

ARTS

5 retiring arts leaders are leaving a huge legacy. Here's what they built and what's next.

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Between last fall and this spring, five arts leaders with more than a combined 125 years of experience at their Indianapolis institutions will have retired.

From the stage to the canvas, these leaders set the bar for high quality productions, assembled exhibits that broadened Indianapolis' understanding of its diverse roots and constructed new cultural spaces.

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Indiana Repertory Theatre's Janet Allen, Dance Kaleidoscope's David Hochoy and the Eiteljorg Museum's John Vanausdall took the helm at their organizations before 2000. Just a handful of years into the new millennium, Judy Byron began helping to build Arts for Lawrence from scratch. And in 2012, Ernest Disney-Britton joined forces with the Indy Arts Council to prioritize equity and community engagement in arts grants.

Now, they're part of a wave of leaders passing the torch to the next generation, who will take on the challenges of recovering from the pandemic, rebuilding audiences and building equity.

A goal to build collections and audiences

The 1990s saw a few of these retiring arts leaders broaden their organizations' footprint on the way to becoming city anchors.

Hochoy found a dedicated but small audience when he took over as artistic director at Dance Kaleidoscope in 1991. The company rehearsed in the St. Mary's School gym downtown and sewed their own costumes.

"My greatest challenge (was) that when you ask someone on the street, 'Do you know what modern dance is?' They (would) say, 'No, I don't know,'" Hochoy said. "And when you say, 'Well, do you want to know what modern dance is?', they say, 'No, I don't want to know.'"

So he went for stunning on a shoestring. With 1992's "Scheherazade," glitz met imagination when designer Barry Doss fashioned costumes from former Ballets Russes garments and beads marked down in an after-Christmas sale. Philanthropist Christel DeHaan joined the crowds at Dance Kaleidoscope's "Carmina Burana" in 1995 and became

a major supporter. She bolstered Hochoy's vision for the company and opened the door to more sponsors.

Vanausdall was the fourth director when he arrived at the seven-year-old Eiteljorg Museum in 1996. Namesake Harrison Eiteljorg's Native and Western art collection was among the most important in the country, Vanausdall said, but it needed more pieces — especially by artists of color. The CEO and president has seen the museum collection grow from about 4,400 to more than 10,000 artworks during his tenure.

Equally important, the Eiteljorg aimed to do a better job of teaching Hoosiers about Native American cultures, Vanausdall said.

"I think we've taken great pleasure and made a real commitment to talk about the American West as the multicultural experience that it really was — the real West, not the mythic West," he said. "Placing Indiana and Native American history and presenting the West as a multicultural story has been what's driven us for my tenure here."

Two exhibits in the late 1990s — "In the Presence of the Past: The Miami Indians of Indiana" and "Cowboys, Settlers and Soldiers: African Americans in the West" set the tone while bringing in big crowds.

Allen had a similar vision for Indiana Repertory Theatre — championing local plays as well as works that had been produced around the nation.

She joined the theater in 1980 after writing a "snotty grad student letter," as she put it, telling the organization it needed a dramaturg. In 1996, she became the organization's fourth artistic director and its first from the Midwest, signaling a recognition of the theater's roots, she said.

During her tenure, she's elevated Hoosier works in programming like 2016's "Finding Home," which examined Indiana's statehood.

"Stories don't have to be from abroad or from some other big city or from some other area of this country to be valid," Allen said.

5 times the play went wrong: Mishaps and laughs over 50 years at Indiana Repertory Theatre

How leaders constructed and sustained more spaces for art

The legacy of these leaders has also taken physical form.

In 2021, Byron saw a dream come to life when the Fort Ben Cultural Campus opened. Byron had envisioned an art center since 2004 when she and her husband moved into a home in Lawrence that was formerly officer quarters.

Three years later, Byron joined the board of the newly established Partnerships for Lawrence before becoming the first staff member and executive director in 2012. Four years later, the organization rebranded as Arts for Lawrence.

Over time, the nonprofit filled what was a desert for arts opportunities with programs like its popular Summer Art Camp, which offers classes in puppetry, digital art, dance and

more for children.

Byron's dream grew into building an art campus. She delayed retirement two years to oversee a \$5.8 million Lilly Endowment grant to turn the historic 1.5-acre plot into a bustling hub with an expanded theater, musical swing set, amphitheater and Visual Arts Center.

"I love seeing on social media that people are coming out and playing on the musical swings and posting their pictures," Byron said. "I love seeing that the community's walking down the street with their folding chairs going to a Fridays at the Fort concert or a Shakespeare at the Fort presentation."

Now at Fort Ben: Heartland Film has moved its headquarters to Lawrence

Alongside the construction has come the less glamorous and necessary work of sustainability — both of buildings and the organizations they house. Vanausdall formed relationships with donors, fundraising and building the Eiteljorg's endowment. In 2022, the Eiteljorg opened the reconstructed Native American Galleries — one of the final parts of a \$55 million campaign.

In 2020, Dance Kaleidoscope moved into its first-ever permanent home at the Circle City Industrial Complex.

And in 2019, Allen helped oversee an \$18.5 million campaign that included updating technology, preserving Indiana Repertory Theatre's historic building and adding to its endowment.

"By the time I became artistic director, sustainability began to be the kind of clarion call about arts institutions in Indianapolis," Allen said.

The journey toward racial equity

Reckoning with racial inequities in art and funding has been a goal for this generation of arts leaders — and one that intensified after the protests of 2020.

To this end, Disney-Britton, the Indy Arts Council's vice president for community impact and investment who retired in September, has worked to reform the Arts Council's grant-making system over the past decade.

Organizations centered on people of color historically received the smallest awards from the council, he said, a pattern he sought to change by shifting the funding criteria to require community impact and racial equity for the Annual Grants Program.

The change helped increase awarded money for organizations focused on people of color, which is fundamental to growth, he said.

"The experience that Ernest designed ... is considered a best-in-class example," said Julie Goodman, CEO of the Indy Arts Council. "So we have partners from all over the country asking (for and with whom) we share the mechanics of our program and how we support the city in that work."

The shift didn't come without challenges, including organizations that said they couldn't

address equity because they'd have to sacrifice artistic excellence, Disney-Britton said.

"It was a painful process because no one likes to admit one, that they have a disproportionate advantage, but it was a huge success," he said.

Instead, equity and artistic excellence improved — a metric that showed on organizations' grant scores and increased their awards, he said.

Pandemic shifts that will reverberate into the future

One of the biggest challenges for these leaders came in the past three years with the advent of an unprecedented global pandemic.

Nationally, demand for the performing arts still hasn't returned to 2019 levels, according to Know Your Own Bone, a website that analyzes data about cultural audiences. The next generation of arts leaders will have to continue navigating the rocky path left in COVID's wake.

"There is a sort of rebalancing on the part of audiences — what they're prepared to do and where they're prepared to do it, and I don't think we're through that rebalancing yet," said Karen Gahl-Mills, a professor of practice and director of arts administration programs at Indiana University's O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs.

Over the years, gorgeous costumes, dramatic lighting and Hochoy's dazzling choreography contributed to the growth of Dance Kaleidoscope's ticket sales. But audience numbers decreased during the pandemic and still haven't fully recovered, he said.

Indiana Repertory Theatre has reduced its programming, producing seven shows this season, down from its pre-pandemic nine, Allen said. She's watched people's tastes shift, too, given the events of the past few years. Many patrons are seeking farce and worry-free comedies like April's "Clue" instead of past top-selling hits like "Steel Magnolias," which Allen heard people describe as "sad" when they staged it last year.

"We're having to relearn a tremendous amount about what appeals, to what extent it appeals, why it appeals," Allen said.

Indiana Repertory Theatre, the Eiteljorg and Arts for Lawrence have hired new leaders, while Dance Kaleidoscope is still searching. Disney-Britton has remained an adviser at the Indy Arts Council.

The decisions give boards time to take stock of what's needed and find a leader to bridge the gap, Gahl-Mills said.

It's "less about trying to replicate the person that you had and more about taking a good, clear-eyed look at: What is it that we need now? What does our city require of us? What does our community require of us?" said Gahl-Mills, who noted she wasn't speaking on behalf of Indiana University.

Part of what's necessary for the future, Disney-Britton said, is recruiting more people of color, especially to leadership positions. Arts boards' diversity grew 10% from 2021 to 2022, a metric that points to the beginning of a larger shift in inclusive hiring, Goodman

said.

The leaders themselves have plenty of advice to offer to their successors gleaned from their own experience. Audience building, they say, will come from a variety of areas, including racial diversity, community immersion and more forms of expression on stage.

Flexibility is key, Vanausdall said.

"You're planning so many years out in advance and put things on a path and stick to it," he said. "We've really had to learn how to change on a dime, react to our external environment."

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