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New Arts Chief Knows

What It's All About

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Wednesday afternoon, Livingston L. Biddle Jr. will be sworn in as the new chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts.

There is no doubt that this man understands what the job is all about.

He drafted the law that established the endowment in 1965.

At his nomination hearings before the Human Resources Committee of the United States Senate, Biddle told the committee that he wanted "to stress the partnership as the legislation enunciates."

"Partnership between government and the private community is basic to the law," he said.

Last week, his blond partner in private life, Catharina, an artist, was busily sorting card files at the endowment's headquarters and very much enjoying herself working on invitations to the swearing-in ceremonies with Biddle's staff.

There will be 193 guests at the ceremonies itself, including the press, as that is the precise number that the treaty room in the executive office building holds.

Then the entire staff at the endowment (more than 300 people) and their husbands and wives will be asked to a reception at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. They will be supplemented by White House staffers, members of Congress, the Art World of Washington and just plain friends of the well-known Biddles.

French wine, cheese and sandwiches will be served as members of the brass quintet of the National Symphony Orchestra play and members of the Howard University Choir sing.

The reception will be paid for privately. The Corcoran can handle 2,000 people.

Later, 40 people will get together with the Biddles for a private dinner to share the significance of the day.

Last week was an exciting one for Biddle as he worked on the 13th floor in the Columbia Plaza office building. His corner office has a truly inspirational view of the nation's capital. The view sweeps up and down the Potomac River with the Kennedy Center just opposite. Georgetown University sits on a hill at one end of the vista, which includes the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial and a wide expanse of Virginia across the river.

Interviews are being conducted.

Redecorating was being done with new pictures going on the walls.

Any of his wife's? "No, Catharina doesn't think any of hers are well enough to frame for my office," Biddle explained.

New staff members were phoning in. "Welcome aboard," Biddle told one in his best Philadelphia accent. For Biddle is indeed one of the Philadelphia Biddles.

"I can't wait for you to get here. Two weeks? I want to see you as soon as you can show your shining face over here."

Biddle, who has been going to his new office for two weeks now is a third chairman of the national endowment.

The first one was Roger Stevens, who now runs the countless affairs of the Kennedy Center and the second was Nancy Hanks who worked hard and successfully to improve the financial situation of the endowment.

Miss Hanks will remain in Washington for a well-earned rest as she sorts out a number of interesting options for the future.

Biddle is expected to approach the management of the endowment in an entirely different way from the style of Miss Hanks who was a very dominant personality at Columbia Plaza. It is anticipated that there will be less emphasis placed on personalities and more emphasis placed on programs as Biddle takes over.

The endowment has an advisory committee, the National Council on the Arts — made up of 26 prominent Americans — which Biddle plans to use in a different way than past chairmen have used it.

"They have been immersed more and more in detailed assessment of grant applications and less in policy assessments," he said. "I hope to change that."

There has been one deputy chairman of the endowment. Biddle intends to spread the responsibility by increasing that number to three.

Biddle is also planning to work much more closely in tandem with a sister operation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, which was also set up 12 years ago by the same bill.

The National Endowment for the Humanities has a new chairman, too, Joseph D. Duffey. But this organization has consistently had more of an identity problem than the National Endowment for the Arts has had.

Biddle was the first deputy chairman of the endowment. He drafted the original legislation for it when he was working on the staff of his former college classmate, Sen. Claiborne Pell. He also suggested the legislation.

Biddle began his professional career as a reporter in Philadelphia. Turned down for the Armed Services in World War II, he signed up to drive ambulances.

He returned to Philadelphia after the war, wrote novels about it and then decided that Washington was the better base so he moved here.

The soft-spoken, well-spoken chairman said he will strive for "balance" for the endowment.

"I think that we should put money into Out Reach programs as well as in the treasured institutions of this country. Obviously, you can't let the

treasured institutions become financially insolvent, but at the same time, they are not going to bring the arts to the full flourishing in the country because their capacity is limited."

His other key to the approach to the new job is "quality."

Biddle will be sworn in for a four-year term which is renewable.

It would have been impossible for President Carter to have found another person for the job, who could start off with this solid base of understanding that Biddle possesses.

(Jayne Brumley is Washington correspondent for The Florida Times-Union.)

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