



Empowering the Arts, Empowering Our Community

Guest Correspondence

SRQ DAILY SATURDAY PERSPECTIVES EDITION

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BY PHILLIP LANHAM



Pictured: Students visit the annual Embracing Our Differences exhibition at Bayfront Park. Photo courtesy of Embracing Our Differences

Since our founding in 1995, Gulf Coast Community Foundation has elevated arts and culture as a cornerstone of our community. Creativity is not only a reflection of who we are, but also a springboard for ideas that continue to shape where we are headed. Three decades later, that truth has only deepened. We continue to look to our artists and cultural stewards to guide us, to challenge us, and to remind us of our shared humanity.

The dynamic power of art inspires us all. What strikes me most is how it elicits different reactions in each of us while also creating a shared experience that connects individuals from all backgrounds. At a performance or in a gallery, you can feel it in the room: the sudden gasp; the quiet reflection; the ripple of laughter; even the tears. Art invites us to pause, to feel, and to see the world through someone else's eyes.

Driven by our belief in the transformative power of art, Gulf Coast's annual Empowering Arts Grant Program provides cornerstone arts organizations with unrestricted funding to fuel their missions. This year, with the vision of our Board of Directors and the generosity of our donors, we are investing \$785,000 across 13 organizations for the 2025–2026 season. These include some of our region's most celebrated cultural icons – from Asolo Repertory Theatre, The Circus Arts Conservatory, and Embracing Our Differences, to the Sarasota Orchestra, Sarasota Ballet, and Sarasota Opera. In addition, we are proud to support these transformative institutions: Venice Symphony, Venice Theatre, Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, Hermitage Artist Retreat, the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Florida Studio Theatre, and Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe.

We are excited to see how these organizations will spark new ideas and inspire our community this year. Venice Symphony is introducing two new concert series at the Venice Community Center, including a Chamber Music Series and a Big Band Series. Asolo Repertory Theatre will move audiences with its spring production of *Fiddler on the Roof*, while Embracing Our Differences continues to engage attendees with powerful exhibitions that celebrate empathy and belonging. These are just a few examples of the exciting programming taking place across our arts and cultural community, promising a season filled with performances, exhibitions, and experiences that will challenge, engage, and move us.

And let's be clear: supporting the arts is about more than inspiration. Every dollar invested in the arts is a catalyst for our regional economy. It drives tourism, strengthens local businesses, creates jobs, and helps our neighborhoods thrive. When we lift up creativity, we lift up our entire community.

At Gulf Coast, we are proud to invest in this creative ecosystem year after year. I look forward to seeing you out in the community this season, celebrating the arts that define us and propel us forward.

Phillip P. Lanham is President and CEO of Gulf Coast Community Foundation