INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Make the arts part of your stay-at-home routine

By Allison Egrin *Program assistant, Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

Editor's note: *Today we begin introducing you to some of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute staff who are working to expand our programming. Allison Egrin, our newest member, graduated from Grand Valley State University last December with majors in both marketing and dance. She also served as president of the student organization Hillel at GVSU. Egrin had worked part time as a student and now joins us full time. Her position is grant-funded and enables her to work with our youth initiative, as well as with the arts and culture community. She also is helping with a new project expanding the interfaith efforts in Kalamazoo.*

While everyone is working from home and staying inside, the arts community nationwide has been tapping into their creativity ways to find meaningful ways to practice and stay connected during this time.

Now more than ever, society has the ability to connect with artists and has access to almost every art form at their fingertips. Those who have never had the chance to see a show on Broadway, visit an art museum in New York or take a class from a professional, now have the capability to do it all. While recognizing that the arts community is the least-funded within our country, they have been providing access and resources from the very beginning of our current crisis.

I have watched as my friends who are dance teachers all over the country have been recording their classes for their students from their apartments; watched as the country's top ballerinas are going live to teach students; and watched musicians going live to share their music with the world. These times can be tough, especially on one's mental health, but artists near and far are finding ways to share their artistic talents and knowledge with those who wish to listen, watch, and learn. The arts can be healing, provide comedic relief, or transport you into an alternate universe, maybe one that isn't as scary.

The arts have unquestionably been positioned in the public's eye as elite and available only to those with money, education and a prestigious social class. While this unfortunate fact prohibits many people from feeling welcome in these spaces, everyone can now use this free accessibility to watch from the comfort of their bed, couch or wherever they choose.

You can now take guitar lessons from celebrities, dance classes from the best in the industry and art classes from experts. You can watch a Broadway livestream, take a virtual tour of the Vatican, the Guggenheim or the Met without even stepping outside. Options are endless and all you need is a smart device. No need to buy a plane ticket, an admission ticket, dress up or feel intimidated that you do not belong.

This notion of elitism and intimidation is something I have discussed at great length with my Kaufman co-workers, and with colleagues at the Grand Rapids Symphony and the Grand Rapids Arts Museum. Part of my job with the Kaufman Interfaith Institute is to help enhance the representation of the arts and culture community within the greater Grand Rapids area. This can be done in a number of ways, including highlighting artists from diverse backgrounds, art that presents themes among minority groups, or choosing a venue that is less formal and could allow greater access for a specific community.

These efforts manifest through curriculum for elementary, middle and high school students, programming that we at Kaufman organize by collaborating with other entities and providing insight and input for artists in the area looking to expand their representation.

There remain barriers for some people to attend performances. These barriers may include ticket price, venue location, transportation to the performance, that sense of comfortability and elitism or even language.

In the current environment there has been an expansion of online livestreaming capabilities and accessibility. Right now, the main barrier remaining could be lack of technology, either Wi-Fi connection or actual streaming device. But now one can break down the feeling of elitism, feel more comfortable listening to live music or theatre and access all of this for free, without traveling anywhere. For the next two months Comcast and AT&T are even providing free internet access. If you want to watch a Broadway show or opera, now is your chance! Are you looking for something more informal such as a private concert? You can have that too! Time and money are no longer excuses. Use these resources while you can. In the end, you may be more inclined to attend these performances in person after getting used to the format and realizing that art is for everyone. No one is concerned about what you look like, but you.

The Grand Rapids Art Museum, Grand Rapids Symphony and the Frederik Meijer Gardens also are providing online access and resources. You can take a daily virtual tour of the Meijer gardens at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. each day to watch their butterfly livestream at meijergardens.org/virtual-visits. The symphony is rebroadcasting concerts at 1 p.m. Sundays on Blue Lake Public Radio. Or you can watch the symphony's recent online version of the Hallelujah Chorus created while social distancing on YouTube.

The GRAM offers virtual tours, artist interviews and social media resources at artmuseumgr.org/museumfromhome, while parents also can download lesson plans, art activities and gallery games for children of all ages.

For those of you with children at home, this is a great family activity. There could be a lesson on theatre etiquette. You could have your family dress up and pretend like you are there live as you watch from your couch. You can find a show that discusses a meaningful topic or highlights a minority population and create a family discussion around those themes. The options are endless for both viewing and discussing. For those able, consider making donations to some of your favorite art organizations, as they are struggling financially now more than ever. Who knows, you might inspire the next Lin-Manuel Miranda, Chopin or Andy Warhol!

Stay safe, stay distancing and continue to welcome the arts into your homes, families and hearts.

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