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## Arts leadership role redefined

### 3 new faces present their vision to keep local industry growing

*Paul Clark*

New leaders have stepped into three key arts positions in Asheville, instantly becoming leaders in a changing and growing local industry.

Diane Ruggiero, Angela Martinez and Geraldine Plato take on new jobs at a time when the role of arts leader has expanded beyond a fundamental need to raise money amid an economic downturn.

Ruggiero has been the city's cultural arts superintendent since January. Martinez started work as the Asheville Area Arts Council's executive director in March. Also in March, Plato became executive director of HandMade in America.

The women find themselves positioned to chart innovation into an already vibrant arts scene in Asheville, one AmericanStyle magazine in April named as the country's No. 2 small-city arts destination. "The mark of a good administrator used to be how good are you at raising money," said Ralph Redpath, an actor and director and a former director of the Asheville Community Theatre. "Now it's how good are you at showing the public how important arts are to the community."

## New directions

Part of that case can be made in pointing to the industry's economic strength.

A survey done by Americans for the Arts, the leading nonprofit organization for advancing the arts in America, said that the nonprofit arts and culture industry in Buncombe County generates \$65 million and supplies 2,192 jobs each year.

N.C. Stage Company, on behalf of all performing artists in Asheville, recently received a \$50,000 two-year grant to come up with a campaign to market the area's performing arts to the nation.

"Raising money is still an important element for any nonprofit, arts or otherwise," said Deborah Austin, who ran the arts council for years. "But the ability to connect (the arts) to the community is vital. The arts can't be perceived as separate."

Asheville artist and arts organizer Kitty Love thinks the new infusion of leadership will make a difference. "We've got some key leadership in the arts community," she said.

But a sagging economy might be their biggest challenge right now.

"Who knows what this economy is going to mean for us?" said Steve Hageman, managing director of the Asheville Symphony Orchestra.

Piloting arts organizations through an economic downturn is a task these three women face.

## Diane Ruggiero

As the city's cultural arts superintendent, Ruggiero oversees the city's public art, its downtown urban trail and the department's festivals division, which puts on Bele Chere, the Fourth of July celebration and the Asheville Film Festival.

Formerly, she was executive director of the Creative Art Exchange near Charlotte. A few years ago, she managed public relations for the Charlotte Symphony. The second day on the job, the orchestra went on strike.

Ruggiero didn't know the musicians or the administrators. Reporters from all over were calling her, and her most consistent answer was "I don't know." But she promised to get them answers, and she did, forging by fire a management style that she believes will serve her well in Asheville.

"You convey trust by just being truthful," she said. "I take very seriously that we work for the citizens. If people call me with a question, I'll answer it. And if I don't have the answer, I'll put them in touch with someone who does."

Ruggiero wants to expand programming at the W.C. Reid Center for Creative Arts, the city's cultural arts center on Livingston Street. She wants to broaden people's perceptions about what constitutes public art.

That could be a water feature, like the fountain Asheville artist Hoss Haley is creating for Pack Square Park. It also could be the botanical-themed ceramic tiles Weaverville resident Kathy Triplett is making for the park's performing area, Ruggiero notes. .

## Angela Martinez

The Asheville Area Arts Council strives to connect the community with the arts by sponsoring the downtown Urban Trail, helping teachers incorporate arts into classroom studies and helping artists develop their business skills.

Martinez, chosen among 60 applicants, was lured away from her job as director of programs for the Association of Performing Arts Presenters in Washington.

She has met Ruggiero and Plato, and said they all are too new to their jobs to chart new directions for their organizations. Martinez is still meeting artists and supporters in town to learn what they need.

But she's clear on one thing: "This is a community known for its world-class artists. This should be a community known for taking care of its artists," Martinez said.

In lunches, meetings and private conversations, Martinez is seeing if artists and arts organizations are interested in the arts council's trying to get them health care, disability and retirement benefits, as well as affordable housing and studio space.

The model already exists in Boston and New York, where coalescing members brings the cost of insurance, legal, medical and other services down. Setting up a similar program should be easier in Asheville because the numbers are smaller, Martinez said.

"It's doable," Martinez said. "But we need to organize the (arts) community. I'm hearing they want an agency that can take care of them so they can do their art. And if that agency is the arts council, fantastic."

## Geraldine Plato

HandMade in America is a nonprofit organization working to establish Western North Carolina as a national center of craft.

Toward that end, Handmade has published a series of craft destination guides as well as two architectural elements guides.

As its new executive director, Plato will promote the work of the more than 700 craftspeople who have signed onto HandMade's craft registry, as well as help teachers create lesson plans using craft to teach math, language arts, science and social sciences.

Plato is working to connect craftspeople with homebuilders and interior designers in the area through homes at The Ramble in south Asheville and Mountain Air Country Club in Yancey County. Both communities are building showhouses outfitted with decorative items and furnishings the craftspeople have made and serve as introductions to designers and prospective homeowners as to what is available in the area.

She also oversees HandMade's Small Towns Programs, which helps communities share experiences in the hopes they'll all prosper

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