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Senate Speeches on the Arts and Humanities (1994-1996): Speech 08

Claiborne Pell

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STATEMENT OF SENATOR CLAIBORNE PELL

This year marks the thirty year anniversary of the establishment of the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities. In 1965 Senator Jacob Javits and I sponsored this legislation to foster the development of excellence in American art and culture. After a long and distinguished history of nurturing the arts in our nation, the National Endowment for the Arts has in recent years become the subject of some controversy concerning the funding of certain works which many of our citizens consider offensive. In light of this, I would like to explain why I believe that the National Endowment for the Arts has been a tremendous boon to our nation and should continue as a viable entity for the support of American culture.

Our nation's Arts Endowment provides critical assistance for cultural works and presentations in music, theater, literature, dance, design arts and folk arts around the country. This year, in my own state of Rhode Island, the Endowment provided funds to renovate painting and sculpture facilities in the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design, supported an after-school arts education program for minority neighborhood youth in the fourth and fifth grades, and funded the Trinity Repertory Theater, one of the nation's premier theaters. In other areas, the NEA funded a "Music in our Schools" program in Providence and aided a folk arts apprenticeship program. Without this funding, Mr. President, many of these programs would simply not exist. In this context, I ask unanimous consent that these editorials from the Providence Journal and others from around the country in support of the National Endowment be included in the record.

I fully understand that many Americans are troubled when they hear of works distasteful to them that are funded in part with their tax dollars. Nevertheless, while the Endowment has awarded well over 100,000 grants, fewer than 40 have resulted in any controversy whatsoever -- a success rate of 99.96%. Over the last year Chairman Jane Alexander has instituted a series of most valuable changes in the agency's procedures. The agency will no longer accept applications from organizations, other than the state arts councils, which subgrant Endowment funds out to other projects. In addition, the Endowment will now require that progress reports be submitted before the release of the final third of a grant award. Permission from the agency will be necessary before a grantee can modify its activities from those approved by the Endowment. These changes give the Chairman greater oversight over Endowment grants and I believe they will go a long way towards addressing the concerns of many of our citizens.

Chairman Jane Alexander has increased the Endowment's focus on rural communities and the inner cities. The Underserved Communities program grants \$8.7 million specifically to broaden public access to the arts. Even the very limited funds appropriated for the Endowment help keep ticket prices reasonable, thus enabling lower income citizens, young people, the elderly and the disabled to gain access to our common culture.

Nothing could be further from the truth than the suggestion that support for the arts provided by the National Endowment constitutes a subsidy for the wealthy. One of the primary missions of the Arts Endowment has been to encourage the spread of American culture beyond those individuals, communities and regions affluent enough to afford it on their own. Uncharacteristically among federal programs, Endowment dollars multiply and foster national support for the arts. Yearly Endowment grants draw matching grants of approximately \$1.4 billion from private, state and local patrons. Thus, before the National Endowment for the Arts came into existence, there were only 22 professional theaters in the entire country and 1 million people attended each year. Today, our nation boasts 420 and 55 million attend. There were 58 orchestras before the agency, today, there are over a thousand. 15 million more Americans attend symphony performances each year.

I think it is rather unfair to our citizens for some individuals to assert that only wealthy Americans are interested in the development of the arts. I firmly believe and the evidence supports the fact that Americans from every walk of life, from every economic level, strongly desire and seek access to cultural events in their communities for themselves and for their children. The National Endowment for the Arts is a testament to the continuing development of our unique culture, to our enduring faith in our own creativity and to our world leadership in artistic achievement.

From an economic point of view, the dollars sent by the Arts Endowment to communities around the nation have been an extraordinarily successful investment. For every dollar the Endowment invests, there is created a tenfold return in jobs, services and contracts. The arts fostered by the National Endowment encourage national and international tourism, attract and retain businesses in our communities, stimulate real estate development, increase production of exportable copyrighted materials and contribute to the tax base. Governors and mayors from around the country can attest to the manner in which Endowment supported projects have breathed new life into the downtown areas of their towns and cities. New businesses and tourists congregate in those areas which have a developed cultural life. San Antonio, Texas; Cleveland, Ohio; Greenville, Mississippi; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; and Birmingham, Alabama are among the cities whose studies have shown the enormous economic contribution of the arts.

Mr. President, every parent knows that the arts are crucial in our school curricula because they 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. Last year, the Arts in Education program distributed millions of dollars in partnership grants to the states to pay for artist residencies in schools and art teacher training.

I am most gratified that Chairman Kassebaum and Chairman Jeffords will be holding hearings over the next few weeks on authorization of the Endowments. I urge my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to share with those of us on the Committee their concerns and ideas so that we can work together to shape the Endowment's future role in our society as effectively as possible. This tiny investment in our nation's culture makes a statement to ourselves and to the world that we view the development of American culture and its availability to our citizens as of significant importance. 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 President John F. Kennedy once said: "Art and the encouragement of art is political in the most profound sense, not as a weapon in the struggle, but as an instrument of understanding the futility of the struggle between those who share man's faith. Aeschylus and Plato are remembered today long after the triumphs of imperial Athens are gone. I am certain that after the dust of centuries has passed over our cities, we too will be remembered not for victories or defeats in battle or politics, but for our contributions to the human spirit."