

Maureen and Mike

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**Interviewee: Tom Benson**

**Interviewer: Michael Larmann**

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Michael Larmann: Okay, and I believe we are recording. Hello. My name is Michael Larmann. I am a graduate student at the University of Montana in the History Department. Today I am interviewing Tom Bensen, the executive director of Arts Missoula. Today is Monday, July 20th just past 3PM. Mr. Bensen, could you please introduce yourself?

Tom Bensen: Yes, I'm Tom Bensen. I am speaking to you from my home in Missoula, Montana. You're correct. I am an executive director of Arts Missoula.

ML: Excellent. Also, just to state for the record, I'm in my apartment in Missoula, Montana, so...

TB: Yes, I hope you're in the same area.

ML: Yes, computer interviews. We can be anywhere. Okay. Excellent. To start off, could you briefly explain what Arts Missoula is and how it is connected to the art and cultural scene here in Missoula?

TB: Sure. Arts Missoula is a local arts agency as defined by... I think it's defined that way by Americans for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts. We're the designated local arts agency for the City and County of Missoula, have been that since 1991. We are a nonprofit organization. We are not part of the city or county. We do get funding, governmental funding from the city, but we are an independent nonprofit.

And how we connected the arts and cultural scene, so our mission is to connect art, culture and community through education advocacy and celebration. So, you know, the key word there is connect. We're connectors throughout the community. We speak for, we advocate for the arts. We try to educate people, legislators, as well as citizens about the value of public investment in the arts and we work with a lot of downtown agencies such as the Downtown Association [Downtown Missoula Association] and Destination Missoula, the Convention and Visitors Bureau, we also work with the city, but our whole job is to promote arts and culture for the benefit of the Missoula community.

ML: Excellent. I guess off the bat we'll move things a little bit out of order. Just because you brought up Art Missoula's mission statement. And I'm going to paraphrase it here, which, as you said, is 'Connecting art, culture and community through education advocacy and celebration.' How do you think the recent pandemic, well, has the recent pandemic affected Arts Missoula's ability to fulfill its mission statement? Has it been harder? Is it still the same? Has there been any impact?

TB: We have not been impacted as yet as hard as some other places, but that may well come to pass. We have been impacted, no doubt about it, but we do not rely on a steady stream of income based on classes or concert performances or sales of our events, something like that. We get most of our funding is either governmental or it's in the form of grants, either from the government or from private foundations. And so, that we haven't been as affected by that, as others so... but that isn't to say we haven't been affected. We've definitely been affected. A lot of our programs that, in particular our education programs, which is really what we're focused on now, more than anything else. We're very much affected when artists could no longer go into classrooms, because nobody was going into classrooms and we're still unclear about what's going to happen in fall, but on the other hand, because there's also the internet with Zoom and everything, else online learning, we've trained we transitioned a lot of our in-person programs to online programs. So, while it has been challenging, the staff is working remotely and has been essentially since March and for the foreseeable future it seems like, but we're still able to fulfill our mission as best we can.

ML: Excellent. How have you found the transition from like in-person communication to like online with your team? Have you found that troublesome to any extent?

TB: With the staff?

ML: Yes.

TB: It's been actually very smooth. We meet regularly. We meet at least three times a week as a staff, just to kind of check in on how things are going and one of our meetings is a dedicated social hour where we're not going to talk about work, we're going to check in with each other and talk about what we're all doing or maybe have a beverage if that's appropriate, but the staff has been able to do its work remotely and to check in and... very communicative anyway so that has been very smooth.

ML: Excellent. How about yourself with the pandemic, has it in any way altered or changed like your daily routine, your work routine or what you do when you get home?

TB: Not really. As it turns out, the staff has been working remotely since day one. I was actually going into work because most of most of what I do is on a hard drive, you know, desktop computer, as opposed to a laptop so I was the only one in the building so we've been able to work remotely. Right now, actually, we're using this time to renovate the office and paint walls and get new furniture and all the rest of it so I'm actually doing a little more work at home now than I was before. It hasn't really affected me that way because I go in, basically go into work, you know, nine to five or eight to five every day. It hasn't really affected me. What's affected is I don't see people. I don't interact with people face to face. It's all interacting through Zoom or the phone or something like that.

ML: Excellent. Well, I'm glad you're staying busy then. Okay. Let's move on to this question. When was the first time that you remembered hearing about COVID-19 and when was the first time you felt that impacted you personally or perhaps working at Arts Missoula?

TB: I remember hearing about it bleakly in late January, early February, but it was something that was happening in China, you know, I mean, it wasn't really affecting us. There was the theory that it could affect us and there certainly had been viruses in most recent history that had been devastating in various places, but they never came to America, whether it was like Ebola or SARS, or the bird flu. And so, this was another one of those that I heard about in, as I said, late January, early February. By mid-February I was actually out of town. I went to visit family and in mid-February and it was during that visit I heard a lot more about it and I heard a lot about how that might affect the United States and fairly soon I realized that, you know, when we returned to Missoula, I realized that that trip was well timed that way. That a few more weeks in another direction and I would have been, you know, stuck in Massachusetts. So that was the first time I heard about it.

When did I notice that it really affected us? Personally, was probably when it affected, you know, a large chunk of America, and that would have been in mid to late March I think when it was blowing up in the Seattle region, and Seattle's not too far so... and then it was probably in late March that we canceled... we had an event in early April, our awards lunch. Everything was suddenly being cancelled and I'm thinking that was late March or so, but I'm not exactly sure.

ML: That's actually a great segue into the next question because Arts Missoula supports or hosting many events, especially throughout the spring and summer and because of the pandemic many of these events had to be cancelled or postponed. So, as you said, the 2020 Missoula Arts and Culture Awards this year were represented online rather than in person. Other events such as Germanfest, the International Community Speaker Series, and the World View Film Series, other events that Arts Missoula hosts and supports have been cancelled or postponed...

TB: Right.

ML: So, what was it like for these events to be canceled? Was it a difficult decision to make? Did Arts Missoula have to go through a process to...

TB: It was a process with all of them and each one of those is it's not my decision. It's a group or a joint decision with either one other person or several people, but it was in... well, I'm trying to think back now. I think the whole pandemic started to affect us all personally like in the middle of spring break when people left for spring break, and then they realized they weren't coming back to school. So, whenever that was that was about mid-March when that happened, and at that point we weren't going to go into school. We weren't going to go into classrooms. It looked like this was going to be something that was going to be settling in for a while, not just a two-or-three-week break.

Our work with both the international speaker series and the Worldview Film Series is a partnership with the Roxy Theater so if the Roxy Theater was going to be closed then certainly the decision was made for us, but it seemed like a logical decision on that one and that came fairly quickly. The Awards Lunch, you know, came fairly quickly.

Germanfest, we had to talk about it a bit because that's in September so we had some time to see what say other organizations, particularly like the Downtown Association. How are they going to be responding to their Caras Park events throughout the summer? How are they going to handle that? And then, you know, a few weeks ago, we met for the, you know, third or fourth time as a subcommittee for Germanfest and we realized that the pandemic... not only was it not going away, we didn't have a viable alternative. Germanfest is something that recognizes our sister city partnership Neckargemünd, Germany and basically what we do is we sort of recreate a version of the German beer hall under Caras Park and, you know, shoehorn as many people as possible into a into a small space and everybody's singing and dancing and eating and drinking and, you know, none of those things are advisable right now for obvious reasons. So, and then you really can't sort of do an alternative to that and call it Germanfest. I mean, there's really not a viable alternative to what that is supposed to be, big community gathering where everybody's together and having a great time, so we decided it's best to put that off and come back with it when we can. So that didn't take too much so... you didn't mention anything other than those four things, right?

ML: No, I think that...

TB: Speaker Series, Worldview. Yeah. Germanfest and Arts and Cultural Lunch.

ML: And as you were just talking, you know, Germanfest wasn't planned to begin until later this September and Arts Missoula still has or had other events on the calendar. And please correct me if I'm wrong. I know like for the First Night Missoula is like in the winter. There's the Montana International Children's Film Festival. I believe the Montana Book Festival is online.

TB: Right.

ML: And then talking about the sister cities, there's also New Zealand Day. So, with events already being postponed or cancelled, how are you looking forward to other potential events in the future?

TB: Yeah, I mean, right now the Children's Film Festival Kiddomatic is again at the Roxy Theater. We're actually having a meeting with members of the Roxy fairly soon. The Roxy, you know, they were able to pivot pretty quickly. They had all of this happened during the beginning. Their International Wildlife Film Festival was one of the first things to really be hit hard, they went to a virtual online festival and it was very successful so we're thinking of working with them to use a similar model for the Kiddomatic. We'll be in meetings with the Roxy theater on that starting

this week actually. First Night is on New Year's Eve and it's looking highly unlikely that we will have any sort of large group gatherings either indoors or outdoors and if we can do some kind of virtual acknowledgement on First Night or have some kind of a recognition and celebratory thing that doesn't involve large crowds of people all gathering together, we'll do that. So, we're still in discussion about what First Night is going to look like, if it's going to happen, and what it might look like and we're in discussion about Kiddomatic. New Zealand day has always been... it's kind of bounced around. It's with our other sister city which is Palmerston North, New Zealand, and for many years it revolved around a touch rugby clinic with the rugby community here in Missoula, but you know they're not they're not getting together to play rugby for the obvious reasons of the pandemic so the idea of a clinic is gonna, you know, isn't going to happen. So, I don't suppose that New Zealand Day, which is a relatively small event anyway, I don't see that happening this year. So, they're all impacted. Events are all impacted and if you can't find a way of taking what you do and putting it online right now as a virtual component it's kind of hard to figure out what to do, if anything, so that's kind of where we're at with that. I'm thinking, was there another event?

ML: No, I think that was all of them. We've been talking about, as you said, if you can't move it to an online digital format, It's kind of in trouble. Do you perhaps think that people moving to online, whether that be for events or communication, do you see this anyway is a good thing, or is it just like a fallback or... [inaudible].

TB: It's a good thing that online and like Zoom video conferencing like we're doing right now is available. If the pandemic had come 10 or 15 years ago, who knows what, you know, who knows how people would have communicated. So, I think that's really good. I also think it's been a traumatic change societally to suddenly not see anybody in person and only be interacting on a computer screen and I think there's a bit of fatigue about that. It's nothing like you know nothing like being live really so it's nice to have certainly, but it's not like the real thing and it's... things have changed now and society has changed now and who knows if it'll change back to February of this year, what we were used to.

ML: Let's hope for the best.

TB: Yeah. Right.

ML: Excellent. You were just talking a bit about our sister city program here in Missoula and thank you for pronouncing them because I had no clue how to pronounce either one and I'm probably going to butcher it, but yes, Missoula has two sister cities. One is, oh here we go, Neckargemünd is that...?

TB: Neckargemünd. Yeah, that was good.

ML: So, Neckargemünd, Germany and Palmerston North, New Zealand.

TB: Palmerston, Palmerston. It's like, named after the... Palmerston was a British Prime Minister or something, Lord Palmerston, and there's actually two cities in New Zealand called Palmerston and this one's on the North Island so that's why they distinguish it by calling it Palmerston North. You know, in America, we would call it North Palmerston, but calling it Palmerston North sort of throw some people off. Like what's, what's the North doing in the back end of that?

ML: I was about to say. I thought I may mistyped the question. Excellent. But like, as we were already saying before, Missoula hosts events such as Germanfest or New Zealand Day to build these connections. I've also been listening to the international podcasts that Arts Missoula has. It emphasizes the communication between the sister cities. I'm very curious if the pandemic has changed this relationship in any way, just like what you guys are talking about, topic wise because this is a global phenomenon.

TB: It is. Well, those podcasts that Udo Fluck has started actually began before this pandemic.<sup>1</sup> It was just an idea he had once a month. Let's have a podcast and he is the director of our global and cultural affairs and sort of the international wing of what we do, which includes the sister city partnerships. And so, as I said, he began a few months before the pandemic hit and I think he's been, you know, we have a lot of information around the sister city so he's focusing on that right now.

How has it changed the sister city partnership? Well, the sister city partnerships is, first of all, the sister city idea has been around officially in America since the 1950s. President Eisenhower began this program as a way of promoting cultural diplomacy as a way of promoting peace. In fact, that is their mission. Their mission is to promote peace and mutual understanding one citizen at a time. And in Missoula our sister cities evolved out of a faculty exchange from at the University of Montana and a university that was attached to one of these two cities. The University of Heidelberg is... well Neckargemünd is a suburb of Heidelberg a bedroom community of Heidelberg and that's where the University of Heidelberg is and there was a faculty exchange between those two that then grew into more of a cultural exchange. Choirs went back and forth. Students for both the university and the high school level, there were student exchanges and so it bled into the into the community beyond the University.

And Palmerston North is the home of Massey University and so that was again a faculty exchange between that and not as much student exchange, but a lot of cultural exchange between the two cities, over the years, there's obviously in New Zealand, there's the Maori are significant participants in their society and their government and being indigenous there's a real affinity between the Maori population and the Native American population here in Montana so there's a connection there. There's, as I mentioned, the connection of rugby, which is the national sport of New Zealand and it's a very popular sport here in Missoula.

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<sup>1</sup> The podcast being referred to is *International Voices with Udo Fluck* which is available on the Arts Missoula website. Accessed July 26, 2020.

So, a major part of the sister city program has always been cultural exchange. Well, cultural exchange is very limited now is not a whole lot of travel going back and forth. None as a matter of fact, so that has affected. On the other hand, we can we can do Zoom conferencing with them and we have had a Zoom conference between the two mayors of Palmerston North and Mayor Engen [Mayor John Engen of Missoula] here in Missoula.

Udo's, I think his most recent podcast, he is chatting with his counterpart in Palmerston North, Toni Grace, about what their response has been to the pandemic.

So, in obviously in some ways we're kind of we're all hunkering down and not focusing on students on any kind of exchange or exchange of ideas, but on the other hand, there is the internet, there is the Zoom conferencing. We can still manage to keep in touch and learn from each other. That's really a big part of what the sister city partnership is that people in each city can learn from each other, government officials can learn to see what other, you know, Missoula as city councillors can learn from Palmerston North how they're dealing with such issues as, you know, affordable housing and that sort of thing. And we can learn from each other in terms of working with our indigenous community so that continues and that can continue. It's just like everything else. It's not continuing face to face.

ML: Excellent. Well, I'm sure all the sister cities will have much more to talk about once things begin to settle down. I want to move on next to the live arts here in Missoula. There is that one report by Americans for the Arts that you recommended to me. In 2015 they created a report and came to the conclusion that the city of Missoula generates approximately 54 million dollars annually from the nonprofit arts and cultural sector and obviously with performances being cancelled left and right, how have you seen COVID-19 affecting the arts and cultural scene here in Missoula?

TB: Well, absolutely it is affected, yes and that report came out in 2015 and Americans for the Arts does this really... I'm searching for the word I can't find it, but it's a significant and it takes a year and a lot of hard work to put together a report. They do it every five years and actually, I think there were supposed to start it in January of 2021. I think that would be the next five-year cycle. I think they're going to delay it a year just because of the pandemic. So, but it's a once every five years study so and we're in the year four so it's dated at this point, frankly, and the 54 million dollars is what it was when it came out and when you compare that to other cities of Missoula's size, that is very significant. The arts, the nonprofit arts community is a very significant part of our local economy. Compared to cities our size and that same report, Missoula is about three and a half times larger than the average city our size in terms of economic output in nonprofit arts and culture.

That has significantly changed with a pandemic. It's not 54 million dollars this year by any means. And certainly, it has affected nonprofit arts in a huge way and specifically the performing arts. We're really not sure what the Missoula Symphony is going to look like this next year, you know, and we're not going to have anytime soon performances, you know, filling a hall of a thousand people with a couple of hundred musicians on stage. That's, that's not



going to happen and the same can be said for, you know, Missoula Community Theater, Montana Rep [Montana Repertory Theatre]. It's going to be hard to do theater performances. And even in the for-profit world, you know, Logjam Productions which manages the Wilma Theater and the Top Hat and KettleHouse and the Osprey Stadium, with all these live events, they haven't had any live event since March and they're not having them anytime soon so it's devastating. It's really devastating for the performing arts. And for the visual arts, it is devastating also not maybe to the absolute degree, but it is still quite devastating and I think a lot of these organizations have responded as best they could, and they've done very well under the circumstances.

I think of the ZACC, the Zootown Arts Community Center, is doing a lot of programming. They had their successful fundraiser early on in the pandemic and it was online. They've been running summer camps. This summer, they've teamed up with United Way to have a fund for artists. The Clay Studio has been having their classes. The art galleries are open in a minor way, but they're also telling me a lot of these galleries and telling me that they're getting a lot of online work and orders and so they're reaching out to a broader community. Not just Missoula, but people from anywhere else in the world.

So, it has been devastating. I think the arts community is responding as best it can at this point. I think we're not I have, I do not know of any arts organization or anyone in the arts, who is not first and foremost concerned about public safety. Public safety is more important than opening the doors to get cash flow and in fact, you know, if you want to talk about what's best for the economy, what's best for the economy is our health. They're not mutually exclusive. So, as I said, it's been economically devastating for the arts community but they understand what they need to do and they're doing as best they can.

ML: I completely agree. As long as you have your health, you have something.

TB: Right. I think there hasn't been on a national level... there's been this disconnect between public health and the economy and who says that has to be disconnected? I mean, it seems fairly obvious that they're connected, strongly connected. Yeah.

ML: Excellent. Let's see. This is what happens when you do questions out of order.

TB: Yeah, that's right.

ML: No, no, this is all my doing, I have to realize what's the next best place to go. Let's do... I think it would be question number 10 on your sheet because I remember reading through a few newspaper articles and there was one from the *Missoulian*, and I really love this quote that you gave. You said "while the arts may not be considered an essential service in this time of crisis, they are indeed essential to our humanity and our connection with others."<sup>2</sup> I was just wondering if you could perhaps expand a little bit about this.

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Bensen, "The Arts are Essential" *The Missoulian* (Missoula, MT) Apr. 12, 2020. Accessed July 26, 2020.

TB: Well, yeah, that was an editorial I wrote in April, fairly early on when things were shutting down and I did, you know, I talked about how important the arts are to Missoula's economy, and I mentioned some of the economic statistics that we just discussed, but I also, I said that if you look just beyond the numbers, the arts are crucial to our daily lives because they spark innovation and creativity. They unify our communities and they tell stories that nourish our spirit during times good and bad. Contributing to our personal and collective wellbeing. It's sort of like the arts feed the soul. It's one of those things that people have said you know people who are opposed to public support of the arts can often say, 'you know, the arts... they may look nice and maybe make you feel good but they don't they don't actually feed families' and I can show that well actually look at the economic numbers and they do feed a lot of families, but more to the point, they feed the soul. So, what you were mentioning about the arts not being considered an essential service, but they are essential it's that connectivity. It's that unifying of communities, the sparking creativity, and innovation. And you can see that through the pandemic in the way the artists and organizations have used their creativity to try to figure out how to get through this. How to do an online Zoom auction or something like that or how to do online, you know, sort of Facebook concerts and things like that and Missoula is not alone. That's happening all over the country. So, I guess, to answer your question, you know, they're essential because of connectivity with other human beings. You know, it's part of our humanity and it's an inspiration and uniting people together.

ML: Excellent. Do you think perhaps this pandemic will change the way that people look at the performance arts or visual arts and just the way the appreciate it being so long without it?

TB: Yeah, I think they miss it terribly. You know, I don't know what the future holds, in terms of specifics. You know, it's hard to say whether three years from now, we'll be packing into the Wilma Theater or the Dennison [Theatre] to see a performance like we have in the past or whether there will be some sort of variable in there that hadn't been seen before, but I think that there's a real need. We are social animals, and there's a real need and arts in many ways fulfill that and there's a real need and I think people long for that. I think I'm not exactly sure what that's gonna look like in the future.

ML: Yeah. One of the reasons I asked this, I'm not sure if I told you this last time, one of the groups I interviewed previously was the band called Letter B.

TB: Oh yeah.

ML: During my interview with them a big theme they said was, 'wow, I just never appreciated like the little shows and all the things we did' and now they were so excited to hopefully get back to work in the near future.

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[https://missoulia.com/opinion/columnists/the-arts-are-essential/article\\_08043f35-ff99-5e24-8c68-7a370973d272.html](https://missoulia.com/opinion/columnists/the-arts-are-essential/article_08043f35-ff99-5e24-8c68-7a370973d272.html)

TB: Oh, if you're a performing artist, you know, and you know your bread and butter was, you know, loading your gear into your car and driving to the next town and performing a... and it might be like a brew pub and, you know, and people weren't listening, you know, and you got paid a little bit at the end of the night and you get to, maybe, you know, have a free beer and some food and then you hop in the car and go to the next one. You know, that might be kind of a fatiguing thing in the moment, but right now, just like Letter B said, boy, did we miss that, you know. The interaction that this is what we do with our life. Yeah.

ML: Excellent. And obviously, as you said, nothing's set in stone, because who knows where we'll be months or years from now.

Do you see potentially what the art scene will have in the near future, or is it just all in the air right now?

TB: I think it's all in the year. I mean I think that the arts are also resilient. I think that will come through this and Missoula has been a town that thrives on the arts and I think it will continue, but who knows what it will look like. There may be some players who were pillars of the arts community who may not be around on the other side of this they, you know, they may not have been able to economically make it. On the other hand, I think generally the arts will survive because it's an expression of our humanity, but I think things will change.

It's interesting, ironically, while we're while we're talking, just in the past couple of days I subscribed to *The New Yorker* and the *New Yorker* has an interesting article this week about pandemics and how they actually are catalysts for creativity and change and they're focusing on a lot of things, but they are spending a lot of time talking about the bubonic plague and the Black Death which occurred right as you know, the next, you know, if you look at your history textbooks, the next big thing after the Black Death was the Renaissance. Oh, you know, a new way of looking at the world and life and in our place on this planet and all that kind of thing. And, you know, the bubonic plague and Black Death had a big impact on the way people thought of their place in the world and that sort of, I think what the theory is that had a big effect on what we call the Renaissance. And so, that might be happening right now. You know, when we finally get out of this pandemic there might be a totally new way of looking at life and in so many ways and art being one of them that that can point directly back to this pandemic, so there's positives that come out of that in terms of creativity and innovation and a new way of looking at the world.

ML: That's actually great. That actually ties in very well with another question, because as the old saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention and I think you mentioned this briefly, a few artists are like some museums are doing online auctions. Some bands of doing these like Facebook online concerts. Have you noticed how certain like institutions or artists are trying to like still work through and adjust to the pandemic?

TB: I think they are. There's a lot that are still adjusting and you know that the online thing works fine. It's a lot more challenging and I mentioned the symphony it's a lot more challenging

with a symphony orchestra, what, you know, which has, you know, a hundred instruments and then if you throw a choir in there, you know, there's another hundred voices. You know, how's that gonna work? What's, the future of choral singing of people getting together and, you know, singing that way? So, a lot of people are still working through this. You know, others have learned to adjust through use of the internet as much as anything else. And, you know, for instance, or some of these organizations are conducting summer camps, but they're doing so following all the health guidelines. They're different kinds of summer camps. Everybody's wearing masks, smaller numbers of people, that kind of thing. So, some groups are working through it. Others are having a more challenging time, but that's based on the genre itself I think as much as anything.

ML: Now, that's great because I remember when I was just doing a little background research on SPARK! [s], which is one of the programs of Arts Missoula... well, first, I'll just state that SPARK! [s] is an Arts Missoula program that connects the Missoula Public County School system with local artists. One of the big things that SPARK! [s] stress was like getting students involved with art like in person like you don't have to live behind a screen and now we're forced in a situation where we're trying to express art through a screen.

TB: Right.

[inaudible]

ML: No. Please go ahead.

TB: Yeah, the spark program is... there's a lot of that's going to be very challenging and we don't know. That's a Kennedy Center initiative. They have about 25 or so cities around the country that are part of this Kennedy Center initiative for equity and access in arts education at the elementary school level and Missoula's program its collective impact and involves a partnership of nonprofit arts organizations, Missoula County Public Schools, the University of Montana, the City of Missoula, and a lot of arts organizations and artists and one of its actually sort of three major parts of SPARK!

One is called arts integration, which it's just that it's using artists in the classroom to assist with basic subjects like math, science, English. A lot of students, even smart students are, you know, they don't necessarily get a lot of those concepts the traditional way, but they might get them through art and it makes learning a little more fun and it kind of opens doors for people and it's been very successful. That involves artists going into the classroom and working with regular teachers. Well, we haven't been able to do that. We've had to sort of work with the teachers to develop online resources where the teaching artists are actually teaching classes in an online format and then the students can connect with that and the teachers can connect with that.

Another part of the SPARK! is what's called arts enhancement, which is getting the students to actually experience art. So, that means you know the fifth graders go to the art museum every

year. The fourth graders go to the symphony every year. One grade will go to the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival and those are hard to do. What we do every fall is we take every second grader at Missoula County Public Schools and we bus them to the Missoula Children's Theater where they have a play that is specific to that age group and they not only act the play, but they then discuss it with the kids and they break it down, but we can't, you know, we're not... at this point, if it would happen tomorrow, we wouldn't be able to put every second grader on a bus and send them all over to MCT [Missoula Community Theater] and pack them MCT with the with students to watch a play. It is just not going to happen. So, I don't know if the arts enhancement program will continue in the fall. We may have to take a year off of that.

So, there are challenges with the SPARK! program, but this spring we put together over 40 videos that are available on the SPARK! website that are resources for teachers and students, immediately put them together. We also are right now we're in the final stages of putting together art kits that we're actually going to deliver to low income students with the lunch program that they've been doing ever since the Food Bank and the bus service has been able to deliver lunches to students and they're going to be delivering art kits. So, we're figuring out ways in which to engage students in art, but it is very challenging.

ML: Okay. Great. Where to next? We only have a handful, a few more questions so we're, almost... do you need to take a break or anything?

TB: No, I'm fine.

ML: Okay, we'll power through them. We're right on track. I guess we'll hit this one and this I guess we'll just stem from what you've seen, or what you've experienced yourself. Because as you know, in addition to the global pandemic, there's a lot of other things that have been going around in the world, and especially within this country. And one such development is the Black Lives Matter movement and I'm curious if you have seen any influence of that movement in the art scene here in Missoula.

TB: Yes, I have. First of all, I think that most every arts organization that I know of has some sort of response to it, either a poster that says Black Lives Matter, they have something on their website that supports the idea and the movement. There are some specific things. I know that the Montana Repertory Theater at the University of Montana is... they've made a pledge to focus on writers of color for their next season which may be a virtual season, but they're actively seeking out playwrights of color as a way of showing their solidarity with it. You know, another arm of Arts Missoula is the global and cultural affairs program which teaches intercultural literacy and intercultural competency and classes and as a result of that we've been involved in meetings with members of the BIPOC community [Black, Indigenous, People of Color]. Empower Montana is leading some meetings and we've been a part of that. So, I've definitely seen the arts world respond to the Black Lives Matter movement and the idea of social justice. And a lot of them were kind of moving in that direction, anyway.

ML: Great. I'm glad to hear that something great is coming out of it so that's awesome. Okay. And I know from what you told me because Arts Missoula is an art agency. I know it works very closely with the city government here. Is there anything from Arts Missoula, or perhaps you yourself, some opinions on how municipal leaders have handled the pandemic here in Missoula?

TB: Oh, I think they've been great. I think they've handled it well. I think the response of the mayor and the county commissioners when they came out with their county-wide mask mandate last week was, well they didn't come out with it. They asked the health department to look into it and the health department came out with it and I think there's very strong leadership there and I've seen that also at the state level. I think Governor Bullock has shown great leadership as well with it, same thing. Their overall concern is with the health of the community and that shows and that's similar to the overall concern of the arts community is the health of the overall community. So, I think I am very impressed with the local government response so...

ML: It's been a bit more prompt than a few other regions.

TB: No kidding.

ML: Excellent, and I know as well Arts Missoula works alongside the city. I know you yourself are involved and have connections with the Downtown Missoula Partnership so maybe not from them specifically, but what does Arts Missoula, or perhaps in a larger sense the art and cultural scene in Missoula, like, how can the community, help them? What do they need to? They need support to they need resources, like, how can we...

[Inaudible]

ML: I'm sorry please go ahead.

TB: Yeah, that's a good question. I think they all need support. We all need support. I think there's also probably a need, you know, there's also people want to help, they can call up an organization, say, how can I volunteer and even if they may not have, organization may not have anything for right now, just to know that there are people out there that support either the arts generally or that specific art form or organization is good to know. I think people can continue to support by being involved in any way they can and a lot of that right now is being online or some places are actually opening up for like live music. There are some places that are opening up right now for live music and socially distant arenas. If it's like outside, we can do that right now.

ML: Excellent. Is there anything that Arts Missoula perhaps requires or would find helpful?

TB: You know, I can't think of anything specific.

ML: Especially with all this uncertainty as we were talking about...

TB: You know, I think what we all need is patience and understanding of each other more than anything else.

ML: Patience, understanding, and health.

TB: I said more than anything else of it. I think, yeah, patience and understanding.

ML: Excellent. Okay, then. I think then that brings me to an end of my main list of questions. So, I guess to finish off. I would just ask you if you had any thoughts for perhaps someone listening to this in the future, wanting to know about this odd and interesting time that we live in. Is there anything you think that they should know?

TB: Well, you're a historian and as I mentioned before, you know, I studied history too. It's very easy to look back, you know, to read history and look back on an era and sort of think 'Boy, they didn't know anything, they really blew that' or something like that, but this is a prime example of when you're in the midst of a have a historically, you know, epic event, you really don't know a lot of stuff. I mean, some stuff maybe seem very clear and years from now, it was born out, but there's a lot of moving target stuff going on right now and it's... When you're in the midst of a turmoil situation, in a large way you're operating from ignorance because you don't know how things are going to turn out and once they've turned out and years later it seems obvious, but it doesn't seem obvious at the time.

ML: Excellent. In that case I guess I will end it on a strong note.

TB: Yeah, okay.

[End of Interview]