

A Necessity, Not a Luxury: A Funder Looks to Activate Art's Power to Heal



A GRANT TO A MENTAL HEALTH ORGANIZATION ENABLED YOUNG PEOPLE TO MAKE AND SUBMIT SHORT FILMS THAT TELL STORIES TO HELP COMBAT STIGMA. PHOTO: COMMUNITY ACCESS

In my recent conversations with arts professionals looking at how philanthropy can [build a more resilient post-coronavirus arts sector](#), respondents repeatedly called for more robust advocacy from funders.

“Right now, we are seeing a demand for the arts like never before: individually and collectively, societies around the globe are expressing themselves through art, yearning for creative expression, using the arts to heal,” said Melissa Wolf and Sean McManus of the [advisory firm M + D](#).

My thoughts immediately turned to the prescient work of the Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund, which recently announced it would [expand its Arts in Health Initiative](#) to include three additional organizations and new programs at seven others.

The fund launched the initiative in 2018 as a \$10 million, multi-year effort to support organizations working on health issues that impact New York communities and that “utilize the arts as a tool for healing, with a special emphasis on improving access and addressing disparities in health outcomes.” The initiative defines “the arts” as visual art, dance, music, theater and film, and focuses on mental health stigma, trauma, aging-related diseases, as well as caring for caregivers and frontline healthcare staff.

The expanded Arts in Health initiative is “a natural evolution of our philanthropy over the past 12 years and combines two of Laurie’s passions—increasing access to the arts and [fostering healthy communities](#) in New York,” said Rick Luftglass, executive director of the Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund.

On March 20th, the Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund joined a broad consortium of funders, including Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Ford Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in launching the \$75 million [NYC COVID-19 Response & Impact Fund](#) to support the city’s cultural and social services organizations.

A Focus on Quality of Life

[Laurie M. Tisch](#) is deeply involved in New York City’s arts and education scene. She is a former co-chair of the board of trustees at the Whitney Museum of American Art, vice chair of the board of trustees at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, and a trustee of the Aspen Institute. She is also a co-owner and member of the board of directors of the New York Giants.

Laurie’s late father Bob started Loews Corporation with his brother Laurence. *Forbes* pegs her net worth at [\\$1](#)

[billion](#). Her brother Steve is chairman and executive vice president of the Giants and a [prodigious donor](#) in his own right.

Laurie launched the Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund in 2007. “It’s pretty simple, really,” she told [C-Suite Quarterly’s](#) Jason Dean in 2018. “I asked myself, ‘Why should someone’s zip code or the circumstances of their birth dictate the quality of their life or their health?’ I grew up without having to worry about the basics, but a lot of people in New York, and in so many other places, lack simple things like access to healthy food, a good education, and the arts.”

Ten years later, when Laurie’s mother Joan Tisch passed away, Laurie and her two brothers decided to sell the family’s Joan and Preston Robert Tisch Collection. Sold at auction in May 2018, the collection raised more than \$66 million for Tisch family foundations. As of the end of 2018, the [Laurie M. Tisch Illumination](#) Fund had awarded over \$100 million in funding.

Moved to Action

Tisch told Dean that she was compelled to address mental illness stigma, trauma, and aging-related diseases after witnessing her mother’s battle with dementia near the end of her life.

Prior to establishing the Arts in Health Initiative, Luftglass said that Tisch and her team “started to see the intersections between arts and health percolate up, and started to learn about specific programs such as museum-based programs for people with Alzheimer’s, a program using art to combat mental health stigma, and a dance program for survivors of domestic violence. We saw new ways in which the arts change people’s lives.”

“Decades of scientific study show that engagement in the arts provides cognitive, emotional and physical health benefits for people from youth to old age, but there are great disparities in access to services in New York City,” Tisch said upon [launching the initiative](#).

“This initiative will help organizations doing important work with underserved populations, increase their ability to reach more people, and build awareness of the role the arts can play in healing. At our core, we are dedicated to using the arts to help build healthy and vibrant communities in New York City.”

“We Started to See Huge Leaps”

“Though we did a lot of research and kicked a lot of tires before choosing our first grantees, once we got up and running, we started to see huge leaps,” Luftglass told me.

For example, the initiative awarded a grant to mental health organization Community Access earmarked for the [Changing Minds Young Filmmakers Competition](#), which enables young people to make and submit short films that tell stories to help combat stigma. “The year before we made the grant, they had received about 325 film submissions through their online portal; that jumped to 825 in 2018, and about 940 in 2019,” Luftglass said. Community Access went on to launch the first Changing Minds Young Filmmakers Festival and increased film distribution to schools and youth organizations.

Another recipient, [Arts & Minds](#), which developed museum-based programs for people with Alzheimer’s and their caregivers, saw an increase in demand, including among communities of color. “Success breeds success,” Luftglass said.

“In addition to expanding our work with the first set of grantees, we found organizations that we hadn’t previously known about,” Luftglass said, such as Mekong NYC, one of the initiative’s three organizations receiving funds for the first time under the expansion. The organization works in Cambodian and Vietnamese communities, and uses the arts to address long-term trauma among survivors of genocide.

The initiative also forged a new partnership with the largest city hospital system in the country, New York City’s [NYC Health + Hospitals](#) (H + H), which launched its Arts in Medicine program to use the arts to address frontline staff burnout. With the Illumination Fund’s support, H+H was also able to take specific arts healing programs across its vast network and replicate them at other sites in the system.

The latter initiative achieves impact at scale since H + H “serves the most diverse population, including low-income communities, immigrants, the uninsured and underinsured, and is at the frontline of many emergencies, from gun violence to pedestrian accidents to, most recently, the coronavirus pandemic,” Luftglass said.

In early April, the fund committed [an additional \\$500,000](#) to H+H’s COVID-19 Relief Fund, boosting its total support for the public healthcare system in New York to \$2 million. Administered by Network for Good, it will provide funds for the hiring and support of healthcare workers as COVID-19 continues to spread in the city.

Assessing Impact

A big takeaway from my reporting on arts and philanthropy in recent years has been the need for advocates to [better measure and articulate the impact](#) of the “arts experience.”

Luftglass is not so keen about that idea, at least in principle. “We believe in and support the arts because of its intrinsic value—because it makes us human, because we believe they’re a necessity in our society, not a luxury,” he said. “So we should be careful to not instrumentalize the arts for other purposes.”

That said, the beauty of the Arts in Health Initiative is its elevator-pitch-like simplicity: It uses the arts to heal. It also looks to achieve measurable outcomes, assessing impact at two levels. The first is based on the grantee’s own definition of success. The metrics are unique to a specific organization since “the health issues, populations and program models are so distinct,” Luftglass said, providing a useful example:

Recipient Gibney, which uses [dance and movement workshops](#) for survivors of domestic violence, is conducting a research study that looks at decreases in what are called “PTSD-intrusive thoughts.” But programs working on mental health stigma and museum-based programs for people with Alzheimer’s are “wholly different,” Luftglass said. “In the case of Community Access’s Changing Minds Young Filmmakers Competition, success means the number, quality and diversity of film submissions, and ways in which the selected films are used.”

Meanwhile, other programs may look at quality of life and sheer enjoyment that the arts can bring to people experiencing challenges in their lives. “That’s not [necessarily measurable](#), but there’s also a very valid claim that you know it when you see it, and generally can trust your gut,” Luftglass said.

The fund’s second level of assessment is “cross-cutting,” which applies to all of the organizations. These outcomes include increased access, particularly with low-income and/or diverse communities; partnerships among organizations, sectors and fields; new and enhanced knowledge to inform practice, and leadership development. The fund convenes all grantees in a network to share experiences.

“When we started the initiative, we were looking at individual organizations and programs,” Luftglass said. “As it has grown, we’ve seen more collaboration and learning across organizations, and there is a lot of momentum building across the field.”

Broadening the Definition of “Arts in Health”

The initiative also acknowledges disparities in health issues and outcomes. “Some mental health conditions are higher in particular racial or ethnic communities

due to a wide range of societal and historical factors,” Luftglass said, “and there is uneven access to appropriate services.”

In the case of Alzheimer’s, Luftglass pointed to research showing that African Americans are twice as likely to have Alzheimer’s as white populations, and Latinx populations are 1.5 times as likely. [“Healthcare disparities](#) are just one manifestation of broader inequality, and the same factors contribute toward disparities in access to the arts, access to economic opportunity, access to high-quality education, and so many other essential areas.”

Compounding these inequalities is the fact that social and health-related organizations—for example, those working with court-involved youth—fail to connect the arts and health-related causes. “But trauma is a major factor in ending up in the [criminal justice system](#),” Luftglass said, “and being in that system brings new forms of trauma.” Some of the programs with court-involved youth use trauma-informed practices, so the fund began to look at them within the context of its initiative.

Similarly, some funders think “arts in health” means “arts therapy or hospital bedside artmaking and music programs,” Luftglass said. While those perceptions are accurate, they’re also limiting. “The power of the arts extends to a broad range of community and societal issues, including aging, mental health, trauma after mass shootings, recovery from natural disasters, and refugees fleeing violence.”

Fortunately, many prominent arts funders agree with Luftglass, who cited [ArtPlaceAmerica’s](#) work in exploring the impact that the arts can have in [public health](#) and Bloomberg Philanthropies’ [Public Art Challenge](#), which funded a project that used the arts for healing after a mass shooting. He also lauded the Barr Foundation’s work in Massachusetts and the Pabst Steinmetz Foundation’s arts and wellness initiatives in Florida.

“‘Arts in health’ isn’t an either/or proposition,” Luftglass said, “but it can be hard for all of us to fund across traditional boundaries. More funders have been expressing interest in this intersection, so we think that’s going to change.”