

In examining The Heinz Endowments' approach to investing in artistic and cultural organizations and initiatives, the foundation decided to go deeper than statistics or even legacy. The organization decided any update would need to explain the importance of the work to the community. By Elwin Green

By the time the Pittsburgh's Cultural Treasures initiative completes its first year, the two people who were most responsible for its creation and for overseeing its start will have left The Heinz Endowments.

Grant Oliphant stepped down as president in February. Come December, Janet Sarbaugh will vacate the position of vice president of Creativity.

Ms. Sarbaugh's departure coincides with what the Endowments has dubbed "a strategic refresh" of the Creativity department. The comprehensive review began more than a year ago.

"It is one of the most in-depth reviews of our program that we've ever had," Ms. Sarbaugh said.

The analysis has included the engagement of a wide variety of people and organizations in a nine-month conversation, as well as foundation board members and staff. It took a fresh look at research on the cultural community that the Creativity area had commissioned in the previous year, including about 30 interviews with cultural organizations. More than a dozen other foundations were consulted, not just in the region but across the country and beyond, together with other thought leaders in arts philanthropy who weren't affiliated with foundations.

The process led the Endowments back to a single question: Why?

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Janet Sarbaugh, vice president of Creativity, The Heinz Endowments

"We spent a lot of time talking about the 'why' of the Creativity program," Ms. Sarbaugh said, noting that the approach was something that it might have been easier not to do. The organization could have begun with the assumption that with decades of experience in funding cultural work, the only question to be asked and answered was how to improve techniques for executing a self-evident mission.

Instead, the foundation asked, "Why?" Why is the community's cultural life important?

The answers that emerged form a bedrock of convictions upon which to build. The Endowments concluded that culture provides an array of benefits that fall into three categories: individual benefits, community development and community cohesion.

For individuals, cultural activity provides a sense of meaning and of identity; it helps us as human beings to develop empathy and provides an understanding of ourselves and of the world.

"This process has given us an even stronger belief that cultural experiences are critically important in providing insight into each of us individually and into the communities and the world we inhabit," Ms. Sarbaugh said.

In the realm of community development, "we also need culture to enhance our physical presence in the world, the places that we move and live in, and the communities that we inhabit," Ms. Sarbaugh said. "We want to live in places that reflect our history and culture. We want places that are beautiful and welcoming."

"The built environment and the neighborhoods we live in are expressions of culture."

She cited Pittsburgh's Hill District, a historic Black community adjacent to the city's Downtown, as an example.

"I can't go there without thinking about August Wilson's home. I can't go there without thinking about the redevelopment of the New Granada Theater ... the Hill District is a locus of culture, and its revitalization efforts are putting culture at the center. Pittsburgh's neighborhoods have a great many stories to tell about their history and culture, which can be expressed through a variety of cultural activity."

As part of the program analysis, "community cohesion" is when members of a community share cultural experiences and resources, which produces strong relationships, common values and a common purpose, and a sense of solidarity.

The board and the Creativity staff will consider primary courses of action for the Endowments to pursue over the next decade, including: support cultural institutions, large and small; support individual artists; support creative learning, or as Ms. Sarbaugh put it, "the ability of youth in the community to have access to high-quality arts learning activity and deep interaction with teaching artists"; and support creative places.

Ms. Sarbaugh explained that "creative places" refers to neighborhoods where "culture is an inherent component of the neighborhood's well-being, both in the physical environment and in the experiences that you can have in that community."

Those courses of action will be bound by more than a focus on arts and culture.

"A throughline for those things is a stronger and better-defined emphasis on equity," Ms. Sarbaugh said, which would mean wrestling with the question, "What do we mean by equity in cultural life?"

The questions of how all of this will play out in the day-to-day work of the Creativity area remain open to be reviewed by the foundation's board and staff following the arrival of Ms. Sarbaugh's successor, who will be appointed by the Endowments' next president. Ms. Sarbaugh will be available as a consultant to help in finalizing the process. **h**