

A man's crusade to bring art to Indy's west side

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(Photo: Photo provided by Bryan Fonseca)

Bryan Fonseca, founder of [Phoenix Theatre](http://phoenixtheatre.org/) (<http://phoenixtheatre.org/>), is taking on a new project to bring the arts to Indianapolis' west side.

A new initiative by the Arts Council of Indianapolis and Lilly Endowment, the [Transformational Impact Fellowship](https://indyarts.org/funding/individuals/transformational-impact-fellowship) (<https://indyarts.org/funding/individuals/transformational-impact-fellowship>) was awarded to two Indianapolis artists for 2016-17. The [fellowship](https://vimeo.com/143649243) (<https://vimeo.com/143649243>) was created with the intent to put artists at the center of community development projects. Each fellow received \$100,000 for the two-year span and will use his skills in the arts to create change in the city.

People often don't typically look to art when considering how to solve a problem in the community, Arts Council's Shannon Linker said. But many of the issues society and Indianapolis face [can be addressed](http://vimeo.com/143649243) (<http://vimeo.com/143649243>) by artists.

Fellow [Greg Hull](http://www.greghull.com/Default.htm) (<http://www.greghull.com/Default.htm>), for instance, is working on giving Lou Gehrig's disease and Parkinson's disease patients a way to create art despite their limited mobility. He plans to turn information taken from their brain-monitoring machines into artistic images.

Fonseca, meanwhile, is working on gathering and telling the stories of the African-American, Latino and Caucasian populations in [Near West Indianapolis](http://nearwestindy.com/) (<http://nearwestindy.com/>) neighborhoods. His inaugural event, Flow Fest, was a community fair featuring food, yoga, art displays and musical and theater performances held on July 9.

Arts Council President and CEO Dave Lawrence said he was impressed with Fonseca's desire to grow an arts culture in an area that lacks one.

"Bryan's proposal stood out because of the communities in which he endeavored to work," Lawrence said. "We share a desire to see the arts find an important and lasting place on the near west side, and Bryan's work can be a catalyst to make that happen."

Fonseca hopes his projects will help to create a permanent art scene in the Near West Indianapolis neighborhoods and to help all three cultures understand and learn from one another.

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Fonseca discusses the fellowship, mobile theater and what sparked his passion for the west side.

Question: What pushed you to apply for the Transformational Impact Fellowship?

Answer: Actually just a very strong desire to make a difference in a community that's just incredibly under served as far as the arts go. We did a lot of research. We identified this community that's four neighborhoods, and there's not a single arts organization or discipline that is housed in this community: Haughville, Hawthorne, Stringtown and We Care. There was nothing there, and we just strongly believe in how arts make strong communities, everything from quality of life to economic impact and development. Our expressed purpose is to represent three distinct cultures that make up the community: an African-American culture, a Latino culture and a Caucasian culture. So we gathered stories from each of those cultures and have a 30-minute presentation with a study guide.

Editor's note: The presentations will be performed back to the people in these neighborhoods so that they can see and celebrate the similarities between their cultures.

[Using theater to aid sobriety](http://www.indystar.com/videos/life/2016/06/02/85290498/?in=)

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Q:



A: Part of my team lives in the Near West Side. During a series of meetings, people became involved (and made) the case for coming to the west side.

Q: What was the application process like?

A: We attended a series of workshops as the Arts Council was explaining this new program. We did a lot of research. It was a series of meetings here with my team at the Phoenix and in the community of trying to craft the idea for the project. I was inspired by my experience in college in having a traveling theater company come to Gary, Ind., which I was very grateful for. They were doing what we call agitprop (political) theater. It was Teatro Campesino, and they were doing theater that drew focus to social and political issues. I'm a product of the late '60s, early '70s, and that idea really kept with me — how theater can make that kind of change in people's lives because it has tremendous impact in mind — and it set me on my life's course. So I thought I would try to recreate some of that and update it somewhat and use this as a project that could really benefit the Near West Side.

Q: What does a typical day for you look like since taking on this project?

A: It is so crazy busy that you wouldn't believe it. But I have a great co-producer named Courtney Shelburne. I couldn't do it without her. The details are incredible. The challenge that we did not anticipate was the actual analysis of the impact — how did we set metrics and how will we know at the end of two years if we've achieved this goal. We're working with IUPUI and other organizations that are helping us set up evaluation processes. I usually approach it like: "Oh, I can create this artistic product. I can go into communities. I can go in and work with people." I know how to do that as an artist, but we've really learned that we needed to invest a lot more in the administration of it. The fun part for me is talking with the people in the community. We've gathered folk stories for the first leg of the journey and crafted them into a show. We're taking them out into the community. The next process is to take some stories that we're still gathering from the community, perform them in the community but (also) teach interested people how to put together shows and perform them themselves.

Q: Any future events that you have planned?

A: We have performances scheduled at libraries, at churches. We'll go out into street corners. The neighborhood is putting on a festival that we're participating in. We're going to be putting on a performance in conjunction with the [Great Places 2020 project](http://greatplaces2020.org/) (<http://greatplaces2020.org/>). They're going to have a West Michigan Street festival, and we'll be putting on a couple of performances during that festival, as well.

[Why isn't Indianapolis theater more diverse?](http://www.indystar.com/story/entertainment/arts/2016/02/27/why-isnt-indianapolis-theater-more-diverse/80929772/)

(<http://www.indystar.com/story/entertainment/arts/2016/02/27/why-isnt-indianapolis-theater-more-diverse/80929772/>).

Q: How does it feel to be in this position?

A: My immediate reaction is, wow, it's a lot of responsibility. We've said that we can do something and, boy, now we've gotta deliver. That's just very daunting.

Q: Do you intermix the Phoenix Theatre productions with Near West Indy projects?

A: They are two separate things for me right now. Even though I integrate the time, the project for me is like having a whole separate part-time job. I literally work all day and well into the evening. But no complaints. It's exactly what I feel I was meant to do, and I truly believe in making a difference. And so I'm meeting wonderful people, hearing great stories, making friends, eating great Mexican food on the west side. Everything I really love.

Q: Anything else you want us to know?

BF: This is a unique program, and I really applaud both the Lilly Endowment and the Arts Council of Indianapolis. They are so progressive and innovative and always thinking of ways that will make a difference in people's lives. We have to recognize the people who are responsible for making it happen, and it's both of those entities.

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