

# Conference provides roadmaps for arts organizations to thrive

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Mashantucket — As executive director of the Massachusetts arts advocacy organization MASSCreative, Matthew Wilson has run into the hurdle that political leaders "look at something we do [as] nice but not necessary. Traditionally, artists "run the other way" when elections come around, he said. To make sure artists' voices were heard in the political process, MASSCreative launched its Create the Vote campaign for Boston's mayoral in 2013, and Connecticut adopted the effort this year.

Wendy Bury, executive director of the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition, said she was "a little shocked about how uneducated and ignorant [some] elected officials are" about the economic benefits of the arts. Daniel Fitzmaurice, executive director of the Arts Council of Greater New Haven and Bury's partner in Connecticut's Create the Vote effort, said that for every dollar invested in arts and culture, the state brings in \$7.

Wilson, Fitzmaurice and Bury were among the speakers at the Cultural Coalition's second Thrive conference, which spanned more than six hours Tuesday at the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center. The was held in 2016.

"We really do economic development through the arts and culture lens," Bury explained of her organization.

As such, the six breakout sessions — of which visitors had the opportunity to attend four in full — focused on best practices for arts, heritage and culture organizations as they seek to evolve and attract new audiences.

In a session on rebranding, Mystic Seaport President Steve White talked about the local pushback the museum got in May, when it unveiled its orange colors in place of the red, white and blue.

He showcased several past museum logos, addressed the rationale for the change and spoke to the museum's core values — while wearing corresponding orange socks.

"You can't just keep looking back and saying, 'Boy, it was great 100 years ago,'" White said of museum nostalgia. "It's great now, and it will be great in the future." He said the imagery "doesn't have to be so olde-timey" to represent history.

In a session on "What's Hip in History and Heritage?" Regan Miner and Elizabeth Wood shared the respective work of the Norwich Historical Society and the Stonington Historical Society.

Miner noted that "spooky sells," and so the Antient Ghosts of Norwich tour sold out in 12 hours.

Another thing that sells? Beer. Wanting to bring history to a place where people already are gathered, the Norwich Historical Society started the Benedict Arnold Pub Crawl, later rebranding it as History & Hops for a broader focus.

As for the Stonington Historical Society, the first program of its Irish Presence Project was standing-room-only in the library, and it has sold more than 150 copies of its book on Rollie McKenna photography in the past year.

"We have found that stepping outside our comfort zone has had a positive impact on what we can do and who we can reach," Wood said.

Staff at the Florence Griswold Museum stepped outside their comfort zone a decade ago when they launched the Wee Fairie Village; this was the focus of the session "From Crazy to Catalyzing: Taking a Chance on a New Idea."

It began as a way to draw in new audiences when the Great Recession hit.

"When we started, we thought we were going to see a bunch of young girls, in tutus, with fairy wings — and we do, we see a lot of them," said Matt Greene, manager of visitor relations at the museum. "But we also see a lot of young couples."

Tours for school groups were selling out, so the Florence Griswold Museum created a self-guided experience.

Greene warned of balancing added costs — such as for parking, cleaning and grounds maintenance — when launching an ambitious new project. But he noted that since 2008, shop revenue increased 160 percent, and the museum gets 100 to 150 new members in October every year.

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