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Disney is a new breed of arts administrator

She takes a businesslike approach to her job

About an hour before Diane Disney learned she had been named director of the State Council on the Arts, she was attending a meeting at Rhode Island College. As she left Roberts Hall, she encountered a young woman with an armful of paintings who was struggling to open a door. She quickly ran to assist her.

Later that afternoon, while sitting at her desk in the arts council's Westimister Mall headquarters, Miss Disney recalled the incident and remarked that it was somehow appropriate. For at least one of her agency's many doors, Miss Disney was in position to open a lot of doors for struggling artists.

NOW THAT TRENDS seems to have reversed itself, a development Miss Disney comments on, early this year, was the ability to keep the arts alive and well despite the economy continuing to falter. If rumors cut in federal arts subsidies by 25 percent, Reagan administration would take place. Reagan staffs have said no or new arts council's policy toward providing support to the arts, but there has been speculation in the press that it may partially or even completely dismantle the National Endowment for the Arts - a somewhat like-minded" grants council. The arts council's budget concretely assumed a needed administrative staff, and Miss Disney was attending a downtown coffee shop, Miss Disney, wearing a chestnut-colored jacket and a blue, plaid scarf to tie back her auburn hair, discussed the future of her agency.

"For arts councils to flourish in times of high inflation, especially when some people do not understand how vital the arts are to a person's life, the management approach has to be different," Miss Disney said, chopping at the tabletop with her hands to emphasize her point.

"If inflation continues, resources will shrink and the competition for those resources are going to be increasing. The arts council, like other agencies, will have to be far more competitive in its search for capital."

BORN IN Louisville, Ky., Miss Disney, who is in her 30s, single, and lives on the East Side, was hired in 1981 by the National Endowment for the Arts, then headed by John Rockefeller. She said in a local management corporation. People will have to live with a three-year-old or a five-year-old thing they will not forgive an adolescent for, and that happens to organizations as well as people.

"We've gone through the first phases, and now, in order for the arts council to be taken seriously, we must behave like a responsible, professional organization. People will forgive a three- or five-year-old thing, but they will not forgive an adolescent for, and that happens to organizations as well as people.

Asked whether she belongs to the populist or elitist camp, Miss Disney referred to herself as "an enabler."

"The arts council does not do art, it allows others to do art, and we must focus on that enabling function."

Miss Disney holds graduate degrees from Duke, in English and education, and the University of Florida, in administration.

"My job is to work on grants and other arts-related issues, and to make sure that our beliefs are shared with these agencies. One agency where there was support from the National Endowment for the Arts, but other agencies where the arts council was not there."

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"The arts council does not do art, it allows others to do art, and we must focus on that enabling function."

"The council doesn't put on festivals, it allows others to put on festivals. And the better we are at enabling, the more festivals there will be."

WHAT LITTLE TIME is left at the end of Miss Disney's often long work day is devoted to tennis and volunteer work for more than a dozen civic organizations, including the United Way, the St. Mary's Community Fund, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

"It's just part of my life," she says referring to her volunteer work. "It's something I feel I should do. If I believe in a cause or believe in an issue, I feel I should do something about it. If I don't, then it's not my issue, I don't have the right to complain about it."

A couple of years ago, Miss Disney made news when, at an annual meeting of the United Way — normally serene affairs — she read a two-page position paper urging the recruitment of more women and minorities for the agency's allocation committees. The incident resulted in the formation of a minority task force the following year.

"I can't say it was the most comfortable thing I ever did," she said half-jokingly. "But I felt strongly about broadening the base of the people who made the decisions. These are public funds being collected from everyone and spent for everyone. And everyone should have a say in that process."

TO SOME EXTENT, Miss Disney hopes to apply this same philosophy to the operation of the arts council, not so much in the recruitment of minorities, but in opening up the agency to the broadest cross-section of the public.

There are, for example, many part-time positions available at the council. Miss Disney, who said, as well as opportunities for artists to serve on the agency's panels, volunteer groups that recommend to the council's 15-member board which grants are to be made, said these panels are open to everyone. And everyone should have a say in that process."

"I want to make sure there is some mechanism to review everybody that would like to work for the council in our programs," she said. "There are too many people interested in doing this to rely on who knows who, or anything like that. Everyone should have an opportunity to be considered."

"Quite simply," she said, "I want to professionalize the process."