

ARTS IN IOWA

Metro Arts Alliance: Brightening up the city for 40 years

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Register file photo

Preschool kids at Oakridge Early Enrichment Child Development Center danced during a Metro Arts Alliance

percussion workshop led by Penny Furgerson, right, in 2007.



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Brymontia Austin of Des Moines watched Metro Arts Alliance intern Mia Chong-Hanssen glue together styrofoam pieces to make a boat at a Picnic in the Park event in 1999.

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Metro Arts Alliance has grown slowly and so steadily, like a tree, that it's easy to take for granted its impact on greater Des Moines.

But ever since it started, 40 years ago this week, the nonprofit group has helped hundreds of local artists make ends meet. It's taught generations of school kids how to

get their hands messy with paint or clay, attracted countless crowds to Jazz in July concerts, and generally made the city a little less beige.

So its anniversary is a good time to see how much the organization has grown from its humble start, when it was just an idea tossed like a seed out of some committee meeting at City Hall.

“It’s a thrill to see how something that was really struggling in those early days has blossomed and grown and has such widespread participation,” former board president Gloria Hoffman said. “It’s truly a success story about hard work and people who got together and said, ‘Hey, we’re going to keep this going.’”

Some of the programs [the Alliance](#) started a long time ago are still going strong. Others have come and gone and might be due for a revival.

There are too many to name or number in a single article, but here’s a look at a few highlights:

1975

After six years of planning, city leaders formed what was then called the Arts and Recreation Council (ARC) of Greater Des Moines in order to streamline other initiatives and attract more businesses and residents to central Iowa. The new group was officially incorporated on Oct. 16, 1975.

1980s

Outdoor concerts

The Jazz in July series started in 1982, with help from the Iowa Arts Council and the city of Des Moines, whose special events and marketing manager at the time was Jennifer Marcouiller.



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Eric Hernandez and Heather Smith danced to the salsa sounds of Orquestra Alto Maiz at a Jazz in July concert in 2011.

“I just love jazz,” she said. “A guy I worked with at City Hall used to make cassette tapes and drop them by my desk: ‘Hey, listen to this.’”

Marcouiller turned out to be the right person at the right time. She was familiar with the parks from a previous job with the parks and recreation department. And she knew a bunch of musicians who played around town on nights and weekends.

She persuaded some of them to perform, for less pay, for the new series, which the city

and state arts council eventually handed off to Metro Arts Alliance.



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Sally DuBois of Ames tied a balloon sword onto Jalem Hardy of Des Moines at a Jazz in July concert at Evelyn K. Davis Park in 2013.

“I still can’t believe I pulled it off,” she said. “But they were willing to do it for the exposure. And right away, people would come up afterward and say, ‘Hey, we’re getting married. Could you play for us? Are you available?’ ”



Register file photo

West Des Moines' Gary Otting, with daughter Joie, and Leanne Otting, with daughter Addie, spent some quality time at a Jazz in July concert in 2002.

Thirty-three years later, the Alliance's executive director, Kim Poam-Logan, and the Jazz in July planners have a long list of musicians and host groups alike – too many to cram into a single month.

“I just about cried the other day when Kim told me people were fighting to get in,” Marcouiller said.



Register file photo

Music fans packed Waukee's downtown triangle for a Jazz in July concert in 2010.

Employee art shows

ARC encouraged local businesses to display artwork by their employees for a program called On Their Own Time. A jury of professional artists chose the winning entries, which were displayed downtown at Capital Square.

Former executive director Lee Ann Bakros, who now works at the Des Moines Community Playhouse, remembers people were surprised to discover that a local hospital administrator had a hidden talent for carving beautiful wooden bowls. (She also remembers sneaking into her downtown office after it had been evacuated during the

floods of 1993 to retrieve a list of musicians and venues for Jazz in July. But that's another story . . .)

Arts education

ARC beefed up its outreach to local schools in response to concerns that budget cuts would strip schools of their in-house arts and music programs.



Register file photo

Angel Rodriguez of West Des Moines got help with an art project from his teacher, Jane Wirth, during a Metro Arts Alliance event in 2004 at Raccoon River Park Nature Lodge.

“It was a pretty big issue at the time and still is,” said Hoffman, a former Des Moines School Board member who took a turn on the ARC board in the ‘80s.

So ARC drafted a roster of local artists to send to schools to lead workshops in theater, music, dance and visual art. One of the program lists, from 2001, touted Polk County judge Odell McGhee and the local Langston Hughes Players' use of "poetry, prose and song to present the experiences of African-Americans from Africa to slavery to the Harlem Renaissance to modern America."

1990s

New focus

ARC changed its name to the Metro Arts Alliance to reflect a tighter focus on arts (rather than recreation). It also unified smaller arts groups under one umbrella so they could stake their claim between bigger cultural players like the Des Moines Art Center and Des Moines Civic Center (now Des Moines Performing Arts).

"We figured we should be more of a unit," Hoffman said. "Everyone still had their own interests and their own fundraising, but we could help each other grow by supporting one another instead of being just a group of rivals."

That collaboration laid the groundwork for later organizations like Bravo Greater Des Moines, which was founded in 2004 to distribute a portion of regional hotel/motel taxes to arts groups throughout central Iowa.

The newly re-named Alliance also lent its support to individual artists, who were struggling to make a name for themselves.

"It was an underserved group. There just wasn't enough exposure," said Tracy Levine, the Alliance's executive director from 1993 to 2008.



Register file photo

Artist J. Brommel painted a big canvas for a Metro Arts Alliance auction in 2006.

She often worried whether enough people would show up for events, but “the artists were happy just for the chance to make their art,” she said. “They were so resilient. That always inspired me.”



Register file photo

Actress Alissa Tschetter-Siedschlaw of Des Moines helped Susan Stacy of Des [more](#)

More arts education

One of those artists was Concetta Morales, who led various make-and-take workshops for the Alliance's after-school ArtSmart program. She sent students home with their own handmade collages and mosaics.



Register file photo

Hannah Cole of Ankeny shows off green grout on her hands after working on a [more](#)

“We called it 60-60-60: 60 kids for 60 minutes and 60 bucks,” she said.

It wasn’t a big money-maker for the teaching artists, but “the program was really impactful,” Morales said, because it took art to the masses, to students “who had never really thought, ‘Hey, I can do this.’”



Register file photo

Fifth-graders Josh Johnson, Jack Lillig and Ethan Gray added grout to a mosaic [more](#)



The Des Moines Register



who have become artists or art teachers

themselves.

“You just never know how far the ripples will go,” she said.

Public artwork

The Alliance has left most public-art projects to other groups, like the Greater Des Moines Public Art Foundation, but it has made a few commissions.

Morales created a series of mosaics for the Des Moines airport in 1993 with help from students in one of the Alliance's programs for at-risk youth. Their seven panels – of 801 Grand, the Iowa State Campanile and so on – now hang near the baggage claim. It's a bright spot in a mostly plain building.

“There is so little art at the airport. It's kind of a shocker,” Morales said. “There are so many opportunities right there.”

2000s

Environmental education

The Alliance re-programmed many of its workshops to make them more eco-friendly by using recycled or repurposed materials. The group's Green Arts initiative set an early example for low-impact, low-waste events that other groups around town have followed.

2010s

Increased accessibility

With the Alliance's help, Iowa artists with various disabilities presented an arts exhibition along with more than 100 performances and demonstrations at this year's Iowa State Fair.

Another airport installation

Thousands of Des Moines Arts Festival visitors helped eastern Iowa artist Bounnak Thammavong paint an aluminum sculpture of the state bird, the Eastern Goldfinch, and a flock of smaller canvas birds. The project, called “Birds of a Feather,” was commissioned for the Alliance's 40th anniversary and will be hung from the ceiling at the Des Moines airport in late November or early December.

Its scheduled dedication, on the Alliance's official birthday on Friday, was postponed because so many people painted canvas birds. The artist had to re-work the logistics to

make room for the larger flock.



Register file photo

Kadyn Denham, 5, helped artist Bounnak Thammavong paint the "Birds of a Feather" sculpture at the 2015 Des Moines Arts Festival. The piece will soon be installed at the Des Moines airport.

Art Corps

Alliance leaders hope to launch new program, based on AmeriCorps, to create jobs and training opportunities for college graduates with art degrees.

"It's a way to keep them in Iowa and grow the number of working and professional artists in our community," Alliance executive director Poam-Logan said. "It's one of the most innovative and exciting projects on the horizon."

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