



Arts Warrior

Janet Langsam, ArtsWestchester CEO, discusses the impact of COVID-19 on area artists and why our cultural framework may never be the same. **BY PAUL ADLER**

As CEO of ArtsWestchester, Janet Langsam is not simply some advocate for local culture. She is a warrior at the frontlines, fighting tooth and nail virtually around the clock to boost Westchester's arts organizations and venues, help secure vital funding for individuals and nonprofits alike, and come to the rescue of countless local artists who would likely have nowhere else to turn. This role firmly places Langsam at the very heart of the region's arts' scene, so she has witnessed firsthand the effects of COVID-19 on Westchester's cultural landscape.

Langsam notes that during the early days of the pandemic, it was remarkable how rapidly and drastically priorities changed. "We collectively spent thousands of hours sanitizing our whole building and just dealing with the process of finding out how to do this, who could do it, and what was a legitimate price for it," recalls Langsam. "Then I found out that everyone needed the same information, so we did a group Zoom call with engineers and cleaners. Not exactly the information that every arts organization needed in the past."

Langsam adds that the tremendous variety of local organizations further complicated matters. "Not everybody in the arts community in Westchester is the same, so you have small groups who were saying, 'Can I have a class of 10 come in for a lesson, or do I have to wait for phase four?'" explains Langsam. "There is such a diversity of situations that when the guidelines came out, everybody was interpreting them differently, and rightly so. But there was nobody to ask how to apply them."

There was, however, one bright spot that seemingly united both large and small arts organizations. "The PPP Loan [Paycheck Protection Program] was a lifesaver," says Langsam. "As they loosened the guidelines, it became more and more helpful to us. In fact, I was recently on the phone with a bunch of colleagues from the state, and I would say about 95 percent of those who filed for the PPP got it."

Langsam is quick to add that this does not mean there was no fallout. "Most of us still can't do events, can't do concerts, and can't do gallery talks," she says. "But worst of all, we can't do fundraisers, and most of our community and most of the not-for-profit community relies on golf tournaments, galas, award luncheons, and things like that in order to balance the budget." ArtsWestchester itself was not exempt from this issue. "We normally we get \$500,000 in funding from our events," shares Langsam. "We had to cut that in half and budget \$250,000, and I don't even know how we are going to reach that."

One possible lifeline, grants, has been similarly impacted by the rise of COVID-19. "We'll get a grant to do a series of concerts or an artist's residency, but nobody provides grants for general operating support," explains

PHOTO BY CATHY PINSKY/ COURTESY OF ARTSWESTCHESTER



Janet Langsam on camera outside ArtsWestchester's White Plains gallery.

Langsam. "Most general operating support comes through events, so what I am seeing is that not being able to do the events is not just a loss in revenue but also a loss in flexible revenue — in unrestricted revenue."

Yet, even during this nadir of funding, Westchester's cultural organizations have proven to be incredibly adaptive. "We have all pivoted. We are all doing virtual programs; even the smallest organizations are doing workshops with artists over Zoom," she says. "Everybody has found a way to use the internet to maintain contact with their audiences." ArtsWestchester itself has organized everything from Paraguayan folk-arts programs to Pride events, all via Zoom.

Believe it or not, some organizations have even found a way to grow during this period. "You would think that organizations would be losing audience," says Langsam, "but the executive director at RiverArts, Doug Coe, said they have a lot of people on staff who are very savvy with the internet and are finding a whole new audience." The artists who rent space at

"I think there is an enormous amount of grit in the cultural space. The people who work in the cultural arena are tough people. They really care about what they do."

ArtsWestchester's White Plains gallery have supplied another cause for optimism, with virtually all of them not only returning to their spaces but even paying rent through the quarantine, despite not having been on the premises.

Yet Langsam remains pragmatic. "I think one of the challenges that we have to be mindful of is to do what we can to allay fears, to let people know that we have taken this COVID crisis seriously and that we are doing our best to sanitize, to wear masks, to wear gloves,

to clean surfaces, and do all the prerequisites that we can do so that people will feel comfortable and confident coming back to a gallery or a theater.

"It's not going to be the same; we are just not going to be the same cultural community," Langsam continues. "But I think there is an enormous amount of grit in the cultural space. The people who work in the cultural arena are tough people. They really care about what they do. There is no fooling around, and they are determined to make it work." **10**

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