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## Arts groups paint a gloomy picture

The big picture for the arts in the region is big indeed and cracks are showing.

When word got out about a month ago that New Paltz's venerable Unison Arts and Education Center was in dire financial straits, the arts community that has grown up around it was stunned. So were many observers across the region.

Unison has been in business for 35 years. It had long been the gold standard by which arts organizations could be measured, offering top-notch performers from around the world, studio space, a sculpture garden and workshops over those years.

Now, its board of directors is considering leaving the only home Unison's ever had in search of financial savings and a younger audience.

Clearly, longevity and a solid artistic reputation are no guarantee for survival in the arts world.

Brendan Burke is only too aware of the evanescent nature of the business he's in and the job he holds. He's the artistic director of Ellenville's Shadowland Theatre.

"Artistic directors come and go," he said. "It's our board of directors that's kept us going all these years."

The former movie theater has been presenting plays, offering classes and providing a stage for well-known artists for nearly 30 years. Bill Collier, president of the theater's 18-member board of directors, has held that position for 28 of those years.

Stability at the top, Burke said, is the key to survival.

Shadowland's success is all the more surprising because of its location in a village that has suffered one economic blow after another during those 30 years.

But as Burke points out, and as patrons of the arts everywhere insist, Shadowland has been a beacon around which the village's best hopes for the future have clustered - three restaurants that have been doing turn-away business for years.

Although many of the performances staged at Shadowland are pitched to baby boomers, Burke said the theater does its best to cultivate a younger audience through its Childrens Theater Academy and through its reliance on young volunteers.

Burke, who teaches at SUNY New Paltz and SUNY Ulster, is well aware that college students feel they must get a job through their education.

"That's all true, but the fact remains, there are jobs in theater," he said.

Those jobs at arts and cultural organizations in Orange, Sullivan and Ulster counties account for nearly \$90 million a year in organizational expenditures.

At the same time, audiences funnel \$203.8 million in spending into the region.

That figure was determined in a 65-page report released in July entitled "Mid-Hudson Arts & Culture: The Economic Impact. The report, in which 214 organizations in the three counties were canvassed by SUNY New Paltz's Center for Research, Regional Education & Outreach (CRREO), found that the arts also contributed about 1,200 jobs, either directly or indirectly, to the local economy.

But for many reasons, not least of them the disparate and variable sizes and ambitions of these not-for-profits - along with what arts advocates call common misperceptions about the value of art - arts organizations face a constant struggle to survive.

Elaine Giguere sighs when she hears the question of survival posed.

"It's been very difficult. The recession was sort of first felt in the city but it worked its way up here, up the mountain," she said.

You only have to remember how long the recession's had a grip on the economy to know why the executive director of the Delaware Valley Arts Alliance sighs when discussing the plight of her organization and the artists it serves.

The toll has been wearying and seemingly relentless, though Giguere said the DVAA is starting to turn the corner.

The DVAA is a combination clearinghouse, helpmeet and performance space for Sullivan County artists and arts organizations. It helps provide state and county grants, and presents various events at two galleries and a recital hall.

State funds from the Council for the Arts that once comprised 40 percent of the DVAA's budget now stand at 20 percent, she said.

"I know we're not the only ones - it's that way everywhere."



Elaine Giguere, executive director of the Delaware Valley Arts Alliance, stands in front of the latest exhibit at the gallery in Narrowsburg on Saturday. Giguere said she's been "putting out fires and keeping one step ahead of the bills" in recent years, but that things are starting to improve. Dawn J. Benko/For the Times Herald-Record

For the past few years, she said, it's been all about hanging on - in her words, "putting out fires and keeping one step ahead of the bills."

It's been that way for the organization and the artists it serves.

"We seriously looked at ourselves last year and asked, 'Are we gonna make it?'"

DVAA ramped-up fundraising efforts to pay the bills, but Giguere said that posed its own perceptual danger. "People can think if you're that desperate, you may be going out of business," she said.

That's not the case, she said, "but it's a constant battle."

### Looking long-term

The CRREO Arts and Culture report that examined the impact of arts on the region also asked its participating agencies a question: "Looking to the next five (and 10) years, what does your organization need to sustain and grow?"

The answers surprised the authors of the report. Money, they found, was not the leading issue.

"Instead," the report stated, "responses were remarkably consistent and centered on three topics: quality arts education in K-12; recognition from the business community, municipalities and government leaders; and collaboration between and among organizations."

Janis Benincasa, co-author of the report, said Friday she thought the responses didn't emphasize money "because it's just so obvious a thing."

One of the responses to the survey explained how an appreciation for the arts is waning, especially as school budgets have decreased. "Our current culture values reading, math and science above all else and misses the opportunity to present the arts as a viable platform for success in many career fields."

But the response that caught Benincasa's eye was also the most consistently stated theme: the need for collaboration and shared services between and among organizations.

The need for a strong regional network, she said, is critical.

"The possibility of shared services is a wonderful thing," she said. "We've seen a lot of organizations fail."

Shawn Dell Joyce, director of the Wallkill River School of Art, said that such sharing has kept her organization alive.

"I don't think we would be still be in business today if we did not have a community around us that wanted to see us in existence," she said.

Over its 14 years of existence, the program, based now in Montgomery, has rooted itself in the local culture and economy, she said.

"We have woven a web of interrelated small businesses," she said. "We channel business to local bed-and-breakfasts and restaurants. We create a lot of community impact and these folks, in turn, support us."

Not that the path has always been a smooth one.

The school capped several physical moves by taking over larger quarters in 2008. "That was when the economy tanked," she said. "Our budget was cut in half. ... We hung on by a thread for three years."

The variety of funding sources - classes, memberships, local food sales on the agricultural front, and children's camps in the summer - have all helped prop up the school, she said.

It also strengthens the web of community support, she said.

"The arts generate cultural tourism. When people come here (to the school), they want local flavor," she said. "It is only natural that arts organizations work with other small businesses that are going to benefit because when the tide comes in, all boats float."

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*Reporter Paul Brooks contributed to this report.*