

ENTERTAINMENT

Berkshires pilot for national program puts artists on the payroll



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Hancock Shaker Village.

Provided photo

Six cultural institutions in the Berkshires are being paired with artists and social-impact organizations in their communities under a pilot program that puts artists on the payroll for six months and provides health insurance.

Called Artists at Work, the program was inspired by the Depression-era Works Progress Administration and its Federal Project Number One, which at its peak employed more than 40,000 actors, artists, musicians and writers

across America. Artists at Work is a response to the coronavirus pandemic, which has taken a devastating toll on the arts and cultural world, with most institutions being closed and individual artists, many of whom work independently, losing contracts and clients as well as venues to exhibit and perform their work.

"The central idea was to put artists on salary, to give them a steady income and (health) coverage to help them get through," said Rachel Chanoff, founder and director of The Office Performing Arts + Film, which created Artists at Work, or AAW.

A 23-year-old independent curatorial and production company based in Manhattan and London, The Office partners with institutions, venues and festivals around the world to create events and ongoing programs, particularly those designed to have a positive impact on society, Chanoff said. Among its partners is the FreshGrass Foundation, which, working with The Office, for a decade has produced the popular FreshGrass Festival, held in September at Mass MoCA in North Adams. The celebration of American roots music was to have had a new sibling festival in April in Bentonville, Ark., but both were canceled because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Chanoff said her long familiarity with the Berkshires, its rich cultural life and community of artists made it ideal as the region for the AAW pilot, which is already being developed for rollout elsewhere, including in central Appalachia, Miami and New York City.

As official if temporary employees of The Office, artists receive the prevailing living wage for their region — \$15,000 over six months in the case of the Berkshires, Chanoff said — and health insurance. Unlike simply giving artists a grant or stipend, the arrangement allows for them to apply for unemployment benefits afterward and/or continue their healthcare coverage through COBRA, if they choose. Chanoff said she hopes to be able to continue the Berkshires pilot for another six months after its initial trial, depending on funding. The budget for the first six months of AAW in the Berkshires is \$217,000, with The Office using its network of donors and other fundraising sources to cover the cost, Chanoff said.

"This is an enormous gift, obviously. It's humbling and exciting to be a part of it," said Joe Aidonidis, a documentary filmmaker and owner of Great Sky Media, a production company in North Adams. He is paired with Images Cinema in Williamstown, an independent movie house known for screening classic, independent and foreign films and supporting the local filmmaking scene. Aidonidis and Images will be working with Gardner Athol Area Mental Health Association, which offers services for individuals with substance-use disorders. Aidonidis, whose documentaries often focus on social issues including addiction, said he expects AAW to allow him to create a new documentary about the opioid problem in North Adams as well as to pursue his own film projects on similar themes.

"To be able to rely on a steady income when so much else has been canceled is reassuring and a privilege," said Aidonidis.

The other participants in the AAW pilot:

- Institute for the Musical Arts, an organization in Goshen that supports women and girls in music and music-related businesses. Naia Kete, an IMA student at its first camp in 2002, will create a six-song EP of new music in collaboration with youth educators from The Alianza Project, a community trauma healing and youth leadership organization in Holyoke.
- Jacob's Pillow, in Becket, America's longest-running international dance festival, will work with choreographer Dante Brown and Roots Rising, a local nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering youth and building community through food and farming.
- Mass MoCA, the museum and performance center in North Adams, is partnering with Northern Berkshire Community Coalition visual artist Sarah DeFusco, whose work combines sewing, screen printing and painting.

- The Mount, former estate of the writer Edith Wharton and a Berkshires literary hub, is paired with Lia Russell-Self, a local poet and theater artist. Their project will work with The Rusty Anvil, a community organization dedicated to helping marginalized populations, on creative-writing workshops for people ages 15 to 30, with a particular focus on queer youth of color in the Berkshires.

- Hancock Shaker Village, a landmark with 750 acres, 20 historic Shaker buildings and more than 22,000 Shaker artifacts, will work with Brece Honeycutt, an artist whose interests and output include fiber art, natural dying, printmaking, sculpture and bookbinding. Honeycutt will have an open studio on the Hancock campus and as part of AAW will offer series of public workshops and an exhibition in partnership with Camphill Village, a community for adults with developmental disabilities and service volunteers, located in Copake, Columbia County.

"It really is an admirable program," said Amanda Powers, director of communications for Hancock Shaker Village. "We know artists are struggling. To be able to connect with one, have her here on campus, and also work with Camphill Village, gives a boost to us all."