

Akron Beacon Journal

NEWS

Knight Arts Challenge awards nearly \$400,000 to support arts programs in Akron

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From art workshops to theater, poetry presentations and more, arts and performance are returning to more city venues, and plans are in the works to support creators in bringing their talent to town in coming months.

After a year's pandemic hiatus, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation has announced recipients of the 2021 Knight Arts Challenge Akron awards. The foundation said six area artists and arts organizations will share nearly \$400,000 to bring their work to life.

More: Knight Arts Challenge returns to Akron with focus on technology

This year, the challenge put its emphasis on those using innovative methods to attract broader audiences, enhance in-person experiences, document creation or to reach people who wouldn't otherwise have access to a variety of arts experiences in the city.

Victoria Rogers, Knight's arts program vice president, said the recipients were notable in that they "adapted and used technology during the pandemic to reach audiences wherever they are. The ability to inform, engage, and connect people through their art is a gift to all of us, and we're proud to help bring these ideas to life."

"The arts are an essential part of Akron's community life," said Kyle Kutuchief, Knight's Akron program director. "Whether it's a dance performance, a concert or an immersive experience, Akron's artists help connect Akronites to their city and to each other, helping build a more engaged community. We're excited to see the ideas of these Knight Arts Challenge winners come to life."

This is the fifth year of awards in Akron. The foundation also offered challenges this year in Miami and Detroit.

More: 27 Knight Arts Challenge winners to share \$1 million for Akron projects

Top recipient to focus on parks

The largest grant went to the Akron Black Artist Guild, an organization founded in February. Co-founder Dara Harper said the guild will use \$128,000 to bring a variety of projects to life through a partnership with Summit Metro Parks over two years.

Harper said the project is being called the Art in the Park Collective and will involve several works, some from artists who have already made proposals; the group is also preparing a call for artists to submit more proposals.

"We're just finishing our planning," she said, adding work on specific programs will begin in earnest in January.

"The idea is to have a collection of different opportunities, because different people come out to the park for different reasons," she said. "The idea is to promote the parks and give people the opportunity to see those kind of activities or have those kind of activities – to come out and do a workshop, for example."

She said art programs are the first things to get cut and suffer during hard times, adding that the pandemic made people really see what is important.

"If you cannot go to a space to relax, to create, to see something visually stimulating or to feel as though you have accomplished things outside of your regular 9-to-5, it gets depressing," she said.

She referred to museums and theater venues that were closed and added, "It was a loss of jobs for artists ... We are trying to be that organization that tries to support artists in creating a portfolio for themselves in whatever genre they practice."

She noted the technical aspect to the program will allow artists such as dancers and other performers to document their work online.

"Some people cannot make it out to these venues in person," she said.

'Pop-up' poetry

Kent State University's Wick Poetry Center received the second-largest award of \$125,000. Its project is titled "Mapping Akron: A Poetic Exploration of Home."

The center plans to create an "interactive poetic map" of Akron displayed in pop-up exhibits throughout the city. Work should begin in January with partners that include Akron Public Schools, Akron-Summit County Public Library, International Institute of Akron and Akron Art Museum, among others.

Wick Director David Hassler said the two-year project builds on a previous work, where the center collaborated with immigrant communities to tell their stories through poetry in a project called Writing Without Borders. The project used digital expressive writing tools and platforms Wick had previously developed with support from the Knight Foundation.

"We led writing workshops with refugees and immigrants and children in the Akron area, partnering with the International Institute of Akron, using poetry with English language learners practicing using this new language by making simple poems and making sense of their own lives," he said. "We went back with videographers and filmed short videos of them talking about their journey, making it to Akron, where they come from and reciting their poem."

He said the resulting project was shown at Summit Artspace as part of an exhibit where people could add their own voices to the project.

The current project will engage people throughout the city to create an interactive "growing poetic map" of the city that will include short videos of Akronites talking about special places and parts of town.

"We'll be building interactive, pop-up exhibits," planned for installation in libraries and other locations.

"What we envision is pull-out banners surrounding a kiosk with an iPad ... but everything will be available online," he said. "We will be facilitating discussion groups and intergenerational workshops throughout the city. We're inviting both Akron public schools and adults and seniors and refugees and immigrants to all participate.

"It's our belief that we all have the capacity to participate in the joy and the meaning making of writing poetry. It's not something that you have to be certified to do. We all play

with language and we all have a story to tell; and we'll guide people through the process of finding their own authentic voice and to make meaning of their sense of place and belonging in the city."

Other projects

Other 2021 Knight Arts Challenge winners include:

Gum-Dip Theatre (\$60,000) *Brokers Without Borders* – A cross-cultural play created by a multiethnic former refugee ensemble that demonstrates the experience of navigating an entirely new world and the celebrations of finding success in a globalized community.

Natalie Warren (\$46,000) – *The Onyx Club Exhibitions: Hidden Gems*. A series of exhibitions to make Black history and culture more accessible to the residents of Akron throughout the year.

Radio on the Lake Theatre (\$18,000) – *Listening to History: An Akron Radio Play Tour for the Visually Challenged*. A portable audio tour utilizing the art of the radio play to illuminate five Akron historical landmarks for the visually challenged.

"Working with the visually challenged community has always been central to Radio on the Lake's mission," said Executive Director Caroline Breder-Watts. "We look forward to working with the Akron Blind Center, as well as Akron-based playwrights and actors, to create this tour."

QuTheatr (\$16,000) – *Pride 365A* community-driven performance in Summer 2022 crafted from stories collected during monthly queer gatherings throughout the city.

New focus on digital

The six 2021 grantees, along with eight additional recipients, will each be awarded \$10,000 to implement digital strategies in service of their individual practice or organization.

The funds, totaling \$140,000 for the group of 14 artists and arts organizations, are meant to assist with technical equipment, software, consultants or other tech-related aspects needed to bring their works to life.

Winners will also receive access to training resources and materials related to business

sustainability, budgeting, revenue generation, marketing and outreach.

The 2021 \$10,000 Tech Grant Knight Arts Challenge Winners:

Gum-Dip Theatre

Akron Black Artist Guild

Natalie Warren

Radio on the Lake Theatre

The Wick Poetry Center at Kent State University

QuTheatr

Kent State University Foundation

Tyron Hoisten

Dominic Moore-Dunson

Sarah Kabot

Ebrahim Poustinchi

Vince Giles – 4 Pillars Edutainment

Akron Soul Train

Megan Young

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