This executive summary, based on a full report by Pam Korza and Barbara Schaffer Bacon of Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts, focuses on two primary areas of inquiry: the efficacy and value of a humanities-informed and arts-based approach for community research and planning; and community outcomes of the Chester Made project. A companion report provides detailed description and analysis of Grant History and Assessment Methods and Results.¹

¹ A companion report was written by Dr. Steven Kauffman, associate professor in the Center for Social Work Education at Widener University and graduate student Mary Beth Semerod. It includes two sections that provide...
In 2014 and 2015, the Pennsylvania Humanities Council (PHC) led a bold partnership with the City of Chester, Gas & Electric Arts (later renamed Just Act), Chester Arts Alive!, Widener University, and The Artist Warehouse that is grounded in the belief “that democracy is animated by imaginative humanities programming—by people creatively engaged in history, storytelling, and dialogue about issues affecting their communities.” In the project that came to be known proudly as Chester Made, partners transformed typical public planning process by engaging the people of Chester, Pennsylvania, in arts-based processes and events that would recognize and promote Chester’s arts, culture, and creativity in the City’s revitalization plans.

Chester Made grew out of previous community-development efforts and the vision for a Cultural Corridor to be developed, stretching from Widener University to City Hall. The idea to take an arts- and humanities-informed approach to civic processes was inspired by nationally known dialogue efforts, as well as a previous Chester-based dialogue effort, that aimed to meet residents in their own neighborhoods and settings and to foster dialogue on community concerns. It was also significantly influenced by a summer 2014 peer exchange to Washington, DC, by a Chester Made core planning team supported by the German Marshall Fund, during which team members met with city planners, artists, developers, entrepreneurs, and National Endowment for the Arts representatives to discuss how to reach diverse urban communities through arts and culture initiatives. Together these efforts set the stage for Chester Made’s own unique engagement strategies.

As a discovery project, Chester Made sought to build knowledge of the full range of Chester’s arts, humanities, and other cultural assets and resources. As a demonstration project, it was one step in a longer journey to build community relationships, leadership, and civic engagement capacity. A central programmatic feature of Chester Made was a series of Story Gatherings incorporating story and theater techniques created by Gas & Electric Arts and facilitated by a local ensemble. With a commitment to community engagement and ownership at its heart, the project gained momentum, scope, and synergy. The whole of the project encompassed the planning and organizing process itself, which engaged the core team and Chester community advisors, other arts events that grew out of the project, a strategic
detailed description and analysis of Grant History and Assessment Methods and Results. These sections provide community context regarding the impetus and foundation for the Chester Made project; description of the Story Gathering events and processes; analysis of data collected through stories and a questionnaire; and the results of a community cultural asset mapping including an online map and a characterization of what the map portrays about the cultural resources of Chester, Pennsylvania, past and present.
communications campaign, and a culminating presentation of findings to the Chester City Council, jointly delivered by the Chester Made ensemble and a representative of the City Planning Department.

Chester Made delivered on its discovery and demonstration intents in many ways. It expanded who participates in public process; 1,518 people participated in Chester Made, representing a wide cross section of the Chester community. Chester Made revealed a spectrum of cultural assets that had not been fully known or acknowledged, captured concretely in a Cultural Asset Map that Chester leaders and citizens can now proudly point to and use. The Story Gatherings revealed that the impact of arts and culture on Chester and its people is profound and multidimensional. Arts and culture are valued as a source of personal wellbeing, a form of connection to the past, and a force for bringing individuals together in community. In resurrecting the history and stories about the shaping of Chester that hold meaning to the community, Chester Made generated a palpable sense of hope and pride among participants, albeit a guarded hope based on previous unmet expectations.

Chester Made has perhaps been most potent in making connections, improving existing relationships and building new relationships within and across sectors, catalyzing new collaborations, and developing leadership in the community for future efforts. In the process, much learning has taken place regarding what it takes to plan and implement an arts-based and humanities-informed approach to civic planning and community building.

**WHAT DISTINGUISHED CHESTER MADE**

The Chester Made project is situated in the context of a significant national trend in *creative placemaking*.² Whereas creative placemaking has often been a top-down initiative steered by urban planning, Chester Made demonstrated a strong commitment to building ownership and initiative across a spectrum of sectors and people. It was anchored in a set of somewhat uncommon partners—a state humanities council, a university, the city planning department, and local arts organizations and entrepreneurs—and in a theory that the project would need to find and cultivate “anchor people” who could work together and through their organizations to make progress and sustain efforts beyond the discovery phase.

² The National Endowment for the Arts study “Creative Placemaking” states: “In creative placemaking, partners from public, private, nonprofit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities. Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired.”
Chester Made is also distinctive in that it was led by a state humanities council and informed by a humanities way of working. As history and humanities organizations have sought to bring public relevance to the humanities, the Pennsylvania Humanities Council (PHC) is on the leading edge through its initiative to foster civic engagement through humanities and arts. In the design and implementation of Chester Made, PHC’s executive director, Laurie Zierer, underscored the humanities ethos and approach toward the projects goals. “People and human stories had to come first ... the honoring of community knowledge, the celebration of the community’s creative assets. This is the pre-work that must happen to build community muscle of understanding, collaboration, and leadership for fuller civic processes around planning in the future.” This pilot advanced the council’s own investigation and learning about its role, capacity, and efficacy.

The branding of the whole project as Chester Made lent it a symbolic value and a vibrancy. In the context of community revitalization, the Chester Made branding offers a lesson to the field. Chester Made sought to contribute to a new public narrative that would counter the one focused on a distressed economy, a high rate of violence, poor conditions in the schools, etc. Branding is not a common strategy in revitalization efforts or in arts and humanities programming. However, Chester Made demonstrated that it can be a catalytic force for engaging people and helping to shift public narrative. The label and related logo created by artist Devon Walls carry resonant historic association and convey the sense of a trusted brand that can be applied to anything authentically arts and culture that is Chester Made. It worked for young and old—reclaiming the old and what has been lost and fostering new. In these ways, a humanities sensibility infused the branding, enabling people to draw meaning and value from it. A comprehensive marketing, press, and engagement campaign was implemented that involved not only the creation of a brand logo and collateral materials, but a social media campaign, and pop-up events that aimed to foster a greater sense of pride in community among Chester residents and counter negative press and stereotypes held by outsiders.

THE STORY GATHERINGS AS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND DATA COLLECTION

The Chester Made project afforded not only the opportunity to tell the story of art in the community, but to apply the power of art and humanities in the process of collecting this information. In February 2015, five Story Gatherings and three Story Corners were held throughout the community. Designed by Lisa Jo Epstein of Just Act with Don Newton of Chester Arts Alive!, and facilitated by the 10-member Chester
Made ensemble, the sessions were hosted by a variety of arts, civic, human service, faith-based, youth development, education, senior housing, and other organizations, and they attracted more than 350 residents sharing 140 stories.

Story Corners were one-on-one interviews, and Story Gatherings were larger guided group story-telling sessions in which ensemble members facilitated simultaneous Story Circles that emphasized equal participation and attentive listening. The Story Circles were followed by reflection activities, and then a “Gift Back” to all participants, using short Image theatre pieces accompanied by a percussionist. Gift Backs reflected the heart of one or more stories that were shared, including the themes, emotions, and ideas conveyed. Participants were invited literally cultural meaning to them. All of these creative techniques were designed to actively engage residents, honor the individual and collective voices of residents, and to reinforce that their voices were heard and valued.

The Cultural Asset Map resulting from the story events is viewed as a tangible and potentially generative product highlighting Chester’s cultural resources past and present. In addition to being a creative vehicle for community engagement, the Story Corners and Story Gatherings offered a creative form of cultural inventory and data collection; the latter analyzed by Dr. Steven Kauffman and graduate student Mary Beth Semerod of Widener University. In total, 141 stories were collected and 120 surveys were completed. The online ESRI map created by the City Planning Department, PHC, and The Artist Warehouse directly addresses the city’s need for an inventory of existing cultural assets in order to inform future cultural corridor development as well as leverage funding and projects. Some remarked that it is significant that the map is located on the City’s website, an indicator that the City is invested. Beyond city officials, the map has generated interest within the Chester Business Association (CBA), which sees the development and promotion of arts and culture as part of a strategy to shift perceptions of safety and offer attractions that will help businesses to grow downtown. Widener theater faculty and students will be creating a walking, living-history, theater event that highlights some of the locations on the map. And Widener’s dean of arts and sciences, Sharon Meagher, noted that the integration of Widener University and its cultural assets alongside community assets on the same map is important “to communicate the message that we are all Chester Made.”

“The cultural asset map] is a GOOD THING. If you don’t know what we have to offer, you would breeze right on by.”
-RICHARD WILCOX, OWNER, PHATSO’S BAKERY

The project culminated with three events: a preview of findings of Chester Made activities performed by the Chester Made Ensemble at Open Mike’s Café; the city’s first-ever evening
Arts Loop, which brought to life points on the Cultural Asset Map through a cultural corridor walk highlighting artists and organizations; and finally, a presentation by the Chester Made Ensemble and Latifah Griffin of the Planning Department before the Chester City Council in the form of a performative summary of the whole Chester Made project, along with key findings and the Cultural Asset Map.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DID CHESTER MADE MAKE?

Chester Made increased civic participation and fostered new ways for residents to bring their voices into civic concerns and processes.

Chester Made expanded who participates. More than 1,500 people (1,518) participated in Chester Made in the roles of core team (18), 3 advisors (50), Story Gathering participants (350), attendees at related events (745), and as Facebook followers (355). The Story Gatherings attracted and welcomed a wide cross section of Chester residents in a range of locations from churches to the senior center, Boys & Girls Club, City Hall, Entrepreneur Works, The Artist Warehouse, and others.

Chester Made succeeded in engaging people who do not always participate in public processes and in making them feel heard and validated. The Story Circles and the Gift Backs drew out and honored individual voices. One person interviewed reflected, “The most powerful part was seeing people let down barriers and begin to share.” Stories offered an alternative way “to see and hear actual data.” Participants realized their stories were more than just a personal experience; they were valued by others. Stories often took on new meaning for the original teller. "By putting the personal into the theatrical, the community was able to re-see their own strengths," Lisa Jo Epstein explained.

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3 Core team members included: Laurie Zierer, PHC; Donald Newton and Carita Morgan, Chester Arts Alive!; Lisa Jo Epstein, Just Act; Lisa Dennis, Chester Office of Community Liaison; Latifah Griffin and Paul Fritz, Chester Planning Department representatives; Sharon Meagher, Steve Kaufman, and Mary Beth Semerod, Widener University; Devon Walls, The Artist Warehouse; Pam Korza and Barbara Schaffer Bacon, Animating Democracy/Americans for the Arts; Bob Leonard and Jon Catherwood-Ginn, Virginia Tech Department of Theater; David Brown, The Marketing Collaborative; Bryan Clark, PHC Operations Manager; Michelle Bowen, PHC Program Assistant; Kevin Jin, PHC Haverford Intern.
Arts and humanities were valued by community stakeholders and civic leaders as an effective approach for civic engagement and community research and planning.

Community leaders were exposed positively to and gained a better understanding of the role of art and artists in community engagement and planning processes. Key to developing this understanding was the actual experience of working with artists on the core team and in experiencing the Story Gatherings first hand. Planning Department staff member Latifah Griffin and planning consultant Paul Fritz recognized creative strategies as valuable enhancements to planning process, albeit requiring flexibility on the part of planning professionals. Griffin said that Chester Made brought the Planning Department into the 21st century in terms of civic engagement and wished that all of her meetings achieved the kind of human dimension to public issues that the arts fostered in Chester Made. She explained that, while the Planning Department was knowledgeable about the presence of the arts community, staff did not understand how much of an impact the arts have had and could have on community revitalization. “Most of the artists have been operating underground,” she said. Through the Chester Made process all of the major players in the arts community are now “visibly” working together, she observed.

Chester Made had, perhaps, its greatest impact in making connections, building relationships, and catalyzing collaborations. In its short duration, Chester Made succeeded in making inroads to dispel conflicts or perceived conflicts and to develop relationships in what some people described as a sometimes “cliquey,” “fractious,” and “splintered” community. The collective planning process facilitated by PHC connected people who had limited or no previous occasion to work together.

Many new collaborations between area artists, non-profit groups, and institutions resulted. Here are just some examples, with more detailed in the full report:
The Artist Warehouse has become highly visible and engaged in many new collaborative projects, for example with gallery and property owner Linda Braceland to mount community painting parties in the downtown and an Artist Warehouse furniture exhibition in Braceland’s gallery. The Artist Warehouse’s Devon Walls teamed with several Widener faculty and Dean Sharon Meagher of the College of Arts and Sciences in the development of a business plan for Walls to open a new café that will sell Widener’s fair trade brand of WU Brew coffee as well as advice and research from Widener’s School of Law on property ownership issues and incorporation and nonprofit status related to Walls’s creative entrepreneurship.

Open Mike’s Café led by Mike Miller is the locus of new collaborations with Widener University: Widener Nights, featuring spoken word and musical performances; a dinner theater production; and future projects are in the works, including civic theater projects, and writing workshops and tutoring as a forerunner for a planned Chester Writer’s House.

A new project entitled “One Day in Chester” has been proposed for funding from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, spearheaded by the NIA Center and involving artists, nonprofits that sponsor culture and/or arts programs, and Widener University. A day-long event in the cultural corridor will feature organizations and artists located outside the corridor, capitalizing on the new attention placed on the corridor and the Chester Made brand. Notably this project has moved forward without the assistance of the Pennsylvania Humanities Council—demonstrating that Chester Made has built greater capacity through the creation of sustainable collaborative relationships.4

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4 A list of participants as of the time the PCA Letter of Intent was submitted included: Boys & Girls Club of Chester, Chester Arts Alive! Chester Historical Preservation Society, DeAira Womack (artist), Don Newton (actor), Hedgerow Theatre, John Carr (singer), K and Light Productions, Markiya Collier, Monika Thomas-Rhodes (dancer), Nation of Islam, Open Mike’s Café, Patricia Wagner (photographer), Philadelphia Women’s Theatre Festival, Prime, AMC, Ruth L. Bennett Home/Wilson Center, Mafalda (dancer/percussionist), Spirit News, St. Daniel’s Ray
Chester Made recognized and amplified existing and new leaders in the community, giving them a platform to exercise their leadership in a broader public realm and in new ways. As Toni Truehart of Entrepreneur Works observed, “It became about community raising itself rather than an entity from the outside coming in and solving a problem.” For certain civic leaders, Chester Made became a platform to exercise leadership; e.g. for Lisa Dennis, in her position as a community liaison in city government, to diversify and deepen the City’s community engagement strategies. Likewise, Latifah Griffin in the Planning Department gained an opportunity to serve as a spokesperson with the media and with the Chester Made ensemble, along with serving on the core team.

Chester Made Ensemble members view themselves anew as agents of civic change and are motivated to do more community-based work. They see themselves as active participants in the larger community and expressed a strong desire to use their skills in relation to significant social issues in Chester. Several ensemble members already see immediate application of skills in their current professional work as therapists and in youth development.

Both Devon Walls and Linda Braceland turned from early skeptics of the project to champions and drivers, and both gained social capital through their efforts. Walls was acknowledged by the Business Association as an important player in the downtown and was also recently invited to join the Rotary Club.

Dean Sharon Meagher seized the possibilities that Chester Made afforded to build even stronger relationships between Widener University and the Chester community. She played an active catalytic role in making connections, introducing Widener faculty, students, and administrators to new contacts, and working with them to develop new collaborative projects.

Chester Made served to advance Widener University’s civic engagement mission and, in particular, the College of Arts and Science’s plans to connect in meaningful ways with the Chester community. Faculty, administrators, and students who had historically thought of

of Hope CDC, Stephanie Perez (poet/musician), Van Buren Payne (artist), Widener University, YES Center (Yes We Can Achievement & Cultural Center).
community engagement as being about solving problems in Chester now see more reciprocal opportunities. Dean Meagher stated, “Many of my faculty were yearning to connect to the mission of the university but they didn’t know how; this project has helped them think beyond standard service learning courses to the creation of new projects. ...The Chester Made Project helped us drive more civic initiatives more quickly.” She expects student involvement to grow, both because their faculty are involved and there will be more related courses and because their perceptions of Chester are changing as a result of the Chester Made campaign.

SUCCESS FACTORS: WHAT MADE CHESTER MADE WORK?

The core team grounded the project with critical local context, knowledge, sensitivity, and credibility. Chester Made relied significantly on the core team’s leadership and hands-on work. People like Don Newton, Lisa Dennis, Dr. Steven Kauffman, Paul Fritz, and others offered a through-line of leadership from previous efforts to ensure that Chester Made built on them. Facilitated by PHC, the core team served well to distribute local leadership for the project.

Thoughtful conception and execution of the Story Gatherings on the part of lead artists and the ensemble, and input from the core team, contributed to their power and the outcomes. Specific factors included:

Lisa Jo Epstein brought multi-dimensional expertise to the project, including a critical understanding of Chester from past experience there, skill in community-based theater practice, and sensitivity to her outsider status, which ensured that local artists were doing and being recognized for the work.

Don Newton contributed a critical understanding of the community, which ensured strong connections to host sites, recruitment of both ensemble artists and participants to the Story Gatherings, and making meaning of the stories.

Composing the ensemble entirely with individuals who live in and know Chester lent authenticity and credibility with community members. It made people feel comfortable and understood, which helped to draw out stories.

Holding the Story Gatherings in various community spaces and settings helped to

“IT WAS REALLY IMPORTANT THAT WE WERE FROM THE COMMUNITY.
You can only understand it by living in and being from here.
This was essential to people trusting and opening up.”

- STEFAN MATTHEWS,
CHESTER MADE ENSEMBLE
ensure a range of participation and perspectives. Those who attended were on familiar ground, and it was important to meet community members where they felt comfortable.

Stories about arts and culture as community assets provided an easy entry point (whereas stories about a divisive issue may not have). Although many people were shy or at first felt they didn’t have a worthy story, the process worked; as one person opened up, then others did, too.

Creative engagement techniques enlivened, engaged, and reflected participants. The opportunity to “get on the map” (participants wrote cultural assets on post-it notes and posted those on a map) brought something participatory and tangible to the dialogue. Gift Backs (a theatrical presentation of a select story at the end of each Gathering) were highly effective in honoring people’s stories and demonstrating that people were heard.

Chester Made stimulated other art events that further amplified and showcased arts in Chester to the broader community. The concept of “tactical urbanism (creating small cultural events that build momentum and excitement) that the core team learned about on a peer exchange in Washington, D.C. proved inspiring. This idea manifested in events curated by The Artist Warehouse such as the Made in Chester furniture exhibition and the Arts Loop 14 walking tour, as well as other community event at Open Mike’s Café. About the Arts Loop, Lakesha Logan, an artist and staff member at J. Lewis Crozer Library wrote: “The event was wonderful...absolutely wonderful. Something that I along with so many others (artists, residence, orgs.) have been waiting to see for a very long time. I enjoyed witnessing diversity in so many ways (age, ethnic, social groups) all come together with an understanding that "The Arts Loop, Chester Made, Chester Arts Alive, The Community of Chester, is so much greater than one person or entity. Thank you, thank you, thank you & it was an honor and I am humbled to have simply been present. I look forward to supporting more in the near future.”

The Pennsylvania Humanities Council’s coordination of Chester Made was crucial to its success, while at the same time PHC created a platform for the people of Chester to “do it together.” PHC was doggedly committed to engaging and building leadership within the community, understanding that the Council, as an outside agency, could be a catalyst but not a sustaining force. Extensive time and energy was required on the part of PHC to navigate the dynamics and politics of various sectors of the community, connect and convene the many stakeholders, and even mediate tensions. PHC was key to keeping the big picture and goals in mind while often kicking in on detail work of

“I am making a difference.
I’m being part of the change.”
SHINELLE GRAVES,
CHESTER MADE ENSEMBLE
program planning and logistics. It also coordinated fundraising and communications. Laurie Zierer received unsolicited respect and praise for her gentle leadership, listening, humility, and ability to keep the project on a strong path while allowing others’ strengths and leadership to come forward.

LOOKING AHEAD:
WHAT’S NEEDED TO MAINTAIN THE MOMENTUM OF CHESTER MADE?

“You want to ride the wave while the wave is high. Sustainability is key.”
Joy Taylor, Special Events Coordinator, City of Chester

As interviewees imagined what Chester Made’s success would look like in the future, they held both a sense of hope and possibility and concern that momentum will prove challenging to sustain. People expect that City government will not provide leadership or resources for extending Chester Made and acknowledge that forward movement must come from within the community. They articulated that they felt it would take to build upon that success.

Chester Made needs to be more than a name. “It has to be something.” It has a clear purpose, an agenda, and a home where it can continue to work on behalf of arts and culture. Many interviewees said that tangible things need to keep happening to maintain trust and momentum.

Relationships, leadership, and assets that emerged through Chester Made need to be tapped and further developed. People who have been activated by Chester Made need to know what new opportunities to connect to. There needs to be a consortium or coordinating team such as what the core team provided and skilled and sensitive project direction such as what the Pennsylvania Humanities Council provided. Certain people have indicated their interest in providing leadership, and interviewees acknowledged others who have already stepped up and should be encouraged to help define and lead next efforts.
**Invest in the Chester Made ensemble to apply creative strategies to other community concerns.** Ensemble members are motivated to apply newly gained skills and capacity. To position these and perhaps additional Chester individuals to use creative approaches to civic and social concerns will require further training as well as assistance in coalescing the ensemble for action.

**City government makes arts and cultural development an integral dimension of Chester’s revitalization efforts.** People want to see Chester Made “on the agenda,” with the support of City government after the Mayoral transition. Most agree that there should be a broader private/public partnership to lead and sustain efforts.

**Plan for and support cultural and economic development building on the synergies that emerged through Chester Made.** Many point to arts and culture as a critical and promising economic development strategy for Chester modeled on what has occurred within other communities. Interviewees pointed to the Cultural Corridor as a key part of the picture, but they want to see support for cultural resources and artists outside the corridor and in the neighborhoods as well. They want to see coordinated efforts among artists, cultural leaders, and organizations and between the cultural community and the City and business community.

**Youth benefit from the cultural assets identified by Chester Made, and that arts-based activity can create opportunities for youth to participate in the community.** With limited arts education in the schools or in other out-of-school settings, many people interviewed underscored that future plans focus on Chester youth, their parents, and school teachers and staff. Future efforts could be strengthened not only in how youth can be served, but also more connected to the development of what Chester could be.

The Cultural Asset Map is used and continually updated as documentation and a visual celebration of Chester’s creative resources and a visioning tool. The information on the cultural asset map can be integrated into city projects and land use planning in a number of ways.

**What has been learned and developed through Chester Made can position the community to leverage other resources.** Chester Made already proved this possibility. Major support totaling $102,000 was provided by the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, PECO, the German Marshall Fund, and the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, along with many more in kind and cash contributions from the partners and Chester community. PHC, an independent affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, contributed more than $91,000 alone. Both the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and The Barra Foundation have closely followed Chester Made activities as a way to learn about the community and identify leadership, and they show potential as future funders.

**Widener faculty members, administrators, and students continue to build mutually respectful, trusting, and meaningful relationships with the Chester community.** Key leaders at Widener have bought into the power of “bigger ideas” as represented by Chester Made. Currently Widener is planning a grant project that will utilize performing arts methodologies
and employ local artists collaborating with faculty and students to address remaining concerns around safety and trust so that collaborative partnerships can continue to grow in healthy directions.

CONCLUSION

Chester Made set out to recognize and promote arts and culture in the City of Chester and to harness its power as a force for community revitalization. The project did this and more. Creative processes in the form of Story Gatherings as well as other arts events served effectively to transform data collection and planning into lively opportunities that welcomed and engaged community members with meaning and spirit about arts and cultural assets and their value. The project revealed a spectrum of cultural assets that had not been fully known or acknowledged. Chester Made created space to be heard for people who have been disenfranchised from public processes. The branding as “Chester Made” lent a symbolic value and a vibrancy to the project.

Chester Made built the city’s civic engagement capacity and muscle. It catalyzed new relationships and substantiated developing ones. The project recognized and amplified existing and new leaders in the community, giving them a platform to exercise their leadership in a broader public realm or in new ways. The Chester Made ensemble members, most of whom do not identify as artists, gained skills in using theater and story circles with civic purpose and view themselves anew as agents of civic change, motivated to do more community-based work. Chester Made served to advance Widener University’s civic engagement mission, in particular, the College of Arts and Sciences’s plans to connect faculty and students in meaningful ways with the Chester community and the community within the University. While the Pennsylvania Humanities Council’s leadership for Chester Made was crucial to Chester Made’s success, the Council was deliberate in providing a humanities platform for the people of Chester to “do it together.” Community leaders testified to PHC’s and Chester Made’s effectiveness in building community ownership and leadership of the project.
As a result of this dynamic initiative, there is hope and excitement in the promise of new artist and cultural leadership in the downtown and in elevating new as well as longstanding cultural assets that are “Chester Made through and through.” More than 1,500 people imagined forward to the role that arts and culture can and should play in the city’s revitalization, including a cultural corridor infused by a new generation of artists, entrepreneurs, and leaders working in collaboration with long-time leaders.

Many in Chester share a concern that Chester Made’s momentum won’t be sustained, as has been true of previous initiatives. However, the Chester Made process elicited a number of ideas from within the community, and leaders from cultural, business, and civic sectors are motivated to step up and define and advance next steps.

Finally, beyond its significance to Chester, Chester Made was an informative and valuable test by the Pennsylvania Humanities Council of “applied humanities.” Nationally, as arts-based civic engagement has taken hold over the last fifteen years, the application of humanities, specifically within civic processes such as Chester Made, is new territory. Other humanities agencies and agents of civic change can indeed benefit from the rich learnings of Chester Made.

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