

MAINE ARTS REVIEW

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF
THE MAINE ARTS COMMISSION

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From Our Executive Director



Julie Richard

I grew up in rural Wisconsin in a town that had a population of 700 – it was also an incredibly arts-rich region. It was the home of Frank Lloyd Wright and the birthplace of one of the country's first local arts councils – Upland Arts.

I was also the product of an excellent arts education throughout my school years. My district had one of the top music programs in the state – a place where most of the football team would run in to the locker room just prior to half-time to change into their band uniforms, perform in the half-time show, change back into their football uniforms and finish out the game. I had band and chorus five days a week, during the school day and a one-on-one lesson with my band director once a week. I didn't know that this wasn't the norm.

I wouldn't say it was a particularly wealthy region. There was an abundance of farmers, a few large construction companies and other small industries that kept the economy going. But the arts were always there, drawing tourists into the region, enriching community gatherings and

providing the bedrock for future arts administrators and performers.

I honestly didn't appreciate how influential my childhood experiences were until I came to Maine. In my seven-plus years here, I have travelled to every corner of the state (yes, there are still niches that I need to see) and I can say that the arts are everywhere. We all know that Maine is the most rural state in the country – but that fact has been the draw for artists and performers and writers for generations.

The arts have helped revitalize many of our rural towns including Eastport, Winter Harbor, Skowhegan, Rockland and the list goes on. This issue of the *Maine Arts Review* features six organizations or artists that are doing amazing work in rural Maine. I hope you enjoy the journey.

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Julie A. Richard".

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The Rural Arts Edition

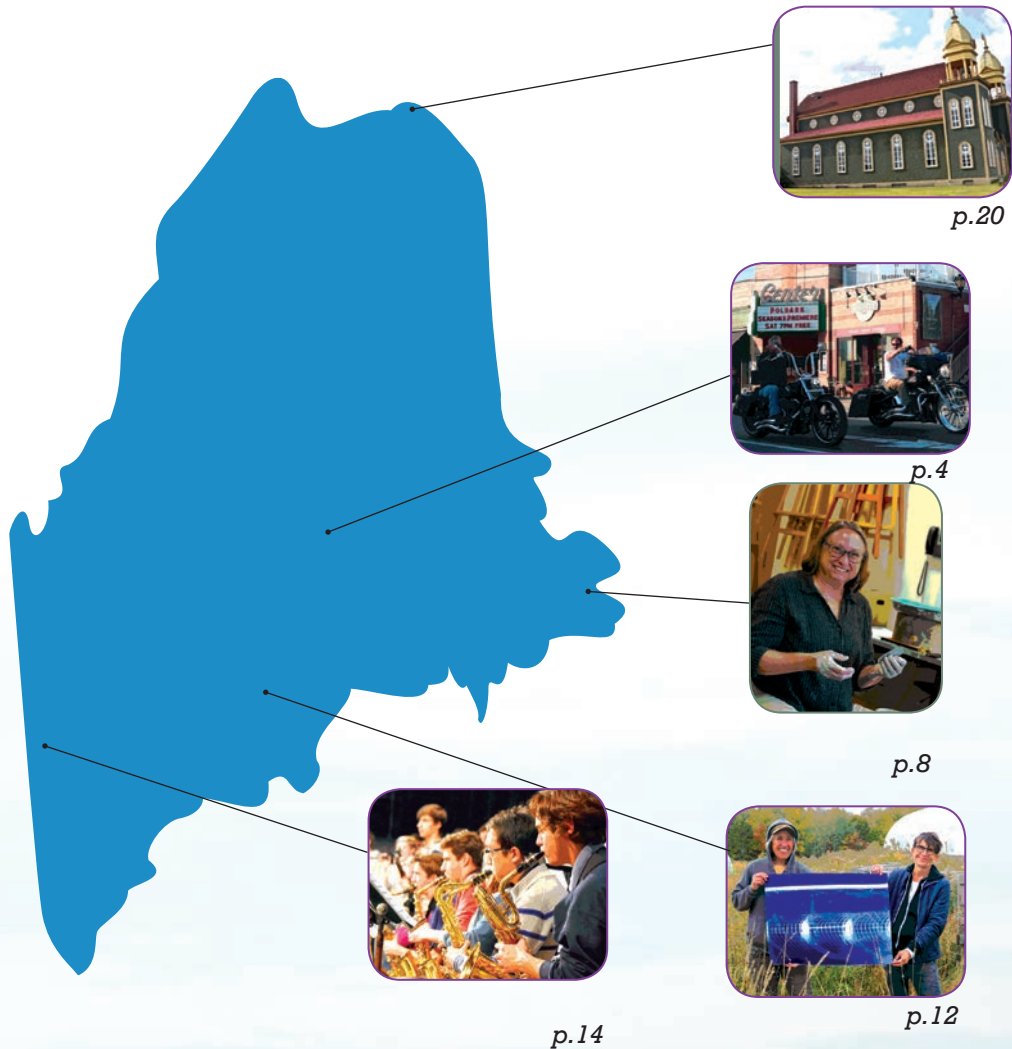


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COBSCOOK COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTER



Innovation and change often arrives too little, too late in rural America. During the Census, Maine topped the charts with 61.2 percent of the population living in rural areas. The population density in Washington County was roughly 13 people per square mile. In addition, Washington County consistently ranks among the poorest school districts according to the Bangor Daily News annual scorecard. While critical resources are available to residents and schools, the need is much greater in rural counties, and the supply of these resources is simply not equitable.

In Washington County during the late 1990s, the future was looking bleak.

“A bunch of parents were saying we don’t want our kids dying literally or spiritually. We need the lights to come on for our kids,” said Alan Furth, a local educator who has taught in the downeast area for decades. And it wasn’t just the kids who were suffering. The whole community agreed that something needed to be done.

It started as pictures on a flip chart. An assortment of objectives drawn up by parents, neighbors, teachers, and community members. It started as

a grassroots effort. A shot in the dark to change the landscape of Washington County.

Alan was part of that “generative energy.” In 1998, a group of community members came together to form a movement that would develop a sense of place.

“We wanted a community place that was readily accessible and that provided opportunity for everybody to enter into relationship building through an art medium,” Alan said. “And that perhaps, was a portal into the world.”

The portal opened in 1999 when the Cobscook Community Learning Center was founded in the northern part of an unorganized territory in Trescott Township.

The responsiveness of CCLC's mission played a crucial part in shaping their programming. Daily workshops were offered from cradle to elder; yoga, pottery, poetry, singing, music, and dance-- whatever they could do to keep things going.

The CCLC founders promoted the idea of social ecology, that is transforming the outlooks of both social issues and environmental factors from the ground up. What that meant for the organization, was to pursue a holistic approach to self-betterment for the individual, the community, and the global condition.

While the CCLC was starting up in the early aughts, other likeminded organizations such as the Eastport Arts Center and the Beehive Design Collective, were also sprouting up and opening the downeast region to the arts.

"And they were doing phenomenal work," Alan said. "But we said we don't want to be redundant. We want to figure out what is our mixture. What is it that we can offer that



*Tim Christensen teaches a pottery lesson during Apple Fest
Photos courtesy of Cobscook Community Learning Center*

compliments what's going on here?"

The most compelling answer came from the Scandinavian Folk School model. Alan was a member of the Folk Education Association of America. The model aimed at redefining rural areas through a democratic and thoroughly creative process. Rooted in the teachings based on local needs and interests, folk schools have proved successful in blighted areas of the American south and Appalachia. The practice was a hands-on, direct approach to community design. And "like a good song," Alan said, "it resonated with the people."

This past year, the Maine Arts Commission awarded the CCLC with a grant to produce Apple & Arts Day- a celebration of the heritage and traditional handcrafts in Washington County. It was also the celebration of the CCLC's 20th

anniversary. What better time to pay them a visit?!

After driving a solid three hours with the compass pointed east, we landed on Route 1 in Machias. Trescott Township wouldn't show up on the smartphone's GPS. The closest town is Lubec, which shares the border with New Brunswick, Canada. Nestled along narrow roads and thick woods rising from the sea, we reached what appeared to be a homestead and pulled into the dirt parking lot. A brand-new building greeted us with fresh pine shingles and red trim. We received a warm welcome from staff members, and then we were led to the new wing where a high school class was in progress.

Fifteen students were gathered in the classroom making nature prints under the instruction of a teaching artist. The kids were outgoing, not shy to share their work, and all eagerly engaged in the activity.

There are no lockers or bells in CCLC, or anything reminiscent of a traditional school setting.

It's not a specialized charter school or private academy. The CCLC high school was created through public policy. While the kids are enrolled in a standard eight-class curriculum, they are technically students of Calais High School. Yet it is entirely possible that a student could spend four years at CCLC and never step foot in Calais High School.

"It's an interdisciplinary learning environment for students wanting something more than a traditional school setting," said Kara McCrimmon, the Lead Teacher of the Experiential Program. Throughout the year, students embark on outward bound trips. They learn to build birch bark canoes and electric wood guitars. And at least five times a year, they experience multi-day and night study retreats.

On the day we visited, the students were making nature prints, so there was an assumption that they would be curious to identify the plants, Kara said. The forestry plots on the CCLC campus will let students to conduct tree growth measurements as they build upon their data literacy for their eco systems studies. They will then

document species diversity through the lens of science and art.

"We are not engaging in the arts for art's sake," said Daphne Loring, the Assistant Manager of Retreats and Community Programs. "We're recognizing that arts are connected to our social experience and to our environmental experience."

Since joining the CCLC staff three years ago, Daphne said she's watched the organization evolve into a multi-use facility. The 50-acre campus now includes residential capacity with the Heartwood Lodge accommodating work retreats and residencies. Between the four environmentally friendly buildings, community gardens, a bandstand, and a wood fired

cob oven, the landscape is teeming with creative energy.

Two years ago, the CCLC launched what is considered one of its major pillars—TREE: Transforming Rural Experience in Education. The TREE program is a pilot project collaborating with Colby College and the University of Maine to track the effects of trauma and its impact on the brain. Using real-time research and development, TREE aims to remove the barriers of poverty and trauma in Washington County schools. The benefit is students are getting the mental healthcare they need in a totally de-stigmatized environment, Daphne said.

The sun rays poked through the limbs of heirloom apple trees as we were led from



The Monday Night music circle brings out a lively crew. Photo/Ryan Leighton

the library down the steps of Heartwood Lodge. It was just about time for the Monday Night Music session.

In an afternoon spent at the CCLC, we learned what community responsiveness truly means in Maine’s easternmost reaches. Transformation doesn’t happen overnight. It takes patience, persistence, resilience, and most importantly, a willingness to listen.

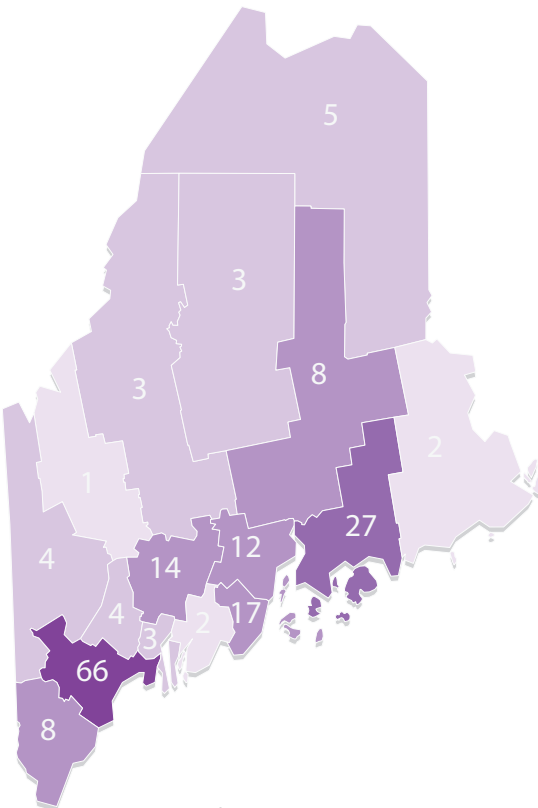
Inside the new wing, the music circle has commenced.

Older folks, mostly gentlemen, with guitars in hand. Others, gathered outside the circle to enjoy the music and gossip like they have done for the past 20 years. Alan, seated at the head of the circle assumed the role of the jam session maestro. Between quick quips and inside jokes, compassion abounds. As day faded to night, the guitars in unison started strumming the chords for “This Train is Bound for Glory.”

Maine’s downeast region is sometimes called Sunrise

County because it’s the first place the light touches in the 48 contiguous states. That notion conjures up an image of a lighthouse basking in the warm sunlight as waves crash along the shore. Out here on the horizon, the long dark winter is coming, and yet in Trescott Township, there is a beacon of hope at the Cobscook Community Learning Center.

Grants By The Numbers



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**Grants Awarded in
Fiscal Year 2020**

Androscoggin	4
Aroostook	5
Cumberland	66
Franklin	1
Hancock	27
Kennebec	14
Knox	17
Lincoln	2
Oxford	4
Penobscot	8
Piscataquis	3
Sagadahoc	3
Somerset	3
Waldo	12
Washington	2
York	8

The FY20 Grant cycle had a total of 201 applicants seeking funding from nine grants offered by the Maine Arts Commission. The total ask was \$895,932.50. Out of these, 125 received funding totalling \$366,764. The chart on the left shows grant awards broken down county by county. The new grant cycle opens January 15, 2020. Learn more by visiting www.MaineArts.com

