



photo: Americans for the Arts, Washington, D.C. 2016. Personal Archive.

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Barb Whitney: Curating a Career in the Arts

[Heather Vaughan-Southard](#) [Americans for the Arts](#), [Arts Advocacy](#), [arts education](#), [Barb Whitney](#), [Kalamazoo College](#), [Lansing Art Gallery](#), [portfolio career](#), [The All-American Singers](#)

I haven't always thought of myself as an artist or an arts advocate.

I currently serve as the executive director for Lansing Art Gallery & Education Center. I am proud to lead the work of a local community arts organization dedicated to providing "public awareness, education and enjoyment of the visual arts by promoting the works of Michigan artists." Driving community engagement through public art, exhibitions, and education, our team is igniting passion for the visual arts, providing a forum for self-expression and community engagement. As a stakeholder with vested interest in the success of Lansing's students, a significant part of my work is related to providing access to the arts for all students.

My involvement in the arts may have been a departure from my parents' anticipated journey for me. My academically-driven primary school experiences offered me success, and achievement, but little satisfaction. Then I discovered musical theatre. I sang and danced my way through high school, through college, and across the country. The All-American Singers offered me the opportunity to travel, a professional performance experience, and friendships that have lasted a lifetime.



That's me in the lower left corner, pictured with 20 peers from the United States, along with our stages, costumes, and vehicles. Promotional materials, All-American Singers, circa 1995

I learned how to see differently, encountering the world as light and shadows, as edges and spaces. Over the next three years, I spent endless hours drawing and painting, honing my craft and learning to develop a visual narrative for my work. I discovered that the visual arts offer me a way to be completely unique and the means to represent my reality. Each piece I create acts as a thematic means to an emotional end with a goal of facilitating an interaction with the viewer.



photo: Kalamazoo College, Homecoming 2017, personal archive.



I exhibit my work at Grove Gallery in East Lansing, and I have previously shown in Grand Rapids and Toledo, among other venues. This February, I worked on a large-scale commission in Palm Springs, California. Photo credit: Layna Lesnau, Title of artwork by Barb Whitney: Resonance

My undergraduate degree in the arts has produced seventeen years of gainful employment. Importantly, it offered me opportunities to serve in exciting roles that made a difference in my communities. I have taught in inner-city schools, created camps for kids, ran a gallery, and administered funding programs for the arts. I consider myself an artist, educator, and arts administrator. Recently, I have begun to also identify as an advocate and an activist.

I recently completed a national fellowship with Americans for the Arts and defended my Master's thesis from the University of Michigan – Flint titled "Arts Education: A Fundamental Right for Youth in the United States of America." This fall, I joined the faculty at Michigan State University in both the Residential College in the Arts & Humanities and Arts & Cultural Management. Within each step of my journey, I advocate for all students who deserve quality arts instruction as a civil right. My academic research is focused on equitable arts education for youth in the United States of America from a sociological perspective, outlining the injustice perpetrated by withholding the rights to arts education from particular populations.



photo: Americans for the Arts, Washington, D.C. 2016. Personal Archive.

In my role as an artist, educator, and administrator, my goals are to drive access for ALL people to this piece of our humanity. We quantitatively know that the arts are a driver for the economy, a vehicle for attraction and retention, and a means for community interaction. More importantly, the arts offer freedom of expression. They make people think. And feel. And discuss. They offer social commentary and are a first amendment right.

I truly believe the arts make life worthwhile, and I have bet my life on it. Not only are the arts a vehicle for my livelihood, they are the driver for my leisure activities. I volunteer as a juror, panelist, and consultant. I attend arts events regularly in my own community. I seek out arts and culture as a tourist; when I travel, I search for the local arts and culture that tells the narrative of the unique communities I visit. I strive to be a champion for access and equity in the arts, engaging stakeholders regarding the arts and arts education locally, statewide, and nationally.

Barb Whitney serves as Executive Director for the Lansing Art Gallery and Education Center, on the faculty in two departments at Michigan State University, and as a MAEIA Leadership Associate.