

***Disinvested***  
**Episode 6: Arts and Culture**

Chip McCabe: Case studies have been done on this, and when you look at cities who have grown either in actual population or they've grown in "hipness," but cities like Austin, Texas, or Portland, Oregon, or Philadelphia, for example, or Minneapolis, Minnesota; every single one of these cities utilized arts and entertainment. Not as a, "Oh yeah that also happens here." They used arts and entertainment as a keystone to the foundation of how they were going to rebuild and remodel their city and change perceptions of how people from the outside looked inward on their cities.

So the arts and entertainment community, in my opinion, has just as an important a role in recreating that perception of Hartford, as building up jobs and capital...

*Background Music...*

Tyler Johnson: Welcome to DISINVESTED, a podcast about reimagining a city and building a stronger, more inclusive community. Created by the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving. I'm Tyler Johnson.

This episode is about arts and culture. You just heard from Chip McCabe. Chip is the Director of Placemaking and Events for the Hartford Business Improvement District. At their core, arts and culture bring people together over a shared experience of wonder. However, arts and culture are not just nice; they're necessary.

Arts and culture contribute heavily to the economic growth of our region. They can help build the skills we need for the modern workforce. They can help children deal with the trauma they've experienced or help connect multiple generations around a shared passion for the stage. Arts and culture are weaved throughout the region and touch on nearly every aspect of our work at the Hartford Foundation.

The question as we look forward is: how can we take what's great about our local arts and culture and use it to help unlock our untapped potential? In this episode, we'll examine how arts and culture can do even more for our region.

David Fay: You know, we will this year be running somewhere between \$25 and \$30 million dollars through our box office.

Tyler Johnson: David Fay is the President and CEO for the Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts, the largest arts organization in Connecticut.

David Fay: The number that is usually ascribed for compounded economic impact is a multiple of about 7. Seven times 30, if my math serves me, is \$200 and some odd million dollars that The Bushnell alone provides incentives into the economy.

We employ 55-60 full-time people, but then we have hundreds of part-time people. And then of course, our many friends in the restaurant business when we have a show like Hamilton running for three weeks, they're filled to the brim all evening long.

Arts and culture are not only an important economic driver in that direct way, but if you talk to other major employers in the area, when they're out there looking for talent to work for their companies, folks who are considering working for those companies look at the entire community. In fact, it's been said a lot of studies have shown that the millennials now are often picking a city, a community or an area of the country that they want to live in, they move there, and then they go look for a job.

If we are going to be competitive with other parts of the country, other towns, communities and cities, cultural arts is a very important part of the array of offerings that really has to be present.

Tyler Johnson: Bonnie Koba is the Senior Program Associate for the Connecticut State Office of the Arts.

Bonnie Koba: There was a review done by the Bureau of Economic Analysis and the National Endowment for the Arts. A report came out in 2015, which noted that the arts generate \$763 billion dollars per year, or 4.2% of the GDP. So those numbers, in terms of the percentage GDP, is more than agriculture, transportation, or warehousing. In Connecticut, at that time in 2015, we reported 57,236 employed in the arts in Connecticut so that's a pretty significant industry.

Chip McCabe: So if you work in the insurance industry and you have your pick of job locations, ...

Tyler Johnson: Once again, Chip McCabe of HBID.

Chip McCabe: ...even within one company – let's say you work for Aetna, The Hartford, Travelers or whoever, and you're offered a job where you have your pick of cities where you could work, are you going to pick the city that just simply gives you the best chance to make the most money or are you going to look at those locations – I'm talking about millennials, I'm talking about 20 somethings – are you going to look at those locations and go, "Where do I want to live?" Almost always, people are going to lean towards that location that gives them things to do and reasons to be in the city outside of just what they do from 9-5.

Yes, you need to have the jobs, you need to have the capital, you need to have the infrastructure, you need to have the affordable housing, you need all of those key components,

but without the arts and culture component, you're competing into a vacuum with a million other places.

It's the same reason why a lot of kids pick a college. They're looking at not just what they can major in, they're looking at what can they do on campus? What does the city around the campus offer, and that thinking follows them into the workforce.

The perception that Hartford shuts down after 5 o'clock, there's something to that when businesses are not open on weekends and they're only open 9-5 Monday thru Friday. But the reality is that the majority of people at night are in establishments. So they're in Theatre Works, they're in Hartford Stage, there's 10,000 people in the XL Center.

What people are not seeing is the foot traffic. We don't have that critical mass of people living downtown where there's constant foot traffic, so that's what feeds into that perception that Hartford is closed for business after 5 o'clock. Especially in the wintertime, nobody wants to be outside when it's 6 degrees, right?

A lot of what we're trying to with the Hartford Business Improvement District is we're doing more series types events, we're doing more free stuff outdoors, live music, arts on the streets and things like that. So part of it is that you give those people something to look at and do while they're on the street, so that there is that perception that there's stuff happening and going on.

Tyler Johnson: Artists and creatives are an important part of the workforce, especially in the digital age. Does your company have a logo? Chances are it was created by a graphic artist. However, you don't need to work in a creative field to benefit from arts-focused skills training.

Once again, David Fay.

David Fay: You talk about the workforce. Education, I believe increasingly in the future is going to reverse a trend that has been going on for quite a long time and that is....you know in the industrial revolution era, we needed to create an education system that graduated individuals from that system who were basically interchangeable parts in a huge economic machine. In doing that, the education system really was designed to shove out the natural creative inclinations of human beings.

It was, "No, no, no I don't need you to be unique and different, I need you to fit into this particular peg."

We are going to have to redesign the education system to draw out the individuality of everybody. What used to be considered skilled labor is now being taken over by artificial intelligence. What it both allows and demands is that we human workers are going to have to

spend more time in the creative imaginative domain because that's the contribution that we as human beings will be making to ourselves, our society, and our communities.

Julia Pistell: We get a lot of folks who initially think that taking an improv class is about being funny, having fun, or being a star.

Tyler Johnson: Julia Pistell is the Managing Director and founding member of Sea Tea Improv, a for-profit theater in Hartford.

Julia Pistell: And it certainly can lead to those things or be about those things, and we love that. But what improv is really about, is about being a great listener, being flexible and adaptable, about collaborating and communicating really well. It's also often about letting go of your own idea. If we're doing a scene or a show together and I'm like, "I have the best idea ever," and you start the scene and we're going in a different direction, I just have to say that's what this is, it's okay. That's what collaboration is about.

All of these skills are extremely important for any workplace. I've been shocked how many companies, I mean all the big ones in Connecticut – ESPN, Lego, every insurance company – they've all brought us in, and we're not pitching them. They're saying we need people to help us get our workers more adaptable or our workers more open-minded.

One thing I've really been thinking about lately is the word creative has started to occupy this like strange weird sphere in corporate life where people think being creative just means you do some art in your free time or it means you're a creative, like you work in a marketing agency making ads.

We should all be creative. That's so important. I mean, what job is more creative than computer science, for example. When we have people come through our doors, whether they're in the audience or taking a class, saying like, "Oh I'm not creative so I'm going to be bad this this." It's like, what kind of world are we building? What kind of community do we have that people say, I just can't open my mind, and I don't trust myself? Of course, it comes out of fear, like I don't trust myself to think creatively.

We're going one by one to folks in the community being like, "Yes, you can do it. You can think creatively. You can collaborate. You can say something weird and maybe it will be awesome. And you know what, if it's terrible whatever, we don't care. You're not going to burst into flames." So it's a blast.

I've been shocked how meaningful it has been to work with really corporate types, because they're the ones who come back to us and say this changed my life, this changed my marriage, or my boss and I get along better. That's real change and it's important collaborative change, especially for Connecticut, which can be very rigid at times.

Bonnie Koba: There's a research study that tells that one of the main reasons a person is fired or cannot keep a job is because of their inability to work with others.

Tyler Johnson: Here's Bonnie Koba from the Connecticut State Office of the Arts.

Bonnie Koba: The arts teach so many of those intrinsic values. So besides the idea of arts for arts' sake, the arts are important in developing character, in helping people know how to work on a team, in changing perceptions, in communicating thoughts and ideas, in opening up emotions, and engaging students.

Tyler Johnson: Arts and culture are a necessary part of a well-rounded education. According to the Brookings Institute, arts education experiences have a remarkable impact on students' academic, social, and emotional outcomes, to help better prepare them for the future.

Dr. Constance Devereaux is an Associate Professor and Director of the MFA of Arts Administration Program at the University of Connecticut.

We asked her what you can do with an arts degree.

Dr. Constance Devereaux: So let me tell a couple of stories. I have two sons who are grown. They're both visual artists. One is a commercial artist and earns a living and does very well.

I think there are a lot of just mistakes about what it means to be an artist and what it takes to be successful, and the kinds of jobs that you can have.

My two very talented sons – the one who does commercial artwork, he does work that probably you would see if you went to fine hotels around the world because designers buy his work and that's art. So that's one job that you could do is become a commercial artist. Or the kind of artwork that you see in stores like Walmart. You know you go through the art section – well somebody had to create that work, so that's a job there.

Then in that company that produces that, there's an art director and there are probably a whole room full of designers. Then there are the sales people who decided maybe that they didn't want to produce art, but they have to know something about art in order to sell it well.

When people ask me this question, rather than say here's the long list of things, I always say what do people want to do because artists are natural problem solvers. They're natural leaders. What we really want is for artistic people to be out in the world doing whatever job they want to be doing to earn a living so that they're part of our community.

My program is a Master's program. That means you should be a master at what you're doing. That's a tall order, but we can aim in that direction. That means that you're aimed at the top level of management in an organization.

It would be analogous to a Master's degree, say in business to MBA. There we're training people to take over companies, right. The same kind of thing. We're teaching people to manage resources, manage people, manage time, manage ideas and that's a little bit different kind of training.

I think if I wrapped it all into one term, the biggest thing they need to know is how to be good decision makers.

**Naomi Arroyo:** Introductions are fun because right when they tell you to do it you can do them. My name is Naomi. I actually go by Cat, because not a lot of people know how to say my name properly. A little bit about myself, I want to do psychology as a major. I'm studying at UConn. I'm going to be living in Storrs. My main focus is trying to do therapy through the arts.

So my first year that I did it, I was part of HSIP, which is the Hartford Promise Internship. It was like my first internship type ever. I had no idea how to do resumes, I had no idea how to do any of those little things. Then this year, I'm working at the office here are the Center for Latino Progress and I'm practically being like a little office assistant, which I love. But I love theater. I'm an arts kid, too. I love theater, I love art, I love creativity, I love performing, and I love singing. That's always been my passion and my suit; however, sometimes the art won't give you as much money as you would expect and as a first generation immigrant, as the first person that comes here, I'm here to establish the rest of my family. I'm here to help my mom, to help my grandma, to help everyone.

Then I realized that I have a love for the mind, so I decided to study psychology, but I really love the arts, too. So then I thought, I was like, the only reason that I really do love the arts is because it's a therapeutic form for me. I get to express myself. I get to dance, I get to sing, and I get to be whoever I want to be in a play. So I was like, why don't we use this as therapy. So that's really how it came up. It took years to develop. Years. I've been thinking about it forever.

I feel like the arts really helped my personality, who I am, how outspoken I am. Like I said, in theater, you get to be who you want to be. So if you want to be the king of a play, the princess, or the queen of a play you get to be that and you get to personify that.

The same thing with dance. I love dance, and I'm learning how to dance. I'm not the best dancer at all, however I love to dance. So with dance it's the same thing. You get to embody a person, you get to embody a character and with that, especially growing up, especially going through your phase, your teenager phase where you're trying to figure out who you are, figure out who your friends are and all that type of stuff. Throughout that the arts have been a consistency of who I want to be and how I want to flourish from that.

I feel like if you're young and you're trying to get an internship, or you're trying to work and you have an idea for yourself, like I said, ideas take a long time. Believe in yourself. Speak yourself and most importantly, go about life in a positive attitude. And why I'm saying that is because right now, we have a very negative outlook on life, in general, everywhere around the world.

We're going to get nowhere with that. What we need to do is we have to become more positive. We have to become more joyful. We have to bring in the good in life in order for things to happen, and you're trying to bring that joyfulness into life in every single thing that you do. So that's it.

Tyler Johnson: Faithlyn Johnson is the Founder and Artistic Director at Act Up Theater in Hartford. Act Up aims to mobilize the power of the arts to promote social justice activism within our community.

Faithlyn Johnson: I really need to qualify this – I am not the only founder of Act Up Theater. I have two daughters; Tyler Johnson and Priestly Johnson that are owners of the company, as well.

Tyler Johnson: Oh, did I forget to mention she's my mom?

Faithlyn Johnson: The reason why I'm saying that is because how we prepare young people is the fact that two-thirds of my returnings that are now young adults, are our young people that I've worked with most of their lives. They've been in my programs, they've been in my life. I've been their mentor, and now they're giving back.

We really push for healthy relationships. Confidence, of course, goes over the top. We push for solid training, teamwork, resiliency, friendship, and kindness. We talk a lot about kindness and we also talk a lot about family.

We have a lot of times when parents feel the need to reach out to us because maybe their kid was acting fantastic when we have a show on, but when we take a break, the kid goes back to whatever it is that the parents are concerned about.

My daughter Tyler is a real advocate. She teaches in the Hartford Schools, as well. The kids see her, they reach out to her. We had kids that have lost family members or people in the community. A mom will call us and say, "Hey, can you spend a few hours with them?" They'll come by. They're able to talk.

The art gives them not only a safe haven, a place to express themselves, and a place that they can go outside of themselves to see the bigger world. So many times we do have kids that have come in, they're having a bad day, something is going on at home, or something is going on at school, but they won't miss rehearsal. Many times they'll just say to me, "This is where I feel celebrated, this is where I feel safe," and the expectations are high. I think they love the fact

that we see them for who they can be instead of what they are. They love that and they really try to live up to those expectations.

I was a teacher in the classroom, as well. I've taught gifted and talented most of my life. I don't see those kids any different at all, and my expectations have always been high. As a provider, going in at least for our companies, we don't go in thinking that we're saving these kids. We're thinking that they're equal shareholders in what we're doing and we don't go with prejudices of where they're coming from. We just know where we want them to go.

We will have the pushback sometimes from a young person that's so used to failing that they push you into a corner to either cut them or something else because they're used to that negative response to their behavior. I've had it. I will look at one of my kids – I call them all my kids – and I'll say, "I'm not going to cut you and I'm not going to take you out of this position, so you better figure it out because it's not going to happen," and they'll look at me like, oh.

So that shows not that I'm just invested in them, but I want them to realize that the cycle of failure is not going to happen when you're at Act Up Theater.

Tyler Johnson: Rich Hollant is the Commissioner of Cultural Affairs for the City of Hartford.

Rich Hollant: There is now ample data that verifies that arts and culture is typically one of the top three economic drivers in a city, and I'm delighted that we know that. I'm delighted that we can wrap our heads around that and hopefully make investments along those lines. I just want to caution folks not to get too caught up with that. What arts and culture brings to the community is so much more. It's so much more than the story that's told through the economics of a place. You can't put a price tag on belonging and even if it didn't contribute a red cent to the economy, the sense of belonging that it brings to people is worth everything.

*Background music...*

Tyler Johnson: Throughout this podcast series we've stressed the importance of building stronger and more inclusive communities. Arts and culture are one of the best avenues to achieve this goal.

Mike Zaleski: The Connecticut River is a majestic asset that makes its way through Central Connecticut.

Tyler Johnson: Mike Zaleski and Deborah Baker from Riverfront Recapture. Riverfront Recapture is dedicated to improving quality of life and urban vitality through cultural events, entertainment, and recreation along the banks of the Connecticut River.



Mike Zaleski: The Riverfront park system is set up in a way that gives people the opportunity to do a variety of different things. Whether it's our rowing program or our community events, whether it's our large festivals and small concerts.

Deborah Baker: I think Riverfront builds community in a variety of ways. As Mike said, there's so many different options for people in the parks. You can come and kind of be on your own, but know that there are people around you doing something similar.

People come together in our health and fitness classes and that builds that sense of community. Rivers have always been a source of inspiration for people. Cities are built around rivers and that's a place to gather and share things together.

Mike Zaleski: I'm very proud of the fact that our events attract a diverse section of the community. It's not just people from the city of the suburbs, it's everyone.

Community means something different to everyone. I use the example all the time about the Riverfront Fireworks – one of our largest events. I have the opportunity to welcome the crowd to the Riverfront Fireworks just before the fireworks shoot off at 9 o'clock on a Saturday evening. It's always amazing for me to look up at the plaza, Mortensen Riverfront Plaza and see thousands of people who have gathered for this fireworks display. It's a diverse crowd. It's people from all walks of life who are coming to Downtown Hartford and Mortensen Riverfront Plaza to enjoy this free summertime tradition.

It's an opportunity for people to gather on the river to not only celebrate a longtime tradition but also gather with others and get that sense that you belong to a larger community.

Dr. Thomas Loughman: Access as a principle is kind of an expectation of the public in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Tyler Johnson: Dr. Thomas Loughman, Director and CEO of The Wadsworth Atheneum. The Wadsworth is the nation's oldest public art museum.

Dr. Thomas Loughman: They don't want to just know that somewhere, something exists that does this. They want to experience it and they want to be a part of it. and breaking down the barriers that may exist to participation are what most of the arts leaders around our state and around our nation are working on quite busily.

I'm only here three years, but the community engagement initiative goes back a decade and with the help of the Foundation, the initiative was seven years of funding and partnership that allowed for greater public conversations to happen. It also created free opening hours for the institution.

When I arrived three years ago and looked and saw that the free hours we were opening on a monthly basis were three hours a month, and that seemed to me not where we wanted to be. I

looked at the participation numbers and you know, Hartford residents were participating at a rate of 40% and the rest of the days of the month they weren't coming in as great numbers. That didn't seem right to me because in the end, the museum belongs to everyone. People can come and say, "Hey, art museums really aren't for me but at least you tried, at least you reached out to us."

So we created kind of an exploded version of the Community Engagement Initiative when we started Wadsworth Welcome. It allows people to come with guests any hour of the day that we're open. We've seen the participation in the life of the atheneum from these Wadsworth Welcome members really blow us away. We found out that the people that wanted to be coming on a regular basis to the museum are statistically younger than our formal membership base, so the Wadsworth Welcome population reflects the demography of our city as a city that's actually getting younger.

We now have data on the 27 languages other than English that are spoken in the homes of the people that signed up for the program. Even if you just count the person that said they speak Klingon at home, we have a good measure of how we can reach people and make it a more welcoming place.

On World Museum Day last month, we offered tours in four languages other than English. You praise Connecticut as being a place where you have access to the outdoors, access to the best education in America, and access to a cultural life, a vibrant cultural life. That's the envy of all my colleagues around North America, and that's not a story that's told often enough.

Tyler Johnson: We've spent a lot of time in this episode touting the virtues of the arts, but there are certainly areas for improvement. Like all the other topics we've covered in this series, when you look at arts and culture, you'll find disparities, mostly around race, place and income.

The Hartford Foundation recently partnered with the Connecticut State Office of the Arts to commission research to better understand the dynamics of the Greater Hartford's arts industry.

Here's Bonnie Koba of the Office of the Arts.

Bonnie Koba: So I think there were no big surprises, but rather the study confirmed a good deal of what we thought we knew but we didn't have the data to back up. So the study showed there is a vibrant arts community across the region, that funding and sustainability is a critical concern.

About a third of the organizations in this area have only one month of available unrestricted net assets, which makes that a critical concern, and that there's a disconnect between the percent of non-white residents in the Greater Hartford community, particularly Hispanic, and the percent of non-white professionals engaged in the arts industry.

Ana Valentine Jackson: I think that the main driver for me to say, you know what, we need to do something, and that's when we started Cultural Mosaica, was because my grandson was going to be born in 2015...

Tyler Johnson: Ana Valentin-Jackson, Interim Executive Director and founding member of Cultural Moasica. Cultural Mosaica promotes Latino culture and heritage in the community.

Ana Valentin-Jackson: ...and I was like, what am I leaving for this kid to know? I mean, he has four different heritages through his veins. He's Mexican, he's Puerto Rican, he's Dominican and he's German, so I'm like, at least we've got three of the four that we can definitely give him to learn who he is. But I really wanted him to have something the day I'm not here anymore, because I failed to do that as a parent with my daughters. So I'm like, my grandkid is going to learn about who he is, where he came from, where his ancestors came from, and that we are good people contrary to what he may see on the news.

To see the girls put on some skirts to dance bomba in the middle of the class, to catch them feeling the beat of a drum and really connecting that to the heart, because it's a heartbeat. To see them just flourish in those 90 minutes or 60 minutes is like, "Oh my God, this is exactly why we started doing what we're doing because we want the babies to connect to that."

I've been in Hartford for 30 years now. I can say that officially – I'm an official resident of Connecticut, but especially Hartford is home. So over the years I have been able to see the ebbs and flows of what Latino communities can bring into the region.

But more importantly, what I'm seeing is that over the years there has been a continuous decrease and decline in the representation of Latino arts in general, whether it's music or visual arts. We look at that and say, okay you know what, we have a group of new kids, new generations growing in Hartford who don't necessarily have a connection to their own heritage and to their own culture whether it's Latino or not. So for us, it's really important that we come back and say, you know, we need to do a better job with that.

It is important because take a look at what Hartford and what the region looks like. We are very diverse. We have communities from every spectrum and from everywhere in the world pretty much. We need to be able to serve everyone and also learn from each other.

I think that's the more important part, learning from each other and bring down those barriers around knowledge and what we know about other people in other cultures, because most of the time it's portrayed by the media in a way that we don't want and for us, It's really important that people know who we each are and what we bring to the table.

Chion Wolf: When you've got the arts, especially if you've got a diverse line up not only race and ethnicity, but of age, of gender expression, of all that; it's so important...

Tyler Johnson: Chion Wolf is a WNPR personality and Hartford resident.

Chion Wolf: ...because there's no other way to see the world when you're your own self. You have to hear it from the people who are going through it, and the people who are most marginalized have the clearest view of what the truth is, of what's really going on in this world, and that is so valuable.

If we don't amplify these voices, if we don't put a light on these voices, if we don't absorb that, it's our loss, it's our loss forever.

There's a lot of people that you may know are on this LGBTQIA+ spectrum and sure, yes, if I interview them, you'll probably hear something new about them. But because I have the freedom that I do, I get to look around me and all the people around me who I don't think have had a chance to say what they need to say.

Also, being interviewed by somebody who is on that spectrum with them, you might hear something more intimate that you wouldn't get in any other way. You might hear questions asked that you wouldn't think to ask because I've been living in it, too, in my own way. But even within that spectrum, I have no idea what it's like to be trans. Even the labels of the spectrum as they are, you know, we joke it's so many letters, LGBTQIA+ LMNOP. Even though I'm on the spectrum, I still have a lot to learn, too. As I've gotten older I've realized how very little I know. I'm thrilled when I don't know something and I figure it out or I get a new insight. It's like a little hit of dopamine.

So when you've got voices from people in the arts who are finally getting a platform, the world really does lighten up and diversify to our benefit.

Julia Pistell: I believe so strongly that everyone wants a community that is outside of work and outside of their house.

Tyler Johnson: That's Julia Pistell of CT Improv.

Julia Pistell: I mean, we get so many folks who want to get deeply involved in an artistic community for friendship, to find people to date – when we're talking about younger people especially. We get a lot of folks who are older and they've never really pursued an artistic passion and they're just really curious. It's fulfilling this other need in people to do something interesting, do something challenging.

One thing that has been interesting for me is a lot of our folks, they're kind of replacing almost that church mentality. Like where do I go once a week where I know everybody, everybody knows me, and I can just do the thing I love? That has been our role in a lot of people's lives. It's really nice and it's also a place for people to nerd out.

Faithlyn Johnson: I think I could best phrase this. We had two elderly come out that had not been out of their house in years.

Tyler Johnson: That's Faithlyn Johnson of Act Up Theater.

Faithlyn Johnson: They said they barely just go to the senior center and back. We got them to come to a performance, and with tears in her eyes she said, "I felt like we have our own Broadway in our own community." I felt that yes! Mission accomplished! They felt included.

We created a talk back session about dreams. So after the show we had like a little dinner theater. People did not want to leave. They felt so excited that we're able to communicate and talk back. And we didn't talk a lot about just our mission, we talked about them as a person. I think those personal conversations opened up so many more. There were so many relationships that were formed from that.

Knowing that people are people, whether race, color, religion, knowing that people appreciate beautiful things in art. Art exposes you to the world. It gives you a world in the middle of your hands that nobody can take away.

When you have it in a community like ours, you will see thriving individuals, happy individuals. We say we're putting community back into community theater, and a uniqueness about Act Up Theater that I think we've really tapped into as well is that we have a lot of siblings on the stage together, parents on the stage with their kids.

Everyone kind of shies away from me when they see me because they'll say, "I love it. I used to do it when I was younger," and my next thing is, "So when are you going to be in the next show?" That really opens the door for them because many of the parents will come to audition with their kids and end up auditioning themselves.

Tyler Johnson: We've discussed a bunch of ways that arts and culture can be used to improve our region. But arts and culture also have intangible benefits. They can help people achieve personal growth.

David Fay, President and CEO of the Bushnell.

David Fay: Well, the arts and culture are a reflection of what's going on in society, in humanity, in our world, and certainly in our community. It enriches the life of every citizen and it provides great opportunity for expression. I like to call the arts "the gymnasium of imagination." It's in the arts experience that the human being can really stretch their imagination, which is not just about enjoying the arts, it's about really working on that side of your brain. This is something that's not just a nice amenity to have, but it's really an important part of our human advancement.

Ana Valentin-Jackson: I consider myself an official arts dabbler.

Tyler Johnson: Again, Ana Valentin-Jackson of Cultural Mosaica.

Ana Valentin-Jackson: I am not by any means a jewelry maker. I am not a painter. I am not a musician. I would probably die starving as a musician because I cannot sing a tune or play a note, but I find that for me personally, it helps me balance myself mentally when I am overstressed and I can go and paint something.

Whether it's something my four-year-old grandkid could've done or whoever's opinion about it may be, the way I see it and my philosophy behind it is that the arts have a very big and strong positive effect on the mental health of people. It's part of our...like that heartbeat, like that pulse, you know...

*Background music...*

You cannot come down if you're always up, so the arts help me come down and it may help others to do the same. We really need to convey the message and relay the message to people that the arts really matter.

*Music...*

David Fay: The Bushnell, like the other major arts institutions, the academic institutions and the hospitals, you know we're not going anywhere.

Tyler Johnson: David Fay of the Bushnell.

David Fay: We're not going to pull up roots and move our headquarters to Tapusic, Wyoming. We're going to be here. So we have a responsibility, I certainly believe, to collaborate very closely with each other, with government, and with the business community to do everything we possibly can to enrich the lives of our citizens, to enrich the lives of everybody in our region.

We have terrific staffs, great boards who are very influential in the community, so I think our vision needs to go beyond the walls of our institutions and that which we do on a daily basis.

Chion Wolf: How do I put this succinctly?

Tyler Johnson: Once again, Chion Wolf.

Chion Wolf: For our survival as a species, for our survival as a city, our survival as a country, our survival as a world, we need to be informed in these ways, we need to be inspired in these ways to survive. And I don't mean that in a cutesy way. I mean it for us to keep going for the long term, for the kids who are coming up underneath us.

It's funny because when I think about kids, we're in a tough spot in a lot of ways right now and so I think, "Oh the kids, they've got this. They know what they're doing," but we need to do everything we can to make sure we now – because I care about us, we now too – that we here now and those who are coming up behind us have as much of a clear vision for what the world has to offer and what we can accomplish together and there's no other way to do that than to have a diverse way of expressing ourselves.

Tyler Johnson: The arts are about more than seeing a play or looking at a painting. They can build the skills we need to be more engaged at work and help foster innovation. They help our children to be well-rounded individuals and prepare them for the future. Arts and culture not only build community, they can help make our neighborhoods safer.

We as a region can and should do more to support the arts and culture in our communities. Without them, life would be boring.

Before we end this episode, we have one request:

By now, you should understand the power that arts and culture have in a region like ours.

The Hartford Foundation is asking you, whether you're a resident or an arts organization, to think about new and unique ways that arts and culture can be used to tackle disparities, be a solution to our problems, and make Greater Hartford a better place. Reach out and let us know!

We leave you now with one final thought from Chip McCabe.

Chip McCabe: I'm a pie in the sky person when it comes to towns and cities to begin with. I drive through a town and I'm like, you could put music there, you could put a mural there, I mean, that's just how I look at cities and towns, in general.

For me, when I look at Hartford, I absolutely see potential to create more arts and more entertainment. You know, I literally look at every single building and think to myself, what can we do to make this more entertaining?

I think if you get more people thinking in those terms, then those creative minds start to come together. That's when a lot of your pop up stuff starts to happen, you start to fill empty retail space maybe with stores in retail that you didn't even think existed, and then you start to see that critical mass of people on the streets, and then that's where the perception really starts to shift.

*Background music...*

Tyler Johnson: Thanks for listening to DISINVESTED. I'm Tyler Johnson.

If you've enjoyed this podcast, please subscribe and share with your friends.

Next time on DISINVESTED we ask, what does it mean to be part of a community? Join us for our final episode.

This podcast is created by the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving. Produced by Tom Zeleznock, Steph MacGillivray, Michaela Mendygral and Autumn Gordon-Chow.

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