

# LAWRENCE BUSINESS MAGAZINE

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*The* **IMPACT**  
*of* **ART**

# The Business of the Arts



The arts in Lawrence provide the community with a sense of pride and vitality while also contributing to the overall economy.

by Darin White, photos by Steven Hertzog & Peaty Romano

**Art washes from the soul the dust of everyday life.” Pablo Picasso**

Porter Arneill, assistant director of parks, recreation, arts and culture in Lawrence, recently provided an example of understanding the beauty of art at a grant review he attended. He said, “Rather than taking the usual 'talking heads' approach, an opera company chose to remind the grant review committee of the true, living value of their art, something that cannot be captured in charts, graphs or financial data. When it was their turn to present, one of their singers quietly stood, took a breath and simply began to sing. The response was immediate and profound. The room grew still, emotions surfaced and tears flowed. In that moment, the question of value was not just answered, it was felt.”

Arneill has been a huge advocate for art and culture in the region for many years and was hired for his current position in 2015. He believes we are at a huge turning point in our culture. He has been involved in and also a proponent of Americans for the Arts and the work they are doing to advance arts and culture. The Americans for the Arts website states: “The arts are fundamental to our humanity. They ennoble and inspire us—fostering creativity, empathy and beauty. The arts also strengthen our communities socially, educationally, economically, and improve health and well-being.” The group is using a newer three-legged stool approach from purpose-driven leadership of the triple bottom line (TBL), which includes people, planet and profit.



Artist Cate the Great performing at the Lawrence Busker Festival

above: Richard Renner, creator and producer of the Lawrence Busker Festival



Americans for the Arts connects the arts to the triple bottom line by demonstrating how the arts generate economic benefits (profit), improve social well-being (people) and contribute to the health of a community (planet). This approach uses research to show that arts and culture are not just cultural amenities but vital economic drivers that foster community and improve health, and create a higher quality of life.

Kelsey Miller, in the article, “The Triple Bottom Line: What It Is & Why It’s Important,” writes, “To some, adopting a triple bottom line approach may seem idealistic in a world that emphasizes profit over purpose. Innovative companies, however, have shown time and again that it’s possible to do well by doing good.”

The brass tacks of the economics of art are substantial. Americans for the Arts share that notion: “The nation’s arts and culture sector—nonprofit, commercial, education—is a \$1.2-trillion industry that supports 5.4 million jobs (2023). That is 4.2% of the nation’s economy—a

larger share of GDP than powerhouse sectors such as transportation, agriculture and utilities. Similar results are found at the state level.” The arts accelerate economic recovery, it continues. A growth in arts employment has a positive and causal effect on overall employment. The nation’s nonprofit arts and culture industry alone generated \$151.7 billion in economic activity in 2022—spending by arts organizations and their audiences—which supported 2.6 million jobs and generated \$29.1 billion in government revenue.

“A lot of business will want to partner with us to show the community that they support the arts,” explains Derek Kwan, executive director of the Lied Center of Kansas. “This community is clearly passionate about the arts. We are very fortunate about this.” Communities come together through a united goal, whether through a local sports team such as the Jayhawks, an event such as Final Fridays, which celebrates the artists in the area, attending a film at Free State Festival, or watching a street entertainer juggle fire at the Busker Festival or a performance at the Lied Center.

## Art as Life

So how does art unify, shape or enliven a community? Whether we know it or not, art is in all elements of life. Every aspect of how we live has been designed in one way or another. Creatively responsible choices affect us, directly translating into the way a city is laid out, what designs are approved, who is making the choices for investments that aren’t just about the bottom line. But consider a more holistic approach, one that also addresses what people need to fully live and how our actions will affect our planet—a quality of life and longevity approach.

Quality of life has played a central role in how our city has made strategic decisions throughout its history. As Lawrence has grown over the years, the downtown area has been protected to maintain a certain look and feel, with many local businesses, restaurants, bars and shops maintained all along Massachusetts Street and the surrounding area. Outdoor public art is placed by the yearly Unmistakable Public Art Exhibition (formerly known as the Outdoor Downtown Sculpture Exhibition) throughout the downtown area. Lawrence Business Magazine chief photographer/publisher Steven Hertzog writes, “Public art and cultural programming foster civic pride, neighborhood identity and overall well-being—making Lawrence a more vibrant and attractive place to live.”



*"Making Connections" an installation by Tyler Kimball at the Multi-modal Transit Facility*

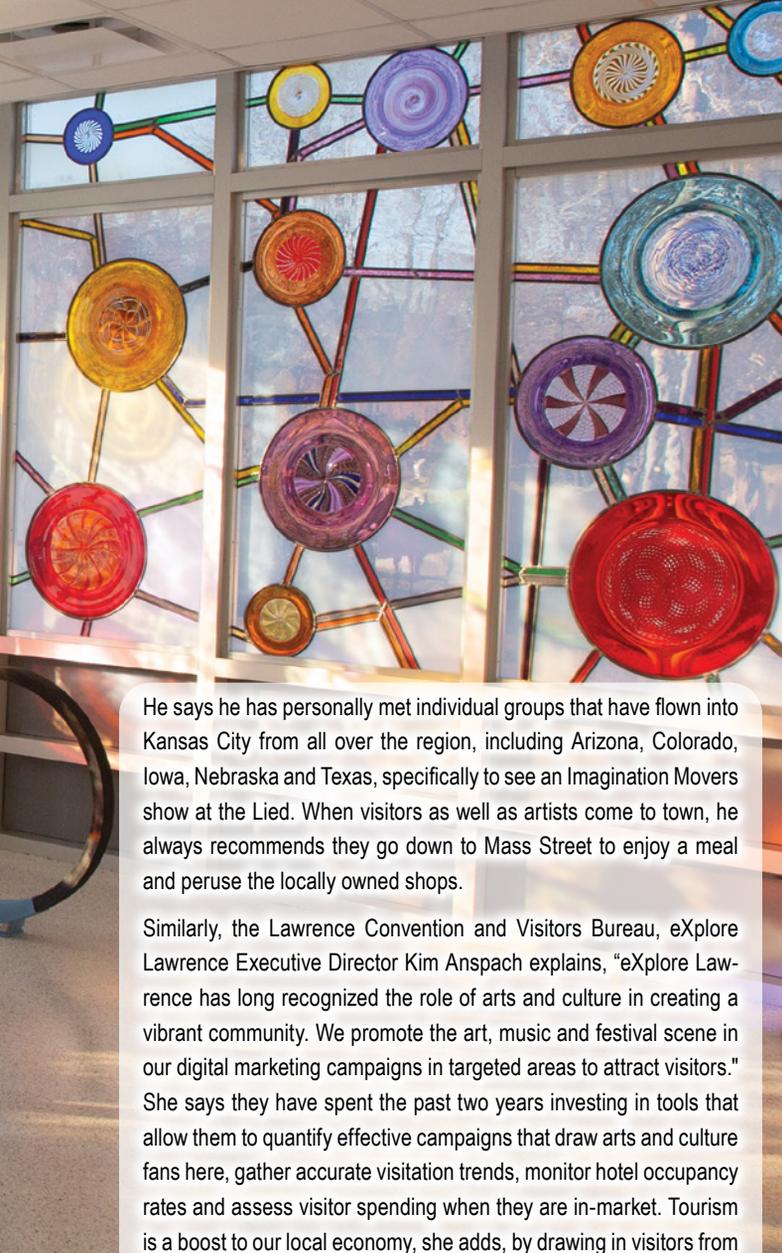
*Top to bottom  
The Lost Keys performing in Lawrence at The Busker Festival 2025-  
by Peaty Romano  
Busker Fest Fire Act - by Peaty Romano  
"American" by Myles Schachter celebrates the diverse origins of  
people who made the United States their home*

The Unmistakable Public Art program, spearheaded by Arneill, is one way of showing that we care about public art, which allows for equity and inclusion for all. He says, "My attitude with any city is, if you are going to do public art, do it on purpose."

So what is the vision for Lawrence? What does our community want to focus on and invest in as a city? One example Arneill suggests is musician Nick Carswell, who worked with Lawrence Parks, Recreation and Culture, eXplore Lawrence, the Kansas Arts Commission and others to create the Lawrence Music Census, "a community-led initiative to gain a better understanding of the current music needs of the Lawrence, Kansas, community," according to the census website.

"That (census) was really eye-opening," Arneill explains. "When you can give that much attention to a specific genre or field, you really learn a lot about what is and isn't working. And clearly, the music scene like the art scene is working. ... The next question is what entity can serve in a bigger leadership role, or how do we make this better for the whole community?"

Kwan believes to attract businesses and places of employment to a community, the quality of life is absolutely critical, as are opportunities for employees to participate in a wide variety of creative activities. Companies are looking for places with a lot of vibrancy from a cultural standpoint to establish their businesses. They look at a whole range of activities, not just the performing or visual arts, but the culinary arts, athletics, outdoors and more.



He says he has personally met individual groups that have flown into Kansas City from all over the region, including Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, Nebraska and Texas, specifically to see an Imagination Movers show at the Lied. When visitors as well as artists come to town, he always recommends they go down to Mass Street to enjoy a meal and peruse the locally owned shops.

Similarly, the Lawrence Convention and Visitors Bureau, eXplore Lawrence Executive Director Kim Anspach explains, "eXplore Lawrence has long recognized the role of arts and culture in creating a vibrant community. We promote the art, music and festival scene in our digital marketing campaigns in targeted areas to attract visitors." She says they have spent the past two years investing in tools that allow them to quantify effective campaigns that draw arts and culture fans here, gather accurate visitation trends, monitor hotel occupancy rates and assess visitor spending when they are in-market. Tourism is a boost to our local economy, she adds, by drawing in visitors from not only the region and all over the country, but occasionally—depending on the event—from around the world.

## Attraction Is Key

There are many different events throughout the year that are a draw for visitors and locals alike, and provide commerce for Lawrence. Free State Festival (FSF) is one of them. Founding Director Marlo Angell serves on the Lawrence Cultural Arts Commission and is a community ambassador for eXplore Lawrence. An annual event, the Free State Festival, celebrates the free spirit of the state of Kansas with films that challenge, inspire and entertain, according to its website. This signature annual event brings independent films, live music, comedy and art to venues across the vibrant college town of Lawrence.

The event, which is held over a week during the early summer months, partners with local businesses for events such as directors' talks, book signings at The Raven Book Store, Ladybird Diner happy hour, six short films and thematic dip pairings featuring local chef Louis Wigen-Toccalino, from the Cellar Door, as well as numerous after-parties. "We program for both [locals and tourists]," Angell says. "We program for locals to create those community-type experi-

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ences ... We also cater to appeal to out-of-towners ... To me, this is the beauty of it, it is the mixing of the locals and the out-of-towners ... " He says there have been so many interesting connections made—whether an artist or fan, a community member, a local business—where someone brings something home they got at a local store or gallery. "Those are really the sparks that last beyond that one week ... we think it affects things throughout the whole year."

Another annual signature event many people look forward to every year that draws regional, national and international tourists is The Busker Festival. Busker Fest creator Richard Renner explains, "I have heard it said recently, 'Art is the light industry of Lawrence.' It is a very productive part of our economy, and it contributes not only to culture but tourism—and people come for it. We get people who come in for the weekend. They are making it a family reunion just for the Busker Fest." He says he has spoken to people from California, Minnesota and other locations who have driven to see specific performers. With an estimated \$10,000 to \$15,000 yearly grant that is financed by the bed tax, The Busker Fest generates over a quarter-million dollars in revenue tax during the weekend.

Speaking of signature local events, Final Fridays (FF), a monthly event, is an art walk that happens the last Friday of every month in galleries, retail spaces, restaurants, bars, pop-up shops, music venues and more in Downtown Lawrence, the Warehouse Arts District and a number of other places around the city. It was created and developed with overwhelming support from the creative community, artists of all types, the Lawrence Cultural Arts Commission, the Lawrence Arts Center, Downtown Lawrence Inc., galleries, art collectives and many other businesses. It was launched in August 2010. Fifteen years later, the impact of this event can be seen through support of the retail businesses in the area, musical venues, bars and restaurants.

Early impact of Lawrence Final Fridays was detailed in its Impact Analysis and Economic Development Survey conducted in November 2011. This early survey states that Final Fridays have very positive impacts in categories of souvenirs and gifts, meals and refreshments, lodging, transportation and other areas, including general business and economy. Thousands of visitors unique to Final Fridays events were identified, and the survey was randomly conducted by volunteers. Since that time, the event has received centralized management and development through City of Lawrence entities and continues to provide these benefits to the community.



*Derek Kwan greeting Martha Gage by Carter Gaskins*

## Working Together

The vitality, community and economics of art are an asset to the City of Lawrence. Grants and other opportunities from the city, funding from the state through the Kansas Arts Commission, federal funding through the National Endowment for the Arts all provide support. Many private organizations, businesses and individuals have also backed places, events and groups like the Lied Center, the Lawrence Arts Center, Theatre Lawrence, The Busker Fest, Final Fridays, Free State Festival and many other amazing arts and cultural offerings in town. A major upcoming event that will be a huge economic boost is the FIFA World Cup, in 2026 in Kansas City, and there is a special call for public art through Unmistakable Public Art Exhibition.

The arts remain a vital resource that keep on giving to Lawrence. Together, we can continue to look forward and move toward ideas and actions to ensure we invest in the future of our city and grow our economy by devoting our resources to support artists, the arts and culture. In doing so, we will continue to create a vibrant culture and give back to the community.

"You can't use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have." Maya Angelou. ▲

### **TEN reasons the arts are vital to our culture, health and prosperity.** (backed by actual application and hard data):

1. Arts strengthen the economy.
2. Arts drive revenue to local businesses.
3. Arts unify communities.
4. Arts strengthen mental health and well-being.
5. Arts and culture are tourism drivers.
6. Arts improve academic performance.
7. Arts spark creativity and innovation.
8. Arts have social impact.
9. Arts improve health care.
10. Arts for the health and well-being of our military.

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