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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 arts council, she was sitting in 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 Westerly Mall headquarters, Miss Disney recalled the incident and remarked that it was somehow appropriate. For at head of the agency that will pump nearly $1 million into the state's cultural life this year, Miss Disney is in a position to open a lot of doors for struggling artists.

NOW THAT TREND seems to have reversed itself, a development Miss Disney takes as one, early on, that the economy continues to falter. If rumors cut in federal arts subsidies by

In Rhode Island, Reagan administration staff have said little or nothing about the new administration's policy toward the government's support of the arts, but there has been speculation in the press that it may shift, if not completely dismantle the National Endowment for the Arts — a source of half the Rhode Island council's budget.

Interviewed recently at a downtown coffee shop, Miss Disney, wearing a chestnut-colored jacket and blue-pinted 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 can be to someone's life, the management approach we take here, the way Miss Disney said, changed at the tablestop 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 creative in its search for capital."

BORN IN Louisville, Ky., Miss Disney, who is in her 30s, single and lives on the West Side, worked in the late '70s for the Interpublic Group of Companies, a New York-based advertising conglomerate as a sort of go-between for the corporate and creative ends of the business. She moved to Providence after 10 years ago and has for the past four years worked in her own consulting business, Disney Lightfoot Lee Ltd.

She holds graduate degrees from Duke, in English and education, and the University of Florida, where she got a business administration degree. While she was an undergraduate there, Miss Disney worked as a freelancer for the wire services, reporting on sports events.

She received the National Volunteer Activist Award in 1975, and is the recipient of six National Arts Thespians Awards. She was also a consultant to the U.S. government, helping to develop a program for Hispanic youth.

"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, I should do something about it. If I don't believe in a cause, I should go 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 committee. 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, she 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 should receive funding.

"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. I believe that everyone has an opportunity to be involved.

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