



Worcester Cultural Coalition Annual Report: FY21

As voted on and approved in the WCC Annual Meeting in October 2020, the fiscal year end date will shift from August 31 to June 30 to better align with other fiscal calendars. As such, FY2021 began September 1, 2020 and ended June 30, 2021.

Advocacy

COVID-19 Response: In addition to acclimating to virtual environments, cultural workers and organizations have had many challenges due to the pandemic, which the Worcester Cultural Coalition (WCC) is working to address in a variety of ways.

- **Worcester Together:** The City of Worcester partnered with the United Way, Greater Worcester Community Foundation (GWCF), and additional community partners to address acute and long-term needs of the Worcester community. Areas addressed include health, food, housing, education, youth opportunities, internet access, economic development, logistics, behavioral health, seniors, culture, and the clergy. In response, the City's Cultural Development Division (CDD), WCC and GWCF established methods to identify the needs of the creative community and Worcester's residents, and to embed arts, culture, and creativity in the support of the community's greater needs.
- **Cultural Task Force:** Beginning in May 2020, the WCC began holding discussions for local arts and cultural workers. Initial conversations focused on COVID-19 concerns and shifted to racial equity in early June. Over the course of 31 meetings, the Cultural Task Force has covered many topics of interest to its attendees, including messaging, virtual audience engagement, COVID safety protocol, engaging with Worcester Public Schools, funding opportunities, and more.
- **Virtual Meetings:** The WCC embraced virtual meetings internally and externally in FY21, improving accessibility to important conversations for all with phone or internet access by removing physical and logistical barriers to participation. In FY21, the WCC hosted 359 meetings with over 2,500 participants in total, accounting for a total of 119,655 minutes, or 83 days, of connection!

Addressing Systemic Racism: In [a statement released last summer](#), the WCC Executive Director and Board Chair encouraged Worcester's creative community to take action to address structural racism, cycles of violence, and injustices with our own voices and within our own organizations. The WCC is increasing diversity within its Board and staff, actively engaging with creatives and youth of color, communicating and encouraging creation in languages other than English, creating funding opportunities to amplify marginalized voices, and seeking out additional community partners who had previously not been part of our conversations.

Since issuing the statement, the WCC added new members to the Board of Directors representing BIPOC-led cultural organizations, implemented residencies at the JMAC for artists of color and young people, and expanded outreach to BIPOC and LGBTQ community partners.

Education: The WCC Education Working Group partnered with the Worcester Public Schools (WPS) and Worcester Education Development Fund to implement 13 Culture LEAPS in the FY21 school year. Many programs were curtailed due to COVID-19, prompting the WCC to engage Worcester Together in education and other areas. Led by the Worcester Education Collaborative (WEC), the WCC joined the Education Round Table to discuss current educational priorities. This work manifested in:

- Continued development of the Woo-Labs model, a virtual enrichment academy concept to address out-of-school learning needs.
- A summer enrichment academy, in which 12 cultural organizations collaborated with youth programs taking place via Recreation Worcester and partners such as the Boys and Girls Club to provide virtual camp curriculum and creative supplies. WCC provided guidance in the call to cultural organizations and outreach, and United Way provided funding support to the cultural organizations.

- Following the summer academy's success, the WCC assisted the WPS in providing virtual cultural programs during school hours in the first semester, in which 10 cultural organizations each received \$20,000 to deliver a series of 10 curriculum-based, interactive workshops. At the recommendation of the WCC, Crocodile River Music and Guardians of Traditions were added to the CultureLEAP roster for FY22.

Cultural Plan: Arts, culture, and creativity are important to Worcester's vibrancy, sustenance, and growth. The City's continued commitment to these priorities resulted in increased financial support for arts and cultural initiatives throughout the city, including public art; education; programming; accessibility; paid opportunities for artists, collectives, and institutions; and creative placemaking in multiple neighborhoods during FY21.

To execute the objectives of the Cultural Plan, the City partnered with the WCC and GWCF. The Cultural Plan, titled [*Becoming Worcester: The Evolution of a Creative City*](#), became public in June 2019. Working groups have been established, and an oversight committee was convened to weigh in on the strategies and impacts of implementation. The original steering committee members are revisiting the Cultural Plan to reset priorities of this living document, with special attention paid to addressing systemic racism, supporting social justice, and developing equitable access and engagement for all voices. Even the oversight committee construct is being reexamined to best accommodate our sector's evolving needs.

Legislative Advocacy:

- MASSCreative is an advocacy organization promoting support of the arts, sciences, and humanities. WCC staff and board serve on the MASSCreative Board of Directors, its Leadership Council, and as co-chair of the Policy Committee. These voices increase Worcester representation in statewide arts and cultural advocacy. Along with MASSCreative, the WCC continues to advocate locally and at the state level for COVID-19 relief funding and public art initiatives.
- Due to COVID-19 and the resulting hold on the state budget, WCC member organizations continued to advocate for federal, state, and local funding for the creative sector.
- The WCC joined MASSCreative, the MCC, and cultural institutions to successfully advocate for \$10 million in funding for the MA Cultural Facilities Fund, and actively advocated and engaged legislators to update them on the advantages of the film tax credit and the allocation of \$585 million in ARPA funds from the Commonwealth to the MCC for distribution.
- WCC members advocated for and received support from City leadership, which will allocate \$4.5 million of the City's ARPA funds to Worcester's creative economy.
- Legislative Breakfast: On March 5, 2021, new MCC executive director Michel Bobbitt joined Congressman Jim McGovern, Senator Harriette Chandler, and City Manager Ed Augustus Jr. to learn about the needs of the creative sector. As a result, Congressman McGovern established a working group to seek additional federal appropriations for the cultural sector.
- The WCC serves on the Americans for the Arts "Putting Creatives to Work Roundtable," which advocates for national funding for the creative sector.
- Mass Humanities – in addition to regular partnership and conversations, Erin Williams was elected to the Board of Directors to better represent the interests and concerns of Worcester's cultural district.

Promoting Arts and Culture

- **Media Buys & Trade:** For years, the WCC has run a multi-faceted advertising campaign on a variety of outlets including print, radio, local television, and online. These regularly-scheduled cash and trade efforts were paused in March 2020 in response to COVID-19 and in alignment with the paid marketing strategies of many WCC members. However, select initiatives for the greater arts community were promoted using this inventory, including the Creative Giving Campaign (December 2020) and I Am Worcester (May 2021).
- **Newsletters:** WCC publishes the Arts & Culture Connection, a biweekly e-newsletter with over 26,000 subscribers. Over the past year, adjustments were made to improve visual accessibility, quantity and range of programs included, and more. Further considerations were made to meet the needs of WCC members and newsletter subscribers during the pandemic. Additional emails include the monthly newsletter from the JMAC, press releases, calls for artists and collaborations, Worcester Arts Council notices, special meetings, and CDD- and WCC-programmed events and opportunities. In FY21, the WCC sent over a million emails, with an average open rate of 19% and an average click rate of 4%.
- **Radio & Television:** WCC staff make numerous appearances on local media to share arts and cultural events. In addition to guest segments on WCCA-TV with Mauro DePasquale and Community Conversations

with Vicki Greene on WXLO, for years Erin Williams has been joining Hank Stolz on Talk of the Commonwealth each Thursday at 8am. Starting in January 2021, Nikki Erskine and WICN's David Ginsburg began hosting "Culture Beat," airing each Thursday at 6:30pm.

- **Social Media:** WCC maintains active social media channels, with approximately 11,400 followers on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter – up 20% from FY20. Total posts generated nearly 60,000 impressions, with women making up 2/3 of the audience, and 35-44 years of age showing the highest engagement. Changes to social media platforms have impacted visibility of messaging, and in FY21 over 1/3 of total impressions on Facebook and Instagram came from paid posts. Organic, or "unpaid" posts, are no longer receiving the visibility they once did, and the WCC will be revisiting its social media strategy in FY22. Nearly 300 social media posts were created in FY21 to promote events and initiatives of WCC members, as well as advocacy efforts and news related to the local arts community.
- **Website:** With help from our website management team at Avatar Computing, WorcesterCulture.org was revamped in December 2020 to remove bulky back-end infrastructure which was unused, yet created challenges for the user experience on both desktop and mobile. Following the renovations, page load times decreased making navigation easier, which may contribute to average page views per day doubling after the transition. In FY21, WorcesterCulture.org had 8,272 visitors and over 20,000 page views. The WCC Calendar of Events accounts for 20% percent of the website's traffic. After the Home Page, the next highest viewed pages were for the Calendar, the About page, and the Cultural Plan. Visitors to the page were 58% female, and over a quarter of total visitors are between ages 25 and 34. More than half of all traffic to the WCC site was direct, with organic search as the second highest traffic source.

Jean McDonough Arts Center

The Jean McDonough Arts Center (JMAC) is home to the Worcester PopUp and BrickBox Theater, a hub for creative culture accessible to the community by design. Though the pandemic delayed plans and complicated in-person engagements, both spaces in the JMAC have been active throughout FY21 – both virtually and in person, with COVID protocol and safety as top priorities.

In the wake of COVID-forced cancellations of over 40 scheduled events, the JMAC team sourced equipment to facilitate streaming programming for use by its presenters. This equipment was used by several WCC members and artists in residence. The JMAC hosted El Salón as its first artist organization in residence in FY21. A vibrant cooperative that celebrates and makes space for BIPOC artists, El Salón used the BrickBox and its support spaces (dressing rooms, green room, and rehearsal hall) for a performance and film screenings, as well as for weekly meetings. The JMAC also made space for Heart of the Arts, a youth-focused program designed to empower young creatives in their own pursuits.

Completion of the BrickBox Theater, and by association of the JMAC, was made possible in part by long-time Worcester Arts Angel Jean McDonough. McDonough passed away in August 2021, and the WCC is proud to continue her legacy in supporting the arts through the JMAC.

- **Worcester PopUp:** Since opening in April 2018, the PopUp has hosted 400+ creative community events produced by WCC member organizations, artists, creative entrepreneurs, and staff. More than 4,000 people have attended public events at the PopUp, which is committed to supporting a diverse range of arts education and professional development opportunities through exhibitions, performances, mentorship programs, workshops, and networking events. The PopUp staff also collectively manage the Worcester Windows program, which installs visual arts in downtown storefronts and City Hall. These themed installations empower local artists to contribute to the evolving vibrancy and walkability of the Downtown area.
- **BrickBox Theater:** Despite the challenges of the pandemic, the BrickBox Theater began hosting performances and events in FY21, including theatrical productions, karaoke, meetings, hybrid (live-streamed and in-person) meetings, musical performances, and more. Venue improvements were made to better accommodate clients and patrons, including sound proofing and remediation; comprehensive A/V, LX, and Streaming infrastructure; acquisition of two pianos; and implementation of state-of-the-art streaming and recording equipment.

The BrickBox also became home to The Hanover Theatre Repertory (THT Rep), an initiative committed to delivering dynamic theatrical events made in, and made for, Worcester. Among its freshman accomplishments, THT Rep staged a free, outdoor, professional-quality production of *Julius Caesar*, as well as Worc at Play: a no-cost actor training program.

- **Mentorship:** In addition to actively supporting and promoting cultural equity (#artsforall), the JMAC has worked with interns and mentees, giving young people the opportunity to gain exposure to and experience

in the business of the arts, event production, venue management, marketing, and customer service during their tenure with the JMAC. As needs of the JMAC grew, so too did these positions; in late 2020 these roles transitioned to a full-time Special Projects Coordinator position.

- **Marketing:** The JMAC web presence combines voices and initiatives of JMAC staff, as well as events presented at both the BrickBox and PopUp. JMACWorcester.org had over 16,000 site visits, from 8,357 visitors. Its active social media accounts reach over 5,900 followers, showing growth of 125% on Facebook and 414% on Instagram in the past fiscal year.

City of Worcester Cultural Development Division

- **Community from Home:** The Poets Laureate hosted a series of virtual open mics in December, January, and February. These open mics highlighted original multigenerational and multilingual poetry, spoken word, and music from dozens of local poets. An estimated 9,400 people were reached through these programs through the City and WCC's social media.
- **Festival of Lights:** Due to the pandemic, Festival of Lights was reimagined for 2020. In lieu of an in-person event, the Cultural Development Division (CDD) and Cable Services partnered to create a virtual program featuring speakers, performances, and a tree lighting. This program reached over 10,000 people between social media and the City website. In partnership with the Downtown Worcester Business Improvement District, Main South Community Development Corporation, and Creative Hub Worcester, the celebration also expanded beyond the Worcester Common to a multi-district series of illuminated public art installations featuring local artists.
- **Filming in Worcester:** Thanks to years of advocacy efforts, tax credits for the film industry became permanent in early FY22. During FY21, "Hollywood" hosted nearly a dozen professional media productions including films, television, and commercials. The Cultural Development Division works in partnership with the City's Business Assistance Program to advocate for and accommodate the needs of the film sector.
- **Heart of the Arts:** In collaboration with the Division of Youth Opportunities and with support from the JMAC, twelve youth partnered with local artist Nicole Coleman to pilot the Heart of the Arts (HOTA) youth creative entrepreneurship and event planning summer program. HOTA coordinated Worcester's first youth-lead, youth-produced Color the City festival on the Common and Franklin Street on August 20, 2021.
- **I Am Worcester:** Over 150 portraits of Worcester community members were captured by photographer Matt Wright during two public photoshoots in November and May. To celebrate Worcester's 508 Day in 2021, portraits and personal stories were on display at the JMAC and on the I-290 Exit 15 off-ramp in collaboration with the international InsideOut Project. Additional images and biographies were released on the [City website](#) and on the @IAmWorcester Instagram account.
- **My Vote Counts:** To create paid opportunities for local artists, as well as to encourage the community to make their voices heard in the 2020 elections, the CDD partnered with the Election Commission for "My Vote Counts." This call to artists invited submissions to reimagine the stickers voters receive after casting their ballots. Twelve designs were selected, using the phrase "My Vote Counts" in 1 of the most widely-spoken languages spoken in Worcester.
- **Poets Laureate:** Poets Laureate, Juan Matos and Amina Mohammed, continued their second years as [the City's Poet Laureate and Youth Poet Laureate](#), respectively. During their second year, the Poets served as ambassadors of Worcester's historic, vibrant cultures of poetry and literature, using their positions to promote the city's great writers and the transformative qualities of poetry and the written word. The poets continued to host the Community from Home Open Mic series (above) and collaborated with the Worcester Public Library to offer a public Writing Workshop in celebration of National Poetry Month in April 2021.
- **Public Art:** The City's dedication to enhancing public space through Public Art evolves as conversations with organizations such as Art in the Park, Creative Hub Worcester, and independent curators and producers continue. The Public Art Working Group, made up of City staff and representatives of the creative community, serve as advisors to public art initiatives. The City has continued pursuing opportunities for gateways into districts around the city. In early FY22, GWCF is working with the City and WCC to create a public art fund.
 - Main Street Reimagined is underway. This streetscape-focused program incorporates public art into the redesign of Main Street, with installation for the nine works already procured planned for 2021.
 - Wayfinding: public art installations and storytelling trails create a sense of place and engagement. The second round of artists have been selected, with installation planned for fall 2021.
 - The Worcester Black History Trail committee submitted plans for final trail locations and content, with signage to be installed by fall of 2022.

- **Special Events:** The Special Events Committee holds monthly meetings as a means of assisting event organizers and continues to update its permitting process based on best practices around COVID-19 guidelines. As local gathering restrictions lifted, the CDD supported an unprecedented influx in Special Event Permit application request and inquiries.
- **Worcester Arts Council:** In its FY21 grant cycle, the [Worcester Arts Council](#) (WAC) received 105 applications for project and fellowship grants, and awarded over \$219,000 to 52 projects, 6 fellows, and 7 fellowship finalists. The Greater Worcester Community Foundation (GWCF) generously donated \$10,000 toward fellowships.
 - Thanks to robust marketing efforts, WAC's 2021 Funding Priorities Survey received more than twice the response of the 2020 Survey, with over 2,000 people sharing input on art and cultural initiatives most important to them. As a result of this detailed input, paired with the Council's drive to address equity issues, the Funding Priorities for the FY22 grant cycle are:
 1. Project Categories: projects that focus on Public Art, Arts Education & Instruction, and Children's Programs.
 2. Cultural Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion: Projects that elevate the voices and experiences of historically marginalized groups to highlight the current and historical diversity of Worcester. Projects should create opportunities for artists and community members who identify as Black, Indigenous, POC, LGBTQX, refugee, immigrant, or person living with a disability.
 3. Locations: Projects that take place in or benefit historically underserved areas of Worcester.
 - To further its work in supporting local arts and culture, WAC has applied for \$250,000 in additional funding in ARPA funds from the NEA. If awarded, funds will be used in FY22 and FY23 grant cycles.
- **Cancellations:** In compliance with COVID-19 guidelines, many annual events hosted on the Common were cancelled including the REC Spring Garden Festival, City Field Day, and Latin American Festival.

Worcester Cultural Coalition Operations

Funding: In FY21, the Worcester Cultural Coalition was funded in part by: the Jean McDonough Foundation, the Barr Foundation, the City of Worcester, the Massachusetts Cultural Council, the Greater Worcester Community Foundation, the George I. Alden Trust, the Hermann Foundation, the Stoddard Foundation, the Pell Family Foundation, WCC membership, and revenue from the JMAC.

Leadership: Tracy Kraus, executive director of the Worcester Chamber Music Society, has served as the Chair of the WCC since 2019. Ms. Kraus will step down in fall of 2021, with a new Chair to be determined.

FY21 WCC Board Members

Chair: Tracy Kraus, Worcester Chamber Music Society	Anh vu Sawyer, Southeast Asian Coalition of Central MA
Vice Chair: Eric Butler, WCLOC	Troy Siebels, The Hanover Theatre for the Performing Arts
Treasurer: Ellen Dunlap, Community Volunteer	Matthias Waschek, Worcester Art Museum
Clerk: Zach Combs, Crocodile River Music	Jen Riley, Worcester Arts Council Chair*
Gloria Hall, Art in the Park	Peter Dunn, City of Worcester Chief Development Officer*
Vanessa de Leon, Guardians of Traditions	Erin Williams, City of Worcester Cultural Development Officer*
Yonca Karakilic, Arts Transcending Borders	
Tim Loew, Mass DiGI	
Nadia McGourthy, Dresser and McGourthy, LLP	
Joy Murrieta, Main IDEA	* <i>Ex-Officio Board Member</i>

WCC Staff

Doménica Dillon, JMAC Special Projects Coordinator	Olivia Scanlon, BrickBox Managing Director
Nikki Erskine, Marketing Manager	Hank Von Hellion, PopUp Managing Director
Yaffa Fain, Programming Manager	Erin Williams, Executive Director

Working Groups Facilitators

Advocacy: Erin Williams	Executive: Tracy Kraus	Marketing: Nikki Erskine
Education: Joy Murrieta	Finance: Ellen S. Dunlap	Public Art: Erin Williams
	Governance: Tracy Kraus	