



# Placing a value on arts: Lehigh Valley leaders gather to discuss importance, sustainability

LehighValleyNews.com | By Micaela Hood

Published May 30, 2024 at 5:16 PM EDT



Micaela Hood / LehighValleyNews.Com

Bach Choir of Bethlehem executive director Leela Breithaupt, Becky Bradley, Stephen Fink, Bethlehem Mayor J. William Reynolds and Jason King Jones attend the Lehigh Valley Arts and Cultural Alliance conference on Thursday, May 30, 2024.



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## EASTON, Pa. — How can the arts in the Lehigh Valley continue to improve both socially and economically?

That was the question posed by community leaders and elected officials during a conference Thursday organized by the Lehigh Valley Arts and Cultural Alliance (LVACA).

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Directors and staff from organizations such as ArtsQuest, Bach Choir of Bethlehem, Touchstone Theatre, Zoellner Arts Center and Northampton Community College gathered at the Williams Center for the Arts at Lafayette College to discuss the economic and social impact of arts in the region.

Guest speakers included Randy Cohen, vice president of research at Americans for the Arts in Washington D.C., and Lesa Ukman, president of the Prosocial Valuation Service in Chicago, Illinois.

Also in attendance: Allentown Mayor Matt Tuerk, state Rep. Josh Siegel, D-Lehigh; and panelists Becky Bradley, executive director of the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission; Bethlehem Mayor J. William Reynolds. Stephen Link, director of philanthropic services at Cornerstone Advisors Asset Management; and Berrisford Boothe, an Easton-based artist and curator who teaches at Lehigh University.

Moderators at the event included Leela Breithaupt, executive director of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem and Jason King Jones, artistic director of the Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival.



*Micaela Hood / LehighValleyNews.Com*

Randy Cohen, vice president of research at Americans for the Arts in Washington D.C., presented at the Lehigh Valley Arts and Cultural Alliance 2024 conference on May 30, 2024.

## Generating jobs, driving economy

Cohen shared data from a 2022 study highlighting the economic impact of nonprofit arts and culture organizations and their audiences.

Nationally, those organizations and their audiences generated \$151 billion dollars in economic activity, supporting 2.6 million jobs.

In the same study, data was collected by 97 organizations located in Carbon, Lehigh and Northampton counties.

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Overall, those organizations generated \$171.4 million dollars in activity and generated 2,590 jobs.

"Arts organizations employ people locally, they purchase goods and services from other businesses in the community, they're members of the chamber of commerce, they drive tourism and help market the region," Cohen said. "Arts organizations are good business citizens. Few industries generate the kind of effortless spending that the arts do."

Additionally, 2.9 million attendees visited the 97 organizations in the three-county area, the study revealed.

"Those folks spent \$90.8 million in event-related spending. And that's just something you don't see from other industries," Cohen said.

"Alright, \$171.4 million in economic activity. What is the economic impact of that? Well, the first thing we look at is jobs. Ask any legislator what their three priorities are, there's a good chance they'll tell you, jobs."



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Lesa Ukman shares data on ArtsQuest's impact on Bethlehem at Lehigh Valley Arts and Cultural Alliance's 2024 conference.

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## About ArtsQuest

The arts not only boost the economy in the Lehigh Valley. There are positive cultural impacts as well, advocates say.

ProSocial Valuation's Ukman presented results from a 2019 study conducted by her company, which tries to measure return on investments for philanthropic initiatives, public/private partnerships and social enterprises.

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The study, which centered around ArtsQuest in Bethlehem — home to Musikfest, Oktoberfest and Christkindlmarkt — applied analytics and data to measure its social impact in the city.

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"Most Rust Belt towns that lost their dominant employers were decimated, but Bethlehem, they not only survived the industrialization, but they were thriving," Ukman said. "And we did this work in 2019. So what we knew then was that they had the highest median household income in [eastern Pennsylvania], the lowest poverty rate, and they indexed higher than the national average in attracting young professionals.

"The innovation engine driving most of this was ArtsQuest, and traditionally ArtsQuest was viewed through economic impact, and not through at all the lens of social capital, and so we looked through social capital, and how much of it could be attributed just to ArtsQuest for some of the things."

## **Comparisons to Brooklyn, Philadelphia**

Analysis of 24 small and medium-sized cities and towns with a history of metal production showed that Bethlehem's ability to reinvent itself after the closing of Bethlehem Steel in 1995 was not the norm.

A piece of the old Bethlehem Steel plant was transformed into SteelStacks, an arts and cultural campus that is home to ArtsQuest.

"We found two-thirds of the [cities and towns] were either undefined or stagnant," Ukman said. "Half the cities studied lost population, and most of the rest remained flat with one exception, Bethlehem. Its population grew 5 percent during the five-year study.

"In another study of 78 older industrial cities, Bethlehem is one of the four that grew its share of metropolitan employment since 1990, earning Brooklyn's top classification as a result of its performance on growth, prosperity and inclusion."

A study of 13 smaller cities surrounding Philadelphia found Bethlehem had the highest median income, lowest poverty rate, and lowest crime rate, according to the study.

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*"Arts speak very loudly to people. They change lives, they reflect the emotions that we experience in a long course of human life."*

Artist and Lehigh University professor Berrisford Boothe

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Thousands of ArtsQuest event attendees were asked a series of questions related to it and quality of life.

"What we found out was that almost 7 in 10 respondents, or 69%, qualified as highly engaged. According to performance research, we were anticipating a maximum of highly engaged of 20 percent of the audience. That would have been considered like a huge number," Ukman said.

"That was close to 70% of 1.7 million people. We also found that attitudes about Lehigh Valley widely between respondents whose level of engagement with ArtsQuest was high, versus those who were less engaged. For example, there was a 30-point spread in the answer to the question, 'I feel deeply connected to Lehigh Valley.'"

## 'Arts change lives'

Longtime local arts advocate Berrisford Boothe, an artist and professor at Lehigh University, touched on the support he's received from the community over the years.

That mentality of artists and organizations supporting one another must continue, he says, as the older generation ushers in the new.

"Arts speak very loudly to people. They change lives, they reflect the emotions that we experience in a long course of human life," Boothe said.

"I think one of the things I'm hearing most frequently from individuals ... is concern about how do we sustain this? Seventy-nine percent of people who are attending the event are thinking about the legacy for the future," Boothe said.

He said community support is critical.



"The reality is, art organizations need endowment. They need endowment through other things like a pandemic, other things like an economic crisis, and it is really critical to secure that through long-term relationships and very careful education," he said.

"If we work together cooperatively, we have a more sustainable future."

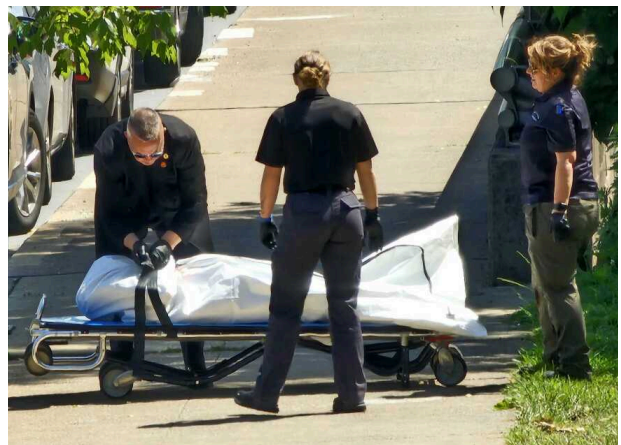
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I'm LehighValleyNews.com's arts and cultures reporter covering the best in music, theater, food and lifestyles. I have covered entertainment and features for the Miami Herald, South Florida Sun-Sentinel, New York Daily News, the Pocono Record and USA Today Network. As a proud Latina, I look forward to showcasing the diverse and vibrant communities in the Lehigh Valley. A fashionista and foodie, when I'm not working you can find me shopping or dining at my favorite Colombian and Italian restaurants and local coffee shops. Contact me at [micaelah@lehighvalleynews.com](mailto:micaelah@lehighvalleynews.com) or 610-984-8217.

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