

The art of making money

By Jessica Cox, reporter

A degree in art will only secure a place in the unemployment line, or so artists are often told. But that may not be the case. There are some people in West Virginia that think the arts can help revitalize the Mountain State's depressed economy.

For example, Richard Ressmeyer, director of the arts at the West Virginia Division of Culture and History, is taking steps to build what he calls a "creative economy." Ressmeyer thinks that artists have a lot to offer the state not only in terms of ideas and culture, but also in upping the quality of living.

"Without a doubt we see the arts as having a connection to tourism," Ressmeyer said. "We also see it as building community development. Artists live in communities and they teach classes and give studio and gallery tours - they are an extremely important part of building stronger communities."

According to a survey completed by the West Virginia Development Office in early 2003, Ressmeyer is not overstating the importance of the arts. In that study, researchers found that West Virginia arts and crafts contributed at least \$54 million to the West Virginia economy in 2002.

Michael Hicks, associate professor of economics at Marshall and data analyst for the survey, said that sum is understated by far.

"That \$54 million represents an absolute minimum brought in by that industry," Hicks said. "I certainly wouldn't spill my coffee if someone came in and told me the amount is really 250 million dollars."

The survey only counted money circulated by direct sales that fall under the "arts and crafts" category and did not attempt to measure money circulated by arts publications, performing arts, commercial arts such as graphic design, advertising or architecture, or fine art such as painting or gallery sculpture. Surveyors estimate in their report that had those areas been included, the minimum figure would have been closer to \$81 million.

Ressmeyer said the findings from the survey spurred a decision to form a committee to further develop the arts. He met in January with more than 50 West Virginia business people, legislators, artists, teachers, and civic workers to map a strategy to expand artistic endeavors.

From that session titled, "An Industry of Culture Roundtable," the group elected a management committee to set about conducting research, promoting art education, and lobbying for legislative support of the arts. Ressmeyer said members of the committee have been meeting this month to begin action on their plan.

His group is not the only one working to promote artistic work in the Mountain State.

Tom McColley, marketing director for MountainMade, a non-profit organization that markets West Virginia artwork and educates artists in business, has been organizing a series of lectures throughout this spring called "To the Top" featuring West Virginia artists who have made a living with their artwork.

Jeff Fetty, a blacksmith artist from Spencer, was the first to speak in the MountainMade series. He has been a blacksmith for over 25 years and has commissioned works for President Bill Clinton and the Elizabethan Globe Theater in London among others.

"The most important thing to learn is to run your art business like a business," Fetty said in a telephone interview. "Keep regular hours, be on time, be a good communicator, because as artists we are dealing with professional people and they in turn want to deal with

professional people."

Fetty, who works from a forge built in the woods overlooking his home, told the audience at his lecture that his ability to build a strong business in art has allowed him to stay in West Virginia, since he didn't have to leave the state to find work.

"Every day as I walk out the back door up the path to the forge with my cup of coffee in my hand I just think, I can't believe I'm still getting away with this - I can't believe how lucky I am to be able to do this," Fetty told listeners.

MountainMade offers free market counseling services to artists like Fetty and works closely with Ressmeyer's group.

Economist Hicks said such programs not only help build industry in the state, but are crucial to development.

"Those types of support organizations are critical," Hicks said.

He said providing an environment to promote learning and skill is important as more and more "brawn power is being replaced with brain power" because of the advance of technology.

"The most secure jobs are those that are based on a large amount of human capital (a knowledgeable and skilled workforce)," Hicks said. "So small businesses that require an intense amount of skill, such as we see in the arts field, may be more likely to thrive - especially in West Virginia where there's no real urban setting."

Susan Power, an art professor at Marshall, emphasizes the business side of art to students such as creating letterhead and art samples.

"We as a faculty feel the class (art business practices) is very important so we are putting far more emphasis on it," Power said.

Ressmeyer said teaching artists business skills is a major focus of the Industry of Culture Group. He said he thinks building better business practices and appreciation in the arts will complement and improve the lifestyle in West Virginia.

Hicks agreed, saying, "the arts

naturally are interlaced with the skills and practices that increase the amount of human capital - I don't think artists realize exactly how much they really contribute to the economy."
