

# AMERICAN ARTSCAPE<sup>®</sup>

A MAGAZINE OF THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Number 1, 2023

## In Celebration of **Artful** Lives



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# This issue

Since starting her term in 2021, National Endowment for the Arts Chair Maria Rosario Jackson has routinely discussed the premise of “artful lives” during her travels across the country. As she notes in her essay in this issue, it is “an inclusive concept containing a wide range of arts experiences, including the everyday, deeply meaningful practices and expressions within our daily lives as well as the making, presentation, and distribution of professional art from all disciplines and traditions.”

The concept revolves around a set of principles:

- All people have the capacity to be creative, imaginative, and expressive on their own terms.
- Arts and cultural activity happen in many kinds of places, not just museums and theaters, and our concept of that activity must be expansive.
- Art process can be as important as and, in some cases, even more important than art product.
- Artists, culture bearers, and designers have many kinds of relationships to the world and help us see things from different perspectives, ask questions, speak truth, and help us imagine what could be.
- The arts are intrinsically important (full stop). The arts are most impactful when they exist not in a bubble, in isolation, but in connection to other dimensions of our lives, our communities, towns, and cities—at the intersections of other areas of policy and practice like health, education, community and economic development, transportation, the environment, and more.

In this issue, we spoke with artists, arts administrators, public health professionals, and nonprofit leaders about the important role the arts have played in their lives.

# AMERICAN ARTSCAPE®

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Cover: Military families at the 2022 Blue Star Museums launch event at the New Children’s Museum in San Diego, California. Photo by Brandon Colbert Photography



◀ NEA Chair Jackson with White House Liaison and Senior Advisor to the Chair Jenn Chang and Senior Advisor to the Chair on Partnerships, Expansion, & Innovation Jen Hughes at the CDC Museum's exhibit *Trusted Messengers: Building Confidence in COVID-19 Vaccines Through Art*. This exhibit highlighted some of the projects that were part of the NEA's collaboration with the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) and the CDC Foundation on an initiative that engages artists and arts organizations to promote COVID vaccine readiness in their communities. NEA File Photo

# Arts Outside the Bubble

BY MARIA ROSARIO JACKSON, PHD

I have been in my position as chair of the National Endowment for the Arts for more than a year now. During my travels around the nation, I have lifted up the concept of artful lives—an inclusive concept containing a wide range of arts experiences, including the everyday, deeply meaningful practices and expressions within our daily lives as well as the making, presentation, and distribution of professional art from all disciplines and traditions.

Our individual lives have unique and nuanced dimensions and include many different ways to participate in the arts. My fondest memories of arts engagement trace back to childhood and stem from my parents looking to the arts to help my brother and me understand our cultures. My father introduced us to the works of African American writers, musicians, and visual artists to make sure we understood

the African American experience, intellectually and emotionally. My mom was adamant that we had exposure to the work of Mexican artists of all kinds—visual artists, writers, performers, artisans, and tradition bearers. There was an artists' collective, known as St. Elmo's Village, that was near my grandmother's house and we used to go visit her every Sunday. We would stop by the artists' collective to see what the artists were doing, and they were always working on something different and amazing and we were curious to see it. Those experiences were meaningful for many reasons, one of them being the cultivation of curiosity at an early age. The more I learned about my own cultures, the more curious I became about the cultures of others. I think I also, through those experiences, learned that people rely on the arts to tell their story fully as humans.

Family traditions intersect with the idea of having aesthetics in your life and taking care to share something in a way that is special. In the summertime, I would visit my mother's family in Mexico and the elders there were very committed to stewarding traditions, whether it was around food or a life event such as a baptism. In my experience in California with my father's African American family, there was care taken around New Year's and the foods we ate. There's something about those family traditions that I think affirms the idea that having aesthetics in your life and taking care to share something in a way that is special is essential. It's connected to our human dignity.

I have always loved going to exhibitions, concerts, and festivals, and taking part in all of the ways that we participate as audience members or consumers. When I have time, there is the joy of making things, taking ceramics classes and dabbling in creative endeavors at home. My childhood arts engagement has flowed into my adult life in that, when I have family or friends over, there's a lot of care taken to host, especially when it's something that is a tradition or part of my heritage—there's a stewardship that comes with that, and it makes you pay attention to the aesthetic choices and the roots of the traditions as well as their evolution.

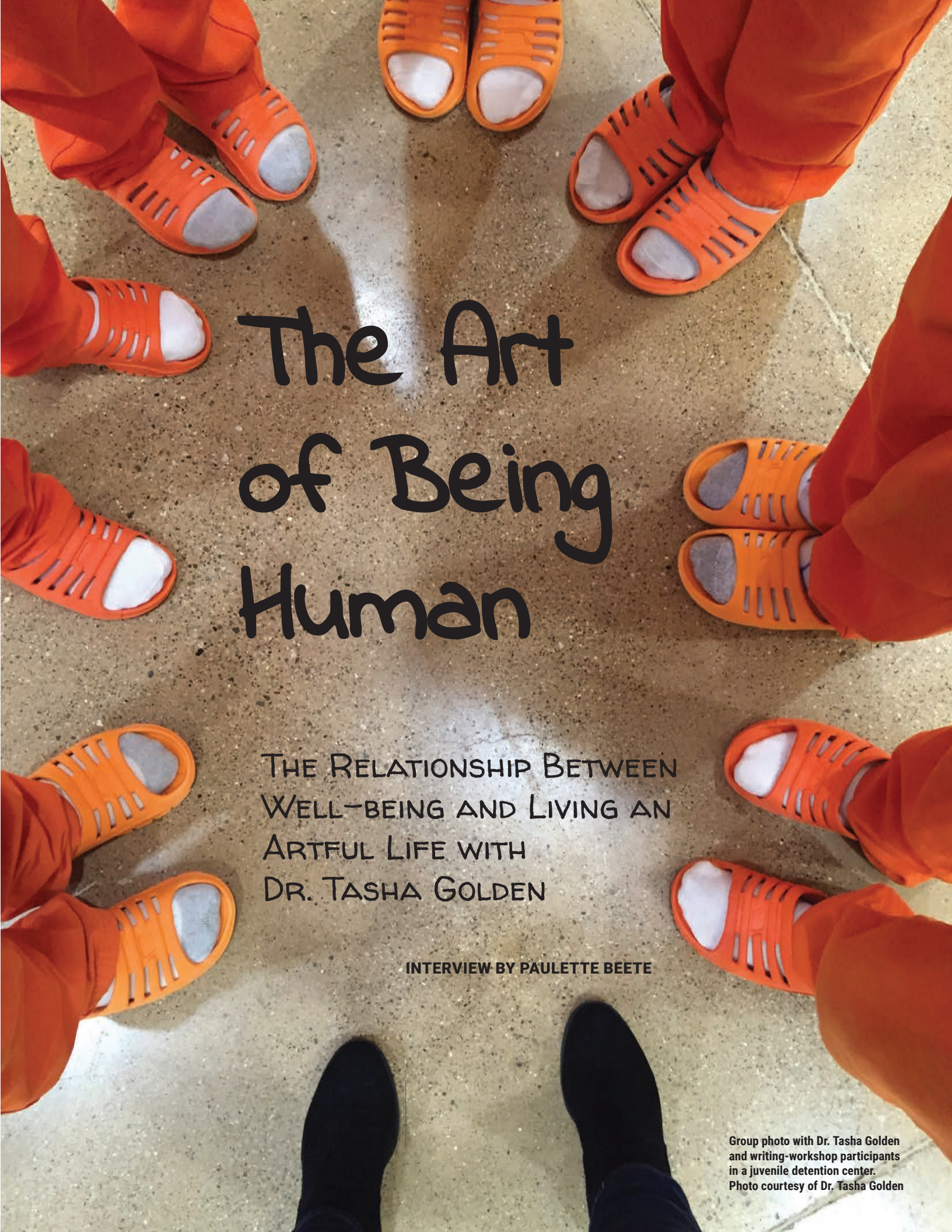
So, when I go to other places or other countries, in addition to experiencing the arts that are presented in cultural venues like museums and concert halls—which can be extraordinary—there's also something really important about understanding the fashion, how people dress, the choices that they make to express themselves. Or understanding the food of that place, the dishes they make that they are proud of. I think it's very important to pay attention to those things too.

I've been working in the arts for almost 30 years. A lot of my training has been in fields that are about creating equitable places where all people can thrive. And I am convinced that you can't do that well without including arts, culture, and design. I think of those very early experiences where my parents relied on the arts to make sure that my brother and I were proud of where we came from, and had not just an intellectual understanding but a deep, well-rounded understanding of the histories that preceded us, and the tools to help us understand the contemporary. All of that has informed my worldview and cemented my belief that the arts need to be woven throughout various dimensions of our society and our lives.

The idea of the arts just being set aside in a bubble that you touch just once in a while, that's not enough. The experience of art is a precondition for so many other priorities that we say we want to accomplish as a nation of opportunity. In order for us to care about a group of people that we don't have connection to, or don't know well, we have to be curious. If we're not able to establish that kind of connection, curiosity, empathy, or whatever tethers us to other humans, we will never get to the important priorities we say we want to do or be the society we aspire to be.

In this issue of *American Artscape*, we explore and celebrate the vital role that the arts and culture have in our everyday lives. These first-person narratives showcase various art disciplines and examples of community engagement, and they illuminate one common theme: that to live an artful life—to connect with the arts and see the intersections with other dimensions of our lives, whether it is health, transportation, or the built environment—is essential to lifting up humankind.

*Maria Rosario Jackson, PhD is chair of the National Endowment for the Arts.*

A top-down photograph of a group of people standing in a circle on a light-colored concrete floor. Most of the people are wearing bright orange, perforated athletic shoes and matching orange pants. At the bottom center of the frame, a pair of black shoes is visible, likely belonging to the person taking the photo. The text is overlaid on the center of the image.

# The Art of Being Human

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN  
WELL-BEING AND LIVING AN  
ARTFUL LIFE WITH  
DR. TASHA GOLDEN

INTERVIEW BY PAULETTE BEETE

Group photo with Dr. Tasha Golden  
and writing-workshop participants  
in a juvenile detention center.  
Photo courtesy of Dr. Tasha Golden



▲ Dr. Tasha Golden performing with her band Ellery. Photo by Bill Ivester

**H**ow and why can people communicate about some things via the arts that we can't communicate about otherwise?

That question has pursued Dr. Tasha Golden since she was a touring singer-songwriter and realized the way in which her songs seemed to give audience members permission to share their own stories. "Many people followed their stories by saying that I'm the first person they had ever told," she remembered. "I [recognized] the implications of the fact that if they had never told anybody before they told me: that means they've never told a doctor or a therapist or even a spouse or partner.... I was recognizing that there are implications here for what we think health is and for what we think healthcare is and how we approach it."

This lightbulb moment led Golden to start formal research into the arts as a type of technology for communication, meaning that the arts seemed to imbue difficult or otherwise intense situations with what she calls "talk-about-ability." Golden left touring behind to pursue studies in rhetoric and communication, and also founded a creative writing program for incarcerated girls. Her work with justice-involved youth offered further supportive evidence about the arts and talk-about-ability. Golden eventually obtained a PhD in public health, a promising arena for pursuing the dominant question of her research.

In her own words here is Golden, now the director of research at the International Arts + Mind Lab at Johns Hopkins University, on her aha! moment, the role of the arts in community, and what she thinks it means to live an artful life.

### **ON THE AHA! MOMENT THAT CHANGED HER LIFE**

I wrote a song about my family's history of domestic violence. It was a way of processing

the emotion of something that I hadn't really looked in the face before. The song was called "You Did Everything Right," and I didn't think that I would ever play it for anybody else, because sharing it wasn't the point. But unexpectedly, at a show soon after that, I just put it on the set list. I probably cried my way through half of it. [After the performance] everybody wanted to talk to me about that song, wanted to ask me questions about it. They wanted to relate their own stories. I wound up hearing all those people's stories and having this confrontation with, like, something is going on here that we don't know enough about. Why and how were we able to have these really beautiful, generative conversations with relative strangers around this song, when none of us would have just offered this up in any other kind of gathering? I began doing a little bit more work at the intersections of how music can effect change—music as advocacy, using music as a way to process [our] lives and share messages, speak truth to power, whatever the case may be.

### **ON THE ARTS AS AN INTRINSIC PART OF BEING HUMAN**

I'm an advocate for the things that we need as humans to be able to be well and to thrive and to connect, which, quite often, includes the arts. And I'm an advocate for ceasing the arbitrary exclusion of the arts from our conceptualizations of what it means to be healthy or to have a healthy community or to build a city that's conducive to human health. When it comes to the role of the arts in public health, I think of it in concentric circles: there's the individual, the interpersonal, the community, there's policy, there's culture, and art has roles to play in all of these. For many people, when they personally engage in art, especially if it's something that they find meaningful, they can have some [health] benefits associated with that. There are also studies indicating that the arts can support us in communicating with one another. We evolved to like and share art as a way to communicate the human experience, right? We need a variety of ways to interact with our world, to process our world, to respond to what it means to bear witness to our world, to communicate with one another. Art can support us in being able to process, to bear witness, to connect, to share things interpersonally, but also with our communities, with our cultures. And then at the outer levels of those concentric circles, we're looking at policy and culture. We've seen that, historically, artists and art have been

at the forefront of social movements and have been critical in helping to shift perspectives and norms around issues that wind up shifting how people are able to engage with their worlds, shifting human rights, shifting who we welcome into what some of my colleagues might call our moral communities. The arts have been essential in changing those kinds of narratives for us over time and that has implications for changes in policy and changes in culture.

### ARTS IN THE COMMUNITY AS DATA

I live in Louisville, Kentucky. It's an arts-rich city. There's so much innovation here and so many people trying new and beautiful things. I think all the time about a poet named Rheonna Thornton here who founded one of the largest all-female, spoken-word competitions called Lipstick Wars. I love it as an artist and as a fan of spoken word. But I've also, when I have attended that kind of event, often thought, "Are there any health researchers here? Are there any policymakers here?" Because so much of what's coming at

you from the stage is people sharing important specific experiences that reflect their needs, their priorities, their strengths, their desires, what they need from their community, what they're not getting from their community, what it might mean to be and live in a safe and healthy space. There's so much important data that is emerging so powerfully from those spaces, and that's true of art in general. The way that the art represents the community and informs the community, I'm always thinking about who's listening and how this information and these narratives are being incorporated or should be incorporated into our understandings of local policies and resources and needs.

### ON WHAT IT MEANS TO LIVE AN ARTFUL LIFE

There is one side of me that wants to say we all already live artful lives. It's just to more or less degrees of intentionality and awareness. We don't get to live in a world that's unaffected by the arts, where the arts have no influence or power. That world does not exist. The only world we have is a

▼ Dr. Tasha Golden at a poetry reading with workshop participants at a juvenile detention center. Photo courtesy of Project Jericho



world in which the arts exist and have influence, and we can ignore that or not. We ignore the effects of the arts, and the presence of the arts, the impacts of the arts to our detriment and, sometimes, at our peril. We all are influenced and impacted by the arts to various degrees. It's just a question of whether that's an impact that we can really use to support what we want for our lives and for the people that we love, or whether that's something that we're passively ingesting without realizing it, and it's having effects that we might not register. What I would want for people is to not exclude the arts from your sense of what is meaningful, what matters, what it means to be human. It's not so much that you should draw a picture every day, or try to write a song every day, or even listen to music every day—although I think most people probably do that last one already—but it's more to stop telling yourself that those things are frivolous or disconnected or peripheral. We evolved to look to various art

forms, to want beauty, to respond to certain kinds of sounds or beats or experiences or visions. All of that affects us, and it doesn't have to be something that we play down as if it doesn't matter. We can instead choose to see ourselves as fully human and to see art as a part of that human experience that we can honor and recognize and be curious about.

*Paulette Beete is the social media manager in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.*

▼ Dr. Tasha Golden facilitates a workshop at Johns Hopkins University. Photo courtesy of International Arts + Mind Lab





# THE SON OF GO-GO



## Wiley Brown of the Chuck Brown Band

INTERVIEW BY AUNYE BOONE

A decade ago, if you were to ask Wiley Brown about leading his father's band in the future, he would've laughed out loud. Literally. I attended Virginia Tech with Wiley and we formed a friendship and comradery as college athletes—I ran track and field and Wiley played football as a defensive back. During our time at Virginia Tech, Wiley never bragged or alluded to his familial ties with music. His primary focus was on the field; under the bright lights of the stadium, with hopes of going to the National Football League upon graduation.

You may be wondering who Wiley's father is. Wiley is the youngest son of Chuck Brown, known

as the "Godfather of Go-Go," who passed away in 2012. Chuck Brown, 2005 NEA National Heritage Fellow, was a musical trailblazer who gifted the world the distinctive sound of go-go, an infusion of Latin beats, jazz, African call-and-response chants, and rhythm and blues born in the nation's capital. Among his lifetime achievements and accolades as a musician, his hit "Bustin' Loose" reached number one on the Billboard Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs chart in 1979, and he received a Grammy Award nomination in 2011. In 2014, the Chuck Brown Memorial Park was built in Washington, DC, and in 2020, Mayor Muriel Bowser signed the Go-Go Music of the District of

▲ Musician Wiley Brown.  
Photo by Seth Travers



▲ Family photo of Wiley Brown (left), Chuck Brown (middle), and brother Nekos Brown (middle). Photo courtesy of Wiley Brown

Columbia Designation Act of 2019 to make go-go the official music of Washington, DC.

Chuck Brown's legacy is still alive nationally and globally, through the radio airwaves, social media platforms, dancehalls, and street corners and playgrounds of the Washington Metropolitan area. His artful impact continues to the present day through the voice and visage of his son Wiley. If you enter a Chuck Brown Band performance, you will see a young man, donning a fedora hat and dark sunglasses, with a voice that is strikingly similar to his late father—so much so that Wiley will be portraying his father in an upcoming bio-picture that is co-written by his brother Nekos. In addition to leading the Chuck Brown Band, Wiley co-wrote his 2022 debut solo single "Not Obligated" and runs the Chuck Brown Foundation with Nekos.

We spoke with Wiley about the impact of his father's artful upbringing, his pivotal moment in joining the Chuck Brown Band, and his plan to keep go-go music and culture alive for future generations.

### **GROWING UP WITH A MUSICAL LEGEND**

The ways that my father incorporated arts and culture in the household, I got to see it every day.

Every day, he would be practicing. I was exposed to a lot of different genres of music even though my dad created go-go. We listened to everything from blues to jazz to classical music to even country. I was always around the music, and I was the one that was always on stage and wasn't afraid to be up there with my dad, ever since I was about five. We grew up with arts all around us, and my mom was big into arts and crafts. She was always working on something, doing some type of project around the house and just making something her own or making something better. The arts were always around me, and my dad, he would tell his stories and sometimes draw at the same time while he was doing it.

### **TWO ROADS DIVERGED**

I would go to sleep to my dad practicing on his guitar, and it got to a point where I would have to go to sleep with some type of music on or some type of noise or TV on. And then I went from music to being around my brothers all the time and playing football. I gravitated toward that even more than music, and followed my brother Nekos—he ended up going to Virginia Tech first. My dad was so excited to have both of his boys at the same school. I finally got to Virginia Tech, and things were going well. By the time my senior year came, it was right before the [football] season started. My dad gets sick and ends up passing away in the spring. My siblings, they asked me right before the season started, "Wiley, what you going to do, man? You going to stay and play or are you going to help us at home with Ma?" My Ma wasn't doing so well. She had a breakdown. Football doesn't last forever, so I ended up finishing school from home. It was rough but I still managed to graduate on time.

I came back to Virginia Tech for my pro day. I had a few teams that were about to bring me on—the Rams, the Colts, and the Jaguars were looking at me. Everything felt like it was getting back on track for me, and then right after my pro day, I went back down there to train and I ended up getting attacked by a pit bull, who bit a chunk out of my ankle and then I couldn't play anymore. At that point, I felt like, "All right. Who am I without this sport?" I really had to do some soul searching.

### **LEADING THE BAND**

In 2016, the band started doing Chuck Brown Mondays at the Howard Theatre, and just being

around the music started to give me that same type of drive that I would get from putting a [football] helmet on. I'm like, "This was it the whole time. This was my first love." It was what I knew before football and here I am back to it.

There was one show we had on Chuck Brown Mondays where I was in the front [of the stage] and the band starts to go into "Chuck Baby," and DJ Rico is right beside me. He's like, "Man, get upstage. Get on the stage, man. You been up there since you were little, man." So, I get on stage and I start singing "Chuck Baby," and I could see the crowd's reactions. I have the raspy voice like my dad, so the band is looking like, "Something is happening here." So, I gradually started doing more and more songs.

I talked to my dad's manager. I told him, "Hey, Tom, I really want to talk to the band and ask them how would they feel about me joining the band full-time." They welcomed me with open arms.

I kind of mix my dad's style and my own and I know my voice is very similar to his and the older I get, the deeper it's getting. Out of my siblings, I look the most like him, and it kind of gives people a comfort like, "Dang, he looks just

like his dad." My dad was more old-school, but he always changed with the times. He kept up with whatever was hot, whatever was going on. Made sure he kept his ears low to the ground, and I think that's something I not only incorporate with my own feel, but also take from him to make sure I stay up with what's going on.

### KEEPING THE GO-GO BEAT ALIVE

Being in the DMV [District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia] area, we express our music and love for the arts in many different ways, many different forms, but I do believe go-go is the soundtrack of the town. You have to experience it live in order to really understand it. I think it's very spiritual, where it gets into your soul and you can't do nothing but move something. You are going to start moving. You are going to start dancing, and the little bit of tension that you might have in your joints and in your muscles, it's going to start to loosen up. I think the art throughout the city is definitely something else that we need a little more of, but it's always there. It's always been there.

▼ A collage of Wiley Brown (right) and his late father Chuck Brown (left). Photo by Michael Young



I pay attention to the different art that's around the town and the sculptures. At the Chuck Brown Memorial Park, there's a sculpture of my dad holding out the microphone and the lady [Jackie Braitman] that did it, she's a great artist. When you cross paths with people like that, you want to get into what they're into. What led them to this point? Life is all about learning from others and not only giving what you got to give to the world, but also receiving what the world has. I think just seeing the music and art come and work hand in hand together in the DMV area, is something you have to see and experience to really appreciate.

Our big event is Chuck Brown Day every year, and we try to make sure that it gets bigger and bigger. We had about 6,000 people at one point at Chuck Brown Day and it's an event of love, music, art, and culture. Everything that you want to see and learn about the DMV is at that day. Also, we focus on the things that my dad cared about and had to deal with throughout his life, which is giving back to the homeless and making sure that we give back to education as well.

## THE NEXT ARTFUL CHAPTER

I'm currently teaching my nieces, Xena and Xerena, what I know with the guitar. Whenever I come around it's like, "Oh, it's music time. Uncle Wiley's here." So, they'll go run and get the guitar and be like, "Uncle Wiley, can you show me some more chords now?" I see them picking it up and it brings joy to my heart. I understand that there's not only a duty I feel like I have but it's something that I have to keep going in the family. But also, out in the world, I think it's very important for not only myself and the Chuck Brown Band—but also everyone that's involved in go-go—to get it to the youth, because the youth are the future. They're the ones that's going to keep the music going. There's nothing like live music, and go-go is about as live as you are going to get when it comes to live music. I am keeping the legacy going but also creating my own at the same time.

*Aunye Boone is a writer/editor in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.*

▼ Wiley Brown performing with the Chuck Brown Band. Photographed by Virginia Xander



Kathy Roth-Douquet's children (in white Blue Star Families tee-shirts) at the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego, California, during the 2010 launch of Blue Star Museums. Photo by Sandy Huffaker



# Connections through Culture

## Kathy Roth-Douquet of Blue Star Families

INTERVIEW BY CAROLYN COONS

**A**s founder and CEO of Blue Star Families, a nonprofit that serves active-duty military, Guard and Reserve, veterans, and their families, Kathy Roth-Douquet considers herself a creative professional.

"I created an organization that has had an impact in the world," she said. "I think the roots of that were what we normally think of as creativity—as someone who wrote poetry."

Roth-Douquet credits a fourth-grade teacher for igniting her creative spark. The teacher, Mrs. Krogness, had her class write poetry every day, a practice that led Roth-Douquet to edit literary magazines in middle school, high school, and college.



▲ Kathy Roth-Douquet. Photo courtesy of Kathy Roth-Douquet



▲ Kathy Roth-Douquet speaking at the 2022 Blue Star Museums launch event at the New Children's Museum in San Diego, California. Photo by Brandon Colbert Photography

“All of that becomes an extension of the creativity that is required if you're going to be innovating things in the world,” she said. “I think that value of creativity, as an end in and of itself, takes you many, many great places.”

Roth-Douquet now puts that creative energy toward Blue Star Families and their programs, including Blue Star Museums.

For more than a decade, the Blue Star Museums program has offered active-duty military personnel and their families free admission to participating museums during summer months. It is a partnership between Blue Star Families and the National Endowment for the Arts, in collaboration with the Department of Defense and museums across America.

Roth-Douquet was inspired by her own experience as a military spouse, raising two children during frequent moves abroad and across the country. Museums helped her and her children connect with their local communities and feel at home wherever they happened to find themselves. Below, she reflects on why she is drawn to museums and the value of arts and culture to the military community.

### MAKING AN IMPACT

I didn't come from a military family; I was in politics and government, and the foundation

world. I'm an attorney. But I met and fell in love with a helicopter pilot, and I married him, and then the wars came, and I found myself in a community doing a very heavy, very necessary lift for the country but really needing help to be able to manage the challenges that come with this lifestyle.

My family moved nine times in 16 years. My husband deployed to combat four times. I had to leave my job many times. My children changed schools—my daughter, at tenth grade, was entering her tenth school. While managing all of this and the separation from family and friends, the broken networks, I knew we needed better ways to live, and I knew that my neighbors and my friends needed help for their families to be able to keep doing this work.

Blue Star Families, which started as a grassroots organization with volunteers, has grown to be the largest organization, nationwide, that supports military and veteran families. We have a large national presence: 250,000 families in our membership, over a million people who use our programs and resources every year, and 13 chapters around the country.

Blue Star Families was established so people [wouldn't have to] make the choice, country versus family, but to be able to serve both and to see both thrive together. For me at Blue Star Families, access to the arts and engagement with arts and culture is really a key part of making life wonderful so that people can continue to serve.

### MUSEUM MAGIC

Blue Star Museums is a fantastic program, probably our most popular and beloved program. The inspiration for it came from my own experience with my children. Wherever we would move, one of the first things we would do would be to find the local museums and go to them. That was just an instinct on my part.

Since then, I've learned all the science and the data about why that's a really great thing to do. But for me, both because I had grown up in Cleveland, where we have wonderful museums that are free—and because I have experienced the way that art and culture in my own life makes

life more worth living and contributes to joy, and resilience, and perspective—it was just natural for me to do that. The result was I saw that it gave my children all of those things.

Visiting museums gives you a sense of “I belong here.” If you come into a community and your habit is to go to the museums, that becomes your territory, and that’s a very rich territory. When we were stationed in London, my children were in the kindergarten and 4th-grade age range. The museums are free, and we lived in central London, and after school we would go to the museums many days. As we traveled, we would go to different cities and the first thing we’d do is go to the museums, and it gave them a sense of real mastery of their surroundings. It also gave them a deep connection to this community in a way that’s uplifting, and inspiring, and mind expanding, and an overall plus.

Having that part of our battle rhythm, even as we moved across the country, made it an adventure, and it made it a pleasure. As it turns out, both [of my children] are now in the artistic field. For [my daughter], making sense of her experiences, translating her experiences to the world, finding universality of expression, it’s the arts. Writing, playwriting has been very important to her. For my son, he’s recording music. For both of them, as they traveled around the world, they found connection to people through the accessibility of culture.

### SPEAKING TO THE SPIRIT

This idea of creating [beautiful] environments that make people feel better, that speaks to human dignity. I think often, when people are trying to make change, they think in very practical ways,

▼ Military families at the 2022 Blue Star Museums launch event at the New Children’s Museum in San Diego, California. Photo by Brandon Colbert Photography



and in some ways the least frivolous, or the least beautiful, or the least attention spent to other things, the better. I don't think that actually works. I don't think that's aligned.

To me, arts and culture are particularly valuable because they speak to the spirit. It's not in the realm of the things that you can count; it's in the realm of things that aren't material. Military service is also in that realm. Immersing ourselves in the things that speak to those kinds of values reinforces service, because it elevates the fact that things that aren't necessarily material are worthwhile.

There's a curation process at museums, and there's a sense that these are the things that our country values and keeps. Well, we in the military, we fight to preserve the things that are of value for our nation. To feel that we have the right and

the purview to be in the space of those things that are of such value to our country, there's something really beautiful about it, and I think it re-inspires. It helps you remember what we are living this challenging lifestyle for—we're living it so that our whole community, our whole nation can enjoy these artifacts, these inspirations, these concepts that make us more human, and in some ways make us more American.

*Carolyn Coons is a staff assistant in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.*

▼ Marine Sgt. Jimmy Ochan and his son William enjoy their visit to the Phillips Collection at the 2015 launch event for Blue Star Museums. Photo by James Kegley





The public art sculpture *Meet Me at the Triangles*—created by artist Norie Sato in collaboration with Adrienne Moumin, Eric B. Ricks, Maritza Rivera, and Achamyeleh Debelu—at the Wheaton Town Square in Maryland was supported by the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County. Photo courtesy of Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County

(below): Suzan E. Jenkins. Photo ©Fritz Photographics



# Our Authentic, Creative Selves



Suzan E. Jenkins of the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County

BY CAROLYN COONS

**S**uzan E. Jenkins has an inquisitive mind—from a young age, she was eager to learn about the world around her, in particular the artistic practices she saw in her community.

Growing up in Trinidad, she became enraptured with the steel pan, wanting to know how it worked and what it meant. When she later moved to Puerto Rico, she was fascinated by *bomba* and *plena*. The first time she met a saxophonist, she knew she wanted to study that too.

This hunger for learning and passion for the arts led Jenkins down a career path in arts administration. She has held executive positions at the Rhythm and Blues Foundation, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Recording Industry Association of America, and is currently CEO of the Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County (AHCMC) in Maryland.

Jenkins shared her insights on living an artful life with us, not only what it means to her personally, but how it manifests and is nourished in her community, in particular through the work of AHCMC.

▼ Suzan Jenkins moderates an artist talk for *The Cost of Living*, an exhibition centering on the marginalized voices of Black women. Photo courtesy of Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County

**THE POWER OF CREATIVE THINKING**

I think of myself as a cultural warrior. I see myself as an advocate for the arts and humanities. I also see myself as an advocate for traditionally marginalized communities, and the need to bring these voices to the table. From an

administrative standpoint, running a local arts agency is about creative thinking. I think about how to run our agency in a way that allows me to use improvisational thinking in innovative ways. I am a student of the saxophone and have been playing for a very long time. I am not a performing musician, but I greatly appreciate that work and pick it up every once in a while, for inspiration and grounding.

I grew up in the Caribbean. I was born in Buffalo, New York, but raised in Port of Spain, Trinidad, and San Juan, Puerto Rico. I didn't come back to the States until my late teens. While in the Caribbean, I attended small, private schools, and those programs provided me with incredible opportunities to practice visual arts. There was always music in my house growing up. My father played the trombone with a small group of friends in New York, and my mother sang around the house. So, I've always had a huge appetite for the arts.

Curiosity is what I ride on every day—wanting to learn more about how it's made, what creatives think about to make things, and what barriers to participation they might face, keeping them from realizing their biggest dreams.

**CREATIVITY IN THE COMMUNITY**

I live in Montgomery County, Maryland, and as the CEO of the Arts and Humanities Council, I see the entire county as my community. I've been in this position 15 years, and over that time, I've had an opportunity to observe and work in a county that's the size of Rhode Island with 1.2 million people (about the population of New Hampshire). You see all kinds of things throughout this incredible county, from Klezmer groups and East Indian dance to Cambodian Buddhist practices and Ethiopian coffee rituals. There are many great global cultures here, and so much to learn in a community representative of the global majority. I spend my weekends going out, looking at and experiencing new things in the region that I might not have seen before. I've gained an enormous appreciation for the vibrancy and the vitality



we have in Montgomery County due to my experiences here.

I've learned in my career that, as we say in the islands, "all of we is one." Whether you live in Essaouira, Morocco; Perugia, Italy; Málaga, Spain; or Rockville, Maryland, we all want safety. We want our families to thrive. We want to be our authentic, creative selves and reside where we can express that and feel a sense of belonging. My curiosity to investigate this culturally throughout the world has grounded me in an artistic way of life. It constantly helps me see myself in others, see them in me, and appreciate our oneness.

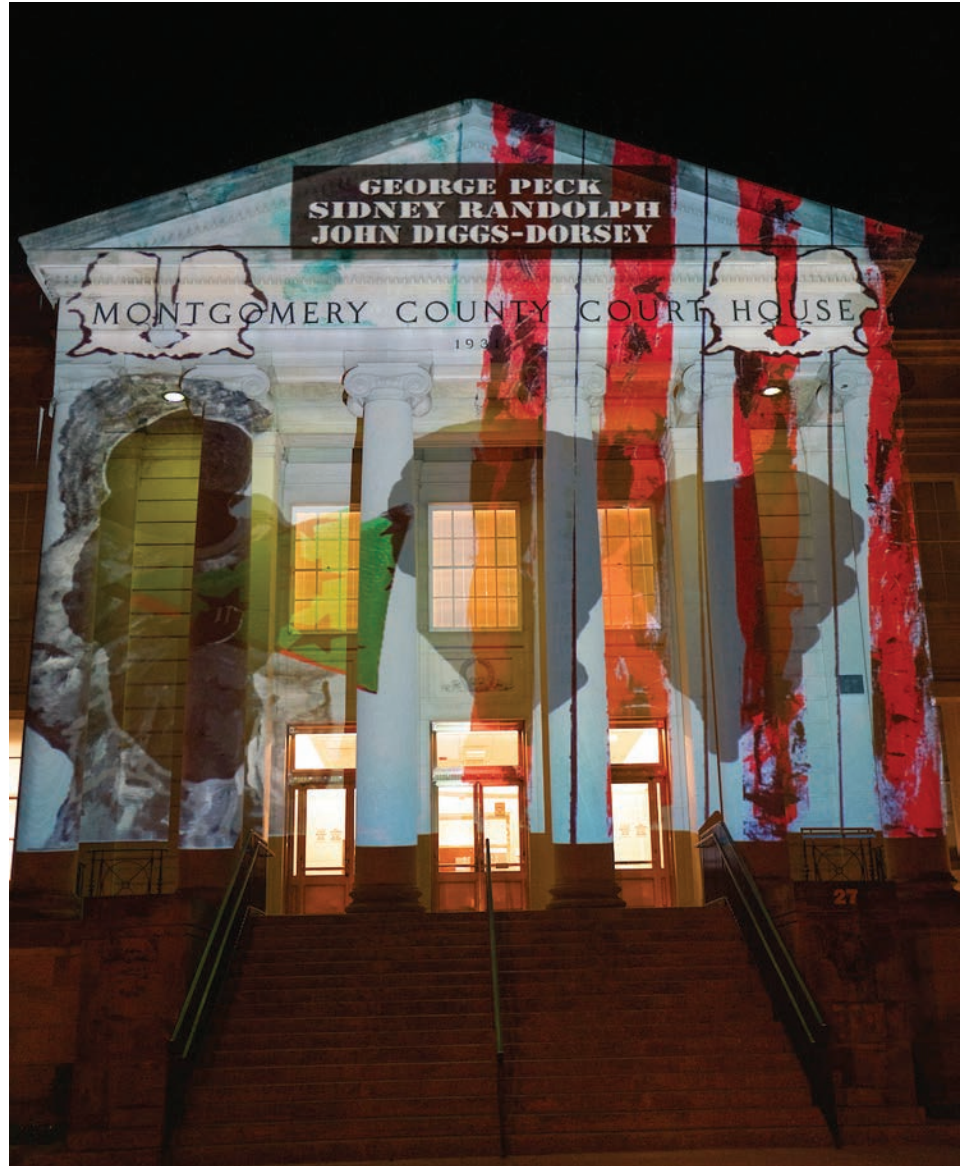
### AN IMPACTFUL ARTISTIC MOMENT

I was asked to join the Remembrance and Reconciliation Commission for Montgomery County a few years ago. This commission sits under the Human Rights Commission in Montgomery County and was formed to memorialize the three African American men—John Diggs-Dorsey, Sidney Randolph, and George Peck—who were lynched in Montgomery County in the late 1800s.

I joined the commission as an ad hoc member to serve and support my colleagues who were figuring out how to accomplish this, and they asked me to think about it through an arts lens.

Initially, I didn't know how that was going to work. My agency has a public art roadmap, and we began looking at the roadmap and asking ourselves, is there any intersection between the work the commission might do and our public art roadmap? We decided to investigate the new media campaign for public art. And we engaged an expert projection mapping artist named Robin Bell. I met Robin and said, "Look, I have this incredible challenge. What will I do?" and he said, "I think we can help."

We engaged [Bell as] the lead artist on a public art project now known as *Certain Party or Parties Unknown*. The lead artist then worked with six artists from the DMV [District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia] who had never done projection mapping before. We asked them to



talk about the three gentlemen who were lynched and through this process, to create an original piece of projection artwork.

Once completed, we projected these images of racial terror on the front of the Montgomery County Council Building—which is the site where the three men were jailed in the 1880s when the public broke them out of jail, dragged them to their deaths, and lynched them. It is a horrible history of racial terror, but we made something memorable out of it for three days at the beginning of Remembrance and Reconciliation Month in November 2021. *Certain Party or Parties Unknown* educated the public, taught artists new skills, and gave them greater agency and gravitas to express themselves in new and different ways. The entire experience was terribly moving.

▲ *Remembrance of the Three* by Tim Davis, part of the public art project *Certain Party or Parties Unknown* in Montgomery County, Maryland. Photo by André Chung

In November 2022, we took the original pieces of art the artists used to create their projection works, put them on display in a gallery exhibition, and produced audio recordings of why and how they approached the work in the way they did. We followed up the gallery exhibition with a documentary film tour, inviting the community to discover the process of creating 2021's outdoor projection art installations from inception to opening night. We also asked artists and residents to participate in roundtable discussions after the film screenings to further community dialogue and understanding. I learned an immense amount through this project, including how open people's hearts are, even in the face of incredibly difficult issues.

I chose the title [*Certain Party or Parties Unknown*] because, in the history of American lynchings, this is the most commonly used term for describing those who committed the majority of the terror lynchings in America. How can it be that no one knew any of the perpetrators at all? The opportunity to bring this horrific history to light for remembrance and reconciliation inspired our work.

▼ Installations that were part of the public art project *Certain Party or Parties Unknown* in Montgomery County, Maryland: left installation by Robin Bell, right installation by Liz Miller. Photo by André Chung

## LIVING THE ARTFUL LIFE

I am a dyed-in-the-wool jazz fanatic. I love jazz. I'm there wherever I can see it, hear it, or talk about it. I also love the visual arts, particularly quirky and contemporary visual art. I enjoy new forms of creative expression and new media. Anywhere those things are happening is where I'm going to be.

I do not have a choice. I was born a creative. My birthday is September 23rd, and a plethora of creatives were also born on this day, like John Coltrane, Bruce Springsteen, Ray Charles, and Ani DeFranco, to name a few. If you look up how many artists' birthdays are on that day, you will see it is a sparky, creative day on the cusp of the autumnal equinox. If I didn't do this work as an arts management professional, I would be a musician along with my work as a leadership coach. For that, I'd have to practice much, much more and would probably be a saxophonist!

*Carolyn Coons is a staff assistant in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.*



# A MULTITUDE OF POSSIBILITIES

A Talk with Multidisciplinary  
Artist Toby MacNutt

INTERVIEW BY CAROLYN COONS



Toby MacNutt during  
the Dancing Queerly  
Festival 2019. Photo  
by Robyn Nicole Film



▲ ▼ Weavings by Toby MacNutt. Photos courtesy of the artist



Art has been an integral part of multidisciplinary artist Toby MacNutt's life since childhood. MacNutt, who uses they/them pronouns, has been dancing since they were enrolled in their first class at five years old. Their grandmother taught them to knit and sew in elementary school, an age when they also began writing poetry and stories.

MacNutt's creative practices have continually evolved since childhood, challenging systems and structures in order to create space for their work to exist. Their art is deeply informed by their lived experience as a queer, nonbinary-trans, disabled person.

"I return to themes of embodiment and relationship repeatedly as a throughline of my work," they write on their website. "It is queerly disabled from the inside out."

MacNutt, who has served as an NEA dance panelist, is both a dancer and choreographer, working in contemporary, improvisational, and adaptive styles. They write poetry and experiment with a variety of textile arts, including quilting, knitting, and weaving, among others. Now that they have access to a yard at their home in rural Vermont, they have also taken up gardening.

Given the multitude forms of expression MacNutt engages with, we sat down with them to hear more about their perspective on living an artful life. MacNutt reflects on making art for joy rather than profit, what it means to shake off "structural baggage," and how their art intersects with their identity.

## FOR THE LOVE OF CRAFT

I am a multidisciplinary artist. I work in dance as a choreographer and a performer as well as textile arts. I also write fiction and poetry, mostly speculative or genre work, sci-fi fantasy or slipstream. Those three [artistic practices] have been with me for a really long time.

The different genres and media ebb and flow over time and sometimes have taken fairly long hiatuses. Occasionally, I sprinkle other things in and out there. I always love to try any new way of making a thing, anything you do with your hands. I love tools and any sort of creative stuff.

I'm always looking for new processes or media to try, and textile arts are just a rabbit hole of that. You start with knitting and then you think, "It would be useful to be able to crochet better for this edging." So, you start learning crochet and then maybe you dye your own yarn. Yarn is very interesting, so you learn how to spin and then you hear there's a loom that's available somewhere and one thing leads to another.

There's a sort of interesting tension as a multidisciplinary artist, where it's really interesting and unique and generative to let your art forms fuse into one another. I'm having more fun being more intentional with that in recent years. But in the vein of thinking about ways we can find better ways of being, when you become an artist professionally, there's a new pile of structural baggage, of expectations about your work. How fast can you make it? How much can you do? What does it cost? Who is it for? How is it marketed? It's really easy for your whole creative being to be commercialized and commoditized.

People love to say, "Do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life." The rejoinder to that is, "Do what you love and you will literally never stop working ever, the end," which I've found to be very true. It's really important for creative folks, whether they've called themselves an artist or not, to have some component that's not capitalism, that's not money.

Make a quilt because you want to make it, not because the pattern will sell or because you want to sell the object, but just for the love of doing it or love of its intended recipient. It's so easy to have everything get sucked into the grind, but in taking care of ourselves and in trying to have a better world to live in, we need to hold on to some things that can still just be for us or just for giving or sharing in a non-money-based way.

## ART AND INTERSECTIONALITY

On a broad, meta level, there's connections between the ways queer people and trans people continually reinvent ourselves and the creativity involved in existing in an ableist world. Creativity is part of that lived experience, and it's important to me in performing and in writing to represent that as authentically as I can.

The definition [for dance] I tend to use is making an intentional choice about movement or stillness—about movement of your body and how it is seen, which we don't have to be on a stage to do. As a disabled person, that feels really important as someone whose ability to move my body and ability to engage with dance as an art form fluctuates a lot—there's a pandemic and I live in a fairly geographically remote area. How I connect to things, when I can do them, how I can do them can all look really different, but it doesn't mean it's not possible or not valid.

My disability is technically not progressive, but functionally, it gets worse over time. In my teens through puberty and adolescence, things began to get worse and we didn't know why. We didn't know what was going on. I didn't have a diagnosis or anything, and a variety of people who didn't know any better told me that dance wasn't good for me anymore and was probably hurting my body and that I would have to stop. I spent a decade or so away from dance and heartbroken.

Then after that decade-ish, I got a diagnosis and started to understand myself as disabled. I started to meet other disabled people, started to meet disabled dancers, had this inkling of "Hang on, maybe I've been misled." My girlfriend at the time, who was a disabled woman who also used canes, said, "I'm going dancing and you're coming with me." Out we went and it all snowballed from there. It got me back, thank goodness.

I think a lot of my creative work is occurring in seasons, which aren't necessarily literal calendar seasons, but there will be a time when my motivation and energy and opportunities to do work are going to align more toward spending a lot more time writing or more time in the studio.

Sometimes I just come off a performance and I need to let that sit for a while, and I'll dive into a new textile technique. If I'm in a moment of writing being at the forefront, for example, that doesn't mean I've stopped being interested in textiles or stopped being interested in dance. It's just in a rotation. Everything is sort of moving

on micro and macro levels at once. The body is still moving, the mind is still moving, the whole creative process is still turning on a cyclical level.

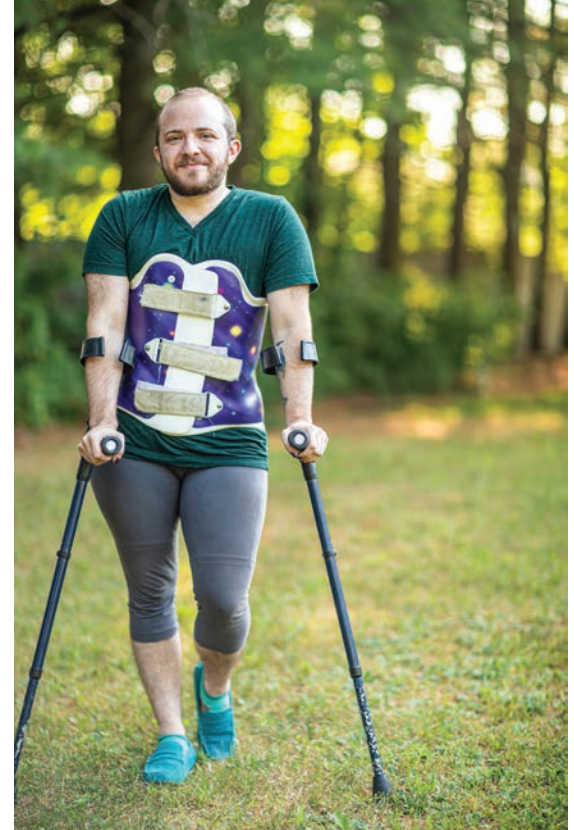
## SHIFTING PERSPECTIVE

I'm really interested in the way alternate perspectives of the body and the world and relationships can create new ideas and aesthetics in any medium. Particularly in dance, there's such a wide possibility of aesthetic and being that's possible that a lot of times goes underexplored

because a lot of mainstream "dance," air quotes on that one, is very similar bodies doing very similar sorts of performance. But there are so many ways to have a body and be in the world, and they're interesting to do and to watch and to experience.

I write what I wish I could read a lot of the time and in dance, it's fairly similar. I make the kind of work that I wish I could see and the kind of work that I wish could be in my body.

*Carolyn Coons is a staff assistant in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.*



▲ Artist Toby MacNutt. Photo by Owen Leavey

# UTILIZING CREATIVITY



A Talk with Arts Administrator  
Irfana Jetha Noorani

INTERVIEW BY KATRYNA CARTER





Irfana Jetha Noorani is an artist, producer, and administrator based in Washington, DC. She supports neighborhoods, public spaces, cultural organizations, and philanthropic institutions with equitable planning processes and programming that center people of color and justice-based outcomes in their work.

Noorani founded a cultural consulting practice in 2021. She currently serves as a senior fellow to the High Line Network and is working as a project consultant with the Ford Foundation. She recently provided interim executive leadership and fundraising strategy for Transform 1012 N. Main Street.

Noorani was a founding staff member and the deputy director of the 11th Street Bridge Park, a public/private partnership between the District of Columbia and the local nonprofit Building Bridges Across the River, and led a multiyear public art commissioning process for the partnership (which received support from the NEA). She also worked with the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in the Performing Arts Program and for New York Live Arts | Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company. Noorani is a founding member of Vital Little Plans, a national artist collective and giving circle that challenges the power of Eurocentric philanthropy and supports creative and disruptive initiatives that are arts-driven and community-led, and was an arts management fellow at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. She also has served as a resource team member for the NEA's Our Town creative placemaking technical assistance program.

We spoke with Noorani about her work and how the arts help others live artful lives in community.

**A NEW WAY OF MAKING ART**

My background is in dance, performance, and choreography. My relationship with my art and my practice has really morphed and changed over time, and I'm sure it will continue to do so. Right now, I feel like I'm making art, but it's different. Currently in my career, instead of making dances, I'm producing or finding opportunities to make art by cultivating community, collaborating with artists, collaborating with organizations and institutions, supporting makers, and convening people. Through my consulting practice, I am supporting the creative ecosystem, and I lean into my background in the arts when I work with clients.

During the pandemic, I had an opportunity to reconnect more directly to dance and performance. I live in the Bloomingdale neighborhood in Washington, DC, and there are a lot of movement-based artists in this community. One of my neighbors, Hayley Cutler, has a company called darlingdance. She was thinking about ways that we could continue to make work and support artists during the pandemic, when a lot of commissions and work for dance makers and dancers were being pulled. We collaborated on a proposal to Dance Place, a local dance organization, and the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities. We were supported to make work in four artist homes in Bloomingdale. We all made our own pieces, and it was a tour of the neighborhood through the eyes of artists.

◀ (top): Irfana Jetha Noorani. Photo by Jared Soares (bottom): 11th Street Bridge Park's Taste of the Harvest festival at THEARC in Southeast Washington, DC. Photo by Becky Harlan

▼ A couple dance at the Anacostia River Festival. Photo by Jeff Salmore



**THE INTERSECTION OF ARTS AND INFRASTRUCTURE**

My main focus working on arts in public space and infrastructure projects is discovering how those spaces can create informal opportunities for people, communities, and cultures to convene, converge, and collaborate. How do people intersect with others that they may never come across otherwise? The most beautiful thing about working on public space projects is the informality of how people come together in those spaces and the opportunities these spaces offer for arts and cultural programming.

I worked for Building Bridges Across the River on the 11th Street Bridge Park, a public/private collaboration between the District of Columbia and a nonprofit based in Southeast DC to build a new park over the Anacostia River. When I started working there, I had this amazing experience of being in what felt like the soul of DC and learning from legacy residents about the culture of the District of Columbia. My work at the 11th Street Bridge Park really opened me up to an understanding of the role of the arts, community development, and infrastructure projects in our neighborhoods. Often when we look at infrastructure and community development, we are thinking about the economic impacts in a neighborhood. The idea of cultural impacts and cultural infrastructure sometimes gets left to

the wayside. Also, in a lot of our communities, the arts organizations and other nonprofits are working in silos. The opportunity to collaborate and think holistically about how to approach a community with investment in affordable housing, infrastructure, entrepreneurship, education, arts, and healthcare all together is really critical when working on infrastructure projects.

Our infrastructure and community development projects [east of the Anacostia River] seek to support and amplify the voices of that community. The arts and culture piece can help keep the focus on the community that is already there; centering the culture helps ensure the current residents are well represented and positioned to benefit from new economic opportunities as well. This is critically important in creating a sense of belonging, a sense of welcoming in neighborhood projects. So that is what I think about when I think about the collaboration between arts and infrastructure.

There is another project that I have been working on in Fort Worth, Texas, called Transform 1012 North Main Street. This is an effort of eight community-based organizations who have purchased a former Ku Klux Klan auditorium that was built in the 1920s near downtown. They are working together to transform that infrastructure into a place for the community, in particular communities

▼ (Left): The building at 1012 N. Main Street in Fort Worth, Texas, a former Ku Klux Klavern that will be transformed into a community center for the neighborhood. Photo by Timothy Brestowski, courtesy of the Real Estate Council of Greater Fort Worth and Transform 1012 N. Main Street



that were targeted by the Klan when that building was originally built. I think about the powerful role of those arts and social service organizations coming together and reclaiming this infrastructure for the use of the community and what they want to see in their neighborhood and city moving forward.

**EARLY EXPOSURE TO THE ARTS**

I started dancing when I was three years old. My parents are immigrants to this country; they were both born in East Africa, raised there, and then immigrated to North America. Our background is Indian origin. My dad owned a restaurant in midtown Atlanta, close to the Virginia-Highland neighborhood. I was always in my father's store. I was always dancing around the store, and there was a man that used to come in often, Sam Goldman. He was the executive director of Callanwolde Fine Arts Center in Atlanta. He saw me moving all around the store and told my parents, "Why don't you bring her for dance class? We have this creative movement program for children. She's literally running around the store, and I think she would love this class." That opened my parents up to putting me into an arts program, and I never left. I did all my dance training at Callanwolde Fine Arts Center, from creative movement all the way through a pre-professional program and then into university.

That early exposure to modern dance, ballet, and improvisation was so key to me learning and navigating through many different careers. That kind of creativity and improvisation was helpful in figuring it out, exploring, and learning new avenues of how to use my brain throughout my career. I think it's really hard for first-generation kids like me to think about a career in the arts. It's impossible to think about for my parents' generation for sure. But the reason they moved to this country was to have the possibility that their child could do anything. I got a lot of pushback when I was younger, and I tried to navigate into something where I could support myself and have my own career. It certainly took a lot of navigating and helping my parents understand what it meant to be in the arts sector and opening that world up for them. So yes, if I had chosen something different it would have manifested in a similar way, of being able to utilize the creativity and exploration that my early dance training taught me.

*Katryna Carter is a presenting & multidisciplinary works specialist at the National Endowment for the Arts.*

▼ (Middle): The interior of the building. Photo by Kelle Moulton, courtesy of the Real Estate Council of Greater Fort Worth and Transform 1012 N. Main Street

(Right): A concept rendering of the interior of the proposed Fred Rouse Center for Arts and Community Healing by MASS Design Group. Courtesy of Transform 1012 N. Main Street





## Check out our online-only material!

We feature an audio piece on Dr. David O. Fakunle of the National Association of Black Storytellers. Fakunle works at the intersection of culture and wellness—using the art form of storytelling in public health research, practice, and philosophy. A transcript of the interview is included.

◀ Dr. David Fakunle. Photo by Shaun Champion

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