

Oral Testimony of
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Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
U.S. House of Representatives
Public Hearing – April 14, 2011

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Moran, Members of the Subcommittee: Good morning. As managing director of Idaho Shakespeare Festival, chair of the Idaho Commission on the Arts, and a board member of the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, I wish to testify on behalf of the National Endowment for the Arts (requesting \$167.5 million in level funding); and share a story you make possible.

While this is an Idaho story, similar stories are found in every state. My opportunity emerged when the Chairman of the NEA paid a visit to Idaho, strengthening the nation's *first ongoing infrastructure for the arts*.

Not that the arts, historically, had been missing from our nation. Things of beauty, culture, science, art and imagination were so ingrained in the Founders, some would say "the pursuit of happiness" articulated this common appreciation, right after "life" and "liberty."

As for legislative infrastructure dating to the Founders, imagine, for a moment, what it may have been like to sign a declaration of independence, mount a revolution, wage war, elect a string of forgotten presidents under articles of confederation, before finally ratifying a constitution and electing a reluctant George Washington. Not an easy first decade; and one with greater challenges ahead. So, under the circumstances, it could seem remarkable for the Founders to leave a few *thoughts* on the arts. Perhaps a vision for the future was provided by George Washington, in words now reaching down centuries: "The arts and sciences are essential to the prosperity of the state and to the ornament and happiness of human life. They have a primary claim to the encouragement of every lover of his country and mankind."

In retrospect, the history of the United States is replete with public investments in art and architecture. In our day, another great General, having led us through WWII, signed legislation creating the National Cultural Center Act – commemorated in the naming of the Kennedy Center's *Eisenhower* Theatre. In the 1960s, with a nation enduring civil unrest not seen in a century, President Johnson created and President Nixon funded the National Endowment for the Arts. With cities smoldering, leaders being assassinated, college students rioting (some getting killed by the public servants meant to protect them), a Cold War heating up – despite all

this, Roger Stevens *founded* and its second chairman Nancy Hanks *grew* the NEA in both reputation and funding, ever mindful that “in dollar comparisons to our national needs for defense, for poverty programs, for health, for welfare, or for education, the requirements for the arts are miniscule,” as Hanks wrote.

During civil famine, the seeds of a federal/state arts infrastructure sprouted like spring wheat when 55 state and territorial arts agencies began receiving annual grants from the NEA; and when governors and legislatures took this as incentive to multiply the funding and steer not only new cultural opportunities, but greater *decision-making*, to regional and local levels. President Carter, Chairman Biddle and Congress strengthened this federal/state partnership, developing federal recognition of American artists through the National Heritage Awards. President Reagan, Chairman Hodsoll and Congress established the NEA Jazz Masters, the National Medal of Arts, the Mayor’s Institute on City Design , and a groundbreaking study on arts education called *Toward Civilization*. As Reagan said, “We honor the arts not because we want monuments to our own civilization but because we are a free people.”

With this history, three succeeding Presidents, their NEA leaders, and Congress navigated the most perilous of times for the NEA, and emerged in all three cases with an arts budget *on the rise* and an increasing federalism. Not only would Jane Alexander visit all 50 states under President Clinton; but Dana Gioia would spend as much time traveling domestically and abroad as he spent in Washington, strategically improving the NEA under George W. Bush with reciprocal support from Congress. As Bush and Gioia left office, not only was Congress *funding* the NEA at greater levels and with stronger Congressional support, but its opponents had changed their *minds* about the agency – as Gioia worked throughout federal and state government to catalyze the development of artistic excellence and accessibility for millions of younger Americans, thousands of educators, scores of journalists, members of the military and their families, towns and cities across America in which libraries, newspapers, schools, civic organizations, businesses and a broad section of citizen-volunteers collaborated (in programs ranging from The Big Read to Poetry Out Loud to Operation Homecoming to Shakespeare in American Communities), ultimately *reversing* a three-decade decline in American literary participation. With equality and excellence, Gioia formed partnerships in every Congressional district.

The NEA is about public engagement, public education, public excellence. It neither *enforces* public values nor *entitles* public goods. It is a rare public infrastructure for which “cost” may be an *object*, but not a specific *requirement*. The more we provide, the better we all become. In the hands of good public servants from all walks of life, it functions like the Biblical talents that, when not buried, can be used to return manifold wealth, prosperity and economic growth. Transcending factionalism, it is not about Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians, or any other

vein past-or-yet-to-come in the American spectrum; it is about how *all* of us – of all faiths, backgrounds and politics – best practice a culturally diverse and politically-united federalism.

Finally, it returns us to the roots of our founders – as an essential emblem of creating a system of self-government. We are amid such defining times today. The marks of our success will be seen in how we separate federal chaff from federal wheat, and thereby fill the storehouse for future generations not with federal deficit but with federal bounty. I would humbly submit that the NEA is an agency of federal bounty; and that with continued funding (thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your actions of last week), people not only from Idaho but from all over America will help you *fill* this storehouse.