

THRIVE
FUND FOR THE ARTS

'Great city, great

Contents

Spotlight

Charlotte Symphony4

Act one

Hitting the reset button8

Timeline

Summary of the fund9

Spotlight

McColl Center10

Act two

Charting a new path13

Spotlight

Charlotte Ballet14

Act three

Missing an opportunity ...17

Spotlight

Discovery Place18

Denouement

Surviving a pandemic22

Summaries

.....23

Innovations

.....26

The summer of 2015, when the Thrive Fund for the Arts publicly announced its first round of grants, was the culmination of three years of behind-the-scenes fundraising by Hugh McColl. The retired chairman and CEO of Bank of America had been privately advocating for the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra (CSO) with Charlotte's top business leaders and philanthropists. An ardent supporter of the arts, who helped save the organization in the past, McColl knew the symphony was again in dire straits. Years of declining support for the Arts & Science Council, a critical funding source, coupled with the lingering effects of the Great Recession, had the symphony drowning in debt.

McColl's quiet campaign garnered tens of millions of dollars in pledges, and the symphony received over \$2 million a year from Thrive, or about 20% of CSO's annual revenue. Fundraising led by McColl enabled the symphony to finish 2014 in the black—the first time since 2003. Consequent-

ly, funders saw how impactful their philanthropy could be, sparking interest in extending support to more organizations.

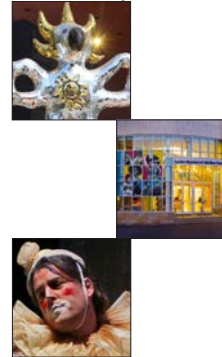
"I've always believed that to have a great city, you need great arts," McColl has often said.

Inspired by the enthusiasm and need, McColl formed a group in early 2015 to develop a plan to assist Charlotte's nine largest arts groups, along with McColl Center. Charles Bowman, a colleague from Bank of America, chaired the committee, and Foundation For The Carolinas became the administrator, with input from the Arts & Science Council.

The first public grants totaled \$3.1 million and were awarded to Charlotte's largest and most influential cultural organizations. (*See table on facing page for grant totals.*)

Rather than merely plugging holes in operating budgets, the Thrive grants were intended to support transformative opportunities that would lead to long-term sustainability. Grant proposals

arts'



fell into two categories: assessment/planning and financial support for implementation. The money could be used for economic stabilization, endowment, diversification, research, and the development of revenue-generating programs. The idea was to inspire the organizations to become more innovative and self-sufficient, and less dependent on philanthropy. In a declining workplace-giving environment, Thrive challenged the groups to create new business models that relied less on contributed income and more on earned income—like ticket sales, rental income, visitor amenities, season passes and merchandising.

Examples of eligible requests included innovative business models, strategic collaborations, the addition of marketing and fundraising personnel, feasibility studies for endowment campaigns, matching funds for new or increased gifts to annual fund campaigns, and plans for boosting earned income. These were the types of initiatives the Thrive

executive committee firmly believed would put Charlotte's premier arts organizations on more solid ground.

The committee did not anticipate that in five years' time a global pandemic would further threaten the existence of the organizations and severely challenge their creativity and resilience.

This is the story of how the Thrive Fund for the Arts operated from 2014 to its cessation in 2022. This report spotlights four of the 10 organizations, summarizes some of the successes of the others, and highlights a few of the innovations resulting from Thrive.

By the numbers

How the funds were distributed, 2014-2022

<i>Bechtler Museum of Modern Art</i>	\$853,380
<i>Charlotte Ballet</i>	\$884,100
<i>Charlotte Symphony*</i>	\$20.12 million
<i>Children's Theatre of Charlotte</i>	\$525,000
<i>Discovery Place</i>	\$1.07 million
<i>The Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture</i>	\$510,000
<i>Levine Museum of the New South</i>	\$440,000
<i>McColl Center</i>	\$705,000
<i>Mint Museum</i>	\$1.04 million
<i>Opera Carolina</i>	\$595,000
Total	\$26.74 million

** Total received from 2012-2022*



Morehouse College Glee Club performs with the Charlotte Symphony, led by Dr. David E. Morrow.

Spotlight

Charlotte Symphony Orchestra

Founded in 1932, the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra employs 62 professional, full-time orchestra musicians and has an annual budget of \$12 million. The symphony's concerts are attended by 132,000 people each year.

The Charlotte Symphony performs in the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center and at other local venues, such as schools, hospitals, parks, breweries and senior centers. The symphony also holds special performances featuring soloists and ensembles, serves three youth orchestras, and offers free educational programming and low-cost performances to underserved communities.

In April 2021, the symphony's board of trustees adopted new vision and mission statements, and in June 2021 a new five-year strategic plan. The symphony's new vision and mission reflect a five-year journey to reinvigorate a not-for-profit arts organization that has weathered decades of financial stress. The Charlotte Symphony's story is not

unlike those of many symphonies across the U.S., which are addressing waning demand and aging audiences, by broadening their appeal and attracting the next generation of music-lovers.

The abysmal state of the symphony's finances became apparent to Mary Deissler within days of accepting the position of CEO. Deissler, who led the institution from 2016 to 2019, described her wake-up call:

"I have an MBA, but I didn't realize when I accepted the position the symphony had no cash. The orchestra payroll was the biggest expense—I remember it was \$76,000 every other week. And there was something like \$2,000 in the checking account. Our line of credit was fully extended, and we had no pledges coming in. We were very close to filing for bankruptcy."

Deissler credits the \$2 million in annual funding from Thrive, as well as a surprise donation of \$1 million in unrestricted funds from an anonymous

patron, as the beginning of the symphony's economic recovery.

"We didn't have to go bankrupt after all," she said, "but it was still a hand-to-mouth existence. The Charlotte Symphony would not exist today without the support of Thrive over the last several years."

As the symphony worked to eliminate debt and build six-figure annual surpluses, a looming deadline in 2020, when the Thrive funding was originally set to expire, meant the organization had to move quickly to change course.

Meanwhile, Thrive was undergoing a sea change of its own. The fund hired EmcArts, based in Winston-Salem, to guide grant recipients through a three-year program focused on building the capacity for adaptive change. The program was called New Pathways for Arts & Culture.

The first year of New Pathways workshops helped the Charlotte Symphony develop a sense of what would be required to undertake adaptive work on



an ongoing basis. Executive staff determined their greatest challenge was to “build a resilient and lasting symphony by engaging in authentic and collaborative community engagement programs.”

One of the most important of those programs was the youth orchestra. At the time, the youth orchestra was “mostly white and Asian, upper-middle-class kids whose parents could afford instruments and private lessons, and could take them around to those lessons and enrichment opportunities on the lake,” Deissler recalled. “We were increasingly excluding a large segment of the growing Charlotte population of young people of color.”

As the symphony endeavored to transform the youth orchestra into “a rainbow of kids on stage,” the effort was met with resistance. “I had hate mail for the first time in my career, saying things like ‘my child will not sit next to one of them.’ It was really really horrible, but I don’t regret it because it was important to show the community that we were committed to this work, that we were not just an institution for those who could afford it,” Deissler said.

The controversy eventually split the youth orchestra in two, with some parents taking their kids out so they could form their own, separate orchestra. For the Charlotte Symphony, however, reimagining what a youth orchestra should look like was just a first step toward making the entire organization more inclusive. The symphony created resources to help young musicians audition, provided coaching sessions for those who didn’t win seats, and formed two more youth orchestras to offer seats to more students. It also launched Project Harmony, an after-school program that provides free instruments and ensemble music training to youth from lower-opportunity neighborhoods.

Another example of the symphony’s work in the arena of diversity, equity and inclusion is the Beatties Ford Strong project. In November 2020, Charlotte Symphony musicians collaborated with a local activist group to create a music video and to perform a quartet concert simultaneously with a public art demonstration. And the symphony has plans to partner with Johnson C. Smith University and the local alumni chapter of Morehouse College as part of a concerted, multi-faceted strategy to explore ways to diversify attendance at symphony performances.

‘...the symphony’s promise to Charlotte is to continue the work we’ve begun, to keep connecting to and being inspired by our community.’

Spotlight

Charlotte Symphony Orchestra

Like every other major arts organization in Charlotte, the symphony was rocked by Covid-19. Its current CEO, David Fisk, joined the organization just three months before the peak of the outbreak.

“Before Covid, the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra was in the strongest artistic and financial shape it had been in for decades,” Fisk said. “Rebounding from the pandemic, having learned much, we are committed to making the symphony more vibrant than ever before.”

The orchestra returned to the stage in April 2021, after more than a year of having to cancel indoor performances and pivot to virtual concerts and educational programming. The musicians continued to perform throughout the pandemic, but the symphony still lost all of its ticket revenue and had to rely on local and federal funding.

As the full orchestra eased back into in-person performances, safety protocols were put in place, such as reduced audience seating and socially distanced musicians. And the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center has a new air filtration system, which was installed in the Belk Theater during the lockdown.

Besides Covid-19, perhaps the biggest challenge the symphony will face going forward is to replace about \$2 million in annual funding from Thrive. “Thrive provided a period of sustainability and helped us keep our doors open during Covid. We’re extremely grateful for that,” Fisk said.

The symphony launched a \$20 million fundraising campaign in September 2021 to coincide with implementation of its new strategic plan. The campaign revolves around three components: artistic excellence, education and community partnership, and the “Path through 2025.”

The first component, “Artistic Excellence,” focuses on creating innovative programming outside of the mainstage series. Commissions of new works to help shape the future of classical music will engage women and people of color. Stronger partnerships with other arts organizations will be pursued. The CSO will continue to use new technologies such as streaming and online platforms to deliver performances and music in new ways.

The education and community partnership component will support the establishment of early childhood music programming and the continued growth of youth programs.

Money has been earmarked for collaborative partnerships with neighborhoods, faith-based organizations and community organizers to use the orchestra as a tool to address community challenges and bring people together.

The final component, “Path through 2025,” will ensure the symphony’s long-term stability by helping to replace the annual funding provided by Thrive. It will include a permanent loan fund to help the organization withstand future economic downturns as well as provide seed money for innovation.

“As the world emerges from the uncertainty of the pandemic,” Fisk concluded, “the symphony’s promise to Charlotte is to continue the work we’ve begun, to keep connecting to and being inspired by our community. Our world is going through a period of drastic change, forcing everyone at the Charlotte Symphony to reimagine the very fundamentals of how the orchestra operates.”

Act one

Hitting the reset button



During the first four years of the fund, Thrive provided funding to the 10 arts organizations based on a grant application process that encouraged innovation and sustainability. Some groups used the seed money to hire new staff, others invested in new technology. Still others expanded community programming and donor cultivation events. Yet Foundation For The Carolinas (FFTC) staff and the Thrive funders noted the grant applications didn't have "big picture" approaches.

"The notion was to support these organizations so they could diversify revenue streams, to have a plan and real expectations for the business side of the house, not just lean on philanthropy for revenue every year. Thrive laid it out there for these groups to really think big, think differently, think completely outside the box, and use this as an opportunity to try something they hadn't tried before," notes Alli Celebron-Brown, who was an FFTC employee at the time.

Celebron-Brown, who left the foundation in 2017 to become president and CEO of McColl

Center, said some of the early grant proposals lacked originality and focus on bringing more organizational and financial stability.

"What we found is there were not a whole lot of new or groundbreaking, super-innovative concepts. The grant requests we received were focused on matching campaigns—'help our thousand-dollar donors step up to \$2,500, and Thrive will provide the match.' We also saw a lot of requests around endowment building. Then some groups just sort of threw things against the wall. And I would say, in full transparency, McColl Center was one of those. We really didn't have anything out of the box and new and different," she said.

Celebron-Brown said many of the early grant requests were aimed at supporting existing programs rather than sparking innovation. Thus, Thrive needed to hit the reset button. "We saw a huge opportunity for there to be additional innovation and creativity and the necessary support to go along with that. And that's how EmcArts came to the table."

Hugh McColl raises pledges for \$20 million to be paid over 10 years to the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra (CSO).

Thrive is officially launched when 9 groups are added. They would not receive operational funding; instead they would compete for project-based grants.

2012 2013 2014

The Arts & Science Council (ASC) and Foundation For The Carolinas (FFTC) encourage McColl to continue to raise money for an expanded group of arts organizations.

Timeline

A year-by-year summary of the fund

During the first few years, all grants (except CSO) are project-based and awarded competitively by a vetting process through ASC. The Thrive Investor Committee later requests changes to the process since most requests are for endowment campaigns or other ideas are not congruent with the fund's goals of increasing earned revenue and exploring innovative models.

2015

2016

2017

2018

2019

2020

2021

After consulting with the 10 organizations and ASC, Thrive retains EmcArts to develop New Pathways. All organizations receive \$20,000 to participate, except for the Gantt Center, which chooses not to participate because the program does not align with its plans.

Thrive provides *The Charlotte Observer* \$100,000 to underwrite the arts/entertainment reporter for two years.

Thrive funds \$665,000 of the sales tax campaign.

The pandemic hits before the third phase of New Pathways can begin. Soon after, the Thrive Investor Committee provides the groups with the option to use the grants as unrestricted funding to weather the economic shutdown and its aftermath.

In the spring, Thrive contributes \$250,000 to support arts groups through the COVID-19 Response Fund. The funding is unrestricted; most of the funds go to small/mid-size arts organizations and an individual artist fund managed by ASC.

In December, Thrive contributes \$1 million (\$100,000 to each of the 10 organizations) as part of the CARES Act funding, leveraging an additional \$4 million from public sources. FFTC manages the program that provides funds to mid-sized and large arts groups; ASC runs the program for individual artists and smaller organizations.

In December, Thrive has \$1.3 million remaining. The decision for how to allocate the balance is yet to be determined.



McColl Center is bathed in blue for an opening reception.

R

Rising from the ashes of a hollowed-out church, McColl Center has become a nationally acclaimed artist residency and contemporary art space since its founding in 1999. The historic structure at 721 North Tryon Street was originally constructed in 1926 and served as home to the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church until 1982.

In 1984, as the church sat abandoned, fire swept through the building, leaving only the frame and stone exterior intact. The charred church remained in tatters until 1995, when Bank of America acquired the property. Just four years later, McColl Center opened its doors as Charlotte's newest cultural gem.

Today, McColl Center houses 14 artist studios, over 5,000 square feet of exhibition space, and multiple common-use spaces, including a studio for large-scale sculpture. The center has a staff of 10 full-time and five part-time employees and an annual operating budget of \$1.8 million.

When Alli Celebron-Brown became president and CEO of McColl Center, she joined an organi-

zation mired in debt. In her first six months on the job, she cut seven staff positions and half-a-million dollars from the budget.

Celebron-Brown credits Thrive with helping McColl Center create a bold new vision with a long-term, sustainable business model. "Through New Pathways, we have challenged the way we typically worked with artists, partnered with new audiences, and investigated new, more adaptive staffing structures," she said, noting the organization received \$705,000 from Thrive.

An example is the Studio Artist Program, which sought to change the old paradigm of McColl Center being renowned for advancing national and international artists, to making room for and supporting local and grassroots artists. The new residency program was for five Charlotte-based artists whose work addresses issues impacting their communities through "social practice art."

McColl Center also launched a new initiative called SPARK, which focused on creating a space for Charlotte-based artists to be creative, learn

about the business aspects of being a professional artist, and connect with each other. The ultimate goal was to make the center more accessible and inclusive.

Through this initiative, the center hired two consultants and worked with EmcArts to restructure the organization, redefine team roles, and change the business model to be more flexible and adaptive. The process also led to new strategies for engaging audiences, expanding programs, and making the center available to a variety of experiences for artists, patrons, and a more diverse representation of the community.

"Our biggest challenge remains being relevant and accessible in an ever-changing community," Celebron-Brown said. "We know that by embracing adaptability into our structure and daily practices, we will be on the path to viability. This has been proven through Phase I and Phase II of New Pathways."

Having succeeded in eliminating the center's budget deficit, in April 2019 McColl Center



announced a multi-year fundraising campaign. Jane and Hugh McColl provided the leading legacy gift and challenged the community to give to McColl Center. The objective of the campaign is to establish an innovation fund and provide seed money for new strategies to increase earned revenue.

Future plans include hiring a creative director to lead new projects and shepherd innovation, reducing the overall number of artists-in-residence to free up space and resources to devote to new programs, and ramping up its professional development assistance for emerging artists. The new strategic plan also calls for renovating the church to create more co-working opportunities for local artists, as well as office space to lease to private-sector businesses.

The strategic plan had just been approved by the board when the Covid-19 lockdown began. “We had to ask ourselves, ‘Is this relevant anymore?’ We prioritized professional development for artists—how to leverage their technology and rela-

tionships to be more sustainable—and we put other things on the back burner,” Celebron-Brown said.

The center closed its doors to the public from March 2020 to March 2021. During that time, it lost all rental revenue, the pace of renovation slowed significantly, and workshops went online. Fortunately, though, the fall and winter residencies didn’t have to be cancelled.

“When we started working from home, I told the team to throw out your job description because this is uncharted territory—and they really did. Our administrative assistant began to work on programming and how to do our workshops virtually. Our event manager spent the first two weeks mastering Zoom. So we threw everything out and started fresh and looked at things very differently, including revenue projections,” Celebron-Brown said.

Celebron-Brown said New Pathways deserves kudos for helping create a resilient mindset among the team at McColl Center. “Without this opportunity, I can’t imagine where we’d be today,” she said, “especially with Covid.”

‘Our biggest challenge remains being relevant and accessible in an ever-changing community. We know that by embracing adaptability into our structure and daily practices, we will be on the path to viability.’

In late 2017, Thrive leadership partnered with EmcArts to launch New Pathways for Arts & Culture, a three-year program to steer investment in “adaptive change efforts and building adaptive capacity.” Before engaging EmcArts, Thrive had consulted with the Arts & Science Council and all the Thrive grant recipients to find a solution that would work for everyone.

New Pathways represented a reset for Thrive, which had been awarding unrestricted grants to the Charlotte Symphony and nine other arts groups since 2015. The new program was designed to empower the organizations to become more resilient by bringing more accountability to the application process.

The EmcArts team described New Pathways as the integration of “a wide range of learning activities and financial investments that escalate from micro- to macro-level experimentation.” The participating organizations would “learn about building financial and adaptive leadership capacity through group workshops, forums, coaching, indi-

vidual organizational facilitation, and tiered capital investment.”

Under EmcArts’ direction, Thrive grant requests morphed into program-related micro-grants to support “small experiments with radical intent,” project grants to bolster prototyping efforts for substantial new strategies, and access to larger capital grants for applicants who met certain criteria.

EmcArts organized New Pathways into four sequential phases—“group learning and sharing,” “building adaptive capacity,” “incubating an innovative approach,” and the pinnacle, “innovation capital grants.”

“The phase one, two and three grants were guaranteed,” explained Richard Evans, EmcArts co-founder and president emeritus, “thus releasing the organizations to take risks and think imaginatively about change. However, the innovation capital grants were discretionary: they were dependent entirely upon results and on the integration of adaptive work into the arts organization as a whole.”

Components of the New Pathways program included:

- Six workshops and three participant-led “innovation forums,”
- On-site coaching for organizations with a \$5,000 micro-grant to support experimentation,
- A year-long, individually facilitated “deep dive” process for each organization to incubate a specific, larger-scale innovation initiative with a \$40,000 prototyping grant, and
- The opportunity to apply for capital grants to support the scaling up of projects having the possibility of long-term transformation.

Spotlight

Charlotte Ballet

Charlotte Ballet is a company of 28 professional dancers. It was founded in 1970 as the North Carolina Dance Theatre by students at the North Carolina School of the Arts, in Winton-Salem. Twenty years later, the company moved to Charlotte, and in 2014 it changed its name to Charlotte Ballet. The ballet presents six performance series each year, ranging from classical ballet to contemporary works.

In 2010, the organization built the Patricia McBride and Jean-Pierre Bonnefoux Center for Dance next to McColl Center on North Tryon Street. The Center for Dance houses a 200-seat theater, as well as rehearsal and office space.

It also runs the Charlotte Ballet Academy, which serves about 1,000 students annually with instruction in ballet, modern and jazz technique. The academy includes former

New York City Ballet dancer Patricia McBride. The Community Engagement Department provides the Reach Scholarship, a need-based, three-year grant to students who want to learn dance in their own neighborhoods.

Charlotte Ballet has received a total of \$884,100 from Thrive. The company has not yet deployed the final Thrive grant of \$300,000 as it continues to identify oppor-



tunities to expand Academy operations in additional areas of Mecklenburg County.

“Expansion will allow us to recruit additional students, building a pipeline to our pre-professional division of the academy and increase net revenues to support the mission of Charlotte Ballet. Net proceeds from operations beginning in year two of operations will resupply the Innovation Fund from Thrive,” said Executive Director

Doug Singleton, who has led the organization since 2005.

Singleton’s first few weeks on the job were not unlike the stories of other arts and culture leaders interviewed for this report. He joined an organization bogged down in debt with no liquidity or working capital. “I didn’t realize just how bad it was,” he said.

Thanks to Thrive, the ballet affected structural changes, including “town halls”

for all employees, and an Artistic Investment initiative with the goal of creating full-time employment for all the dancers. During the New Pathways program, the organization underwent a strategic planning process guided by four consultants from Deloitte; staff leaders attended a national Diversity, Equity and Inclusion program; and the company formed an innovation team to develop “small experiments with radical intent.”



Charlotte Ballet dancers perform ‘Subliminal Tsunami,’ a new piece by choreographer Rena Butler, for the ‘Innovative 1970’ performance series.

Recognizing the challenges of Covid-19, leadership created a strategy to flip our revenue model to 60% contributed revenue versus 60% earned revenue. Board leadership launched the Resilience Fund, and in the fall of 2020, we exceeded our \$1-million goal.’

One of these experiments was “Barre Hops,” where dancers led ballet classes at local breweries. The purpose was to develop visibility and connect the community to the ballet. The company also held a contemporary dance performance and offered a hip-hop class and a master class to the community as a way to gauge interest in dance forms beyond ballet.

The first investment from Thrive in 2015 laid the foundation for sustainable growth in ticket sales and built a pipeline for subscribers and donors alike. The initial investment created positions for revenue producers as well as additional dance artists. The overall increase from 2015 to 2019 was 32% in sales and 44% in attendance.

Charlotte Ballet operates on a thin margin, with 60% of revenues coming from ticket sales and academy tuition, and 40% from contributions. In 2019, Charlotte Ballet’s board of trustees laid the groundwork for a 10-year fundraising campaign to ensure organizational resilience, support infrastructure and build capacity. If the campaign succeeds in offering full-time employment to all of the dancers, it will become one of the only dance companies in the U.S. to offer this type of contract.

“With additional weeks, dancers will have more opportunities to support community programming, perform in non-traditional spaces, teach classes,

attend town halls, and engage in conversations around innovation,” Singleton said.

In response to the pandemic, Charlotte Ballet was forced to postpone all local productions and touring performances. Academy and community-engagement activities were suspended, and the Center for Dance closed until September 2020, when it reopened at 30% capacity. Eighty employees were furloughed from April to September 2020, and six positions were eliminated. The ballet was able to perform again in December—for an audience of just two dozen. But other patrons and donors were able to participate in digital experiences during the pandemic.

“Recognizing the challenges of Covid-19, leadership created a strategy to flip our revenue model to 60% contributed revenue versus 60% earned revenue,” Singleton said. “Board leadership launched the Resilience Fund, and in the fall of 2020, we exceeded our \$1-million goal. This investment allowed us to continue operations through the spring of 2021. The additional funds received from FFTC as well as Thrive and City of Charlotte extended our runway until the fall of 2021.”

In October, the ballet reopened in time to celebrate its 50th anniversary at the Belk Theater with the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra. Two months later, audiences returned to the Belk for *The Nutcracker* performances—with ticket sales equal to pre-pandemic numbers.

Act three

Missing an opportunity

As Charlotte's high-profile cultural institutions were adapting to new ways of sustaining their operations, the arts community as a whole continued to experience declining contributions to the Arts & Science Council's annual giving campaigns. Since 1958, the ASC had been the driver of corporate and workplace giving. However, the Great Recession triggered a 40% drop in workplace giving, and the ASC lost 65% of its corporate and foundation donations from 2007 to 2012, despite heroic efforts from ASC leadership and staff.

Around the same time, the General Assembly passed several unfunded mandates related to health care and mental health, resulting in Mecklenburg County looking for new sources of revenue. Polling suggested the three hot-topic items most likely to garner support from voters were parks, education and the arts. County commissioners voted to place a referendum on the November 2019 ballot requesting a quarter-cent increase to the 7.25% sales tax, which would have provided the ASC with \$22.5 million. Thrive contributed \$665,000 to support the referendum, making up nearly half of the \$1.1 million campaign.

Patrick Sebastian, a political strategist and one of three consultants hired to run the campaign, said the effort was hampered by a tight deadline leading up to the polls. Although the Charlotte community continues to show strong support for

the arts, nearly 60% of voters opposed the tax increase. In fact, none of the proposed tax increases in 2019 passed.

"I think a sales tax referendum is a hard thing to get people to vote for, regardless of what it's for," said former county commissioner Susan Harden. "People are inclined not to raise their own taxes. In fact, across the state a number of similar sales tax referendums went down at the same time."

Both Harden and Sebastian pointed to a lack of specific wording on the ballot as a reason the referendum failed. State law does not permit the purpose of a sales tax measure to be included with the ballot language.

According to Harden, the referendum represented "a huge loss of a significant and sustainable funding source." Whether the community would support a future tax increase to support the arts remains to be seen.

With Thrive funding coming to an end and the continuing decline in ASC workplace giving, the City of Charlotte requested FFTC's partnership in formulating a strategy to underpin the arts and culture sector for three years while an overall plan for long-term support could be developed. The city agreed to contribute \$18 million over three years if the private sector would contribute an equivalent amount to the newly created Infusion Fund, and the Foundation was asked to lead fundraising. The fundraising effort surpassed its goal, with FFTC raising \$23 million, for a total of \$41 million with the city's contribution. A committee of 18 citizens was appointed to allocate funds and develop a long-range plan.



Models walk the runway at the Mint Museum's 'QC GarMINT District,' which highlights local fashion designers of color.



Visitors to Discovery Place pose with a new friend during 'Science on the Rocks: Dinosaur World.'



Discovery Place is comprised of four science, nature and children’s museums located in three cities. The family of museums provides community outreach programs, professional development for teachers, and dynamic exhibits featuring hands-on learning experiences in science, technology, engineering and math.

Founded in Charlotte in 1946, the organization plans to hold a belated (due to the pandemic) 75th anniversary celebration in 2022. With annual revenues of over \$15 million, it serves three-quarters of a million people annually through programs, exhibits and events throughout the Carolinas, as well as at its four facilities: Discovery Place Science, located in uptown Charlotte; Discovery Place Nature, adjacent to Freedom Park; and Discovery Place Kids museums in Huntersville and Rockingham.

The mission of the not-for-profit education organization is to bring science, nature and design together to create transformative experiences that

enable people of all ages to understand, enjoy, and apply science to their lives. Discovery Place’s vision is to be “at the forefront of transforming the way science, technology and nature are explored and learned to inspire dreams, raise aspiration, and motivate people to develop a lifelong love of learning.”

In 2014, under new leadership from CEO Catherine Wilson Horne, Discovery Place began to envision how to reposition itself as an institution accessible to all—not just families and kids. After the construction of two children’s museums, the community-at-large had formed the misconception that Discovery Place was for children only, and organizational leaders realized they were missing out on the residential boom occurring in uptown Charlotte, especially among young professionals. To change the paradigm, Discovery Place launched its first adults-only series of events, “Science on the Rocks,” which boosted its annual operating budget by 2% and generated about \$250,000 each year.

During the first phase of Thrive funding, Discovery Place hired a chief advancement officer and subsequently expanded its successful membership and patron programs in conjunction with its 70th anniversary. The museum also expanded programming for adults as well as donor cultivation events, raising over \$3 million. Yet, around the same time, the organization was seeing a sharp drop in state funding as well as operating support from ASC. As it embarked on its third year of Thrive funding, Discovery Place was awarded a two-year “Transformative Grant” totaling \$200,000, which was earmarked for donor development and departmental capacity-building for innovation and resilience.

To maintain a budget based on 60% of Discovery Place’s income coming from earned revenue (museum admissions, IMAX ticket sales, facility rentals, etc.) and 40% from donations, membership dues and grants, it was critical for the organization to quickly adapt to customer demands and trends



as well as stabilize the declining funding from the government and ASC.

By placing an increased emphasis on adult visitors and learners, the museum sought to develop and deepen relationships with a wider audience. “Thanks to the early learning and work we have done in the first two phases of EmcArts, the Discovery Place team began to investigate and experiment with new strategies for adult audiences,” Horne said. “More than two dozen staff members have now built stronger skills in innovation and adaptive work, which will help us navigate the complex challenges ahead and create larger impacts for the future.”

EmcArts joined the Thrive funders to develop a multi-year professional development program for arts leaders in adaptive leadership. As a member of the first cohort, Discovery Place quickly discovered how valuable this training would be for middle and senior leaders. They learned how to develop small experiments, reflect on successes and challenges,

and then scale the experiments to larger experiences with greater impact.

Following a year of these small and growing experiments, the Discovery Place team began to create a strategic vision for adult learners at DP Science. The next round of Thrive funding yielded a three-year, \$750,000 Amplifying Innovation Grant, which required matching funds of at least \$250,000. The grant was designed to create an innovation fund on the museum’s balance sheet to seed continuing efforts in innovation and audience impact. With this funding, Discovery Place made a major commitment to “adults as learners” through the digital conversion of the Dome IMAX theater, dedication of a separate space for adult exhibit experiences, and a series of programs, memberships and activities specifically developed and marketed to adults.

Then the Covid-19 pandemic turned the world upside down. The museums closed their doors on March 13, 2020, and by the end of the month laid off 75% of staff. Discovery Place remained shuttered until September 2020, then closed again

‘When Discovery Place began to reimagine how we would reopen in the Covid era, we immediately looked back at our playbook for EmcArts and New Pathways.’

Spotlight
Discovery Place

briefly in January 2021. The drastic reduction in earned revenue forced the organization to put more emphasis on contributed revenue and quickly pivot to digital programming as its primary educational tool.

“When Discovery Place began to reimagine how we would reopen in the Covid era, we immediately looked back at our playbook for EmcArts and New Pathways,” Horne said, “and in doing that, we organized cross-functional teams led by middle management, including people who had never led a team before. They took on safety protocols, visitor experience planning and much more—all of the things we had to rethink because of Covid.”

Tapping into the concept of small experiments, for the next three months the staff worked creatively to plan for the eventual reopening of the museums. When it became apparent that wouldn’t happen anytime soon, leadership and staff quickly transitioned from in-person learning to virtual programming. The organization collaborated with a local media company to build a digital studio to develop, produce and share digital content. Studio staff

produced live after-school programs and held a live family-education event for supporters of the annual fund. They also produced the “Stay-at-Home Science” series, which reached nearly 100,000 participants via Facebook and YouTube.

In January 2021, as another wave of Covid necessitated a second closing, Discovery Place opened a new traveling exhibit, “Artificial Intelligence: Your Mind and the Machine.” Staff leveraged the popularity of the exhibit among technology and business professionals by hosting a virtual panel discussion with the exhibit’s creator. And Discovery Place held the first event in a new film series for adults called “Science on Screen” in March 2021.

As impacts from Covid continued through 2021, leadership and staff used the adaptive leadership skills to safely engage audiences of all ages in the four museums, provided summer camp experiences, and oversaw the renovation of the Dome IMAX theater in preparation for new digital experiences for adults. The new Accenture OmniMax Theatre opened in February 2022 with a sold-out series of

the documentary, “The Beatles: Get Back”. The next step in adult programming is to transform the Tryon Street spaces (formerly a lobby and museum store) with funding already provided by Thrive.

If the pandemic had a silver lining, for Discovery Place it was the opportunity for trustees and staff to craft a new mission and values statement, and a bold vision for science, nature and design in the Carolinas as the new strategic agenda is now being implemented. And Discovery Place made a significant commitment to training and development in adaptive leadership for all staff.

Looking back on the pandemic, Horne attributed many of the organization’s innovations to Thrive—especially its resilience and innovation: “In many ways, the dynamic changes to our primary operations have enabled us to clear the slate and re-imagine all facets of Discovery Place.”

It's March 3, 2020. The first Covid-19 case has just been confirmed in North Carolina.

Two days prior, the United States reported the second confirmed death from the pandemic, in Washington State. The number of confirmed infections around the country stands at fewer than 90, mostly in New York and Florida.

During the next few days and weeks, as the reality of the pandemic began to sink in, one by one Charlotte's top 10 arts groups closed their doors. Staff were sent home. Performances were cancelled. Revenues took a nose dive.

Thrive responded to the global pandemic by informing the 10 arts organizations they could use the most recent round of grants however they needed to—no strings attached. The message was loud and clear: Do what you need to do for now, and we'll get back to the program when the crisis is over. Although this represented a suspension of New Pathways, some of the grant recipients continued to apply lessons learned from EmcArts. Little did they know,

as they mastered concepts such as adaptive capacity building and the value of small experiments during the first phase of New Pathways, those skills would be tested by the fires of Covid-19.

By August 2020, Charlotte City Council had crafted a plan to help the arts and culture sector during the pandemic. In September, the Mecklenburg County Board of Commissioners came on board, allocating \$1 million in federal funds from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act to create the Charlotte-Mecklenburg CARES for Arts, Culture & Creativity Fund. The fund also included \$1 million from the city, and \$1 million from Thrive. Then, in October, the city added \$3 million more, bringing the total to \$6 million.

Foundation For The Carolinas and three other nonprofits—Charlotte is Creative, Hue House, and the ASC—managed the fund. Grants ranging from \$100,000 to \$628,000 went to the 10 arts groups Thrive

has supported in the past. The foundation distributed \$4.8 million to the Thrive groups, plus Blumenthal Performing Arts and Carolina Raptor Center. The ASC and the other two nonprofits doled out the remaining \$1.2 million to over 100 individual artists and 38 cultural nonprofits with annual budgets of less than \$1 million.

In addition, on March 16, 2020, United Way of Central Carolinas and FFTC launched the Charlotte-Mecklenburg COVID-19 Response Fund. Altogether the fund raised nearly \$24 million, which was awarded to 237 local nonprofit organizations through 412 grants.

Now, as this report is published, there is light at the end of the proverbial tunnel. Each day, more and more exhibitions are opening and curtains are rising. The arts and culture sector has been tested by fire, and thanks in large measure to Thrive, it has survived and even found ways to thrive.

Summaries

How other organizations utilized grants

The logo for the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art, featuring the text "BECHTLER MUSEUM OF MODERN ART" in white, uppercase letters on a red rectangular background.

BECHTLER MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

For the first five years of Thrive funding, the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art utilized grants to train staff in membership sales and database optimization; hire new employees to support donor development, launch an endowment campaign, and envision a new strategic plan; and receive coaching from EmArts through New Pathways.

In May 2020, the museum, which has received a total of \$798,380 from Thrive, was awarded its largest single grant of \$500,000. The funding is being used not only to expand Bechtler's exhibition program but also to reimagine the plaza and lobby experiences. "During the first 10 years, the museum placed a strong emphasis on showcasing our permanent collection of mid-Twentieth Century European modern art," said Chief Executive Todd D. Smith. "Now we've broadened the exhibition offerings to include modern and contemporary art. We've also set our sights on bringing private and public collections from around the world to Charlotte."

Building on the lessons learned from New Pathways, the museum staff is rethinking how visitors should interact with the museum's lobby and plaza. Future plans involve an extensive redesign of these spaces to create a more inviting visitor experience.



Opera Carolina received four grants from Thrive totaling \$595,000. The first two grants provided funding for the organization to plan and implement a \$5-million fundraising campaign. Grant funds were directed to hiring a campaign director, a corporate development officer, and a development associate. The Opera Carolina 2020 campaign succeeded in meeting its fundraising goal and contributing to the long-term sustainability of the organization.

The third grant enabled Opera Carolina to take part in a three-phase engagement with the New Pathways program. This gave its staff the tools to adapt their civic engagement strategies as they learned from feedback and collaboration with current and new constituents. The Opera Carolina team pushed themselves to find new ways to reach the community.

"We developed ways to engage with opera lovers through live, collaborative engagements like the Magic Box, as well as virtual experiences like the Voices Engaged series and our new virtual opera house," said Artistic Director James Meena. Opera Carolina's fourth grant was awarded during the pandemic; it provided a lifeline to keep staff employed, as well as provide performance opportunities and employment to its resident company of singers and pianists.



Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture participated in the initial phase of the Thrive campaign and received grants totaling \$510,000. In collaboration with Bechtler Museum of Modern Art, membership consultants trained both organizations' staff to incorporate membership sales into every role, particularly for front-facing employees. Consequently, the Gantt saw an immediate increase in membership.

Thrive funds were also used to complete a study on facility usage, with a focus on reimagining the museum store retail space. With the significant increase in uptown residents, conference travelers and tourists, the consulting group explored moving retail operations to another space in the Gantt and locating food and beverage sales to the museum store.

Working with EmArts, the Gantt defined its complex challenge as, "How do we position the Gantt as a destination of choice for African-American arts and culture to all, i.e., everyone, not only to African-Americans, as is often the perception?" The Gantt completed art activations throughout the community—the Levine Center Campus, 7th Street Public Market and the Wells Fargo Atrium, among other locations—to reach a new and diverse audience.



Levine Museum of the New South utilized its two grants from Thrive as seed money to reimagine the way the museum delivers compelling, accessible content across multiple platforms. Due to the grants, the museum was able to prototype a number of innovative new programs; leverage the support to secure a major, multi-year grant from the Knight Foundation; and challenge traditional thinking about the museum's need for physical space.

Digital innovations include HomeCLT, which uses data visualization to illustrate economic disparities across the region, and the KnowCLT phone app, Levine's first completely digital storytelling experience.

New Pathways training provided a framework for the staff and board to articulate a new, succinct vision statement: "Levine Museum connects the past with the future to realize the promises of a New South." The training also helped staff conduct audience research and develop strategies for becoming more community-centered.

And President and CEO Kathryn Hill credits New Pathways for "encouraging us to think critically about our physical facility—a large, aging, and increasingly expensive space." In early 2020, Levine's board decided to sell the building. The museum plans to move its operations to a new, more sustainable space while continuing to offer both in-person and virtual exhibits.



As North Carolina's first art museum, The Mint Museum has been a Charlotte institution since 1936. Mint Museum Randolph was its original location, and it remains open in the heart of the Eastover neighborhood today. In 1999, the museum opened The Mint Museum of Craft + Design uptown. In 2010, Mint Museum Uptown at Levine Center for the Arts opened. In 2020, under the leadership of President and CEO Todd A. Herman, the Mint expanded again, only this time not in construction but in community building.

"The Mint Museums utilized the New Pathways program to radically change the role of the museum in the community," Herman said. "Specifically, to become a community hub for cultural collaboration and to engage with artists to diversify and grow our audience."

Employing grants from Thrive totaling \$1.04 million over eight years, the Mint created a series of events designed to welcome a more inclusive, multidimensional audience. The Mint hosted the pop-up, street-art event called "Battle Walls," and Charlotte-based mural artist "Owl" collaborated with the Mint on the exhibition design for "Classic Black: The Basalt Sculpture of Wedgwood and His Contemporaries." Owl's signature blob art was a vivid backdrop for the black basalt sculptures featured in the exhibition. A video of the collaboration won a regional Emmy Award.



Children's Theatre of Charlotte (CTC) utilized three Thrive grants, totaling \$525,000, for market research, digital marketing, social media campaigns, marque signage for ImaginOn, and the development and implementation of prototype programs to serve racially and culturally diverse communities.

CTC restructured its ticket pricing model and rolled out a dynamic pricing strategy, which boosted earned revenue. During the 2017-18 season, dynamic pricing generated nearly \$20,000 in additional revenue. The theater doubled that margin to just under \$41,000 the following year.

The theater's emphasis on equity, diversity and inclusion—a direct result of the New Pathways training—began by creating a temporary staff position responsible for community initiatives, which led to a permanent position working with schools and underserved communities to break down barriers to accessing CTC programs. The next evolution is to formalize a new, three-year BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) Artist Fellowship. "We have already selected an incredibly talented Latinx artist to be the inaugural fellow," said Scott Tynes-Miller, associate director of development.



Actors perform 'My Wonderful Birthday Suit,' a Children's Theatre of Charlotte production.

Beethoven, Bach and beer

The groundwork for embedding innovation into the DNA of the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra was laid during New Pathways, when several programs were tested and then sustained. For example, CSO On Tap features a more intimate orchestra experience with classical and contemporary tunes from a diverse range of composers within the laid-back environment of a neighborhood brewery. CSO On Tap entering its sixth season in the fall of 2021.

The symphony's Innovation Hub—comprised of members of the board, staff, and orchestra—is now focused on encouraging the development of new ideas in the areas of programming, commissioning and concert presentation; digital media content, marketing and distribution; education; diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives; audience development and fundraising; and external collaboration and partnerships.

CSO's commitment to innovation is evidenced by the inclusion of innovation as one of the seven areas of focus in its strategic plan. The Innovation Hub meets monthly to welcome and analyze new ideas for development from both within and outside the organization. Members of the community can submit ideas via a publicly available form on the CSO website.

Cost-efficient productions

The Teen Studio Series and Trunk Shows are two of the innovations created by Children's Theatre of Charlotte (CTC) through the New Pathways program. The Teen Studio Series creates partnerships with Charlotte-area schools with fledgling or underfunded theater programs and seeks to bolster their theater-education offerings and student productions. So far, CTC has engaged with East Mecklenburg and North Mecklenburg high schools.

Through this series, a CTC teaching artist works with the schools' theater educators to help develop and deliver their curriculum. CTC also provides artistic assistance and production materials for one production. And participating students are invited to visit *ImaginOn* and experience a CTC production and engage in workshops led by the education and production staff. Students learn professional theater skills such as headshot and résumé building as well as auditioning skills.

Trunk Shows are highly mobile and adaptable theater performances designed to be performed most anywhere. With all the props, set pieces, and costumes transported in just one trunk, Trunk Shows are incredibly cost-efficient. The prototype Trunk Show production, made possible through Thrive funds, was an adaptation of the acclaimed children's book *The Dot*. This show was performed at select libraries and community centers throughout Mecklenburg County in the summer of 2021. These shows, which were able to be performed outdoors with masks, were the first in-person performances CTC was able to provide during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Small, simple experiments

For Discovery Place, the lasting impact of New Pathways was the development of organic systems that used small, simple experiments to test ideas that were subsequently scaled to mid-sized activities before either being cast-aside or implemented as a major change to operations. Over the last three years, the organization has worked to embed these techniques into its daily and yearly operations.

Examples include the implementation of advance, online ticket sales which facilitated crowd management and safety protocols; dynamic pricing for admissions, films and programs; an Adaptive Leadership training program to facilitate staff development and promotions; the utilization of experiments as a way to overcome perceptions related to potential changes in operations and programs, giving staff permission to fail and learn from failure; and the expansion of decision-making to a broader cross-section of staff, which empowers more teams to share what they've learned with others.

Community-centered, digital-first

The New Pathways program united the staff of Levine Museum around a vision focused on serving the community. “Our mantra has become ‘community-centered, digital-first,’” says President and CEO Kathryn Hill.

Thrive grants enabled the museum to prototype innovations such as HomeCLT and KnowCLT. HomeCLT is an exploration in using technology within a physical museum exhibit. It uses data visualization to help visitors see economic disparities across the region—literally sprawled on the floor. The exhibit also incorporated videos to make real-life local stories come alive from the walls. “The game-changer for us was the use of augmented reality, or AR, in the HomeCLT exhibit,” Hill noted, “which then led to the use of AR in the app.”

The exhibit was a precursor to KnowCLT, the museum’s first completely digital storytelling experience. KnowCLT takes users through a tour of Second Ward, once a large, vibrant Black community.

“We have now built a repository of digital programs for adult audiences, for families, and for educators and students that are accessible on our web site, on Facebook and on YouTube,” Hill said. “We have attracted a national audience through highly relevant programs that have addressed issues like police-involved violence, voter suppression, the history of insurrection, and Critical Race Theory.”

Affordable studios for local artists

With Thrive’s support, McColl Center has transformed its business model and purpose, resulting in more relevance and greater sustainability. “We challenged our ideas around supporting artists, who could or couldn’t access our building, and filled a gap for local creatives, which resulted in our most impactful innovation, the Studio Artist Program,” said Alli Celebron-Brown, president and CEO.

The Studio Artist Program provides affordable space for local artists, providing 24-hour access to their studios within the center, state-of-the-art equipment in communal labs, and opportunities to sell their work. In the nine months since launch, studio artists have expanded their creative practices and businesses.

The program has been mutually beneficial for McColl Center and the studio artists. Lessees pay an average of \$327 per month for their studio spaces, which will yield \$43,000 annually in new, sustainable, earned revenue. Studio artists have helped strengthen the message that McColl Center is accessible to the local artist community and has created energy around artmaking.

Free on Wednesday nights

“Live at The Mint” was designed to make Charlotte’s creative community accessible to diverse communities through partnerships with local arts and cultural organizations. The program gives organizations a free space to hold events on evenings when the museum is open after-hours. One of the collaborations with the Charlotte Symphony resulted in the Mint’s second regional Emmy Award.

The program was expanded under the new name “Wednesday Night Live,” where each partner institution is free every Wednesday night. To date, this initiative has resulted in the Mint Museum supporting 82 local performers and creatives with an average attendance of more than 300 people of diverse backgrounds. In March 2022, “QC GarMINT District” highlighted local fashion designers of color. The event was attended by 750 people.

The success of this program spawned “Party in the Park” at the Randolph Road location. It’s held on the last Sunday of the month with music, drinks, and free admission. Together these programs represent a transformation in how the Mint Museum is perceived within the broader community.

Written and designed by Jonathan Scott, jonscottinc.com

Photographers

Cover, left to right: Photo of “Battle Walls,” courtesy of The Mint Museum; photo by Todd Rosenberg, courtesy of Charlotte Ballet; photo of *Turandot* by Jon Silla, courtesy of Opera Carolina; photo of artist Sichong Xie, courtesy of McColl Center

Page 3, top to bottom: Photo of *The Firebird* (artist: Niki de Saint Phalle), courtesy of Bechtler Museum of Modern Art; photo courtesy of Levine Museum of the New South; photo of Jason Karn (as Harlequino in *Pagliacci*) by Mitchell Kearney, courtesy of Opera Carolina

Page 4: Photo by Jon Strayhorn, Media Arts Collective, courtesy of Charlotte Symphony

Page 6, top to bottom: Photo by Genesis Photography Group; photo courtesy of Charlotte Symphony; photo by Genesis Photography Group

Page 10: Photo courtesy of McColl Center

Page 12, top to bottom: Works by artists Max-Carlos Martinez, Leah Rosenberg and Julio Gonzalez, photos courtesy of McColl Center

Pages 14 and 15: Photo by Jeff Cravotta, courtesy of Charlotte Ballet

Page 17: Photo by Alex Cason, courtesy of The Mint Museum

Pages 18 and 20: Photos courtesy of Discovery Place

Page 25: Photo by John Merrick, courtesy of Children’s Theatre of Charlotte