

CREATING ART AND OPPORTUNITY

Pittsburgh's Cultural Treasures, a shared foundation initiative to bolster and celebrate Black-led cultural groups in Western Pennsylvania, has moved into its second phase, and that means more support for more organizations.
By Elwin Green

When BOOM Concepts co-founders Thomas Agnew and DS Kinsel learned at the end of last year that their Garfield-based “cultural hub” had been named as one of Pittsburgh’s Cultural Treasures, part of the Ford Foundation’s national America’s Cultural Treasures initiative, the news provided a special type of affirmation.

The selection of the multifaceted workspace, art gallery and studio — along with 15 other groups — didn’t just mean a \$150,000 boost to the organization’s budget.

“We have gotten a good amount of press and have done a good amount of work in Pittsburgh,” Mr. Agnew said. “But to be acknowledged by an organization that is bigger than Pittsburgh, outside of Pittsburgh, that is connecting with other cities and organizations ... it meant a great deal.”

That kind of recognition beyond the local scene “doesn’t always happen,” he said.

Now, other cultural organizations in Western Pennsylvania also will have new opportunities for growth and support through the Pittsburgh’s Cultural Treasures Initiative’s second phase, which focuses on building the organizational capacity of Black-led cultural groups in the region.

The Ford Foundation launched America’s Cultural Treasures in fall 2020 as a way to support and celebrate arts organizations that serve and represent marginalized communities by partnering with philanthropies across the country to provide the type of assistance the organizations deemed helpful. The Heinz Endowments was selected as Ford’s partner for the Pittsburgh region, and the Endowments, in turn, formed a collaboration with the POISE Foundation in Pittsburgh, one of America’s oldest Black community foundations, to manage the local initiative.

The \$10 million Pittsburgh’s Cultural Treasures Initiative (PCTI) was established in 2021 to support Black-led arts organizations in Western Pennsylvania and awarded a total of \$5.4 million to 16 such organizations last year. The initiative is continuing to move forward with new activities for the first group of “cultural treasures” and the \$3.2 million Phase 2 expansion that includes a different group of organizations that will receive organizational development assistance.

For Mr. Agnew, inclusion as a cultural treasure among organizations in and beyond Pittsburgh opened the door for establishing the kind of connections that have shaped BOOM’s growth from



Brian Cook

J. Thomas Agnew, above, and DS Kinsel, below, are co-founders of BOOM Concepts, which offers co-working and community arts spaces in Pittsburgh that promote and support Black, brown, queer and femme artists.



Brian Cook

its beginning. It also led him to have a whole string of questions: “What opportunities can we create? What other resources can we build upon? How can we connect with some of the cultural treasures in other cities?”

The “we” in those questions referred to the community of Phase 1 awardees. The desire to build connection on their behalf led him to join Shaunda McDill, the Endowments’ Arts & Culture program officer, and others on the committee administering PCTI.

He led the group in creating a survey to send to the Ford Foundation’s regional partners in other cities to ascertain their interest — and the interest of the arts organizations named as cultural treasures in their areas — in creating opportunities together.

Those opportunities might involve collaborative programming or inviting organizations to convene in Pittsburgh. The Ford Foundation also announced this fall that it would provide matching funds of \$50,000

to create a pipeline to these other cities for artists in Pittsburgh.”

That pipeline may extend to the next cohort of local arts organizations as the Endowments moves forward with PCTI’s second phase.

Phase 2 of the initiative seeks to assist as many as 30 Black-led arts organizations in the 10-county Pittsburgh region, beginning with a list of some 160 such organizations that was developed during Phase 1. An open application process began in September with a pair of informational meetings, and as with Phase 1, members of the public can nominate organizations through the Endowments’ website.

From the beginning, PCTI was intended to shift the paradigms in arts funding by moving away from short-term funding, usually for specific programs, to providing unrestricted support and helping organizations grow their capacity.

PACE Program Manager Sharon Jefferson dubbed the programs as “capacity-building light” and “deep-dive.”

In the one-year, “light” program, organizations “will have the opportunity to identify singular projects or areas of interest or need that they can take a more tactical approach to in terms of building their capacity,” she said.

In the “deep-dive” program, organizations will have three years to engage in long-term strategic planning.

Ms. Jefferson said that both tracks of programming will offer training and development opportunities to help organizations sharpen their skills and improve their service delivery. Perhaps no less important, PACE will offer customized assistance to organizations as they express needs that neither track of programming may directly address.

“This could take the shape of self-care, organizational well-being, things of that nature that have yet to be determined, because that will be largely prescribed by those organizations,” she explained.

For participants in both “light” and “deep-dive” tracks, PCTI will provide a final dose of funding upon program completion to help the organizations execute the strategy they have designed. Between the initial grant, the funds needed to pay consultants, and the final boost, a Phase 2 grantee’s total award could be as much as \$150,000.

“It’s a non-traditional level of investment for those that are not already in relationship with philanthropy,” Ms. McDill said.

PCTI also is providing a boost to the participating partners as well as the grantees. The POISE Foundation was tasked with housing the \$10 million for the initiative, which nearly doubled its assets under management, increased its management fee revenues, and raised its profile as a community foundation leader. PACE was able to expand its staff to hire a program associate and a data strategist whose responsibilities include supporting the organization’s role in the initiative.

Still, the core of Phase 2 is helping grant recipients to make well-informed decisions about what they want.

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Thomas Agnew, co-founder, BOOM Concepts

to \$100,000 to arts groups participating in the America’s Cultural Treasures initiative that arrange to convene across regions to advance common program goals.

“I’m proud that Pittsburgh organizations were the first to formally reach out to other artists and arts organizations in partner [America’s Cultural Treasures] cities,” Ms. McDill said. “It is exciting to think about Pittsburgh serving as the place for the first convening of national treasures, and equally exciting to think that the effort is artist-led, generating from a Phase 1 awardee who not only wanted to get involved, but who is seeking

Phase 2 will offer the selected organizations an opportunity to participate in either a one-year or a three-year capacity-building program. All participants will receive an initial unrestricted grant of \$10,000, and be matched with a consultant provided by the Program to Aid Citizen Enterprise (PACE), which joined the Endowments and the POISE Foundation this year as an organizational partner in the Pittsburgh’s Cultural Treasures Initiative. The consultants will help groups figure out whether to enroll in a one-year engagement or to commit to a more in-depth development process for three years.

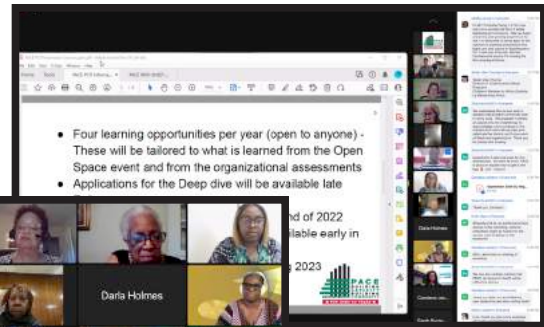
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PITTSBURGH'S CULTURAL TREASURES INITIATIVE

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“We really just plan on taking the time, which oftentimes people don’t have, pairing the groups with someone who can walk them through the process,” Ms. McDill said. “This program is going to give participants hand-to-hand care by asking, ‘What are you trying to accomplish? And now that we know what you want to do, we are going to outline your traditional options, all right? And if you’re going to go against the grain, push the envelope, innovate, and do something else, here’s some things you should be aware of...’” she added with a laugh.

Besides the dual tracks of programming, PCTI and PACE plan to offer workshops that will be open to all Phase 2 participants and even to organizations that are not awarded grants.

Lucille E. Dabney, president and CEO of PACE, said that while her organization has more than 50 years of experience in offering workshops and other types of training for nonprofits, the workshops will not be predetermined.

“The groups will have an opportunity to tell us what they need, then we’ll craft or create those workshops in concert with what we hear from the community.”

Ms. McDill noted that some of the workshops may be led by Phase 1 awardees, and

that having the workshops open to all Phase 2 applicants will create opportunities for connection.

For Mr. Agnew, the connections that can happen in Phase 2 offer all participants the potential to go beyond the current phases of the Pittsburgh’s Cultural Treasures Initiative itself, leading him to ponder another question: “How do we start collectively saving money to make sure that people in the future have some funds, that they don’t necessarily have to go to nonprofit organizations that are giving grants?”

As for Ms. McDill, she recalled one of the PCTI roundtables, in which both Carlotta Paige, founder of the Westmoreland Diversity Coalition, and Tim Stevens, chairman and CEO of the Black Political Empowerment Project, were present.

“Ms. Carlotta was sharing some of the things that Westmoreland Diversity Coalition needed, and Mr. Stevens was sharing some of the initiatives he is working on through B-PEP, and that meeting provided the opportunity for them to conclude, ‘Let’s connect offline.’”

Ms. McDill hopes such interactions will help to “plant a seed and create and/or deepen networks. Hopefully, in the long term, cultural workers will have an array of resources to meet their unique needs.” **h**

Phase 1

Chandler Bingham performs in “Synchronized: with Soy Sos with Buscrates,” a production of PearlArts | STAYCEE PEARL dance project & Soy Sos, which was presented at the Kelly Strayhorn Theater in April. PearlArts was one of the 16 Black-led organizations that received a total of \$5.4 million in the first phase of the Pittsburgh’s Cultural Treasures Initiative.

Phase 2

Lucille Dabney, president and CEO of the Program to Aid Citizen Enterprise (PACE), moderates a virtual information session in September for representatives of cultural organizations interested in learning more about Phase 2 of the Pittsburgh’s Cultural Treasures Initiative. PACE is administering the \$3.2 million second phase, which is designed to help Black-led cultural groups in the Pittsburgh region expand their organizational capacity.