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Twenty-six minutes with Greg Liakos, Spokesperson for the Massachusetts Cul- tural Council



On a warm but windy Friday, April 22, 2016, Wilderness House Literary Review's arts editor Pam Rosenblatt had the privilege to interview Greg Liakos, the spokesperson for Massachusetts Cultural Council, at a coffee shop in Woburn, Massachusetts. What they discussed ranged from arts in education to funding the arts by municipal, federal, and state governments to advocacy, creativity, and innovation to receive funding in the arts. What was about 26 minutes seemed like an hour as a lot of material was covered, material that helps explain why the arts – visual and performing – is so vital to the history of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

WHLR: How would you like your name to be written in the article?
And what is your work title at Massachusetts Cultural Council?



Mass Cultural Council

GL: Greg Liakos. My formal title is Communications Director. But if you want to refer to me as Spokesperson, that's fine, too.

WHLR: You have recently written two press releases for the MCC. One is dated January 27, 2016 and the second one is dated April 13, 2016. Both press releases deal with the proposed arts funding for the MCC from Governor Charlie Baker and from the House Committee on Ways and Means. Governor Baker suggested an allocation of \$14 million to fund the arts, humanities, and sciences through the Massachusetts Cultural Council for this coming Fiscal Year 2017. The MCC requests \$17 million for the FY17, an increase of \$3 million from last year, or FY16.

What do you think of this conflicting situation? And what amount of funding do you think is appropriate for MCC to receive in order to function effectively in FY17?

GL: Sure. Maybe to frame it up with a little bit of context. We are the State's art agency. The one agency in Massachusetts State government that is dedicated to supporting non-profit arts and the humanities and the sciences. Like every State public program, we have to advocate for our budget every year. We operate on a Fiscal Year. So our budget historically is waxes and waned depending on the fiscal and economic situation for the State. We were once as high as \$28 million in today's terms. That would be \$50 million back in the 1980s. We were at \$19 million in 2001. Over the last few years, we've been climbing back from the depths of the recession.

WHLR: What is the lowest amount the MCC was allotted in recent Fiscal Years?

GL: The lowest was probably after the major cut in 2001 – 2002. We went from \$19 million to \$7 million in one year. Yes, a huge cut. 62% of our budget was wiped out in one year.

WHLR: Why is this?

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GL: At that time, the city was in deep fiscal crisis. It was the way they had structured the budget that year. The governor was able to do a single line veto without legislature approval. I think that we're in a better position today than we were back then because we have a stronger advocacy network. But we still have to fight for this every year. Like I said, we went from a recent low of about \$9.5 million back up to \$14 million in this current Fiscal Year. And even that when you consider that we fund nearly 400 non-profit organizations, 329 local cultural councils, arts education programs in the schools and out of schools programs, \$14 million doesn't go very far in a state like Massachusetts.

We've been advocating to build on that, and that is why we asked for \$17 million this year. We wanted to do specific things with organizations and local councils and around arts education.

The budget process year-to-year goes through its ups and downs. The State's fiscal picture is still relatively shaky. The health care costs continue to be a huge budget buster for the State government. Actually, given all those conditions, we were pretty pleased to see that the governor who is conservative fiscally to try to flat fund us. But we were surprised with the next stage of the process when the House Ways and Means Committee then proposed a really significant cut for us.

So we mobilize. We're making the case that it is just a step in the process that now the challenge is to convince the whole House of Representatives to reverse that cut and start going back toward what we approached: \$17 million. What we did was we filed an amendment. We meaning our supporters and legislature on our behalf filed an amendment that would get us to \$17 million and now that's got about one hundred co-sponsors, which is almost two-thirds of our full House of Representatives. That's a good sign!

WHLR: What year was the \$7 million allotted?

GL: It was in 2002 or 2003.

WHLR: It was when the stock market started having a problem?

GL: Following the post 9/11 crash. Exactly. And we built back up until the last

recession. Then we took another big cut. It was like a 25% cut in 2010. Of course some agencies can withstand those kinds of cuts. But us, we're primarily a grant maker. So our relationship with our organizations and the schools in our communities is one based on, we hope, it's based on trust. Trust means on some extent reliability. We'd like to get to a place where the highs and the lows aren't so severe. If there is some reliability in terms of the funding.

WHLR: Could you get contracts established for a few years?

GL: I don't think so. We're always going to have to go through the budget cycle. But I think we just have to keep making the case that this is important and that reliability is an important value to try to maintain from year to year.

WHLR: On January 29, 2016, The Boston Globe published an editorial titled "State and city must lead in arts funding". Did you see this article? I have it with me in case you haven't.

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GL: I did. Yes.

WHLR: Basically, what the piece seems to be saying is that Boston has a lot of private money and a lot of arts organizations [to quote: “Boston’s more than 1,500 arts organizations, on per capita basis, outpaced even New York City, and that the arts have had a ‘significant impact of the state’s economy’.”] but little support from the state and city governments. The editorial also mentioned that the economics of the situation are a bit off quilter as there are three quote “giant cultural institutions – the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Museum of Fine Arts, and WGBH” that each make more than \$75 million a year. This offsets the economic balance, as there are 1,497 other arts organizations in Boston that do not make as much money. Quote: “Boston’s nonprofit arts organizations...depend inordinately on tickets and individual donations” as they “lack foundation support and public funding”.

Do you agree that the state and city governments should fund the 1,500 arts organizations in Boston to help offset costs? Why?

GL: Definitely. Yes! When you look at the big picture of the sort of ecosystem of support for the cultural sector, the public sector is never going to be an overwhelming funder, but it’s got a significant role to play. If you contrast it with European countries like the U.K. or Germany or France that grew out of a tradition of loyal patrons of the arts, you always have robust public support. America had a very different model. Private philanthropy was always dominant and not the nonprofit world generally. But the arts in particular.

What public funding does is it democratizes access to the arts. It ensures that all of the access isn’t limited to persons of significant means or of geography or of ability. The Cultural Council and other public agencies take seriously the notion that the arts and humanities belong to everybody and our institutions belong to everybody.

But they also need support. Our source is a way to expand access to their collectors or their programs or their theater programs or music programs. That’s a big part of it.

Public support also gives everybody a stake – as taxpayers – in those iconic institutions like the Museum of Fine Arts and BSO. Even though you walk into the MFA and you walk into the American Wing and you see the Copleys and the Sargents, you have a little piece of that. It doesn’t just belong to the Trustees of the MFA.

And the other thing, of course, is we really have a particular role of advocating and supporting arts education in the schools at a time when the arts is just not prioritized in most schools. It’s just about science, math, and language. These are important. But the arts should play a role there, too. We are the one agency in the State government that prioritizes that and advocates for funds specifically.

And, again, there’s national funding from the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities. There’s the State Arts Councils. There’s municipal support. All of these streams are important sources to balance against private support and corporate support.

WHLR: The educational system is getting reduced. A lot of schools are

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cutting out the arts, music, etc. But they're building up the hardcore subjects.

GL: At a lot of places, you're right.

WHLR: Why do you think [the public school systems] are doing this?

GL: Well, that's a hard question to answer. I think in general we live utilitarian culture. We live in a culture that values practical learning and a lot of education supporters don't often see the practical side of education. They assume if you're not going to become a bassoonist, why play the bassoon? If you're not going to become a painter, why paint? I think it's incumbent upon us to keep making the argument that arts education transcends the particular discipline that these kids are studying. It's about something deeper and something meaningful.

There's pressures on the schools for time. There's been an emphasis on standardized testing. I think there's a lot of economic anxiety out there. A lot of people who would have been more supportive of band and/or drama for their children are now worried if their child going to get a job when he and she gets out in the real world.

All of these factors undermine support for the arts in the schools.

WHLR: I've read some articles that said that creative students are drawn more toward the arts. And is it true that studying the arts make students understand more about creativity so that he or she can apply [creativity] to their lessons in English, Science, and languages more effectively and creatively?

GL: Yes, I think that's partly true. I am always hesitant to emphasize arts education in the service of something else. And it does help in all those other areas. But I think one of the things ... we have to advocate for is arts education on its own terms. The arts have been a part of education since the beginning of civilization in the West. Not only in the West but in the East, too. China, Japan, and Africa. I mean it's universal. We shouldn't be shy about saying that the arts are part of the way we learn as human beings. We have to keep making that case!

All those things are true. No doubt about it. It's just we need to be better at refining our argument, so we better be better at organizing. Look at the success of the Charter School movement, the STEM movement. They got serious about advocacy over a long period of time. We have to do the same thing.

WHLR: How did the arts fair under President Obama's administration? And where do you think it will head if Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, Ted Cruz, or Donald Trump wins the Presidential election in November 2016?

GL: So under Obama, and this is a little beyond my basic knowledge but I do follow the allocations for the National Endowment for the Arts, the annual grant for the MEA, as part of our annual budget, and of course the MEA funds many programs for Massachusetts and the National Arts for Humanities... Given the circumstances that the President came in – fiscal and financial and political, he's done okay. For example, the last two or three budgets that the U. S. House of Representatives' majority proposed

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would have eliminated the NEA and the NEH entirely. Those [proposed budgets] didn't pass, fortunately. And the President has managed to propose and get passed slight increases.

But still the NEA's budget is like \$150 million and this is for the entire country. Think about that. And of course there's the Smithsonian. There are other significant sources of money. But the wide grant making distribution around the Country – it is still small relative to what it could be, and certainly small relative to our European neighbors. Canada? There's a much larger gap between per capita arts funding in Canada and the United States. Huge gap. It's significant. They support major cultural institutions in a big way and support the more rural communities. So we've got a long way to go.

And, honestly, I have no idea about Donald Trump. The one thing about him that you can think about is he's a New Yorker. If you don't understand the impact of the arts as a New Yorker, you're not looking around!

Ted Cruz I'm more worried about. He's a conservative ideologue. I can see him supporting the elimination of these federal arts agencies.

WHLR: Look at Ronald Reagan. He supported the arts.

GL: Eventually. It took him a while. The first couple of years his administration proposed eliminating the NEA, too. They turned him around. But this doesn't have to be partisan. Bill Weld, former Massachusetts governor, was a big supporter of the Cultural Council. So it really doesn't have to be partisan at all.

WHLR: Do you think an arts education is important to have in grades K-12? Why and in what ways does an arts education have an impact on the higher educational system?

GL: Yes. Well, we talked about that a little bit. But, yes, absolutely. It's a different way learning. We can learn through mathematics; we can learn through language; but the world opens up through the visual arts or through drama. It's a different way of learning about your experiences as a human being. So absolutely, it has to be central. And we've got to give children every avenue into learning that we can. Every child learns differently. We've got to provide those avenues for every child.

Plus, creativity. The thing that we can build on is that Americans do value creativity. They do value the creative mind. What we have to do better is we've got connect the arts to that value and to remind people that the arts are the most direct route to becoming a creative person.

WHLR: True. And if you think about today's society and Robotics. The [necessary] art of it. It has to start from a design.

GL: Exactly. These [robots] aren't just functional objects. They are designed objects. We often tell the story of Steve Jobs. His vision of the iPhone and iPad wasn't functional. It was also aesthetic. He often talked about how his training in the arts and humanities was central to his success. Without that, you wouldn't have had these devices that have changed the way we download music.

WHLR: Do you know of any ways we can get more funding for Mas-

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sachusetts? Into the school system and the Country? How?

GL: The quick answer is the really strong and sustained advocacy. We have an advocacy network, MassCreative, that now works in partnership with us and with all of our organizations. We have to be in the conversations about taxpayers' support. We live in a democracy. Democracy is about making difficult choices about how to allocate resources. And you have to be in that conversation and you have to be part of it. And you do that through ongoing advocacy. That's where it really starts.

WHLR: What are the benefits of arts funding for the State's economy and education? What are the benefits of it?

GL: If you just start with the most obvious thing which is cultural tourism. These are dollars that come into the State and outside the State. Look around. Spend a day in Boston. Look up the Freedom Trail. Look up the Museum of Fine Arts or the Institute of Contemporary Art or Huntington Theatre. A good portion of those people who are having those art experiences are outside the State. The dollars are being invested right here and supporting jobs.

The second thing is that the sector itself is a major employer. If you combine the jobs from big institutions like [Museum of Fine Arts or the Institute of Contemporary Art or Huntington Theatre] down to small community theaters and community orchestras and then of all of the ancillary benefits that those institutions have, you're talking about a pretty big chunk of our economy. But then you go beyond that and you think about what artists and creative entrepreneurs bring to all of the products – like what we were just talking about with Steve Jobs – that way of thinking which also has economic benefit. Creative thinking has economic impact.

So those are the key contributors. Sometimes they are hard to measure, but they are substantial. No question about it.

One more thing I like to mention that's important is the quality of life. How do you attract and maintain a work horse? You often hear Boston, Cambridge saying, "How do we make sure the kids who are graduating from Harvard, MIT, BU, and BC – the best and the brightest – get work after graduation?" How do you get them to stay there? One of the ways you do that is by creating a good quality of life in the city. And the arts are really part of that, too. You want to live and work in a place that's rich in experiences and aesthetically pleasing. So the arts are a big part of that, too.

WHLR: Is there anything else? Have we covered most of it?

GL: Those are the keys arguments that we make all of the time on Beacon Hill and elsewhere on behalf of our sector.

WHLR: Thank you for the interview.

In a June 30, 2016 Massachusetts Cultural Council press release titled "Final State Budget Funds Art & Culture at Current Levels", Greg Liakos reported that the State Senate and House reached an agreement to allot the Massachusetts Cultural Council \$14 million for FY 2017.