

Report to Alabama State Council on the Arts

submitted by

BLACK BELT COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

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I. Written summary report on what has been accomplished over the last two years

The Black Belt Community Foundation (BBCF) collaborated with the Alabama State Council on the Arts and the Youth & Cultural Committee of the Governor's Black Belt Action Commission to ignite the first ever Black Belt Arts Initiative (BBAI) for twelve underserved yet desperately deserving Black Belt Counties.

The assumptions surrounding the need for an arts initiative which supports the Black Belt region were correct. So much so that in August 2004, the Governor of Alabama passed an Executive Order (**See Attachment A**) that depicts the Alabama Black Belt as of a group of primarily agricultural counties, with dark rich soil, extending east to west across Central Alabama, that currently experience high rates of *poverty*, *illiteracy* and *infant mortality*. It also points out that eight of Alabama's ten lowest scoring school systems on the Stanford Achievement Test between the years 1996 and 2001 were located in the Black Belt counties. This reaffirms the need for an initiative that will help address the critical issues of education and community economic development through the arts.

Note: The twelve counties (Bullock, Choctaw, Dallas, Greene, Hale, Lowndes, Macon, Marengo, Perry, Pickens, Sumter, and Wilcox) served by the Black Belt Arts Initiative mirror the counties served by both the Black Belt Community Foundation and the Governor's Black Belt Action Commission.

The Black Belt Community Foundation embraces the concept that exposure to the arts will enhance a student's overall well-being. BBAI has provided a means for many to integrate art into the curriculum—whether it is the curriculum of a community-led after school tutorial program, such as the Snow Hill Community Center in Wilcox County or through the curriculum supported by local schools such as Booker T. Washington High School's demonstrated leadership in the Macon County's Arts on the Green Festival.

The goals of BBAI are listed below:

- ◆ *To promote artists and arts awareness in twelve counties in the Black Belt;*
- ◆ *To stimulate creativity among our youth;*

- ◆ *To work with communities and individual artists to foster artistic expression and enjoyment;*
- ◆ *To document the work of regional arts and art focused organizations by maintaining a database of artists and art focused organizations in the region;*
- ◆ *To provide grants to artists and art focused organization; and,*
- ◆ *To conduct training sessions and provide technical assistance.*

Building relationships and educating residents across the 12-county region continue to be a critical step in accomplishing the aforementioned goals. These mechanisms also play a crucial role in informing the public of BBAI and its grants process, as well as in organizing, documenting and maintaining a database of all art related experiences in the Black Belt.

The Black Belt region was introduced to the newly created BBAI through a total of **24 meetings** conducted throughout the Black Belt with over **450 participants** and **over 100 volunteers**. The volunteers who worked diligently to share the good news of BBAI were individuals who had little knowledge about the Alabama State Council on the Arts. An entire audience of at least 100 individuals spanning 12 counties is now knowledgeable of the Alabama State Council on the Arts. Newspaper ads and flyers were distributed throughout each community, with the help of BBCF Community Associates. (Note: *BBCF Community Associates are volunteers who are passionate about transforming the Black Belt and who want to make this transformation by linking BBCF to their respective communities and linking their communities to BBCF.*)

Agendas were created and used to provide a thorough understanding of the grant application process. Considering some organizations had never completed a grant application before, it was critical that BBCF staff was made available to thoroughly explain and assist the potential grantees in any way possible.

We consider our method of communicating and spreading the word of BBAI to be a success due to the fact that over the last two years, BBAI received a total of **108 grant applications (with each county represented)**, with **requests totaling over \$287,000**. Since BBAI's inception, \$150,000 has been awarded to 68 community artists and community arts programs in the Black Belt region.

The BBAI Grants Process includes the BBCF staff processing the grant applications and distributing them to members of the grants review committee. The grants review committee is made up of seven representatives from both BBCF and the Youth and Culture Committee of the Governor's Black Belt Action Commission.

The committee reviews each application and ranks them according to the goals of BBAI. The committee then meets and discusses each committee member's ranking of the grants and narrows the selection. Of the applicants

selected, BBCF staff conducts site visits on each applicant. Once the site visits are conducted, the staff recommends that each organization be approved or denied for BBAI grant funds.

Two Grant Awards Programs have been held. The first Grant Awards Program was held on Sunday, June 25, 2006 at 4:00pm at the Slavery and Civil War Museum in Selma with over 100 people in attendance. Twenty-nine arts focused organizations (including artists) were awarded grants ranging from \$500 to \$2,500. The second Grant Awards Ceremony was held on Saturday, June 2, 2007 at 11:00am at the Larry D. Striplin Performing Arts Centre in Selma with over 100 people in attendance and thirty-nine arts focused organizations (including artists) were awarded grants ranging from \$500 to \$3,250.

Once grants are awarded, each grantee provides a detailed report to BBCF detailing the use of the funds no later than the anniversary of the grant award. Site visits are an ongoing process. Staff attends many of the functions that are made possible through BBAI grants, such as the Okra Festival (Lowndes County), Heritage Days (Marengo County) and the George Washington Carver Arts & Crafts Festival (Macon).

The first Black Belt Arts Gathering is one of many accomplishments of BBAI. BBAI Arts Coordinator Whitney Green continues in an enthusiastic manner with the task of building a database of artists and art focused organizations throughout the Black Belt, managing existing arts grants, and scheduling meetings throughout the community to spark dialog among the artists and organizations. The Arts Gathering held on the campus of Judson College in Marion on June 30, 2007 was an opportunity for artists and arts organizations to network as well as to gain additional organizational development skills. This Gathering was inspired by the input from the community meetings held in each of the twelve counties. Ten of the twelve counties served by BBAI were represented at the Gathering.

Groups were asked to bring a visual representation of the mission, goals, and programs of their organizations. Judson's Archibald Hall was filled with posters, canvases, and quilts. There was even a manikin representing the Choctaw County Community Sewing Bee and a plaster column adorning information from Magnolia Grove Museum of Hale County. The event was an enthusiastic learning experience.

Throughout the day, participants broke out into brain-storming and discussion groups, thus meeting new people and learning new ideas. By late afternoon, the collective group established strategies and steps for improving the work of their organizations and maintaining contact among themselves. This information was compiled (**See Attachment B**) and is currently being evaluated as BBAI prepares for its Second Annual Arts Gathering.

BBAI has embarked upon yet another venture with the University of Alabama's Center for Community Based Partnerships—Black Belt 100 Lenses. In the spring of 2007, the idea arose—to distribute cameras to citizens of the Black Belt and ask them to document the life and culture of their communities. After much discussion and dreaming, the pilot project was launched in Sumter County, Alabama. Teachers, counselors, students, and community leaders were brought together to consider the possibilities of such a project. Afterwards, they assisted in the selection of fifteen 7th - 11th grade students who would shape this project into a model that will be carried out in eleven other counties.

Black Belt 100 Lenses uses the *Photovoice* method which combines photography with grassroots social action. Given a camera, film, and a short orientation, each of the participants were asked to capture the images in their life that they see as significant in both positive and negative ways. Throughout the project, discussions about the photographs were recorded in anticipation for a future documentary and book.

The conclusion of the Sumter County project was celebrated with an exhibition of the students' photographs, along with three commissioned pieces by Sumter County artist Linda Muñoz. Muñoz participated in many of the group discussions, and created two mosaics and a quilt that portrayed the themes in the students' photography. An opening reception was held on January 17, 2008 at the Webb Hall Gallery on the campus of the University of West Alabama. An estimated 100 guests gathered to see and hear the story of the Black Belt as told by its youth. The students were also given a chance to share their experience with the project, unanimously stating that they view their lives a bit differently since looking at them through the lens of a camera.

This partnership allowed BBAI to leverage additional dollars to implement this pilot project. In 2008, BBAI plans to continue leveraging funds to support implementing Black Belt 100 Lenses in two additional counties. The overall strategy includes conducting Black Belt 100 Lenses throughout all twelve counties. The long term goals of Black Belt 100 Lenses are:

- ◆ To produce materials (exhibits, book and film documentary) that provide meaningful insight and resources that will be used to educate policy makers and outside organizations;
- ◆ To educate children and other residents about public policy and methods of influencing change; and,
- ◆ To create financial sustainability through sales of produced materials and private donations by interested individuals.

With the Sumter County Black Belt 100 Lenses pilot project completed and Greene County Black Belt 100 Lenses commencing March 2008, BBAI is well on its way to making these long term goals a reality.

II. Plans for this fiscal year—FY 2008

BBCF has many new and exciting plans for 2008—the Black Belt Arts Initiative's (BBAI's) third year of operation. The first and second years of BBAI's existence enabled the installation of the infrastructure necessary to support a larger more comprehensive grants program, the creation and utilization of a database that houses Black Belt artists and arts related programs, and an arts gathering that allowed networking between artists and arts organizations as well as capacity building workshops that strengthen these artists/organizations.

BBAI has identified the following as outcomes for 2008:

- ◆ Award \$200,000 of the \$300,000 (67%) in grants to capable organizations for community arts projects
- ◆ Utilize \$25,000 of the \$300,00 (8%) to support special projects, such as the Annual Arts Gathering and the Black Belt 100 Lenses Project
- ◆ Continue to evaluate previous grantees to determine the effectiveness and the impact of the BBAI grants program
- ◆ Implement the Black Belt 100 Lenses project in two additional counties
- ◆ Host the 2nd Annual Arts Gathering to provide additional networking and organizational training
- ◆ Provide two learning workshops which will focus on continued training and identifying resources
- ◆ Provide an "Integrating Arts in the Curriculum" workshop for Black Belt teachers **and** after-school tutorial organizations
- ◆ Develop a strategy to create lesson plans for teachers and tutors which will enable them to integrate "local arts" into core curriculum through conversations with local partners
- ◆ Integrate an ARTS page onto the BBCF website www.blackbeltfound.org where listings of artists and organizations, including biographies and pictures, in addition to arts events and announcements will be posted
- ◆ Begin to conduct and record interviews with artists, festival coordinators, and other arts organizations using training from ASCI

- ◆ Attend the Alabama Folklife Association's Alabama Community Scholars Institute (ASCI) to receive training in fieldwork
- ◆ Attend Your Town Alabama Workshop to make contacts and learn about resources in order to explore the possibility of organizing a "Black Belt Design Initiative"

III. How many organizations/artists have been identified

Eighty nine (89) organizations and ninety-three (93) artists have been identified and information is being collected on a continuous basis. The artists include visual artists, musicians, and writers. (**See Attachment C**)

The Inventory Form (**See Attachment D**) will be used to collect information that will be posted on the website.

IV. Trends you have discovered

Over the last two years, BBAI has noted the following as trends among its grantees:

- ◆ 25 of 67 (37%) grants awarded were in the area of performing arts
- ◆ 14 of 67 (21%) grants awarded were in the area of the traditional arts which embrace the Black Belt culture and heritage, including, quilting, sewing, basket weaving, and community festivals

V. Statement to why the Council should continue support of this project.

The ultimate goal of the Black Belt Arts Initiative is to effect long-term institutional change in the region by stimulating art creation, art appreciation, and art administration in the Black Belt. As such, a significant change in the following indicators will be the true measure of success. These indicators include improvement in the educational achievements of Black Belt children, increase in awareness and exposure to the arts of Black Belt children and adults, and the development of an inventory of artists and arts programs within the Black Belt.

Short-term indicators of success include the number of persons exposed to arts and arts related programs, community organizations in the region participating in arts related programs and engaging community artists and communities served by the project.

It is the intent of the BBCF to evaluate both the outcomes and impact of the project. Since the full impact of the project cannot be determined in a year or two, a longitudinal evaluation will be conducted using the resources of Auburn University and the University of Alabama, who are both partners of the BBCF.

The partnership between BBCF, the Culture and Youth Committee of the Black Belt Action Commission and the Alabama State Council of the Arts

allows BBCF to provide arts education and appreciation to an underserved area of the state as well as to build an inventory of Black Belt artists and arts related programs. Whitney Green, arts coordinator, continues to be an asset identifying and documenting various artists and arts programs throughout the Black Belt. Grants management is not a task for the faint of heart. Whitney has worked efficiently at managing an average of 34 grants per year while simultaneously managing the Black Belt 100 Lenses project and creating a database to house the inventory of Black Belt artists and arts organizations. Without an energetic personality and a personal love for the arts, this task would prove daunting for most. Whitney embraces the challenges and works to provide an assortment of opportunities for those (artists and organizations) affiliated with Black Belt arts. Other BBCF personnel work closely with Whitney, when necessary, to ensure the success of BBAI.

During the two past years, BBCF has had much success in providing networking opportunities for arts and cultural organizations to over 21 organizations in the Black Belt at the first ever Black Belt Arts Gathering. A listserv for the arts organizations to effectively communicate was an outcome of the Arts Gathering. Grants totaling \$150,000 were awarded to over 50 organizations. The 2008 current budget of \$300,000 represents \$225,000 (75%) in grants and special projects and \$75,000 to support the administration of these programs.

Thank you for your support in the Black Belt Community Foundation's role to help design and implement Alabama's first Black Belt Arts Initiative. We are excited with the progress of the Black Belt Arts Initiative and look forward to having the Alabama State Council on the Arts' continued support as the Black Belt Community Foundation continues to serve as a vehicle for community philanthropy and regional change for artists and arts related programs and organization's in Alabama's Black Belt.