



# Cultural Experiences Essential to Health and Wellbeing

Arts Helped Lift Spirits During the Pandemic  
and Will Help Create Community as We Emerge

BY JESSICA BALL AND MARK FIELDS

ARTS AND CULTURE may not be on the top of our minds during a global pandemic, but whether we have been aware of it or not, they play a critical role in our overall health and well-being during a time of great uncertainty and stress.

While spending time at home to avoid crowds of people, we have been singing along to chart topping songs, reading the latest best-selling novels, watching our favorite films and shows, and perhaps trying out a new dance move trending on TikTok. All of these artistic experiences were

developed and implemented by workers in our significant and impactful “creative economy.” According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, America’s creative economy is a growing industry valued at \$878 billion. In Delaware, the creative economy is a \$1 billion industry that employs about 9,000 people.

We spent the last year seeking creative outlets and opportunities for self-expression, and that’s a good thing. Scientific evidence shows that this dramatically lowers our cortisol levels, which are markers for stress.

*Left: Choristers from the Choir School of Delaware perform a virtual Black History Month concert. Right: Baritone Grant Youngblood and Pianist Aurelien Eulert from Opera Delaware perform for an appreciative audience at The Country House.*

But that is not the only way that cultural pursuits are good for everyone. The past couple of decades yielded much research and evidence supporting the connection between arts engagement and significant benefits to our social, emotional, physical, and mental health. There is good reason that art therapy is a growing field used to treat a range of illnesses, including depression and anxiety.

Research shows that even outside of therapeutic contexts, the arts have positive effects on our health. In fact, the World Health Organization's 2019 Health Evidence Network synthesis report shows the arts yield major health benefits across all stages of life. Studies show improved concentration in school for children who are read to at bedtime, and improved memory, attention, and executive function in older adults with dementia who are engaged through music, particularly singing.

The importance of the arts to our health has been made particularly evident during the pandemic, which posed challenges for maintaining mental



wellness and managing anxiety. The COVID-19 shutdown caused cultural institutions to shutter and artists to cancel events. Yet organizations and artists kept busy working to keep Delawareans connected and engaged during isolation with virtual and socially distanced services and programs.

Opera Delaware has been staging outdoor performances to serenade seniors under quarantine and health care workers on the front lines at ChristianaCare and Bayhealth. The Choir School of Delaware set up all of

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their students with internet and laptops, which allowed the school to not miss a beat at music practice and at producing virtual concerts for their audiences. Artists from the Developing Artist Collaboration have been assembling and mailing out art kits to Delawareans seeking to use their brains and hands in ways that make them feel good.

The Grand not only provided a holiday light show to bring some festive spirit in an otherwise subdued December 2020 but it also worked with its own board, EDiS, and the United Way to raise funds to send frontline

health care workers through the light show for free. Out of the 35,000 regional residents who participated in the light show, more than 2,500 were health care workers who received a much-needed break from the stress of providing care during the pandemic.

Perhaps most important, Delaware's arts, cultural, and heritage sector is preparing now to help Delawareans emerge from the pandemic and resume some of their familiar routines. Attending a live concert or viewing an art or heritage exhibit – once finally safe – will be one of the most compelling ways to share human fellowship again after months of isolation.

There are many reasons to value creative expression as a dynamic, even integral part of our shared community here in Delaware. But the ability of the arts, culture, and heritage to create hope, lighten hearts, bring understanding and empathy, and point the way to a brighter future – even in the midst of this global crisis – should demonstrate their value to all. ■



*Cars of patrons drive through The Grand's Winter in Wilmington light show at the Wilmington Riverfront.*



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