

Orton Family Foundation

Art & Community Planning

By Ann McQueen



Starksboro Art & Soul, Outside the Art Bus, artist Matthew Perry and kids document what's important in their neighborhood. Photo: Orton Family Foundation

This Funder Portrait is part of a series of brief papers and podcast interviews featuring funders who are supporting arts and culture as a creative strategy to achieve community building and development goals, civic engagement, or social justice goals. Visit the [Animating Democracy](#) website for other Funder Portraits and [Resources](#).

Listen to a [podcast interview](#) by **Ann McQueen** with **Betsy Rosenbluth**, Director of Projects, Orton Family Foundation.

View the Profile: [North Fork Valley Heart & Soul](#)

The [Orton Family Foundation](#) integrates art and artists into its community planning work with small towns in New England and the Rocky Mountain West. As foundation staff helps small town residents plan for and control future growth through their signature Heart & Soul Community Planning grants, they've found that using art projects—radio stories, intergenerational sculpture projects, illustrated recipe books—to discover and highlight stories about what makes their town special is an effective civic engagement and community building strategy.

As residents are engaged through art, they define the town's core values. What do you value about your town? What, if lost, would change its character? What is the heart and soul of your town? This becomes the basis for master plans, economic development plans and numerous small projects that protect, beautify, and enhance the quality of life and unique character of their place. Lyman Orton, Proprietor of the Vermont Country Store, launched the operating foundation and its planning work in 1995 with profits from the Vermont Country Store. Today, these profits support offices in Vermont and Colorado and an annual operating budget of about \$2.8 million.



*There's a power to using the arts and story in particular ...
in situations and in a process where we don't typically use them.
It changes the conversation, and we need to do that.*

Betsy Rosenbluth, Orton Family Foundation

Today, conversation and storytelling is embedded in the work of the Orton Family Foundation. Betsy Rosenbluth, director of projects, notes that while this was not always the case, the evolution from technology to dialogue and civic engagement progressed naturally from the vision of co-founder and chair Lyman Orton.¹

Lyman Orton is the Proprietor of the Vermont Country Store, founded by his parents (whose own parents ran a local general store) in 1946 and now operated by his three sons. He also collects art, preserving the history of his state's changing landscape by buying the paintings of long deceased Vermont artists and commissioning new work.

Community planning, Lyman's related passion, was spurred by the 1980s building boom, which highlighted his community's lack of consensus and control over zoning. In 1995, Lyman Orton launched the foundation and its planning work with Noel Fritzinger, its first president, to help small town residents take control of future growth in a way that protected the character of their place. Funded by profits from the Vermont Country Store, the private operating² foundation's first effort was to give citizens the data and technology they needed to make informed decisions. CommunityViz[®], a GIS-based visualization program designed to support decision-making, was an early planning tool developed by the foundation. CViz was soon joined by Community Mapping, which used GIS and other technologies to connect students with their neighborhood. Two equally important tools—process and communication—came to the fore with Community Video and Youth Community Video programs, which engaged youth and adults in collaboratively creating their vision for the future.

Storytelling—and art—began to take hold. As the foundation launched a series of projects in New England and the Rocky Mountain West regions, conversation between neighbors became an explicit through-line in their work.

By 2007, as the foundation decreased its attention to technology, spinning off CommunityViz into a private enterprise and increasing its interest in process, Lyman found the language that captured his vision for resident-generated community planning. Data is important to planning, but first, diverse groups of people need to talk about what connects them to the place they call home. What is the “heart and soul” of their community? What do they value? What, if lost, would change the character of their small town? From its inception, the foundation's work was grounded in conversation. Now, as the first Heart & Soul Community Planning projects rolled

out, storytelling, along with the artists whose work encouraged the sharing of stories, would be solidly at its core.

The first round of Heart & Soul projects proved the theory that story, the personal narrative, was an easy entry point that invited wide participation. Even people who wouldn't show up at a meeting would tell their stories to their grandchildren who became reporters and documentarians. As people listened to their neighbors' stories, they discovered common interests, built consensus around the values they wanted to protect, and identified what they could change. Then they could move forward to steering change by implementing initiatives and regulations to enhance and protect what they valued most and, if those values were closely and commonly held, steward their community assets long into the future. Stories about the past put residents in charge of shaping their future.

One of the foundation's first five Heart & Soul grants went beyond storytelling to make the arts the key strategy for engaging the community. In early 2008, the Orton Family Foundation and the [Vermont Land Trust](#) issued a Call for Community Proposals seeking new methods of community engagement and planning to small towns in a rural Vermont county. Seven communities responded. Starksboro's proposal built on the success of its elementary school's arts-integrated teaching methods to become Orton's first "Art & Soul" community planning project.

STARKSBORO, VERMONT

Starksboro, Vermont is rural, with a population of 2,000 people scattered among eight working farms and 20 maple sugar producers. But it lacks the typical New England town center. Instead of a square with a white church, town hall, and general store, it has five neighborhoods, including three mobile home parks, without any direct or easy connection between them.

The Art of Action: Shaping Vermont's Future Through Art

In 2007, philanthropist Lyman Orton and his partner Janice Izzi, working with the Vermont Arts Council, developed [The Art of Action](#), a commissioning initiative supported by the [Vermont Folklife Center](#), the Orton Family Foundation, and others. The shared goal was to commission visual artists to make work inspired by the social, cultural, and political issues that affect the future of the state, expecting that "the artists and the art they create [would] become a vehicle and catalyst for discussing and shaping the future of Vermont."

The project RFP drew an astounding response: 300 artists from 26 states and three foreign countries applied, 20 finalists presented proposals, and 10 artists were selected, ultimately creating 105 pieces of artwork in response to research conducted by the Council on the Future of Vermont.

The art toured throughout the state in two concurrent exhibitions in 2009 and 2010, concluding with a final exhibition in July 2010. Thirty-two pieces were auctioned and 26 pieces were donated to community organizations to ensure that the project's legacy is preserved for future Vermonters.

The two-year Starksboro project began in fall 2008 as Middlebury College students interviewed residents to collect stories about what they valued most about their connections to each other, their community, and the land. After three months, more than 250 people from the disparate neighborhoods came together to share the multimedia profiles³ and a community dinner. As Rosenbluth tells us, “It was an amazing moment. It was like a gift. It opened people up to hearing their neighbors’ stories.”

Next, a nine-month artist residency began when the Starksboro advisory committee, in collaboration with the [Vermont Arts Council](#), issued a Request for Qualifications. About 20 Vermont artists responded, all with different approaches to community engagement. Residents interviewed three finalists, selecting visual artist Matthew Perry based on his experience working with diverse populations, from veterans and struggling students to municipal workers and senior citizens. Perry is the co-founder and director of the [Vermont Arts Exchange](#) in North Bennington, which is as much a community development agency as an arts organization. His art is to create with other people, to get them to create “to strengthen communities and neighborhoods.”⁴ In Starksboro, Matthew was not focused on a final product; rather, his goal was to listen to as many people as possible and to follow their path wherever it led.

“I just came in with an empty canvas,”⁵ Matthew says. In fact, he became the Pied Piper, showing up in his Art Bus, an old school bus turned traveling studio, drawing kids and adults to him. And when they didn’t come, he’d knock on doors, show up at the harvest festival and hold “roadside conversations.” He encouraged teens and adults to create sculptures and photo stories together and helped adults and children make new signs for the mobile home parks and community gardens. Residents painted sap buckets at the annual sugaring festival and local artists illustrated a collection of residents’ recipes; sales of both raised funds for the project. As residents worked together to make art, new and deeper connections were formed, stories were shared and the spirit of Starksboro—what needed to be preserved and enhanced—became apparent.

Matthew Perry was not the project’s only artist. At each gathering, one of the town’s artists made something—a painting, a song—in response to the conversations. Local artists learned new ways of working with their neighbors and, in turn, were introduced and honored in a new way. Orton staff learned something, too: art making goes beyond the traditional story circle to offer many different ways to draw out, illustrate and share stories about what makes a community special.



Starksboro Art & Soul's T-shirt project invited people to "air their dirty laundry" by listing assets Starksboro might be losing. Photo: Orton Family Foundation

Sap buckets painted by Starksboro residents to be auctioned off in a town-wide fall celebration. Photo: Orton Family Foundation



Starksboro Art & Soul, Brookside Sign Project. Photo: Orton Family Foundation

Nine projects over nine months. And to top it all, Matthew, who said, "I needed a map to come up here, literally a road map to find out where Starksboro was," created a large picture map of the community that embodied everything he had learned. More than three year's later, elementary school teachers continue to point to the painting to introduce young students to their town.

Orton's funding for Starksboro's Art & Soul project continued through 2010; the town published its [Plan](#) in October 2011. The Orton-supported work continues to motivate the community to enhance its place. As the school keeps on gathering stories, a network of walking trails connecting neighborhoods is being expanded, designs to create a more walkable Village have been completed and, upgrades to an historic schoolhouse and the Old Meeting House are underway to create places where the community can gather.

Project monitoring and evaluation is ongoing. At its inception, Christine Dwyer, principal of [RMC Research](#) in Portsmouth, NH, worked with Orton staff, its two project partners, the Vermont Land Trust and the Vermont Arts Council and local community leaders to develop a three-phase [evaluation plan](#). The goal was to capture short-term process outcomes, mid-term results measured during the life of the project, and long-term impact in a way that would be meaningful to a wide range of stakeholders from funders and project partners to community members.

As of this writing, the short- and mid-term evaluation work is complete, but the long-term questions have yet to be fully asked or answered. This is a task for 2013. How are the values that were identified during the planning process being stewarded? Do residents continue to make decisions based on those “heart and soul” values? Do they use their Art & Soul skills and approaches—stories, art—in other situations? And finally, did the community co-create this process with the funder? Does the product fit the community? Do they really own it?

BIDDEFORD, MAINE

Art and culture played a different role in [Biddeford](#), Maine, which also launched its Heart & Soul planning project in 2008, with [Heart of Biddeford](#), the local Main Streets agency, as the city’s key partner. Following Orton’s template, the project team, dubbed [Heartworks](#), began with storytelling. And like Starksboro, Biddeford tapped the expertise and talents of its local educators. A high school English teacher had introduced her students to digital storytelling; this evolved into a partnership between local youth and Heart of Biddeford. The students videotaped grandparents, their families and other elders talking about the Biddeford of their youth: active mills, stores, a movie theater and bowling alley. At the same time, three Fellows from the [Salt Institute](#) for Documentary Studies in Portland gathered audio stories from residents at the cigar shop, boxing ring, diner, and beach. Students and adult residents alike began to see the town through different eyes. The students’ conclusion: “If we want to see it change, we have to get ourselves down there.”⁶ And so they did.



Biddeford Heart & Soul. Students create digital stories.
Photo: Orton Family Foundation

The last mill closed before the new Downtown [Master Plan](#) was

published. But for many residents, this presented an opportunity. Artists were moving into town. Students proposed a [mill museum](#) and regular tours began. A new nonprofit, [Engine](#), was founded. Its mission is “to make arts-driven programming, cultural development, and sustainable creative entrepreneurship an explicit community value and civic priority in Biddeford.”

In December 2010, as Orton’s involvement wrapped up, the [Maine Arts Commission](#) awarded a new Biddeford coalition—Engine, [University of New England](#), [City Theater](#) and Heart of Biddeford—a \$50,000 Creative Communities Economic Development grant. The goal: to expand current cultural events and plan for artist housing, exhibition space, and a downtown arts district. This grant, Betsy Rosenbluth notes, “built on the momentum that Orton had started and, in fact, it really nailed that momentum. Now [Biddeford has] really established significant change in their downtown.” The grant also begins to address one of Betsy’s and any thoughtful grantmaker’s core questions: “How do we continue to invest, if not ourselves, then through our partners to keep that momentum moving forward? Because change doesn’t happen in that short term.”

The Starksboro experiment confirmed the theory that art enhances civic engagement while Biddeford made the case for economic development based in arts and culture. In Orton’s next round of Heart & Soul planning, one community would tie both ideas together.

NORTH FORK VALLEY, COLORADO



Residents of the North Fork Valley of the Gunnison River, CO, gather for an early Heart & Soul information session. Photo: Orton Family Foundation

In 2011, Orton released a second [RFP](#), which led to partnerships with five communities in the Rockies and New England. As before, the foundation would make a two-year \$100,000 challenge grant and commit active staff support, training workshops, and project evaluation tools to each project. And again, art was central to the civic engagement proposal of one community that saw its creative economy—local crafts, galleries, artists and writers, theaters, music and film festivals—as key to a diverse and vibrant community.

The North Fork Valley of the Gunnison River in Colorado—three

interdependent towns with a combined population of about 7,000 residents and a rich arts environment—focused its Heart & Soul work on creating an economic development plan. To fully integrate the arts community into the conversation, the project partners—three Chambers of Commerce—also received an additional \$22,000 to cover artist fees, a videographer, and other added costs for [Pass the Mic](#), a youth storytelling and news program led by public radio station [KVNF](#). Fourteen young reporters would each cover a “beat” based on a sector of the North Fork Valley’s economy—health, recreation, the creative arts as well as food, organic farming and wine making, and the energy industries of mining, and oil and gas production—and share the resulting stories online at www.northforkheartsoul.com.

The first Heart & Soul principle is “[Engage everyone](#). Go directly to the people, and go early and often—do not expect them to come to you. Create relevant, compelling and continuous opportunities for participation that reach *all* parts of the community.” Based on this, other North Fork story sharing events include the annual [Paonia Film Festival](#) which screens both youth- and adult-produced “What Matters Most” videos; “Your Slice of the Pie” community conversations with, of course, freshly baked pies; and survey questions printed on coasters at the local craft brewery. Now, as the project moves into its second year, local artists are working with the collected stories highlighting shared community values to create a permanent art installation in the valley. Art and storytelling are at the core of the planning work.

The success of the [North Fork Valley Heart & Soul Project](#) will be gauged by how it strengthened social networks across the Valley, translated its community values and vision into measurable actions that impact community and economic development, and created a shared, unified, North Fork identity. Starksboro’s evaluation plan tested the theory that arts engagement works to create community connections and surface values and vision, which North Fork’s story seems likely to confirm. But North Fork’s emphasis on measurable actions and the economy will more closely mirror Biddeford’s evaluation questions. Was the valley’s economic sustainability enhanced? Are the people, businesses and organizations of the three towns better connected, more collaborative? Was the youth voice strengthened and heard? But whatever the measure, Orton is clear that the route to evaluation is best traveled through the heart and soul values of the community, the fresh eyes of youth, and the lens of art.

SHARED LEARNING

With learning and evaluation comes sharing and more learning. The Orton Family Foundation is not simply committed to increasing citizen engagement and preserving small towns. It also seeks to share its practices to develop a broader movement of values-based planning. Its website at www.orton.org is remarkably rich with pictures, stories, and videos. Orton’s work also includes [CommunityMatters](#), a conference and network of individuals, nonprofits, and foundations devoted to building strong communities.

NEXT

In January 2013, Lyman Orton announced a new executive director, David Leckey, with a singular charge: to “bring the organization’s signature Heart & Soul Community Planning program and other initiatives to wider prominence and use.”⁷

It’s impossible to say what, as of this writing, this will mean. This year, while Orton wraps up the evaluation of work it has completed with its 2008-2010 cohort, staff continue to be actively engaged in five projects in Colorado, Montana, Maine, and Vermont. But whatever the future brings, it is clear that art and artists are now thoroughly embedded in the way the Orton Family Foundation practices community planning. The foundation has learned that by changing the way community planning is usually done, by putting community residents, rather than land use and traffic planning experts, in charge, and by introducing art and artists to the mix, personal stories will flow. As more and more of these stories are shared, a collective narrative of shared values will emerge. And as community members take up a paint brush, mic, and video camera, they discover that they are also prepared to preserve core values while guiding and integrating change, assuring that the future development of their small town will reflect what makes their town matter now.



Starksboro Art & Soul event culminating the storytelling phase attended by more than 250 residents. Photo: Orton Family Foundation



Ann McQueen, principal at [McQueen Philanthropic](#), an advisory service for foundations and individuals, has nearly 20 years experience in philanthropy. Formerly, McQueen served on the board of Grantmakers in the Arts and led the Boston Foundation’s arts grantmaking, developed a fellowship program to celebrate individual artists, and led a series of seminal research projects into the fiscal health of the cultural sector. She is a member of the boards of Boston Natural Areas Network, which preserves and advocates for urban open space, and Associated Grant Makers, a forum for New England foundations and their nonprofit partners.

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For more information, visit: www.animatingdemocracy.org

End Notes

¹ Betsy Rosenbluth, spoke with the author on November 28, 2012. All quotes and observations are drawn from that conversation.

² Unlike a private foundation, which makes grants to other nonprofits to carry out their charitable activities, a “private operating foundation” conducts those charitable activities itself. While the operating foundation is something of a hybrid between a private foundation and public charity, it holds the same IRS 501(c)(3) designation.

³ The audio and video files are archived at the Town Offices, the Town Library and the Historical Society (<http://www.home.starksboroartsoul.org/resources>).

⁴ The mission of the Vermont Arts Exchange, founded in 1994, is “to strengthen communities and neighborhoods through the arts and to bring art, art education and performance opportunities to people of all ages, abilities and income.”

⁵ Matthew Perry, from the “Art & Soul” documentary filmed by Mary Arbuckle at www.orton.org. All other quotes from Perry are drawn from this film.

⁶ “[Saving Downtown](#): Biddeford High School Students Tell It Like It Is,” spring 2010.

⁷ “Orton Family Foundation Names New Leader: *Leckey brings fresh energy, perspectives to Foundation programs poised for growth*,” January 17, 2013.