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Local nonprofits tightening belts

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Many seeking donations in new ways as sponsors, contributors pulling out

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DURHAM -- The downturn in the economy has forced many local nonprofit arts organizations to tighten their belts. They had to reduce expenses or programming, and are preparing for a lean fiscal 2009-2010 while looking for new ways to continue services and eventually grow.

In July during the American Dance Festival's 2009 summer season, ADF students performed "Golden Belt," named after the renovated factory on Main Street that inspired the dance. After the work ended, choreographer Mark Dendy, creator of "Golden Belt," asked the audience for donations to help support the festival's scholarship fund for students to help ensure similar productions in the future.

Festival officials also asked each company that performed to make similar requests, something that has not been done before, said Jodee Nimerichter, ADF co-director. At the end of the season, ADF sent an e-mail thanking audiences for the successful season and requesting donations of \$20 or more. The donation requests were to help ADF reduce what in August looked to be a deficit of almost \$275,000 for the fiscal year (which in the case of ADF ends Sept. 30). This month, Nimerichter said ADF was cautiously optimistic: "It looks like we're going to end better than anticipated," she said.

The festival had to reduce its overall budget for the season because foundations that gave in the past reduced their gifts, Nimerichter said. Some funding promised from donors did not come through "and we didn't hear that until close to our season," she said.

In March, The New York Times pulled out as a presenting sponsor for the 2009 Full Frame Documentary Film Festival. In August, the festival sent an e-mail that included a request for "\$10 for 2010." (Tom Rankin, interim executive director of Full Frame, said the request was an effort to build a wider audience, and that the festival did not end the season in a deficit.) In July, the executive director of Chapel Hill-based Long Leaf Opera stepped down, citing poor revenues.

Arts organizations across North Carolina also report that corporate cutbacks. Some large donors have cut contributions in half or entirely, according to Bridgette Lacy, spokeswoman for the North Carolina Arts

Council. For the coming fiscal year, many organizations are predicting reductions of 10 to 30 percent, Lacy said.

To cope, organizations have left positions vacant, reduced the number of productions or exhibitions, appealed for contributions and even offered discounts, Lacy said.

But amid that glum news, organizations also are reporting that memberships or individual contributions have in some cases increased, the state Arts Council reports. And some organizations report more people attending events.

The experience of some local arts groups mirrors those trends.

In fiscal 2008-09, corporate and foundation funding fell by about 24 percent, said Connie Campanaro, president and CEO of The Carolina Theatre of Durham. At the same time, "the number of people who reached in their pockets and said, 'I want to help,' went up 27 percent," Campanaro said. Presenting income also increased, and by putting on more programs, cutting staff and restructuring, the theater ended the year without a deficit, she said.

"The crew here has become very well adept at having to hunker down and do more with less. ... It's become second nature," she said.

The Durham Arts Council also saw about a 19 percent decrease in contributions, said Executive Director Sherry L. DeVries, but made up that amount with grants and earned income from rentals and other services. At the same time, participation in classes and camps grew. The Arts Council added intersession camps for students on break, and most of those camps sold out. The council also is seeing more use of its PSI Theatre, which DeVries called "a good venue for emerging groups."

The Orange County Arts Commission felt the impact of the economy through a reduction of funds from the N.C. Arts Council, which the commission uses to help fund arts organizations, said Martha Shannon, arts commission coordinator. That reduction means cutbacks in the amount the commission could give organizations.

The Durham Art Guild also saw a drop in gallery sales and its annual Sweet Arts fundraiser, said Valerie Whitted, president of the Guild's board. Revenue from Sweet Arts was down 13 percent, and gallery sales were down 36 percent from the previous year (but showed an increase in the second quarter of 2009), according to a summary handed out at the opening of the recent Members' Show. On the other hand, memberships were up 34 percent, and sponsorships by individuals and corporations increased 57 percent.

Durham's Mallarm

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