ARTS: A STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

SPEECH FOR

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Picture yourself in a room…. in a plain white room. No windows. No colors. No sounds. It seems almost impossible to imagine, but try to imagine this: What would your life be like without the influence of the arts? It’s pretty hard to picture; probably almost as difficult as it would be to empathize with a blind person or try understanding what life is like for those that are hearing challenged. We can close off access to the joy of self-expression but we have KNOWN what it feels like being a part of a group whose combined force creates a universal soul shattering vibration. We know what it’s like to observe fine art so beautiful it moves us to tears, and we’ve probably all had the experience of coaxing a little “**pling**” from a triangle in early education music classes or performing in chorus on assembly day in grade school or learning the power of knowing that if you have a blob of blue paint and you mix it with a little red paint, somehow, miraculously, you get purple!!! Now imagine a world where your children and their children grow up in a white room, void of the opportunity to experience the enrichment of the arts in their lives.

Times are tough and education finances are being squeezed so tight that the only sound we will eventually hear is the screech of the budget doors being shut. Our children deserve better. We must do whatever it takes to support the survival of music and arts programs throughout the education system in the US.

So much has been said about the necessity of the arts, and in particular music, in our lives. Plato felt that music was a “Moral Law and gives soul to the universe.” Maya Angelou taught us, “ Music was my refuge. I could crawl into the space between the notes and curl my back to loneliness.” And Nietzsche reminds us, “Without music, life would be a mistake.” A fundamental and foundational education must include arts education. I cannot imagine a world without the opportunity to learn something that fills the soul and teaches so much more than notes and rhythm. I truly believe it would present more of a struggle for survival to eliminate arts funding. Now, how do we find the way to insure that funding is present to keep arts education programs in our system in perpetuity? It’s time to identify issues and focus on solutions. It is imperative to keep the color and the sound in our lives.

There are several issues that may be at the root of threats to the continuing of music and arts programs both within and outside of the educational system. Regarding the dire conditions throughout the United States’ network of schools, many point the finger at the increasingly demanding rigors of teaching common core, and even though music and art are and should be considered integral parts of the common core curriculum, due to pressure on teachers to maximize lessons focusing on language arts and mathematics, teaching the equally fundamental foundations in creativity, namely the creative arts, is falling by the wayside, getting short shrift and being allocated-if at all- to diminished and inadequate time slots and funding.

How is anyone supposed to reap the benefits of innate creativity if our culture is encouraged to morph into standardized automatons? And while I am sure it is clear that times, priorities and economics, while continuing to be challenging, are shifting, there really has got to be a way to preserve arts funding in every level in our lives.

In an article posted on [www.cincinnatti.com](http://www.cincinnatti.com), we learn, “Across the country, the arts picture reflects the dismal economy… [A few years ago] the Honolulu Symphony Orchestra had to file for bankruptcy. Museums nationwide are cutting exhibitions and laying off staff. Opera companies are erasing productions from their seasons. And 77% of theater companies surveyed by the Theater Communications Group had to cut costs, endure wage freezes and layoffs and were bracing for cash flow problems.

In an article in “New Music Box” from 2010, we learn even more about the unimaginable struggles facing Detroit, ironically the birthplace of certain genres of music vital to the cultural development of several generations. The article reminds us how even though that city “rode to global fame on the backs of two powerful industries”… one being automotives and the other being music, it has seen more than its fair share of economic hardship over the past few decades, but think… where would **ANY** of us be without the joyous and soulful sounds that Motown gave us? Can we even imagine contemporary music history with that influence gouged out of our lives and hearts? The article explains conditions that would be disturbing enough, but it is the editor’s note at the beginning that provides the prelude we should all take as a call to action. It states: “In March 2010, drastic fiscal measures were proposed to balance the Detroit city budget which included the firing of all arts teachers in the Detroit Public School system.” The article is written by operatic tenor George Shirley, university emeritus professor of music and former director of the Vocal Arts Division of the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance. He offers impassioned and convincing arguments about the importance of arts education and reminds us, “A musical education is not meant to be elitist; song is, for most human beings, organic, and every child deserves a meaningful encounter with the developmental powers inherent in musical study. This is the message we must pound incessantly into the awareness of bottom-liners tasked with reducing education to a robotic exercise devoid of creativity and imagination.”

So what do we do? We live in an age of distractions, budget cuts, cries for standardization at the sacrifice of each person’s uniqueness and self-expression, and emphasis on a common core curriculum that doesn’t allow for a complete common core education. We all run the risk of winding up in that plain white room with no windows, no voice, no joy, no appreciation of individual self-expression or the benefits of group cultural experience. But before it’s too late, we DO have the benefits of connection, access to research filled with possibility and a call to action.

Whether we can see our way to the light and to the sound of that music in our lives, we have the means to **find** solutions. Someone once said that apathy and inaction can be overcome by enthusiasm; enthusiasm can be aroused by two things: First, an ideal that takes the imagination by storm and second, an intelligible plan for carrying that ideal into practice.

We all may be devastated by the potential elimination or diminishing of arts programs, and in particular music and choral programs, but let’s face it, it’s time for **each one of us** to be accountable. In this day and age of technological and social connection, in our own way, and in **unison,** we **CAN** make a difference. It’s up to us to do the research. It’s up to you and I to find the way to keep the artistic spirit alive in this and future generations. Never forget that arts education and programs are fundamental to personal expression and ultimately success. There was an article in Essence.com that discussed “5 Ways to Save Arts Education.” In it we learn that “Research from organizations like the Arts Education Partnership proves that children exposed to the arts do a better job in traditional subjects.” Danny Simmons, brother of Russell and Rev. Run Simmons also tells us that arts education “does wonders” for children from disadvantaged backgrounds,  “The creation of something completely new from their imagination is very empowering for a child. It allows them to explore their creative side and imagine themselves being anything.”  Of course it’s clear this applies to music as well as art. Some of the suggestions Danny makes are worth considering:

* Research and support arts and music education programs
* “Learn from the Best” and contact professional artists, museums, theaters and musician groups to possibly form after school or community driven “jam” sessions. He refers to this as “Each One Teach One.” Think about that. What does that one simple statement inspire **YOU** to do?
* Find a way to fill kids lives with music. Acappella singing began in the first thousand years of Christianity, but that doesn’t mean that only church hymns are to be sung without accompaniment. Generations have “looked for an echo… a place to harmonize,” and nothing more than a safe street corner or community room may be needed to create a collective and harmonious voice.

There are other options and resources that can be approached in the search to insure lives are enriched with arts and music. There are organizations like the Wallace Foundation in New York whose mission is “to foster improvements in learning and enrichment for disadvantaged children and the vitality of the arts for everyone.” If they can’t help directly, perhaps they can place us on a path to discovery. Will Miller, President of the Wallace Foundation has said, “Engagement in the arts not only allows young people to express themselves and unleash the power of their imaginations but can also build skills and confidence; foster teamwork and persistence; and inspire the formation of social bonds, empathy for others and a capacity for delight that can last a lifetime. High-quality arts programming can be particularly meaningful to “tweens,” ages 10-13, who are navigating the transition from childhood to their more independent, but also demanding, teen years.” And quite frankly, to me, the benefit of music and art in our lives knows **no age**.

Walt Disney is believed to have said, “If you can dream it, you can **do** it.” Anything is possible with determination, partnership and a plan. We have spent generations overcoming adversity and that’s not going to stop. We just have to keep getting more and more creative with both our persistence and our creativity. As far as I am concerned **NOTHING** is going to stop the music and with all of our collective voices and talents, the glorious and harmonious sounds will prevail.

Thank you all!