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United States Senate

MEMORANDUM

Senator:

Here are two articles on the recent developments with the RI State Council on the Arts. One is about the new Director, Chris White; the other about the questionable selection process.

ADC

Any idea why Lead wouldn't return.

15 July
Name of member selected for committee?
Council head is grassroots administrator

By CHANNING GRAY
Journal-Bulletin Arts Writer

PROVIDENCE — Christina White is no stranger to challenges. A week after she became director of Providence Inner City Arts, fire destroyed a three-story house the group was renovating for its future headquarters. Yet Inner City Arts survived, drawing record crowds last year to its popular Florentine Follies.

Now, Chris White faces an even bigger challenge. A couple of weeks ago, she was named director of the state Council on the Arts, an agency that recently has sustained heavy budget cuts and has been plagued by an unusually high turnover in leadership.

Counting Miss White, the arts council has had three directors (one an acting one) in the last year alone. And in the past couple of years, its $1-million budget has dipped to about $700,000, mostly because of rescissions in state spending and cuts at the National Endowment for the Arts, a major source of the council’s funding.

MISS WHITE, a tall, trim brunette, is in many ways just the opposite of her predecessor, Diane Disney, who was abruptly fired last January after only a year on the job. Since then, Iona Dobbins, who is the local representative for the New England Touring Program, has been serving as acting director.

Miss Disney was a skilled theoretician with a knack for fine-tuning sluggish nonprofit agencies. She was well-connected politically, but had little background in the arts.

Miss White, on the other hand, worked her way up through the ranks of the arts council, cutting her teeth on grass-roots programs like Inner City Arts, which for years was run by volunteers around kitchen tables.

She first worked for the council 10 years ago, as a summer intern while attending Rhode Island College. The council at that time was a freewheeling agency, dabbling in all sorts of experimental programs made available through the then burgeoning national endowment.

She spent that summer in South Providence, she recalled in an interview last week, showing films on Prairie Avenue in Providence from the roof of her green ’65 Chevy. She’d arrive about dark, put a projector atop the car, a screen on the ground in front of it, and show mystery classics like Wait Until Dark.

She became the council’s assistant bookkeeper a few years later, and finally its grants officer before leaving in 1980 to become Inner City Arts’ first director, a post funded in part by a grant from the Rhode Island Foundation.

DESPITE HER background in community programming, Miss White said she nevertheless understands the problems facing larger, more established groups such as Trinity Square Repertory Co. or the Rhode Island Philharmonic.

“I’ve been involved in community arts for 20 years,” she said, “but there are always challenges when there are things common to running all arts agencies, whether they are small or large.

“It’s not the product that’s important, but the needs of the agency. And in terms of arts organizations in Rhode Island, I think I understand that.”

Miss White was interviewed at Inner City Arts’ present home atop the Ocean State Performing Arts Center. She is tying up

Turn to CHRISTINA, Page II-14

Selection process raises eyebrows

PROVIDENCE — While Christina White is generally well regarded among the state’s arts community and members of the Council on the Arts, the way the search for a new director was conducted caused some eyebrows.

Privately, several sources, including one council member, said they were disappointed the process was not more open, especially in light of the way Miss White’s predecessor, Diane Disney, was dismissed.

Council chairman Daniel Lecht had hand-picked Miss Disney for the post but fired her after he could no longer work with her. This angered several council members who were not consulted beforehand. As a result, Lecht promised greater cooperation with the board in the future.

Turn to SEARCH, Page II-14
Search for arts head conducted in relative secrecy

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But the search for a new director was carried out in relative secrecy, by a committee composed of perhaps his two closest allies on the board, Ernest Falciglia and Norma Merolla. Mrs. Merolla, who was appointed to the council soon after Lecht became chairman, is the wife of his close friend and lawyer, Amedeo C. Merolla.

There was also a fourth member of the search committee, who did not attend the interviews, according to two of the three finalists for the job. Lecht has refused to divulge the name of that person, though, saying he is honoring a request of anonymity. Lecht, in fact, would not disclose the name of this person even when pressed to do so by a fellow council member.

UNDER THE council's current bylaws, the chairman alone can hire and fire the director, but in the past, directors have usually been picked by committee.

"Considering what has happened in the past," said one council member who asked not to be identified, "it's too bad we weren't consulted more."

There were other curious twists to the job search, though. While there were between 130 and 150 applicants for the job, which was advertised nationally, no one from outside Rhode Island was interviewed. Lecht said this is because none of the candidates was as qualified as the local applicants. It was learned, though, that a former assistant director of the Connecticut arts council, with nearly a decade of experience, applied but never heard from the search committee.

Also one council member, Anne Utter, was asked to attend the interviews, but not asked to take part in the final selection or to attend any other meetings of the search committee. The committee conducted its final deliberations while she was out of town.

"The position I thought I was in, I wasn't," said Mrs. Utter last week.

"I made an assumption that was incorrect. It probably would have been better if I hadn't attended at all."

Asked if this didn't seem odd, Mrs. Utter said, "Of course it's odd, but he (Lecht) doesn't even have to have a search committee. And until the rules are changed to make more sense, you can't complain."

WHILE LECHT would not say who the finalists for the position were, it was learned they were Miss White; Rudolph Nashan, who until he was recently laid off was New England representative for the National Endowment for the Arts, and Richard Latham, former head of the council's education program and, until he was recently laid off, the state education department's liaison with the arts council.

— CHANNING GRAY

Christina White is a grassroots administrator

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some loose ends there before starting her new job on Wednesday, a post that pays about $25,000.

Miss White's married name is McNeill, but she prefers to use her maiden name professionally. She's a native Rhode Islander, grew up in Providence and now lives in Woonsocket.

And she's currently working on a graduate degree in business administration at URI.

Miss White said her biggest challenge is to stem the council's shrinking budget and at the same time maintain its outreach services, such as helping arts groups develop new audiences.

SHE SAID, for example, she is considering raising money from corporations and foundations, which would be the first time the council has tapped private sources. While its bylaws allow for fundraising, the agency has in the past deferred to the United Arts Fund, which raised money from local businesses until it folded last year.

She conceded, however, that if the council's funding is not restored, programming (the agency runs programs in the public schools, and community centers) will probably be cut first, not grants.

"The council was originally a granting organization, and took on programs only as the National Endowment grew," she said. "But I think eventually there may come a time when it becomes essentially a granting organization once again."

She adds, though, that the success of the agency depends on more than money.

"I THINK the really important thing I've learned at Inner City Arts is that money is not the prime motivator, and I don't see it as the prime motivator at the council, either."

"I think what's important is giving the staff the opportunity to grow and explore ideas that fall within the council's goals."

"Also, I think that there are a lot of local artists who just need a little boost, and who can teach the arts council that it should be doing more of that.