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FEATURED

Statewide arts community flocks to Norman for Oklahoma Arts Conference

By Mack Burke Oct 23, 2014



Oklahoma Arts Conference attendees blow into receptacles of an art installation at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art. The installation, titled "Blow Four," requires participation from four people to form an image on the screen below.

Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art



The Front Page

Hundreds of artists, educators and community planners descended on Norman on Tuesday and Wednesday for the first two days of the three-day Oklahoma Arts Conference, a statewide gathering of arts advocates.

After reveling in a Tuesday night art walk on Main Street, conference attendees got down to right-brained business Wednesday, taking in lectures on arts education, community building and everything in between.

The broad topic of how to improve arts education in Oklahoma was a major focus. Norman arts community leaders like Sooner Theatre's Jennifer Baker, Cimarron Opera's Shari Ransley and Shaw collaborated on building a coalition to address holes in arts education.

Their ideas culminated in a new mission: Change the language and the cultural conversations around arts education to emphasize arts education as worthy on its own merit.

They shared ideas on the notion of community arts leaders stepping up to fill the void. They're ideas now, but they could be made into a reality.

"You can go and do that. It might take time, patience, money, expertise, but you can do it," presenter Jeff M. Poulin said. "Arts education advocacy is not that hard. This is practical. These groups could find themselves working together, making things happen and achieving the goals you talked about here today."

Another segment focused on placemaking, a major priority in downtown Norman that has manifested itself in the form of Second Friday Art Walks and Main Street revitalization. The presentation revisited a project from last spring where lower speed limits and mid-block crosswalks were temporarily installed on Main Street, which had been cut down to two lanes just west of Classen Boulevard.

The project was an experiment in artistic placemaking that had some interesting results.

"People started stopping on Main Street instead of driving 35 miles per hour," OU Institute for quality communities presenter Shane Hampton said.

Their data shows that during the experiment, traffic speeds reduced from 27.2 mph to 17.9 mph. Making adjustments to Main Street, which hosts an average of 11,538 vehicles per day, won't happen overnight and no permanent changes have been approved, but Norman Arts Council executive director Erinn Gavaghan said looking at new ideas is a step in the right direction.

One idea involves making Main Street a two-way street again.

"This idea, taking Main Street back to a two-way street, is something the community is really embracing and pushing the city to investigate," she said.

After a full day of networking and trading ideas, the masses gathered Wednesday evening at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, where OU President David Boren gave a short speech on the importance of arts education.

"So much goes on here at OU that interconnects with what you all are doing across the state," Boren said. "You are touching the citizens of our state in a very special way. Sometimes people at the university ask me if arts programs are a frill. How can you continue to support them as much as we do? And I say no. They're not a frill. We cannot have a great university unless we have great programs in the fine arts ...

"But to say we're going to do all we can to develop the potential of the mind and the body without touching the spirit or touching the soul is simply saying we're only going to be part of what a university ought to

be.”

He urged the audience to not give up the mission.

There was a mission there, but artists can't get together without having a good time.

“The most fun part of the conference has been getting reacquainted with arts advocates from across the state, seeing old friends and showing off Norman,” Shaw said.

Norman Mayor Cindy Rosenthal was also on hand to welcome the return of the OAC to Norman.

“This is the second time and it's really even sweeter to be welcoming them back in 2014,” Rosenthal said. “They were here in 2010 and we've got a lot more things to show off. They have been treated to what we sometimes take for granted — all the wonderful venues, great events and great artists. It's been a fabulous opportunity to show off Norman and welcome them back.”

The conference continues today at Embassy Suites in Norman. For more information, visit arts.ok.gov.

Mack Burke

mburke@normantranscript.com

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[Mack Burke](#)

Mack Burke is an investigative reporter and award-winning feature writer and columnist for The Norman Transcript. An OU alumnus, he has lived in Norman since 2003.

