Access for All

Trust donors provide new opportunities for artists and audiences with disabilities
A NOTE FROM PAT JENNY

A Changing of the Guard

For the past six and a half years, I have had the wonderful opportunity to manage a smart, committed team of grants officers who seek to make this city a better place for all who live, work, and play here. It has been a humbling experience to try and keep up with them. As I retire, I know this team will continue to be innovative and productive, especially led by the new V.P. for grants, Shawn Morehead, and V.P. for philanthropic initiatives, Kerry McCarthy.

The Trust is a special institution. It is dedicated to the people and neighborhoods of New York, across the generations, fulfilling the philanthropic wishes of donors who started setting up funds almost 100 years ago. Its growth, stability, and integrity are all due to a wonderful board of directors led by our chair, Valerie Peltier, and our president, Lorie Slutsky.

As funders, we are not doing the work directly, even though we often share the credit when victories are achieved. One of the secrets to New York's greatness is its large and strong network of nonprofits, a third sector without which the City could not work. They provide services across the spectrum, come up with creative solutions to intractable problems, and keep government honest.

New York City government is filled with talented and dedicated professionals, many of whom I have worked with over the years. In this era of scorn for the public sector, I think it is particularly important to recognize the value of government. Bringing these sectors together is essential to finding solutions that stand the test of time.

When the Trump Administration released its first budget in May 2017, more than 60 percent of its proposed federal budget cuts were to antipoverty programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which helps feed millions of American families.

Anticipating this threat, The Trust made a $300,000 grant to the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities early in 2017 to conduct research and advocate in Congress, state by state, to save the programs.

Thanks to the work of the Center and other groups across the country, the 2018 Farm Bill enacted in December protects SNAP. It did not have any of the cuts, expanded work requirements, or other damaging changes to SNAP included in the draft budget.

“While the new Farm Bill’s SNAP provisions aren’t perfect, the bottom line is that they modestly strengthen SNAP rather than weaken it,” says Bob Greenstein, the Center’s founder and president.

With our support, the Center will continue to defend America’s social safety net against proposals that would make it harder for working families to qualify for SNAP.
As a leading disability funder, we applaud the City’s first-ever cultural plan, released in 2017, which called for more support and opportunities for artists and audiences with disabilities. The next year, Queens Theatre created its Theater for All program with $150,000 from The Trust.

The program boosts the technical and auditioning skills of early career performers with disabilities in an intensive, two-week workshop. Participants train with professional actors, some of whom are disabled themselves. Afia Fields, who completed the program, appreciated that the actors gave in-depth feedback. “All three teachers I had were raw, and that’s what I like,” she said. “Don’t pat me on the back—push my skills and challenge me.”

The program also connects participants with auditions and job opportunities through networking events with casting directors and producers.

For audience members with disabilities, some Queens Theatre performances now offer American Sign Language interpretation, audio descriptions, and open captioning, as well as large-print and Braille playbills. At other performances, lighting and sound are adjusted for people with sensory disorders or those on the autism spectrum.

**THE DONORS WHO MAKE IT POSSIBLE**

At a community foundation like ours, the whole is often greater than the sum of its parts. We regularly increase the scope and reach of donors’ legacy gifts by combining their interests with those of other donors. For this grant, we used the David Warfield Fund, which aids New Yorkers with visual disabilities, and the Adel and Leffler Families’ Fund for Queens, which supports activities and organizations in that borough.

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**ARTS FOR ALL**

**Theater for All Comes to Life**

*Helping those with disabilities on stage and off*

“I felt accepted and taken seriously. Not only do I feel more confident and trusting of my choices as an actor, I feel more confident and trusting of myself as a person.”

—Emma Lemanski, workshop participant

**ACTORS’ WORKSHOP:**

Emma Lemanski, Megan Simox, and Patrick Tombs talk shop in a program at Queens Theatre for actors with physical disabilities.

**ON THE COVER:**

Vincent D’Onofrio teaches a master class for Kerry McMenamin and others in the Theatre For All program. Photo by Ari Mintz

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In 2016, Muslim New Yorkers created more than 175,000 jobs. They also donated 33 percent more to charities than the average American household.

A report funded with $80,000 from The Trust allowed the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) to research these and other facts about our Muslim neighbors. Meira Neggaz, the Institute’s executive director, said, “The main thing people say when they hear this data is: ‘I didn’t know. What I see on the news, what I hear in political rhetoric is the polar opposite of what your project is telling and showing us’.”

Sharing the data is a big part of the project. An earlier report by ISPU on Muslims in Michigan is now being used by the Department of Justice and the movie industry, among others.

Findings from the New York report are being shared at St. John the Divine Cathedral, the New York Public Library, the Tenement Museum, the Brooklyn Historical Society, and other venues.

Brooklyn is home to the City’s largest Muslim population and 100 mosques. Yet, Islamophobia is on the rise there.

To increase acceptance and understanding, the Brooklyn Historical Society is collecting and sharing oral histories of the borough’s Muslim communities. With The Trust’s $150,000 grant, the Society interviewed 50 community members and created one of the first major oral history collections dedicated to Muslims in America.

In his oral history, Asad Dandia, 26, a founder of the nonprofit Muslims Giving Back, said, “The fight goes on, and I’m part of that long trajectory of the fight for social and political justice.” And Shaikh Rasheed Abdullah, 66, director of Islamic studies at the Clara Muhammad School of Masjid Khalifah, recalled, “In Brooklyn, it was not uncommon to convert a cocktail lounge or a dancehall or a youth center or slaughterhouse into a masjid [mosque].”

The collection has been published online and shared in podcasts and at public events. In addition, the Society is creating a curriculum for K-12 teachers on the history of Muslims and their contributions.

**PROTECTING WESTCHESTER IMMIGRANTS:**
Several groups funded by our Westchester Community Foundation worked together to pass a local Immigrant Protection Act. The Act bars Westchester County employees from asking about a person’s citizenship in most circumstances and limits the amount of information the county can share with federal immigration authorities.

**GETTING OUT THE VOTE ON LONG ISLAND:**
Last year’s voter turnout in New York’s Democratic Primary was more than double the turnout in 2014. The Long Island Civic Engagement Table (right), a coalition of nonprofits, played a role. Funded by the Long Island Community Foundation, the groups contacted 54,179 voters and got 9,390 commitments to vote from local residents.
When Arturo Garcia-Costas, The Trust’s environmental program officer, learned about Quebec’s efforts in 2016 to switch to electric school buses, it gave him an idea: “Why not use part of New York’s Volkswagen ‘Dieselgate’ settlement to buy electric buses here?”

VW had pleaded guilty to installing software that falsely indicated its vehicles met emission standards. It paid $14.7 billion to settle U.S. claims; New York’s share was about $128 million.

Garcia-Costas reached out to the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation about the idea and then approached the Sierra Club, which has used Trust funding since 2015 to get more electric vehicles on the road in New York, especially electric school and transit buses. The Trust also made grants to the New York League of Conservation Voters Education Fund, Vermont Energy Investment Corp., and the Tri-State Transportation Campaign to work with the Sierra Club to make a winning argument to the State.

Our investment of $580,000 in these groups helped convince the State to spend more than $50 million in VW settlement funds on electric vehicle charging infrastructure, electric transit and school buses, and other low-emission vehicles. These investments will reduce nitrogen oxide emissions by an estimated 4,500 tons and carbon dioxide emissions by 130,000 tons per year.

Additionally, our grants helped the groups get the MTA—the largest transit agency in the United States—to commit to an all-electric transit bus fleet by 2040.

Lead in Hair Dye is Banned

Progress made on product safety

In 2018, efforts of Earthjustice, a nonprofit environmental law firm, led the FDA to ban toxic lead acetate from hair dyes sold in the U.S. This win was thanks in part to a $100,000 grant from The Trust. However, Americans are still exposed to dangerous amounts of lead from other sources, including industrial emissions, plumbing fixtures, aviation fuel, and paint. Earthjustice will continue its work to reduce exposures from lingering sources of this toxic metal.
Less than 20 percent of the City’s 1,818 public schools are fully accessible for students with physical disabilities. Children in wheelchairs or with impaired mobility sometimes need to enter schools through loading docks, where trash and garbage disposal are handled. Once inside, they might not be able to reach certain classrooms, labs, or even the cafeteria.

Through our Donors’ Education Collaborative and competitive grants program, we gave $165,000 to a campaign led by Advocates for Children of New York’s Action for Reform in Special Education (ARISE) Coalition and Parents for Inclusive Education. The groups got the City to agree to complete accessibility profiles for all partially accessible school buildings, spend $150 million for alterations over the next three years, and provide students with physical disabilities priority consideration to accessible schools.

The organizations also persuaded the city to propose capital spending of $750 million over the next five years to make about one-third of schools accessible. These improvements will benefit children and their families in elementary, middle, and high schools throughout the city for decades. Final authorization is expected in June.

Putting Paratransit in the Fast Lane
Coalition improves Access-A-Ride

The city’s paratransit system is a lifeline for the elderly and those with disabilities who can’t use buses and subways. But too often, its 150,000 users face long waits, drivers who don’t show up, and circuitous, lengthy rides. With $645,000 from The Trust, New York Lawyers for the Public Interest joined other disability rights groups to press the MTA to fix the system.

Now, Access-A-Ride vehicles can use traffic lanes previously reserved for buses. Our grant also helped prevent a single-fare rate hike that would have hurt low-income New Yorkers the most.
Plans for real estate development in once-ignored New York neighborhoods now need more than a pretty presentation to win public support. That’s because local coalitions anchored by longstanding community organizations in places such as East New York, East Harlem, and Jerome Avenue in the Bronx are taking an active part in decisions about rezoning and redevelopment.

Funded with $550,000 from The Trust through the Neighborhoods First Fund for Community Based Planning, the organizations work to protect affordable housing and avoid displacement. The coalitions enable residents to evaluate proposed projects, negotiate details, and voice local concerns.

Citywide, their efforts helped win tenants’ right to counsel in housing court and rules that require landlords seeking to alter their buildings to prove they haven’t harassed tenants.

They also increased the number of housing units affordable to the lowest-income households under mandatory inclusionary zoning, won adjustments to height and density proposals, and convinced the City to invest more in local schools and infrastructure.

“We feel the lasting impact isn’t just the changes and concessions, but the recognition of communities’ standing and their collective expertise in determining their own futures.”

—Joan Byron, program director of the Neighborhoods First Fund

Is The Trust in your will?
The projects in this newsletter are possible because people left bequests. You, too, can set up a permanent fund. We’ll make grants supporting the causes you care about. Forever.

Call Jane Wilton at (212) 686-2563 to learn more.
Better Science, Cleaner Water

Standardized method improves Long Island Sound monitoring

Residents, boaters, beachgoers, and nature lovers care about the water quality of the Long Island Sound. But until recently, nonprofits, schools, and government agencies used different standards and equipment to test it, so the data was of limited value.

The New York Community Trust, along with its Westchester and Long Island divisions, teamed up with other funders to work with the Connecticut Fund for the Environment/Save the Sound. Our $177,000 in grants support standardized testing. The project was so successful, the EPA is now funding the monitoring, and using the data to make policy and regulatory choices.

We’re working together to create a healthier region.

With your help, we can do more.