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A new initiative for artists in Western Mass. offers a salary and stability

By Diti Kohli Globe Correspondent, Updated July 23, 2020, 2:26 p.m.



Artist Brece Honeycutt walks to her Artists at Work space at Hancock Shaker Village. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

A new Artists at Work program in Western Massachusetts is giving creatives something usually hard to come by in their line of work: a salary, benefits, and stability.

Launched on July 2, AAW funds the work of six artists who were chosen by prominent cultural institutions in the Berkshires, including [Jacob's Pillow](#), in Beckett; [Hancock Shaker Village](#), in Hancock; [Images Cinema](#), in Williamstown; [The Mount](#), in Lenox; and the [Institute for the Musical Arts](#), in Goshen. North

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Adams's [Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art](#) is the sole participant using an application process to select its artist.

Each Berkshires-based artist is tasked with creating a project in collaboration with a community organization of their choice. In return, they receive \$15,000 over six months — a living wage — and health insurance.

“We hope it’s enough to give them creative space while keeping them afloat,” said Rachel Chanoff, the founding director of [THE OFFICE performing arts + film](#), which created the program.

The New York- and London-based production company specializes in crafting cultural programming with venues, festivals, and museums. Its push for AAW emerged in the early months of the pandemic and blossomed into the pilot program that is now underway in the Commonwealth.

“In the beginning of the pandemic, I suddenly felt so restricted, especially in terms of financial sustainability,” said Dante Brown, a Leeds resident and participating choreographer, chosen by Jacob’s Pillow. “Having a salary now feels liberating, and a program that offers health insurance is a rarity.”

THE OFFICE team chose to launch the effort in Western Massachusetts because of the role the arts play in [the region’s identity and economy](#). Its locale also has a personal connection to Chanoff, the current curator of performing arts and film at Mass MoCA.

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Brece Honeycutt works in her Artists at Work space at Hancock Shaker Village in Hancock. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Her ultimate goal? Expand AAW into a national effort akin to the Depression-era Works Progress Administration, which employed more than 40,000 artists nationwide at its peak. It's an ambitious but achievable dream for a program conceived only recently, said Chanoff.

“All of these emergency funds institutions put in place for the pandemic are going to get artists through the next month of rent, but what is going to be the sustained effort?” she said. “In this kind of scorched earth moment, is there an opportunity to create something that would put us on a path to a more just future for artists? Like the WPA, this is a real opportunity to impact the whole system and put artists on payroll.”

Providing artists with a salary, rather than a stipend or grant, allows them to apply for unemployment and extended health coverage after the initiative ends, Chanoff explained.

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The current effort is mostly funded by the [FreshGrass Foundation](#), a North Adams nonprofit dedicated to preserving grassroots music. Groups like the [Sundance Institute](#), a national organization supporting filmmakers; the [International Storytelling Center](#), which stages spoken word events globally; and [Theater of War Productions](#), a company that presents community-specific shows centered around health and social issues, also contributed.

The six projects vary in size, but all adhere to the same structure. Every artist is working alongside the institution that chose them and another community-centered organization in Western Massachusetts. The projects are being crafted over the remainder of the year and will eventually be presented in a final exhibition.

Brown is partnering with [Roots Rising](#), an initiative in Pittsfield dedicated to community farming and food sustainability. He will spend the next few months being “a witness to their program,” he said, trailing the food creation process for a Web series documentary and then choreographing a group dance and solo.

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Brece Honeycutt make her own dyes for her art at Hancock Shaker Village. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

And Brece Honeycutt, the Hancock Shaker Village participant, plans to create collaborative art with residents at [Camphill Village](#), a 615-acre farm that houses adults with developmental disabilities. She may send her woven creations back and forth, invite Camphill residents to complete half-finished drawings, and Zoom conference with the members of the community — as safety restrictions allow.

“Camphill and Hancock are both such amazingly beautiful places,” said Honeycutt, a Sheffield native who works in fiber, natural dyeing, printmaking, sculpture, and bookbinding. “Both places emphasize working with your hands to make a connection with the land and foster this sense of community I love.”

For the most part, Honeycutt will work on Hancock’s site.

Based out of [The Mount](#), an institution housed in novelist Edith Wharton’s country estate, Lia Russell-Self is taking a different approach. The poet will work with young

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queer people of color from [The Rusty Anvil](#), an organization in Peru, Mass., that connects marginalized communities with nature.

In the coming months, Russell-Self, also a theater director, producer and performer, plans to host creative writing workshops for the Anvil's members and enable their voices through writing. Some events will be run virtually through a special Instagram account Russell-Self is crafting; others will be live and socially-distanced.

“It’s sometimes hard for us to find community in rural spaces,” said Russell-Self. “This is a way to engage in this healing practice, of writing and journaling, without mandating how people have to interact with the work.”

Writing from these workshops will be featured in the final exhibit.

The remaining artists are making their partner organizations the subject of their work. Chosen by the independent theater, Images Cinema, filmmaker Joe Aidonidis is tracking the opioid epidemic’s course in the Northern Berkshires. He will craft a documentary that takes heed of advice from substance abuse organizations, including the [Gardner Athol Area Mental Health Association](#) and the [Northern Berkshire Community Coalition](#), in North Adams.

“I want to shine a light on why there is a demand for heroin,” he said. “It’s about telling the story of people who grow up through the terrible course of addiction and the families it affects.”

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Singer-songwriter Naia Kete at the Institute for the Musical Arts in Goshen. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Naia Kete’s process is similarly immersive. A singer-songwriter with the Institute for the Musical Arts, Kete is having long conversations with young people from [The Alianza Project](#), a Holyoke organization that focuses on community trauma healing and leadership. The experiences of six individuals will be fitted into songs on Kete’s new EP that she will dedicate to them.

Kete is also making a short film about the EP’s creation process and delving into scientific research that explores the connection between music and trauma healing. “I’ve always known the power of music to heal,” she said. “This — the audio component, the visual component — coming together should show why and how sound, harmonics, lyrics, and language affect the body.”

So far, the artists have held a handful of virtual meetings and bounced ideas off one another. “The process and the people involved in it are as important as the end result itself most of the times,” said Aidonidis. “Six months is more time than most

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of us have ever gotten to mull over these ideas, form connections with people, and present work that is as complete and impactful as possible.”

Diti Kohli can be reached at diti.kohli@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter at [@ditikohli_](https://twitter.com/ditikohli_)