

Why I Serve

CHARLOTTE COMMUNITY AND BUSINESS LEADERS BRING TIME, TALENT AND TREASURE THROUGH SERVICE TO THEIR FAVORED CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS. HERE'S WHY THEY DO IT.

BY MICHAEL J. SOLENDER • PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM SAYER

Charlotte museum visitors, concertgoers and theater enthusiasts know the city's cultural scene is a burgeoning one.

What may be less well-understood, however, is that for every musician, painter, actor and dancer, there's a behind-the-scenes group of professionals volunteering to showcase their artistry. For area non-profit arts and cultural institutions, an active and engaged board of directors can be the key difference between success and struggle.

Having diverse and involved community leaders is critical to the health and viability of Charlotte's cultural sector. So critical that, in 2005, Charlotte's Arts & Science Council launched a Cultural Leadership Training Program to identify, educate and match a deep well of talent to serve on the boards of arts institutions throughout the city.

"This program demystifies board service, provides a grounding in governance, roles and responsibilities and capitalizes on the influx of intellectual capital into Charlotte as the city continues to grow," says Katherine Mooring, senior vice president of community investment at ASC. More than 400 graduates of the leadership training program have been matched with dozens of organizations in the past 15 years, Mooring says.

Why do people serve on arts boards?

The reasons are as diverse as the organizations they serve.

We sat down with five board chairs alongside their executive directors to learn about how they support their organizations, the rewards of service and their passion for the arts.



Arlene Ferebee is surrounded by gowns created with recycled playbills and postcards, part of Opera Carolina's Recycle the Runway initiative.



Arlene Ferebee

Opera Carolina

Arlene Ferebee was beaming as she shared her enthusiasm about last year's Charlotte debut of *I Dream*, the stirring opera chronicling the last 36 hours of Martin Luther King Jr.'s life.

"Our production came on the heels of the recent social unrest in Charlotte," Ferebee says. "[It] really showed how art can be a safe space to create dialogue around sensitive subjects and issues that matter to the community. These opportunities excite me and are innovative forms of community engagement, an interest area I focused on as I came onto Opera Carolina's board."

Opera Carolina's roots extend back to 1948, when the company was founded by the Charlotte Music Club. The nonprofit is entering its 71st season in 2020 as the largest professional opera company in the Carolinas.

Ferebee, senior director, strategic development for Novant Health, was approached about taking a board seat at Opera Carolina when one of her colleagues was rolling off the board. She joined in 2016, and became board chair 18 months later.

"My interest in opera grew from having been a French Horn player in high school and loving classical music," says Ferebee, who recalls Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* as the first opera she attended. "I was [eager] to talk to diverse audiences about opera, leveraging the different programming we do, and illustrate there is a little piece of Opera Carolina for everyone."

Executive Director Beth Hansen says having a large board — it's currently 28 members — comprised of community, business and philanthropic leaders is an advantage for the company.

"We benefit with multiple vantage points," says Hansen, who took on her current role after first serving on Opera Carolina's board. "From arts advocacy and fundraising to community engagement and working with sponsors, a larger board gives us the expertise of senior community and corporate leaders — and [the perspective of] younger professionals we are cultivating to engage and help achieve our mission."

Opera Carolina's board members commit to three years of service. As with most boards, directors are expected to make an annual financial contribution.

"It's been fantastic to be involved with the level of diverse expertise and knowledge found not only on the board, but with the staff," Ferebee says. "As board chair, I'm more involved with different aspects of our operations, from the repertoires to financials, and it's satisfying to work shoulder-to-shoulder with such a great team."

Ferebee said the friendships she's forged are among the most rewarding aspects of her board service.

"I've met and worked with people I wouldn't have had the opportunity to meet elsewhere," she says. "This has been invaluable, especially my friendship with Beth. I've learned so much about her. We've always had respect for each other, but this type of work leads to developing deeper friendships."

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Lise Hain

Charlotte Ballet

Lise Hain could hardly have picked a more exciting and heady time to serve on the board of directors at Charlotte Ballet.

During her seven-year tenure, including the last two as board chair, Hain has seen a major company rebranding; the retirement of Charlotte Ballet's long-tenured artistic director; the search, selection and transition of a new AD; and the company's strategic growth into new markets and expanded community programming.

"Serving on the board is a way I can promote something I feel passionate about," Hain says. "I'm excited and motivated about what we are accomplishing."

Hain joined the board just as the company launched a rebranding initiative — Charlotte Ballet was previously known as the North Carolina Dance Theatre.

"The experience was a great piece of education on the workings of our board and the deliberate nature of planning," Hain says. "Listening to questions asked and seeing how roadblocks were navigated informed me on how we operate."

Growing up in Oregon, Hain was exposed to the ballet at an early age by her mother, who took her to live performances and always tuned in to public television whenever Baryshnikov was performing.

"After graduate school, I moved to New York City and got the cheapest ticket I could to ABT (American Ballet Theatre) and so appreciated all the stimulating offerings of the city," Hain says. "After moving here, I was aspirational for Charlotte and looked for ways to foster the arts."

Hain came to Charlotte Ballet after six years on the board at nearby Children's Theatre of Charlotte.

Douglas Singleton, Charlotte Ballet's executive director, is appreciative of the board's support of the creative direction of Hope Muir as she has transitioned into the role of artistic director.

"What the board has done is allow Hope to curate our programming," Singleton says. "The first conversation we

had as a search committee, was do we have a focus on curation vs. creation. We determined we wanted a balance of the two with a mixture of repertoire, as it takes time to mature and develop. Hope's way of developing repertoire that both pushes the city and prepares the dancers to grow has really been embraced and is paying dividends for the company."

The New York Times has taken note, spotlighting the company's American premiere of *The Most Incredible Thing*, a ballet based on a fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen. Charlotte Ballet's spring 2019 production was choreographed by Javier de Frutos. Opportunities to tour and perform nationally and internationally are presenting themselves as well. For example, Charlotte Ballet will be taking its *Spring Works* on the road to the Joyce Theater in Manhattan in May 2020.

"We need to be cautious and deliberate in how we evaluate these opportunities," says Hain, who acknowledges financial and other risks need to be balanced when considering how to expand the company's reach.

"We have a wonderful diversity of skill sets on our board. Our role is to be a sounding board and support the staff and the company."

"Serving on the board is a way I can promote something I feel passionate about," Hain says. "I'm excited and motivated about what we are accomplishing."







Keri Shull, right, joined the board of the aerial dance company started by Caroline Calouche, left, four years ago. She became chair in 2017.

Keri Shull

Caroline Calouche & Co.

For Keri Shull, the decision to serve on the board of directors at Caroline Calouche & Co., a nonprofit aerial dance company which blends contemporary dance and circus arts, was one that allowed her to both give back to the community and reconnect with her own personal roots in dance.

“I was on a competitive dance team in high school and always enjoyed the dance space,” says Shull, head of specialty lending at Fifth Third Bank. “I was looking for an opportunity to be impactful and saw Caroline’s company as a smaller organization a bit higher on the needs continuum, and at a nice intersection of impact and passion for me.”

Supporting a sole founder and artistic and executive director requires a great deal of alignment in vision — and a degree of faith, so that conflicts between creative ideas (and allocating resources to resolve those conflicts) can be worked through successfully.

Shull, who’s served on the board for the last four years and became chair 18 months ago, wanted to be certain Calouche recognized this balance and was open to measured, sustainable growth.

“It’s not unusual in the nonprofit arena to see someone overflowing with passion for the artistic side of things, but they can’t figure out how to navigate the rest,” Shull says. “I’ve found Caroline excels in areas that go well beyond the creative realm, from obtaining grant funding and business relationships to marketing and staff development.”

As the company’s community presence has grown, sponsorship and performance opportunities have required additional work the board might not have been ready for.

“I’ve always understood there is compromise involved in realizing artistic dreams,” says Calouche, acknowledging the tough financial realities of operating a nonprofit. “As our board has evolved, particularly since Keri has taken the chair, I’m comfortable [giving up some] administrative and operational responsibilities and working to put in place capabilities to catch up to our artistic goals.”

Shull says potential board members considering nonprofit service should seek to understand the strategy and the routines in place.

“How we drive strategic vision — who’s helping, what the structure is and what is required of board members to support the artistic piece — is critical. Knowing what you own, and what the measure of success is as a board member needs to be well understood.”

What does Shull find rewarding about her board journey?

“Seeing the behind-the-scenes of how we get things accomplished is very satisfying,” Shull says. “Our artistic product is top notch. It’s fun and interesting to see behind what makes that happen.”

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Steve Dunn

BOOM

After years of enjoying Charleston's Spoleto Festival, Steve Dunn figured Charlotte was overdue for an engaging street art festival of its own and thought he might create one.

"I approached my friend and former college roommate, Charles Thomas (Charlotte's program director at the Knight Foundation)," says Dunn, a longtime arts advocate, attorney and owner of Steve Dunn Mediation. He told me about BOOM and introduced me to Manoj."

Manoj Kesavan is the founder, executive director and creative force behind BOOM, an annual three-day showcase of performance, visual, musical, contemporary and experimental art created on "the fringes of popular culture."

Launched in 2016, BOOM held more than 120 performances this past spring at ticketed venues such as Petra's, The Rabbit Hole and Snug Harbor, as well as dozens of free events on street stages throughout Plaza Midwood. More than 15,000 people attended the three-day festival showcasing contemporary and experimental art.

Dunn started working with Kesavan as a festival volunteer. "I helped with staging logistics like equipment rental, insurance, noise permitting and legal matters," Dunn says. "I came onto the board in June of 2017 and became board chair last year. It was an easy transition, as BOOM remains an organization where there is a great deal of overlap between the board and key volunteers."

Dunn brings considerable experience to BOOM, having served as chair for Carolina Actors Studio Theatre, the long-running independent nonprofit theater company.

"Being a board member is a year-round job — we meet monthly, look at finances, focus on the mission and vision of BOOM, and keep tabs on potential sponsorships, artists and growth opportunities."

BOOM's nascent stage of development, however, is where Dunn can bring his board experience to bear.

"We're at a fascinating inflection point with BOOM," Dunn says, "Somewhere between a scrappy band of friends putting on a street show and a long-established artistic organization. Where I'm useful is as someone who has been involved in organizations that are further along that path. I've seen how things get done, what's important, and [I can] help articulate concrete actions we need to undertake to get better."

Kesavan, a serial people connector as adept at navigating corporate boardrooms as surfing for talent in underground clubs, welcomes the structural framework that Dunn and BOOM's six-member board brings to the table.

"While we remain an artist-driven organization, that doesn't exclude the opportunity to operate at a professional level," Kesavan says. "We need to have best practices and appropriate governance processes in place. Steve and the board deliver here."

As chair, Dunn is appreciative of all levels of contributions from his members.

"It's important to accept from people what they are willing and able to give rather than be resentful for what they are unable to do," he says. "People contribute in many different tangible and practical ways beyond what's always immediately visible. I'm thankful for everything, from their time to making community introductions. It all makes a difference."

His most rewarding moment during this year's festival?

"Surprisingly, it was just sitting back this year at the beverage tent," Dunn says. "I draw my energy being there while it's happening and being surrounded by so much cool talent."

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Jeff Hay

Blumenthal Performing Arts

When Jeff Hay was approached in 2013 about serving on the board of trustees at Blumenthal Performing Arts, he was concerned he wouldn't be able to commit enough time to Charlotte's largest nonprofit arts institution. Hay, who is corporate and securities practice group leader at Womble Bond Dickinson LLP, already served as president of the British-American Business Council of North Carolina.

"I met with Tom Gabbard (president and CEO of Blumenthal Performing Arts) to initially explore the opportunity," Hay says. "I came to learn the Blumenthal, along with several other regional centers, had created the Independent Presenters Network and were investing in British theater." The IPN consortium brings Broadway productions to more than 110 cities across North America. "My mission with the British-American Business Council was to foster bilateral trade and investment between the U.K. and the U.S., and I saw [great synergies]. By the time lunch was over, I'd agreed to sit on the board."

It was only three months later that Blumenthal brought Sir Matthew Bourne (a British choreographer of contemporary dance and theater) to Charlotte with his smash hit, *Sleeping Beauty*.

"The British-American Business Council sponsored the production and hosted a reception for Matthew with a terrific talk-back interview," Hay says. "I don't think I've ever worked as hard in the first three months serving on a board as I did then. I began to become more aware of what the Blumenthal does for the region from an economic-development perspective, and it's a level of contribution, one I don't think many in Charlotte fully realize."

There's no question Blumenthal is an economic powerhouse for the region, infusing more than \$60 million into the local economy and presenting more than 1,000 shows annually. The organization employs 100 full-time staffers, a militia of more than 350 volunteers and steady income to nearly 350 stagehands.

"Our mission is to reach out into all corners of the community with our programming," Hay says. "Broadway Lights is a tremendous revenue generator that allows Blumenthal to invest in a diversity of productions like Breakin' Convention (an international festival of hip-hop dance) and the Charlotte Jazz Festival, where much of our programming is free, outside the four walls of theater, and beyond Tryon Street."

Now in his second year as chair, Hay sees the board's role in connecting community members as a critical component to fulfilling Blumenthal's mission of using the arts as a catalyst to strengthen education, build community and spur economic growth.

"I'm very excited about our focus on kids. The Blumeys, our awards and recognition program for high school performing-arts programs, is nationally recognized and makes a tremendous impact across the region. [Blumenthal's] ticket scholarships support youth mentoring organizations such as Big Brothers, Big Sisters, and Freedom School. These are the types of partners that extend our reach."

Trustee support also extends to many of the Charlotte community's smaller arts organizations.

"It's especially gratifying to me when there is a healthy exchange of ideas and problem-solving between our trustees and those on the boards of our resident companies," Gabbard says. "Our board has deep layers of expertise that is an invaluable resource in helping our arts community thrive."

Hay says the opportunity to mix with such a diversity of talent is ultimately the most rewarding aspect of serving on the board.

"There's a super network of talented, smart and engaged folks on our board that help me expand my perspective on our community. It's always inspiring to work with them." SP

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