

A career building up Charlotte's arts landscape

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 *Editor's note: Because of the holidays, this is the final planned Ledger of 2023. We'll be back in your inbox on Jan. 3.*

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Exit interview: Krista Terrell looks back on 21 years serving Charlotte's arts sector with the Arts & Science Council



Krista Terrell says she's proud of how the Arts & Science Council has supported creative individuals and organizations and helped them be sustainable during her two-decades-long tenure with ASC. (Photo by Alvin C. Jacobs Jr.)

by Michael J. Solender

Krista Terrell spent more than two decades entrenched in the Charlotte region's arts and culture world with the Arts & Science Council, working her way from a public

relations specialist role to serving as president of the cultural planning, advocacy, grant-making and educational non-profit.

During those two decades, there was a seismic shift in how the city funds arts organizations — a shift that saw the ASC move from a non-profit replete in public and corporate funds and heralded as a national model to a vastly downsized organization.

Last August, Terrell, 49, announced that she would resign from the ASC at the end of the year. She hasn't yet announced what her next career step will be.

(Last month, the ASC board named **Monifa Drayton** as interim president. Drayton is the principal consultant for the **Drayton Leadership Group**, and she has worked in leadership positions with **Atrium Health** and is also the chair of the **Mecklenburg Alcoholic Beverage Control Board**.)

An Augusta, Ga., native, Terrell was destined for a career in the arts. She is a graduate of the nationally recognized **John S. Davidson Fine Arts Magnet School** in Augusta, studied ballet as a teen and dreamed of being a dancer. A poster in her childhood bedroom featured the North Carolina Dance Theatre (now Charlotte Ballet).

She landed in Charlotte to attend **Johnson C. Smith University** where she graduated with a bachelor's degree in communications. Her focus was on arts and public relations. Internships while at JCSU included supporting **Spirit Square**, a standalone non-profit at the time, **Charlotte's Web / Charlotte Mecklenburg Library**, and Charlotte PR firm, **Epley Associates**. She joined ASC after public relations roles at JCSU and the **Community School of the Arts** (now **Arts+**).

Terrell's tenure at ASC saw her take on increased responsibilities in public relations, communications, and marketing. She worked under five different ASC presidents and undertook the role of acting ASC president in January of 2021, and after a brief board search, was named president in April of that year.

The ASC board had surveyed the staff when deciding on who to hire, and the responses were strong in Terrell's favor, said **Susan Patterson**, an ASC board of directors member and former chair.

“Krista’s name came to the top because of how she works with people. She deals honestly, openly, straightforwardly, and with a lot of integrity. People trust her. Over the last couple of years, that’s been important,” Patterson said. “We decided that we couldn’t bring anybody in that would be any stronger than Krista. ... She is amazingly courageous. She may at times ruffle some feathers with her strong positions, but she is tireless in her advocacy.”

Terrell came to helm the ASC as the Charlotte City Council was reevaluating its approach to funding local arts and culture groups where support had traditionally been allocated — both with and without restrictions — through ASC.

The shift in thinking and approach has been accompanied by a newly created city role of arts and culture officer and 18-member Arts and Culture Advisory Board. The [arts and culture plan](#) developed by this team was recently approved for implementation by the City Council and will more directly allocate city funds and money raised through public and private sources such as the Infusion Fund.

Within her first month as president, Terrell had to lay off 40% of ASC’s staff — cuts that had been announced before she took over, but that she had to execute. Since its peak staffing level of 35 in 2019, ASC operates today with a current staff of 11. Their budget for FY2024 is \$10M.

The Charlotte Ledger sat down with Terrell recently as she reflected on her tenure at ASC and shared her thoughts on public/private collaboration and funding for the arts, ASC’s reach and her hopes for the sector. Her comments have been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

Q: To start at the beginning – what was the earliest big project you recall working on?

My first project after I started was in support of an annual series ASC held called the Leadership Lecture. We’d bring in a notable creative, historian, artist, or the like, and they would speak at the Belk Theater.

The featured lecturer in 2002 was Dr. Jane Goodall. Her documentary, “Wild Chimpanzees,” was just released and there was programming at Discovery Place. Her non-profit foundation has a youth education program called Roots & Shoots. I was over

the community relations for this and worked to create experiences for CMS students. It ended up being on the front page of the Charlotte Observer, a picture of Jane Goodall working with a student. That was my first big project.

Q: For those who might be unfamiliar with ASC's role in Charlotte's arts community, how do you describe the core functions of the ASC?

We are a connector, a capacity builder, a grant maker, and a champion for the sector. ASC touches the community in ways people may not be aware of.

An example is we manage the [public art program](#) for the city and the county. ASC has directed 133 public art projects since 2003, following the adoption of Mecklenburg County and City of Charlotte ordinances appropriating 1 percent of eligible capital improvement project funds for public art.

Public art projects people would recognize include “Spiral Odyssey” (2017) at Romare Bearden Park; “Ascendus” (2012) on Billy Graham Parkway near Charlotte Douglas International Airport; “Excelsior” (2021) in Historic West End; individually the artworks are titled “Ever Upward” at Five Points Plaza and “Even Higher” along West Trade Street in historic West Charlotte.

The community knows us as a grant maker. A number I love to share is when I joined ASC in 2002, there was only \$50,000 allocated to creative individuals through our grants. I'm proud to say that over the past two years, ASC has invested \$3.5 million to support the work of creative individuals in our community. Our support to arts and cultural organizations over that period is \$3.6 million.

Q: Can you share some additional examples about ASC's impact and reach into Charlotte neighborhoods, beyond center city?

One thing that I am proud of is [the Culture Blocks](#) initiative that is completely funded by Mecklenburg County. It aligns with Mecklenburg County's focus of bringing arts and culture to its residents.

We listen to and learn from residents in 10 geographic areas and work to support the types of arts and cultural experiences they want to have. We know they have a cultural

life already. We really want to connect them to the assets that are here, meaning cultural organizations of all sizes or creative individuals that are doing the work that responds to what it is that they need.

We understand that people come uptown for the mountaintop experiences like Hamilton and the Broadway series (presented by Blumenthal Performing Arts) or a major exhibition like Picasso (at the Mint Museum). Yet, residents have articulated to us specifically in the (2014 ASC) Cultural Vision Plan, they want to experience arts and culture close to where they live.

An example of this is in Huntersville's Pottstown, a historically African American community. At the David B. Waymer Recreation & Senior Center, ASC commissioned local artist Michele Turner to create laser-cut, powder-coated designs for the railing at the entrance of the gym. Her artwork incorporates significant residents, symbols, and structures relevant to Pottstown, Huntersville's historic African-American community.

Q: There's tension around funding between larger institutional arts and cultural organizations and smaller, less visible organizations and creative individuals. You've made addressing equity in funding, programming, and access a focus of your tenure. Can you speak to that?

There's a narrative that ASC took money from the large organizations and gave it to grassroots organizations. That is not the case. We don't cut our way to equity. It's a funding issue. We have been advocating for over a decade that the city needs to increase their funding to arts and culture because it has not kept up pace with the population growth.

With the [2014 Cultural Vision Plan](#) residents articulated three things. They wanted arts and culture to build community and build bridges across difference. The second thing they wanted diverse, relevant, and innovative experiences for a changing population. And they wanted it close to where they live, at the neighborhood level. The third thing is that they wanted art, science, and history to be central to pre-K through 12-education. We are doing our best to address that and make people aware and what needs to be done. And I think there is a great opportunity to continue to invest in (smaller, diverse) organizations. I call them organizations of the future.

This all needs funding. If you recall in 2019, we had a quarter-cent sales tax referendum that failed. It was estimated to put more than \$22 million into the sector. The biggest challenge for the sector going forward remains funding. I still believe the sector needs a dedicated revenue stream. We are not keeping pace with the growth of the community in the arts sector.

Q: How do you see your personal legacy with the work you've done at ASC and what you've accomplished?

I am leaving because I am ready to figure out the next chapter of my career. Twenty-one years is a long time. I'm proud of the work.

I view the work that has been done under my leadership as exciting. ASC's focus and continued investment in creative individuals, our continued funding of organizations in different ways, and ensuring we're investing in these organizations of the future is all work I feel has made lasting impact.

There is no other organization doing the work for the broader cultural sector better and more comprehensively than ASC. Look at what we do in advance of local elections, for example. We administer a candidate questionnaire and send it out to the community to say, we want you to know where the candidates stand on arts and culture. No one else is doing that work.

I see my legacy as doubling down on our investment in creatives and really showing up in and with the broader community. My hope for the sector is that it will be viable and supported and sustained. My hope is that residents become connected to arts and culture and hold those organizations supporting the sector, including ASC, accountable.

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Raising the roof: SouthPark Mall seems to be expanding to make way for a mystery tenant

SouthPark Mall looks as though it's about to make a minor expansion. But it is staying