A Conversation with Jeffreen Hayes, Executive Director of Chicago-Based Arts Funder Threewalls

Mike Scutari | December 02, 2022

JEFFREEN HAYES, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THREEWALLS. PHOTO: JOHANNE RAHAMAN

Dr. Jeffreen Hayes is the executive director of Threewalls, a Chicago-based organization that "fosters contemporary art practices that respond to lived experiences, encouraging connections beyond art."

Founded in 2003 as a brick-and-mortar gallery, Threewalls has evolved into a community resource that provides

innovative programming and creative space for artists. It also provides grants, including through its Propeller Fund, which supports groups based in Cook County, Illinois, and the RaD Lab+Outside the Walls Fellowship, which supports ALAANA (Africa, Latinx, Asian, Arab and Native American) creatives.

A trained art historian and curator, Hayes frequently speaks about art history, Black art and activism. She has given TEDx talks on "Arts Activism in Simple Steps" and "Small Great Conversations on Race," and has spoken at the National Gallery of Art and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Dr. Hayes earned a Ph.D. in American Studies from the College of William and Mary, a masters in art history from Howard University, and a B.A. in humanities from Florida International University. She became Threewalls' executive director in 2015.

I recently caught up with Hayes in Chicago to discuss her biggest influences, the best advice she's ever received, and the importance of accountability in the post-2020 world of philanthropy. Here are some excerpts from that discussion, which have been edited for clarity.

What made you decide you wanted to work in the nonprofit sector?

I don't know that I consciously wanted to work in the nonprofit sector. I came to the sector by changing my major from chemistry, with the intent to become a pharmacist, to wanting to work in a museum. I fell in love with art history after taking a humanities course

and loved learning how art could be connected to what was happening socially and politically.

I became a curator because I enjoy getting to know an artist's practice, their humanity, and presenting that to the public through an exhibition. I then transitioned from museums to community-based, artist-centered organizations because I really love working with artists and providing them the kind of support that they deserve but don't always receive.

Who are your biggest influences?

My biggest influence is my mother. Over the past few years, when I've done public talks or lectures, I introduce her as part of my work and as part of the reason why I'm able to do what I do.

I jokingly say she "blocked and tackled" for me. My father didn't understand what a career in the arts would look like, and I think that's probably very common with a lot of parents. My mother really went to bat for me and said, "Let her follow her dreams." My mother is from Dominica, and what I've learned over the years is that the women on my maternal side all have this understanding of community and love, care, and respecting each other's humanity. So my mother is my biggest influence, in addition to my maternal line.

An artist who I oftentimes call my godmother is Augusta Savage, a Harlem Renaissance sculptor who worked from the 1920s to about the mid-1940s. She was a Black woman who, against all of the odds, had a successful international career as an artist. She headed the Harlem Community Arts Center and gained a

reputation for love of community and supporting artists. When Black artists moved to New York and went to Harlem, even before moving, they were told to seek her out because she would help.

It's only over the past five years that I've had the opportunity to delve deeper into Augusta Savage, and because I curated an exhibition of her work, I saw alignment with myself. And so the way that she moved and cared for her folks has absolutely influenced the way that I move and care for my folks.

What's the best piece of advice you've ever received?

The best piece of advice I've received is to follow my intuition. Throughout my life, I haven't always done that. Even though I heard the voice, I would do something different, only to realize I should have listened to my intuition. So that is something I absolutely practice today — listening to my intuition and paying attention to how I feel when I'm approached about something.

What makes you optimistic about the state of philanthropy? Pessimistic?

What makes me optimistic is the shift — which feels very intentional, but also a little bit abrupt, particularly because of the pandemic — to practice racial equity when it comes to funding, and having foundations do the internal work to rethink and recalibrate how they have been giving. It seems to me that the state of philanthropy is moving toward "let's be much more equitable and understand the systemic issues that have

caused these huge disparities," and that makes me optimistic.

I'm also optimistic about the shift in who gets hired and how foundations are putting folks from historically excluded groups in positions of power to move money to the communities that need it the most. I don't know that the shift in practicing racial justice or racial equity would be happening without these folks.

As for being pessimistic, while foundations moved a little more quickly during the pandemic to disburse funding, it feels like it's still moving slowly in terms of practicing these values of racial equity and racial justice. While there may be movement in terms of funding organizations of color, I think there is also a disparity when it comes to gender dynamics. It's really disheartening to see that intersectionality is not fully addressed when thinking about or acting upon funding for equity.

This idea that things are moving slowly has come up a lot in my conversations with nonprofit leaders, especially given the fact that it can be difficult to determine if and how funders are following through on their pledges from 2020.

One of the biggest issues around all of this is accountability. Where are the accountability measures? Not just for the foundations, but also the organizations that they are funding, particularly the ones that are white-led, which have shifted or have been supporting historically excluded folks. There's still a lack of a racial analysis or intersectional analysis.

Accountability would help us get to a place of true movement work that can shift the entire field, versus a corner of it.

What's the last great book you read?

The last great book I read is called "Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being," by Kevin Quashie. I've been rereading it in our efforts to center the humanity of artists, and more specifically, ALAANA or Black Indigenous people of color.

We need to think about what it means to support this notion that folks are much more than a negative stereotype. In the case of Kevin Quashie, his argument is that so much of Blackness, Black lives, Black culture is read through the lens of death, but there's so much more, that Black humanity can exist within a Black world where you just get *to be*. This idea informs the work that we do at Threewalls and our efforts to honor Black aliveness or livingness, rather than always kind of focusing our energy on death.

Any parting thoughts?

I've been thinking a lot about what it means to trust and respect the process. That would be my parting thought for nonprofits working with artists or other constituents. Part of honoring our humanity and the humanity of others is to trust the process and to respect it. And so I think we all need a little bit more of that.

Featured

A Conversation with Jeffreen Hayes, Executive Director of Chicago-Based Arts Funder Threewalls

With a Higher Ed Partnership, a New Foundation Is Spotlighting Indigenous History and Culture

We Surveyed Hundreds of Philanthropy Professionals. Here's What We Found

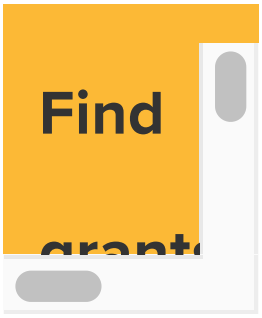
"Unprecedent Change" or More of the Same? Reports Assess Funders' 2020 Response

---

Inside Philanthropy

Three Questions We Have Abou

Explore GrantFinder, a powerful resource for IP subscribers.



Become a member and find grants for nonprofits with our extensive research on who's funding what and why.

SUBSCRIBE

Follow IP

Quick Links

About Us

Contact Us

Consultants Directory

FAQ & Help

Become a Subscriber

Individual Subscriptions →