



MoCo Arts dancers perform "Free the animal", the first number in their performance called "Time to Dance" at Keene State College in 2016.

## The Arts: Painting a Rosy Economic Picture

*It's a prime mover in our local economy according to a recent study*

BY JOHN MCGAULEY / PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL MOORE

If all the arts in our region were in one factory or office building, it would be the largest employer around. Not only that, it would be our most significant single product for both local consumption and export to other areas of the country.

Put simply, the arts, in all its variety and diversity, is one of the prime movers of our local economy, and the largest influence on what people say would be their quality of life in the region.

And, because the arts are so ubiquitous, so all-encompassing, one tends to take them for granted, yet in the aggregate they represent a huge part of our economy and environment.

Don't believe it? Well, Jessica Gelter has the numbers to back that up. She is the executive director of Arts Alive!, the regional clearinghouse for all things arts and cultural, helping artists and arts organi-

zation in the region to enhance their talents, marketing or ability to secure grants.

### **THE SCOPE OF THE ARTS**

Nonprofit arts and cultural organizations employ a combined 2,200 people both full- and part-time, she claims. And that doesn't count the hundreds of independent painters, artisans, musicians, sculptors, writers and performers who live and work in our area. Add to that, too, the hundreds of volunteers who donate their time to arts and cultural organizations, libraries and historical societies.

That factoid is just part of an Arts and Economic Prosperity study done for the Monadnock Region in partnership with the Americans for Arts organization. Gelter explains that the statistics contained in



MoCo actors rehearse for their production of "Grease" last January.

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that study demonstrate that the Monadnock Region benefits significantly in both terms of money, and quality of life, because of the arts.

The study examined 320 communities and regions across the country, including our own. In several ways, the Monadnock Region didn't fit into the typical community examined by Americans for Art, says Gelter. Most of those communities were either cities or regions that encompassed a huge territory.

"We are neither, but a group of small communities in a relatively small region," she says.

A total of 47 towns in New Hampshire were included in the Monadnock profile.

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Also, these nonprofits and cultural organizations are businesses in their own right; they spent \$13.3 million during the fiscal year 2015 to employ people locally, purchase goods and services from local establishments and attract tourists. These nonprofits and cultural organizations also leverage \$5.3 million in additional spending that pumps revenues into restaurants, hotels, retail stores and other local businesses.

"These are powerful, powerful numbers," said Randy Cohen, Americans for the Arts' vice president of research and policy, in a Keene Sentinel article this summer. "These numbers speak for themselves. Arts in the Monadnock Region are attracting visitors that are spending money."

Gelter certainly agrees. "Tourism is just one of the direct connections with arts and culture as an economic engine for our region, but there are many more things they do for our economy."

In several ways, the survey probably underestimated the economic influence of the arts in our region. For one, it did not include our sister cities in Vermont — Brattleboro, Bellows Falls and Putney — all

of which are formidable players in the arts scene. Add those to our mix and the numbers would be appreciably larger. Also, it did not include the hundreds of artisans in our area who sell their works both regionally, nationally and internationally.



John Hughs, of Brattleboro, plays a kora, which he hand-built, during one of the Colonial Theatre's Student Matinee Series last spring.

#### **ARTS ARE EVERYWHERE AND EXPANDING**

A look at downtown Keene illustrates how influential arts and culture are, as both employers and members of the community.

The Cheshire Historical Society has a substantial footprint there, as well as the Colonial Theatre. At Keene State College there is both the Redfern Arts Center and Thorne-Sagendorph Art Gallery, both very influential players in the local art scene. Then there will soon be the jewel in the crown of arts in Keene, the new MoCo Arts center under construction just off the downtown square on Roxbury Street. (MoCo Arts is a family-centered nonprofit arts education organization offering classes in dance, theater and multi-arts camps for children and young adults. Its new \$5 million, two-story center will feature three full studios, a 200-seat black box theater, parking and offices. The building will be 17,000-square feet, compared to MoCo Arts' current 7,700 square feet on Railroad Street, where it has operated for all of its more than two decades.)

Simultaneously, nearby, the Keene Public Library is also expanding with a substantial new annex, a \$5 million project that encompasses the revitalization of the library annex and the former Masonic Hall, and the creation of an atrium linking

the annex to the main library. The library, already a frequently-used venue for lectures and other cultural events, will be able to accommodate even more activities of that nature, according to officials there.

"It's possible to go to arts and cultural events every evening," says Jane Larmon, of Keene, who for decades has been a close observer of the arts scene here, and a one-time art *Continued on next page.*



Helen Mattson, left, of Fitzwilliam, and Suzy Krautmann, of Keene, look over pieces at the Friends of the Keene Public Library Affordable Art Sale in September.

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gallery owner in downtown Keene. “Sometimes you have to make a decision as to which to attend because of the competing offerings.”

Then there’s the annual Art Walk, in which downtown Keene stores display hundreds of works by talented area artists, and the popular Art in the Park event every fall in Ashuelot Park, where artists display and sell their works. The group, Monadnock Art, sponsors an annual art tour each October during the peak of the colorful foliage season, allowing visitors to see the often tucked-away places where artists work in towns surrounding Mount Monadnock. The Fall Foliage Art Tour held this past Columbus Day weekend in the Monadnock Region featured open houses at the studios and workplaces of 24 noted area artists.

“We have very talented visual artists in our region,” says Larmon.

She cites as just one example the nationally-recognized John Traynor, who has received more than 200 awards of merit for his work, including the prestigious Salmagundi Club Medal of Honor and Merit. Many others are of similar talent and have received national recognition as well, Larmon says, including such artists as Jeanne Maguire Thieme of Swanzey and Craig Stockwell of Keene. They are just a few of the hundreds of talented artists in our region in a wide variety of mediums. (See sidebar story on next page.)

Ann Henderson, owner of Ann Henderson Interiors in downtown Keene, agrees that the area has a surfeit of artistic talent.

“I am continually amazed and blessed in my line of work to be in contact with a wealth of talented craftsmen and artists,” says Henderson. “In the fine arts, we have an abundance of nationally and internationally acclaimed and collected artists — painters, printmakers, sculptors and installation artists. We have woodworkers,

cabinetmakers, photographers, metalsmiths, decorative painters, glassblowers, papermakers, bookbinders, typesetters and the list goes on and on.”

#### **OUTSIDE KEENE, THE ARTS ARE JUST AS FORMIDABLE**

Outside of Keene is equally impressive in terms of artistic endeavors, with the Peterborough Players, a nationally-recognized professional theater founded in 1933 and featuring some of the best actors in the country. Also in Peterborough is the MacDowell Colony, arguably the most prestigious artists’ colony in the United States, begun in 1907 and attracting some of the finest artists nationally in all mediums. (Over the years at MacDowell, an estimated 7,700 artists have been supported in residence, including the winners of at least 79 Pulitzer Prizes, 781 Guggenheim Fellowships, nine Grammys, eight Oscars and eight National Medal for the Arts winners.)

In Jaffrey, the arts scene has been richly enlivened by the planned construction of its Park Theatre, set to begin this fall. The project received its final fundraising piece in September when the Savings Bank of Walpole agreed to provide interim construction financing for the facility, which will include two auditoriums with a total of 485 seats. The project is a total reproduction of the town’s old Park Theatre and required that more than \$5 million be raised to design, develop and fund the new construction.

“This is the quintessential grassroots project,” said Steve Jackson, Park Theatre’s CEO, in a recent news release. “Almost \$1 million has been donated by nearly 3,000 individuals and area businesses throughout New Hampshire and across the country ... even the taxpayers of the Town of Jaffrey have contributed to the project ...