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Rhode Island State Council on the Arts (1979-1992): News Article 29

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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 Façade.

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 *Walt 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, so I understand that," she said. "But 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

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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 raised 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.

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file: R.I. S.C.A.