

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



December 06, 2022 3:58 pm

By **Erica Moser**

 e.moser@theday.com

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.

e.moser@theday.com

Comment threads are monitored for 48 hours after publication and then closed.

STORIES THAT MAY INTEREST YOU



Energy rate hikes weeks away. Off-shore wind is years away. For now, Millstone nuclear power plant provides reliability

With consumers bracing for skyrocketing electric rates on Jan. 1, state officials say the situation could have been even worse. But in 2019 the state struck a 10-year deal with the Millstone nuclear p...



4 Maine Maritime Academy students killed in fiery crash

Four Maine Maritime Academy students were killed and three others were injured in a fiery crash, officials said. The group was traveling south on Route 166 in Castine, Maine, early Saturday when the R...



Libyan accused in 1988 Flight 103 bombing now in American custody; dead included Ledyard, Old Lyme men

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Libyan intelligence official accused of making the bomb that brought down Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988 in an international act of terrorism has been taken in...



Shoppers, workers clash over post-pandemic expectations

NEW YORK (AP) — Before the pandemic, Cheryl Woodard used to take her daughter and her friends to eat at a local IHOP in Laurel, Md., after their dance practice. But now they hardly go there anymore be...

About The Day

The Day Publishing Company

47 Eugene O'Neill Drive
P.O. Box 1231
New London, CT 06320-1231 USA

Staff Profiles

President/Publisher Newsroom Advertising/Marketing
FAQs Jobs at The Day Contact Us

Connect With Us



Quick Links

E-Paper Contests Horoscopes Puzzles TV
Calendar Milestones Newsletters

Advertising

About Our Ads Advertise Place A Classified Ad Contacts
Find New London Area Jobs Business Directory

Services

Photo Reprints Privacy Policy/Terms RSS Text/SMS Alerts