

From the Director



Since 1999, New York Folklore (NYF) has been located in the heart of Schenectady's downtown on the Jay Street pedestrian walkway. For many years, our location

has been secondary to our activities elsewhere in New York State, including national American Folklore Society conferences in Rochester and Buffalo; artists' workshops in Utica and Ithaca; the Upstate Regional Project in far western and central New York State; and New York State Folk Arts Roundtables in Peekskill, Utica, Syracuse, Haverstraw, and Glens Falls. Our presence in the Capital Region is often not apparent to our own geographic community.

With an expanded and competent staff, NYF has experienced increased activity within the greater Capital Region, including the inauguration of the Mohawk Hudson Folklife Festival in Albany's Washington Park. In addition, NYF is experiencing a resurgence of activity in folk arts education, much of which involves partnerships with Local Learning: The National Network for Folk Arts in Education and area school districts, including the Schenectady City School District. NYF is pleased to be a participating and involved partner. Three current arts education initiatives are:

- In partnership with the Schoharie River Center, NYF has supported artists appearing within the Middleburgh Advantage Program, an after-school enrichment program in rural Schoharie County focusing on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) learning and the arts. In 2022, with NYF support, selected artists worked directly with K–6 students, engaging children with cultural traditions found in the Capital District's most recent newcomer communities. These programs, supported by artists' grants from the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), have assisted newcomer artists with developing their skills as presenters within school settings. For a sample of the programming, with Pinya

and Eshue Aung, representatives of the Capital Region's Karen community, see: <https://youtu.be/dGZJOr2MwJI>

- An Individual Artists' grant from NYSCA, submitted by Schenectady-based Ghanaian drummer Zorkie Nelson is a currently sponsored project of NYF. With the support, Zorkie Nelson is launching a "Pan African Youth Orchestra" for the Capital District. This orchestra of traditional instruments will be an entirely new musical group, engaging middle and high school youth throughout the region. Practices have begun, and additional partnerships have been forged with the Schenectady City School District.

- A grant from the Our Town Program of the National Endowment for the Arts will provide programming for the 2023–24 school year for the entire Schenectady School District. Programming will focus on introducing North Indian Classical music and arts through presentations by renowned musicians Veena Chandra and Devesh Chandra; community concerts and presentations by additional artists representing diverse Indian cultural traditions; and presentations pertaining to cultural traditions of Schenectady's Guyanese community in Schenectady's five "Community Schools." The Our Town "place-making" project will engage all 17 schools in the Schenectady School District, including hundreds of students and dozens of instructional staff throughout the 2023–24 academic year.

These activities are in addition to the New York State Folk Arts in Education Network activities managed by Mira Johnson, the Network Coordinator, in a jointly supported position by NYF and Local Learning. For more information about ongoing New York-based Culture, Community and the Classroom Workshops, or to join the network, please contact us at NYNetwork@locallearningnetwork.org.

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From the Editor



John Michael Vlach (1948–2022) served as the Director of the Folklife Program at George Washington University (GWU) for over 32 years. He was a giant in the field, a Fel-

low of the American Folklore Society, a leading expert on folklife, folk arts and craft, vernacular architecture, and cultural history (see his obituary and tribute on pages 84–7).

His books, exhibitions, and guidance inspired so many, including this young graduate student, attending GWU in the mid-1980s. He was my mentor, opening my eyes to the artistry found in the everyday—too often ignored—handmade objects, activities, and processes found within diverse communities.

John was not the reason I was initially attracted to GWU. I think its graduate program in American Studies satisfied my eclectic interests in fields of study, already running from undergraduate work in biology, history, and the natural environment to graduate work in anthropology and archaeology.

More importantly, I learned that anthropologist Colin Turnbull (1924–1994) was teaching there. He had made a name for himself with *The Forest People* (1961), his humanistic study of the Mubui pygmies, and I had just read his book, *The Human Cycle* (1983). I found his work accessible and informal, a breath of fresh air, coming out of a graduate program that I found to be sterile in the study of culture, with its artificial constructs and "us versus them" mentality.

Unfortunately, by the time I enrolled at GWU (after a year's deferment to work in Japan), Turnbull had left. They said classroom teaching was not for him. History notes he turned down tenure at GWU to care for his partner.

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"Under the banner of folklife, history and culture are fused into a single entity; different cultural forms are linked within a single perspective, or single cultural forms are set against the backdrop of their pertinent cultural history."

—John Michael Vlach, Preface, xv, By the Work of Their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife. Charlottesville & London: University Press of Virginia, 1991.