The local arts and culture sector pushed through the pandemic and a racial reckoning. Now they’re trying to heal.

Mashantucket — Reflecting on an exhibit with giant sculptures of desserts at Lyman Allyn Art Museum in the second half of 2020, Eileen Donovan commented, “There’s nothing like looking at a giant doughnut the size of a child and re-enjoying life by being at a museum.”

She became director of learning and engagement there after being laid off from her Boston museum job in January 2021, due to the pandemic. While others were reconnecting, she hadn’t found her community yet, but New London artist Diane Barcelo said Donovan “didn’t waste a minute” getting involved.

This was just one example of the theme of an arts and culture gathering Tuesday: healing, with a focus on the role of interconnectedness.

The Cultural Coalition held its third Thrive! conference at the Mashantucket Pequot Museum & Research Center, whose executive director, Joshua Carter, spoke in the opening session. Thrive was designed to be held every other year, but due to the pandemic, this was the first conference since 2018. Around 100 people attended.

“This event, centered on HEALING, is especially needed as we recover from the pandemic, continue to experience racial and social injustices, and face on-going economic challenges,” Cultural Coalition Executive Director Wendy Bury wrote in the program. (Ironically, she couldn’t attend in-person due to contracting COVID-19.)

How municipalities are supporting the “creative economy”

In a discussion about building local and municipal support for arts and culture, Ocean Community Chamber of Commerce President Lisa Konicki said “for us, healing was feeling like we were a part of the solution.” That meant creating its own sort of QVC at the height of the pandemic, and recently, administering small business grant programs.

Her latest new project is the Starry Lights installation debuting Friday in downtown Westerly-Pawcatuck. Noting that Stonington public works staff are using town time to help hang stars, she urged people to not just think about asking for money but for services. She also encouraged organizations to “think bigger and don’t see borders” instead of only working with local artists.

Norwich Community Development Corporation President Kevin Brown spoke of the need to approach healing through interconnectedness rather than in a hierarchical form, and that healing involves simultaneously focusing on economic and community development.

“There isn’t one group of people who should be in charge of everything. This is about parallel courses,” said Elizabeth Shapiro, director of arts, preservation and museums for the Connecticut Office of the Arts.

As director of grants and programs for CT Humanities, Scott Wands said he worked with Shapiro’s office on grantmaking, since the line between arts and humanities “is very thin.” Wands also said despite growing from seven employees before the pandemic to 15, CT Humanities moved to a smaller space and is saving $7,200 a year on rent, due to remote work.

Healing through Native traditions
Bury had initially asked Josh Carter to be keynote speaker, but he said "the idea of a keynote speaker doesn't quite fit our tribal ways of healing."

So they altered the event, and Carter also brought up museum educator Nakai Clearwater Northup, who talked about living off the land and harvest traditions through the year. He said a lot of people come to the museum thinking of Native Americans "as being people of the past," and that a Google Images search doesn't yield pictures of people like him or Carter, but people from 200 or 300 years ago.

Carter also scrutinized his very title of executive director.

"Because of a half-dozen people, I'm an executive director?" he said with a laugh. He added, "In the original teachings of the people in the Northeast, it would've been everybody in this room saying, 'Josh, this is your job.'"

At Bury’s urging, Carter also shared his thoughts on the modern usage of land acknowledgments, or recognizing a specific tribe as the original steward of land on which an activity is taking place.

Carter said while he appreciates the effort, he rarely accepts invitations to do land acknowledgments. He is “not about checking a box and then walking away,” but rather suggested that people reach out to a tribal member to create a relationship.

The event Tuesday started with a gallery talk from Angel Beth Smith, who created The Indigenous People's Project: The Mashantucket (Western) Pequot Women. It’s a collection of sepia-toned, colored-pencil portraits of Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation women — some of whom have passed — that will continue to expand and be up until May. She wanted to portray the diversity and resilience of Native women.

*Editor's note: This version clarifies Josh Carter’s role in the program.*

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