By its nature, the creative environment at Skowhegan is discursive and evolves over the course of the summer. The school's founders, artists Willard W. Cummings, Sidney Simon, Henry Varnum Poor and Charles Cutler, understood the opportunities that could flourish for young artists when they are taken from their familiar surroundings to an isolated environment with great natural beauty, and encouraged to take risks with their work.

Aspiration is at the heart of the Skowhegan experience. The participants at the school, being in an early and prescient stage of their careers, are by nature aspirational in their practice.

Aspiration is also at the core of the significant cultural and educational contributions made by Leonard and Louise Riggio, who we honor this year with the Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney Award for Outstanding Patronage of the Arts. The Riggios are tireless advocates of education, literacy, the arts and what Len calls the “unfinished business” of the Civil Rights Movement in America. During his eight years as chairman of Dia Art Foundation, Len led and funded the effort to build Dia:Beacon, the world’s largest museum of contemporary art, just outside New York City. Len and Louise have generously donated works of art to museums and loaned their art to museums across the country. The Riggios also established the first undergraduate program in Writing and Democracy at the New School, an innovative program that explores the vital connections between democracy and citizenship and the skills of reading, writing, and rhetoric. For ten years, Len served on the board of the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) and has been a generous patron of Haley Farm, a CDF Freedom School institution in Clinton, Tenn., that is committed to cultivating African-American leaders. The Riggios have funded two buildings at Haley Farm—the Langston-Hughes Youth Library for African American Scholars and the Riggio-Lynch Chapel—both designed by renowned architect, Maya Lin. Len and Louise have generously supported the arts and the development of affordable, permanent rehearsal and studio space, a cause that I also believe in deeply.

In 2006, the Bronx Museum opened its new 16,000 square foot North Wing building, a project that could not have been done without Kate’s devotion to expanding the Department of Cultural Affairs’ oversight of planning, design and financing for cultural construction projects. This addition increased the Museum’s public space by 50%, which allowed the Museum to grow its audience, and provided much needed space for exhibitions, education programs and community initiatives. It was also under Kate’s tenure that the Bronx Museum started its Free Admission policy that has increased attendance by more than 50%.

Kate is an unrivaled supporter of the arts and is committed to supporting public art projects across the five boroughs, among them Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s The Gates (2005), Olafur Eliasson’s New York City Waterfalls (2008), and Tatsumi Nishi’s enclosing of the Christopher Columbus statue on 59th Street (2012). Kate has also provided countless support to artists through the development of affordable, permanent rehearsal and studio space, a cause that I also believe in deeply.

Kate is an advocate, supporter and ambassador of the arts who has dedicated herself to enriching the cultural life in New York City. In 2002, as the newly appointed Commissioner of the Department of Cultural Affairs, Kate quoted to the New York Times: “It will be my nonstop effort to see that the cultural community is made whole to the extent that it’s possible.” During her 12 year tenure, she prevailed over New York City’s culture budget and secured it as the largest in the country. Under her watchful eye, New York City saw a surge in the number of nonprofit cultural organizations receiving support, and an increase in average grant awards by over 30%.

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