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Folklore society preserves culture

Grant money intended to support and mentor artists in flagship program

By Wendy Liberatore Updated 1:01 pm, Wednesday, November 16, 2016



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Karenni weavers, with the help of mentors, began to sell their work at the Schenectady Green Market.

Karenni weavings, Latino music and Battenkill River stories don't seem to have much in common. But folklorists know they do. They all are cultural expressions that are communally shared and thus embody a way of life. If not appreciated and carefully preserved, these unifying expressions could become extinct.

New York Folklore Society is ensuring that does not happen. Based in Schenectady, the 72-year-old society's mission is to study, promote and continue folklore and folk life through education, advocacy, support and outreach. Moreover said Executive Director **Ellen McHale**, it's about preserving cultural diversity.

umbrella with other artists because they have a different set of motivations and aesthetics. Some can make the crossover. But others need help, professional training or more specific help. We do it because diversity is important."

The National Endowment of the Arts recognizes that fact. That's why every year the society, the oldest folklore group in the nation, receives grant money to support and mentor folk artists. This year the society was awarded two – a \$42,000 grant, in partnership with the **New York State Council on the Arts**, for professional development for folklorists, and \$13,000 to study the effectiveness of the mentoring program for folk artists.

More Information

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New York Folklore Society: 129 Jay Street, Schenectady. For more information call 346-7008 or go to nyfs@nyfolklore.org or www.nyfolklore.org.

The first, McHale explained, will support folklorists to document, exhibit, market and program around area folk art through conferences, internships and organizational and board development. Funds will go also toward the field work of folklorist **Hannah Davis** who will be studying traditional music, dance, material culture and occupations in nine undocumented counties

around the state including Allegany, Cattaraugus, Thompsons and Wayne.

The smaller grant will fund an analysis of one of its greatest efforts, teaming emerging folk artists with professionals.

"This is a flagship program," McHale said. "We match mentors with mentees so they can have a targeted, intense, one-on-one."

McHale points to Karenni weavers from Burma who learned from established weavers how to showcase and sell their scarves and clothing at the **Schenectady Green Market**. In another instance, the musical group Los Pleneros de la 21 of New York City guided a group of emerging folk musicians on breaking into schools' arts and education programs. Once the relationship is established with the schools, Los Pleneros' musicians explored how to engage and immerse students in the music.

"We've had the model replicated by other statewide and regional agencies," McHale said. "It provides mastery and innovation with traditional arts."

But these are not the only programs the society supports. McHale said she is proud of its micro-enterprise project that provided resources for artists to be able to market and sell their work. Through this program, the society supported Somali Bantu who have resettled in Utica to open an artist-run cooperative.

"We try to find out what the individual artists need and cater to them," McHale said.

Because of the individualized attention that folk artists receive, the breadth of the society's programming is tough to pin down. In the Bronx, the society is supporting worker co-ops with free training on business start-up. In Niagara Falls, the society is hosting a conference for recent migrants to establish and produce cultural capital in their new community. Statewide, it has begun to place markers, similar to the blue and gold history markers, that recall legends and stories that took place on the designated sites. And then there is the work that Davis is doing out in the field, meeting and documenting the work of folk artists like **Pat Smith** who builds traditional cedar and canvas canoes, and **Saundra Goodman** who has spent years perfecting her crocheted wall hanging.

Equally difficult to define is folk art itself. A dictionary definition will indicate it is something produced by an indigenous culture that is utilitarian or decorative rather than aesthetic. Yet the society, established by scholars, has a much broader view of folk art – it lies in the stories handed down and how people go about their daily lives. For example, the **Folklife Center** at the **Crandall Library** in Glens Falls, one of the area's most prominent shrines to folk art, recently celebrated the Battenkill River and the life it inspired.

McHale was tasked by the **National Museum of Racing** to document life at the backstretch. The result was a book, "Stable Views," which retells the stories of the people who built their lives around traveling from thoroughbred tracks to thoroughbred track. It includes stories from Saratoga Race Course in Saratoga Springs.

"Folk art can be anything that people who are doing it feel is important," McHale said. "Our job is to support them in what they are doing. We want to encourage and

embolden people. This is especially important for newcomer artists who need help in settling."

McHale said it's a vital role as it keeps cultural values alive.

"There is an embedded sense of identity in folk art," McHale said. "It's who we are. If we lose our ability in the folk arts realm, we lose a part of ourselves."

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