



One of my favorite elements of my job is going beyond the in person engagement in my own community's arts and culture, into communities across the country as part of our ongoing External Convening Support program. Connecting with people in person is just an unmatched, satisfying feeling for me. I know most of you reading this newsletter work at the hyperlocal level and hopefully can feel the benefit of true in person connection on a daily basis. Last April [in the LAN newsletter issue #3](#) I wrote about a wonderful arts administrator who I happened to sit next to on a bus tour in Atlanta during the Creative Placemaking Community Summit. Well, at the beginning of February of this year, I had the serendipitous honor of sitting next to Willette Jacobs at breakfast on the first day of the [Arts for Everybody Convening](#). I came to learn over eggs, bacon, and potatoes, that Willette is a Librarian at Evelyn Taylor Majure Library (the beating heart of Utica's town center), Homegrown Utica Fest Co-Chair, and Secretary for the Utica Food Club.

Willette has been a member of [The Utica Mississippi team](#), one out of 18 project teams from Arts for Everybody, which facilitated the Homegrown Utica Fest to celebrate and showcase local food culture, the arts, and community connectedness. Utica has a rich Black history that reflects the broader story of African American resilience, culture, and progress in the South. Their long-storied relationship with agriculture starts with an agricultural production boom and the creation of the Utica Institute in 1903, founded by Dr. William H. Holtzclaw, a graduate of Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute. The school provided vocational training to Black students, helping them gain economic independence. The school later became part of Hinds Community College, and today, the Utica campus remains the only HBCU-affiliated community college campus in Mississippi.

In 2014 the last grocery store in town closed, adding to the loss of so many parts of their community infrastructure. In 2017 a thoughtful invitation was extended from Brandi and Carlton Turner, co-founders of [Sipp Culture](#), for a conversation with their community on what they were struggling with. ***How could they reinvest in stories and infrastructure to***

***reimagine and revitalize agriculture in Utica?*** Eight years later there is a community farm, a commercial food kitchen that serves as a place for civic engagement to address other issues, and a food cooperative, all of which were community-driven solutions to food access and security. And of course art and creativity have been a part of it!



You can check out all 18 site projects on the [Arts for Everybody site](#) and projects from around the country on [AFTA's local project database](#).

## **Where do you find inspiration, especially during turbulent times?**

*April M. Harris, MHA, MBA • Policy & Programs Administrator*

I believe that you find it when you come together with others to create positive change for and within your community. This is what I encountered at the culminating Arts for Everybody Capstone Convening with One Nation/One Project. During this convening I was able to interact and connect with leaders who had worked within their communities to highlight the importance of the arts and health to encourage healthier lifestyles. Some of the people Mital and I met included a librarian, a councilman running for Mayor, city government employees, a theater director, researchers, etc., all who showed how the intersection of the arts and health could improve the health needs of those in their communities.



Here are some of the key points that inspired me:

- **The importance of crafting a story:** From the sessions I went to, they stressed the need to craft compelling narratives; there is a need for this in the arts and health sector to bring an awareness to communities, organizations, and government leaders.
- **Bringing an awareness to our targeted audience(s):** Using evidence-based data to narrate the arts and health gaps/needs to push for national policies and legislation by engaging local, state, and federal stakeholders. Evidence-based research supported the work completed by the 18 organizations involved with Arts for Everybody.
- **Modeling:** Identify and share successful arts and health program outcomes that may be replicated in other communities.
- **Amplification:** Effectively communicating the arts and health narrative both locally and nationally; and determining the best messaging platforms.



**Image Description:** AFTA staff and sponsored cohort at Arts for Everybody Convening in Dallas, TX in February 2025. Left to Right; April Harris, Wesley Gentle, Dr. Aisha Siddiqui, Andrieka Lockett, Mital Lyons-Warren and Carl Mordi.



**Image Description:** April Harris talking, seated around a table with Utica MS and Epi Arts Lab staff to discuss Arts & Health after lunch.

# Local Arts Examples

## ✧ Memphis ✧



Memphis is a thriving ecosystem full of art and culture, supported by many organizations and individual artists, creatives and culture bearers! [ARTSmemphis](#), the 501(c)(3) local arts agency for the area, envisions an accessible, impactful, and sustainable arts community with abundant and inclusive engagement.

**Image Description:** ARTSmemphis' logo in cream text over a black square.

DeMarcus Suggs was recently appointed as the new Director of the Office of Creative and Cultural Economy. This new city department is aiming to be a centralized collaborator and convener, supporting artists and cultural organizations while boosting their economic impact. Check out his [new leadership post](#) from AFTA.



**Image Description:** A simplified seal of the City of Memphis with symbols in a rounded box surrounded by the words Shelby County Memphis Tennessee.



Memphis Black Arts Alliance is dedicated to improving the quality of life and economic wellbeing of Greater Memphis through the preservation, celebration, and advancement of African American arts, literature, and culture. Check out [their project](#) on the Arts Impact Explorer.

**Image Description:** Memphis Black Arts Alliance logo features a face and bird almost as reversible figures in the center with a paint brush labelled "creativity," a mask labelled "the arts," and a bird labelled "Sankofa" connecting back to the center.

## ✧ Eastern North Carolina ✧



**Image Description:** Mural with the words "Celebrating our African American Music Heritage Kinston Music Park" with a saxophone player in dark blue on the left and blue, orange, and red striped across the background.

A state that knows a thing or two about music, North Carolina, is home to the [African American Music Trails](#) which help travelers explore African American music in eastern North Carolina. Researchers, writers, and photographers have worked with local residents and arts organizations to provide in-depth insiders' views of music and musicians.



Did you know that an overwhelming **86%** of Americans believe arts and culture improve their community's quality of life? Even more striking, **72%** see arts events as safe spaces to share diverse ideas, while **39%** report changing their perspectives through an arts experience. **Check out our [webinar from January](#) on *Make Music Day and the possibilities for how music can foster community cohesion.***



# Artist Coalitions



**Image Description:** Black Theatre United's logo spelled out and abbreviated in white within a solid black circle

**Black Theatre United** invites members of the Black theatre community to stand together to help protect Black people, Black theatre, and Black lives of all shapes and orientations in communities across the country. Together, their voices are united to educate, empower, and inspire through excellence and activism in the pursuit of preserving the legacy of Black theatre as American culture.

**For Freedoms** is an artist-led organization that centers art as a catalyst for creative civic engagement, discourse, and direct action. Through campaigns and activations throughout the United States, they provide visionary tools to communities, artists, and organizations to make beloved community irresistible. Together, they seek infinite expansion.



**Image Description:** Front cover of "Where do we go from here?" monograph of the hundreds of billboards by artist-led coalition For Freedoms featuring their logo, the letter F elongated to resemble two flags waving with one subverted in front of clouds and a blue sky that turns red as it rises to the top

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## AFTACON Flash Sale

Join us for AFTACON 2025 in Cincinnati, OH! AFTACON is two and a half days of jam-packed peer-driven content crafted by and for the local arts ecosystem. We've even designed opportunities for you to get out and enjoy the arts and culture scene in Cincy!

Member rates and additional \$50 off through March 14th, email [convention@artsusa.org](mailto:convention@artsusa.org) with any and all questions.

### Pre-CON Opportunities

Art in the Public Realm

Assembly on Arts and Culture Policy

Arts and Health: Exploring the Possibility of What If

Community Engagement

REACH OUT FOR A CHAT

**Let's chat!**

GET TO KNOW US BETTER

[mlyonswarren@artsusa.org](mailto:mlyonswarren@artsusa.org) • [hflanagan@artsusa.org](mailto:hflanagan@artsusa.org) • [dgigiban@artsusa.org](mailto:dgigiban@artsusa.org) • [aharris@artsusa.org](mailto:aharris@artsusa.org)

[www.americansforthearts.org](http://www.americansforthearts.org)