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Dan Lecht: the art of calling the shots

Although the state Council on the Arts spends $1 million annually on the cultural community here, it has remained for most of its 15 years largely in the shadow of the agencies and artists it supports.

But 12 days ago, the agency's director, Diane Disney, resigned, creating a flurry of controversy over the way the matter was handled and the way the agency is run.

The man responsible for Miss Disney's leaving — the man some council members say forced her out of the director's post after hand-picking her for the job 14 months ago — is board chairman Daniel Lecht.

But Lecht, president of Rhode Island Lithograph, has left his stamp on the arts council in other ways, too. In the nearly two years he has been chairman, he has built an almost unassailable power base from which he governs an agency that has become increasingly political.

He grew up in the Lippitt Hill section of Providence during the Depression. His father eked out a living trucking cattle from local farms to slaughter houses on Canal Street. Dan went to work at 12.

He recalls finding a $5 bill when he was a kid, and says it caused a family crisis. No one knew what to do with that much money.

"One of the things we learned," said Lecht, as though uttering an often repeated credo, "was there was only one way to go up. And the only way up is to get there is work, for it."

Dan Lecht went up, all right, in the tradition of the best American Success Story.

He'd been working in a printing business owned by his former wife's brother when his son got sick and needed an expensive heart operation. To pay for the medical bills, he took a gamble and started his own printing business — a one-man operation on Front Street in Pawtucket.

"I realized," he said about the move, "that I could control my own destiny."

LAST YEAR, Lecht worked to get legislation passed amending the agency's bylaws and giving him a three-year term. In the past, elections were held each year, when new members were appointed.

But there is another bill, currently before the General Assembly, that would give Lecht an additional three-year term as chairman and give him authority to remove anyone who doesn't attend three quarters of the agency's monthly meetings.

But first, last year's bill. That was sponsored by state Sen. Rocco Quattrocchi and originally called for lowering a quorum from six to five, meaning that only three out of 12 members are now needed to approve a motion. The language affecting Lecht's term, according to public records, was later tacked on by his friend state Rep. John Harwood, a Pawtucket Democrat. It is Harwood who cosponsored the bill now before the legislature.

And that bill, if passed (and Lecht says he's certain it will), would do far more than simply give him another term. It would also give additional terms to vice-chairman Bass and secretary Phyllis Stanzler, both of whom are supposed to go off the board next month when their two terms are up.