y on 92nd street was closing down its poetry program. We figured out how to get the person who was running that, a

marvelous woman by the name of Galen Williams, to reincarnate it in another form which became Poets and Writers which still survives. It's had a marvelous run for several decades. Anyway, I guess blessedly there was no typical day but it sure was easy to go to work.

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

- ___ Grant administration
- ___ advocacy/lobbying with public officials
- ___ field /constituency communication
- ___ agency strategic planning
- ___ program development
- ___ fundraising
- ___ partnership building (with other government agencies, with other types of nonprofits, with private sector, with arts/cultural agencies at other levels of government)

I was looking at that and I was trying to think of how that worked out. Let me describe sort of what the time was like or what priorities were. I would definitely spend time with the council members and, by the way, I had the most spectacular chairman I have ever had in Seymore Knox; and then the vice chairman was the wisest man I've ever met, Henry Alan Moe. The more time I could spend with them, the more I could learn. At certain times of the year when the legislature was in session, I tried to keep specific members of the legislature as informed as I possibly could and I would spend a lot of time in Albany during those periods of time. I would try to get out and give talks particularly if I was invited as much as possible. There really wasn't any fundraising other than trying to convince members of the governor's budgeting staff to increase the funding for the state arts agency. There was a bit of that that went on. I was in a partnership building with other government agencies. We did occasionally try to help an even more fledgling agency that had a similar interest that was a state agency for architecture and we tried to nurture that along but it couldn't find its political constituency and it didn't last. I didn't get very much involved in grant administration nor program development but agency strategic planning was always a concern and it was the focus of an agenda at a retreat once a year.

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

Yes, I was probably much more interested or thought it important to get out to communities in the state and explain what the state arts council was doing and help them sign up for programs and things. It was very much trying to build the constituency. I guess I didn't realize it so much at the time but I knew it was all part of the mission and all so came back around again as a protective political constituency for the agency and I did do that a lot and I didn't do nearly as much of it by the time I left.

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?*

I think the one that still lingers is Ken Dewey's admonition; the arts have to be an enclave in government, not the other way around. I'm mindful this question makes me

think what did the state arts council of New York use as its model and it was quite clear and we stated it often; it was the British Arts Council. Quite a different organization than what state arts agencies have become but there's a lot of similarity. I think the National Endowment for the Arts is probably more like the British Arts Council.

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

No, not really. When I became head of ACA, I stayed in touch a lot. Then I got sort of pushed around to maritime museums of one sort or another and, unfortunately for me, I have become an advocate for history and maritime history and I'm not nearly as comfortable or passionate about it as I am and was about the arts.

A. If so,

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

I don't really know. I see it a little bit in Virginia, of course; less so in Connecticut when I was there. It seems that state arts agencies are hanging on for dear life and exist only so far as they are capable of matching state dollars to the federal incentive which I don't know what that is up to now. That puts them constantly in a defensive position.

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

I think you have to be politically savvy and it would be good to have worked with state government somewhere along the line. It helps to write well or at least express the aims of the agency well. I think being savvy with budgets, a good fundraiser, they don't those count for very much because they're a different beast. They're public agency and, therefore, their ability to raise money privately is frequently limited and the budgeting is all done by the budget department. You want to make sure you know how to manage whatever the amount of money you get but other than that financing and budgeting are less important than selling the importance of the arts and the importance of how your state agency goes about making sure everybody gets a chance to appreciate the arts.

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

I probably wouldn't because I'd have to learn to how to become an arts administrator and get some sort of goddamn certificate. There's where the bishops begin to ply their trade.

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

No, I don't. First of all, the promise....I sort of grew up professionally with the state arts council; it was a little unreal. First of all, it was in New York. You have to really go out of your way not to find really good people who understand the arts to work with so it was a little bit unreal and the governor was so passionate about it and so incredibly dedicated to this concept of government support of the arts, so my expectations and the promise I thought and in large part realized could not have been....I mean I think I had an unrealistic idea of what the promise could be. I also think the state arts agencies are both dependent and mirror the public and political reaction to the National Endowment for the Arts. I think the National Endowment for the Arts has had a very checkered career with

and an uncomfortable relationship with politics and I think that has all to do with its leadership; some really bad; some noble but not strong. Again I just think Frohnmeyer was a disaster and set the Endowment back significantly.

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

I just got turned in different directions with sort of South Street Seaport, then a place in Norwalk, Connecticut which is an aquarium now and Mariners Museum and a little sidebar at the University of Virginia. It just isn't as relevant to what the institutions that I've been working for need in terms of their priorities. The state arts councils don't really play much of a role. I have been a panelist on the Virginia Commission on the Arts and I enjoyed that but it's not part of where I need to expend professional capital, as it were.

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 don't think I've changed my mind about anything. I still think that the arts is one of the most positive forces in the world today that transcends all sorts of petty politics. There's wonderful, wonderful phrasing by Kennedy at the groundbreaking or the dedication of the Kennedy Arts Center in Washington. I can't memorize it but I'll give you a flavor of it. I think it was written by Richard Goodman. He said something like, "Goethe stands serenely above the politics of Germany. Dante outlasted the ambitions of 15th century Florence. Aeschylus and Plato outlived the ambitions of Imperial Athens. And I am convinced that after the dust of centuries has settled over our society, we will be remembered not for victories or defeats in battles or in politics but our contribution to the human spirit which is what the arts in my way of thinking are all about." The opening phrase for that puts that so well.

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

It sounds glib but I don't mean it to be. Don't take yourself too seriously and by that I mean make sure you understand that it's really the arts that you're trying to enhance and bring to more people; it's not you. You shouldn't be taking bows doing that. People who perform on stage can take bows, not administrators.

V. Information about you:

SEE RESUME

A. Education

- 1. Educational level (has, 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)

That's a very interesting question and I was very young when I got into New York. I got out of the Marine Corps in 1967 after graduating from Yale; I worked for a bank; then I worked for a Petrochemical firm; then for American Heritage publishing company which is the first step in the right direction; I would say of all of those things was the most

important was the Marine Corps; it taught me so much about people and what they were capable of doing and in some instances not capable of doing; it taught me a lot about leadership. the importance of leadership; not so much the way I did it or put it together but human relationships in trying to do a job or perform a mission as it was called in the Marine Corps; I can't imagine having better experience; I think the writing helped a lot and also just an abiding interest in the arts and incredible admiration for people who are able to either interpret them or even more so create them

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?

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

SEE RESUME

D. Do you pursue any art form? Which?

Singing and writing. I'm fond of saying letters and the interoffice memorandum are my only art form now and to a certain extent that's true. I sort of like to have fun with it but I'm currently not singing but I enjoy it when I do.

E. Demographic information:

1. Gender - Male

2. Age range now - 72 in another couple of months

3. geographic region he or she lives now - Newport News, VA

4. political/partisan identification - Democrat and was when I was in Rockefeller administration; that did not seem to be a problem; matter of fact when Rockefeller set up the state arts council, after defeating Avrel Harriman for the governorship, he appointed Marie Harriman, Avrel's wife, to the state arts council

Bill Hull taught me how to see; how to look at things particularly architecture. We worked together. He was the assistant director when I was executive director. I was moved above him in the succession which was awkward at first but it became a wonderful working relationship. I have enormous admiration for him.

Ellen Thurston was the keeper of the council fire at New York State Arts Council; she would be interesting for you to talk to at some point; lives in Hudson, New York; doing a history of the New York State Arts Council at one point; I don't think it will ever be finished; she was one of the composer's of "Oh, Batavia"