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THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS
By Senator Claiborne Pell (D-RI)

Although I take a father's pride in its accomplishments, I must observe that the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has been remarkably successful in furthering the ideals for which it was created. Every single community in our country now has access to its indigenous and creative national culture.

The limited funds appropriated for NEA help keep ticket prices reasonable, thus enabling lower income citizens, young people, the elderly and the disabled to gain access to the arts. They are often the only means by which to bring the arts to the geographically underserved. These are not grants to subsidize the wealthy, as some would like us to believe.

Our tiny investment in the arts at the national level makes a statement to ourselves and to the world that we view the development of American culture and its availability to our citizens to be important.

We must not become the only Western industrialized nation to declare that our government cares nothing for the development of our culture. National support for the arts fosters the creation of community -- locally and on the national level.

As the NEA grew, it sponsored a few grants that I wish it had not, but that was no reason to throw out the solid arts networks built over 30 years. NEA has awarded more than 100,000 grants, less than 40 have resulted in any controversy whatsoever--a success rate of 99.96%.

Recently the NEA improved the review and oversight process. In addition, the Endowment took a budget cut of 40 percent in Fiscal Year 1996. It has eliminated a total of 89 positions, 47 percent of its staff. Anything more would severely curtail the availability and accessibility of countless arts programs in communities nationwide.

It is wrong to assume that only wealthy Americans are interested in the development of the arts. Americans from every walk of life and economic level desire access to cultural events in their communities for themselves and for their children.

Every parent knows that the arts teach young people creativity, increase self-discipline, and are a critical means of passing on an understanding of American culture and civilization to the next generation. Study of even a single artistic discipline is of immense value to a child, who may go on to become an avid amateur or patron.

From an economic point of view, the dollars spent by the National Endowment for the Arts represent extraordinarily successful community investments.

Governors and mayors from around the country have demonstrated how NEA-supported projects have breathed new life into their downtown areas, encouraged tourism, attracted and retained businesses, created jobs, stimulated real estate development, increased production of exportable copyrighted materials, and contributed to the tax base.

Moreover, NEA grants prime the pump for other levels of government, and for corporate and private funding of the arts. Each year NEA draws matching funds of approximately \$1.4 billion from private, state and local patrons.

Critics of federal funding argue that the arts will be able to generate the private support necessary to sustain themselves, but I am fearful the opposite will be true. Local dollars are already stretched to capacity. Major arts funders have announced that foundations will not and cannot replace federal funding.

Corporate giving has declined in recent years despite economic growth. Further, removal of both the national recognition and the stimulation of partnerships offered through federal grants will produce a dramatic reduction in state and local support.

Finally, it seems rather hypocritical for the people who cry for the "privatization" of the Arts Endowment to, at the same time, advocate for new tax laws that would end deductions for individual and corporate contributions to the arts.

The NEA has given rise to things of great beauty and has done much to nourish our appreciation and access to the arts. When you attend a concert, watch a play, enjoy a public television show or an art exhibit--look for an acknowledgement of NEA funding--and then remember the vital a role the endowment plays in enriching our lives.