



Executive Director—The Ashe County Arts Council, West Jefferson, NC

THE OPPORTUNITY

The Ashe County Arts Council seeks an energetic and visionary leader to serve as the organization’s Executive Director. The Arts Council’s mission is to enrich the cultural life of the region and serve as a vital partner in the well-being of Ashe County by supporting individual creativity, cultural heritage, tourism development, and lifelong learning through the arts.

THE ORGANIZATION

The Ashe County Arts Council is recognized statewide for its contributions to the cultural and economic life of northwestern North Carolina. Headquartered in the town of West Jefferson (population 1,300) in a historic WPA-era building that has served as a community center, home to the VFW, and later the 4-H Club, the Arts Center was built from the same stone used in the construction of the nearby Blue Ridge Parkway. The facility was renovated in 1993 to create a large exhibition gallery and gallery shop along with staff offices and a kitchen.

The Arts Council has been a significant force in revitalizing downtown West Jefferson, a former furniture manufacturing town that is now a vibrant center of local commerce and tourism. As with many small towns in North Carolina, empty storefronts confirmed the loss of manufacturing jobs some three decades ago, but West Jefferson today is known for its art galleries, gift shops, restaurants, and other small businesses, which stay busy year-round.

In recent years, many artists, musicians, craft persons, and retirees have settled in the county, and the Arts Council has simultaneously built a strategic array of cultural

experiences for the enjoyment of local residents and visitors. These programs include traditional Appalachian, contemporary, and classical music concerts; regular celebrations of heritage arts, crafts, and songwriting; a much beloved public art program, a county-wide artists' studio tour; and a well-established literary festival that draw authors from across the country each fall.

Even with such a wealth of arts experiences available to all, a recent survey found that Ashe residents most value and appreciate how the Arts Council works in partnership with the public schools to provide artist residencies, special in-school performances, and the Junior Appalachian Musicians (JAM) Program.

Now in its 43rd year, the Arts Council is governed by a dedicated Board of Directors (20 slots) who give countless hours of volunteer service at events, festivals, and fundraisers. A team of three full-time and one part-time staff manage the day-to-day operations of the organization.

The organization has an annual operating budget of \$325,000, which includes income from:

- Private donations totaling more than \$110,000 raised through a number of event-based fundraisers and an annual fund drive;
- Major corporate supporters of the arts, including SkyLine/SkyBest, a regional broadband service provider, LifeStore Bank, and Blue Ridge Energy;
- Annual grants from the Grassroots Arts Program of the North Carolina Arts Council (NCAC);
- Regional Artist Project Grants from NCAC; and
- Funds from the county for management of the 282-seat theatre/auditorium in the Ashe Civic Center.

THE PLACE

Ashe County, population 28,000, is the northwesternmost county in North Carolina, bordering on Virginia to the north and Tennessee to the west. The mountains here are more pastoral than rugged, and the people are similarly easygoing, hardy, and friendly to newcomers. As a result, Ashe County has become a favorite destination for second-home owners and visitors to the high country, especially in the summer and fall. In recent years, more and more part-time citizens have become full-time residents upon retirement, bringing with them a range of tastes and interests from all over the globe.

Ashe County is a place of stunning natural beauty. The federally protected and picturesque New River meanders through the county, flowing north into Virginia. The New is believed to be the second oldest river on the planet and is one of the least

industrialized in the state. New River State Park provides access to trout fishermen, canoeists, and kayakers. For cyclists, an old railroad grade along the banks of the New is a great ride connecting the communities of Todd and Fleetwood. The Blue Ridge Parkway, one of the most visited national parks in America, bisects the county and offers ample hiking and camping opportunities. Five spectacular hiking trails also thread through Mount Jefferson State Natural Area, a mountaintop park within sight of downtown West Jefferson.

In terms of agriculture, Ashe County is best known for its vast Christmas tree farms, many of which offer “Choose and Cut” opportunities beginning in time for Thanksgiving. Some farms have also added a pumpkin crop to their offerings, and fall festivals can be found throughout the county. Ashe County cheese is a well-known product across the state, as is the country ham produced here. Heritage apple and blueberry orchards have led to the establishment of a new cidery in the town of Lansing, and a flourishing maple syrup operation in Warrensville regularly sells its products at the lively Farmers Market held from April to October on Saturdays in West Jefferson. The Farmers Market features locally grown produce, fish, meats, and the work of local artisans.

Ashe County is home to the Florence Thomas Art School, presenting fine art and heritage craft workshops that appeal to a broad audience. Artist Florence Thomas was born in Ashe County in 1909; she studied at the School of Design for Women in Philadelphia and later with Carolyn Wyeth. She painted hundreds of compelling scenes of her home county, now collected and exhibited at the school. In 2018, thanks in part to her legacy, West Jefferson was selected to host the Watercolor Society of North Carolina’s annual conference and juried show which was hosted by the Florence School.

One of Florence Thomas’s contemporaries, Ola Belle Reed, is described as “a trailblazing pioneer for women in the old time and bluegrass music traditions.” Reed was born in 1915 at Grassy Creek in Ashe County. Her song “High on a Mountain” was popularized by Del McCoury and is now a bluegrass standard. The Ashe County Arts Council celebrates Reed’s legacy as a banjo picker and nationally known performer at an annual songwriting retreat and concert. The town of Lansing also hosts the Ola Belle Reed Music Festival each year.

THE POSITION

Ashe County Arts Council enjoys a solid foundation and is well positioned for a new generation of executive leadership. We seek a person who is fully conversant in community arts programming but need not be an artist--someone who is visionary, charismatic, organized, energetic, and diplomatic. We seek a leader who can supervise the organization’s operations, ensure financial stability, and nurture and respect our key

collaborative relationships with civic, governmental, and nonprofit agencies in the county and beyond. While serving a vital function in Ashe County, the Arts Council is also engaged with a number of statewide arts networks including Arts North Carolina, the North Carolina Presenters Consortium, and the North Carolina Arts Education Association, among others.

The Executive Director serves as the face of the organization to constituents that include community leaders, donors, and partners. Securing the financial resources needed to fulfill the organization's mission is a primary function of the position, with critical direction and assistance provided by board members.

The Executive Director is responsible for carrying out the mission of the Arts Council at the direction of the board; namely, "to enrich the cultural life of the region" by acting as a provider, collaborator, and leader of arts activities. As the Arts Council continues to mature, some of its programs may have the potential to spin off as independent activities, making it possible for the incubation and facilitation of new arts programs for the region. In this phase, the Arts Council could provide small seed grants, in-kind support of the new organization's performance and exhibition spaces, and technical assistance from staff to further develop the region's menu of arts activities.

The board and staff conduct program assessment and new program development, always taking into account the overall balance of activities that are designed to serve diverse audiences and interests, and produce consistent revenue streams. Providing arts experiences that are both accessible and affordable is essential in Ashe County. Therefore, programming that is undertaken to fulfill the mission of the organization may not always be expected to generate income.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION

Based on community conversations conducted in advance of this search, the new director will be expected to:

- Focus on the way forward, making maximum use of the board's experience and knowledge;
- Examine the current mix of programming in consultation with the board and community and prioritize those most essential;
- Evaluate the potential for some programs to continue independent of direct Arts Council management;
- Facilitate and develop new collaborations with various arts and other nonprofit organizations in the region;
- Contemplate how some existing programs might be freshened up to better align with the county's distinct cultural history and identity in the state;

- Propose additional cultural programming to serve new populations;
- Examine the potential to increase usage of the Ashe Civic Center beyond an entertainment venue to provide additional arts education programming and lifelong learning experiences for the region;
- Consider ways to enhance and advocate for arts education opportunities in the schools and/or after school;
- Anticipate changes in population, demographics, and commerce created by the newly streamlined Highway 221 corridor, and be prepared to introduce newcomers to the county;
- Continue promoting the Arts Council through print and social media with an awareness of the need to showcase the range and volume of year-round activities to multiple markets; and,
- Consider adding additional staff or adjusting job descriptions of existing staff to free the executive director to work more on resource development rather than hands-on programming details.

EXPERIENCE AND ATTRIBUTES

Ideal candidates for the position will have:

- At least five years of progressive leadership experience, preferably in the nonprofit sector and/or in arts and culture
- An undergraduate degree (graduate degree preferred)
- Experience in reporting to and serving a board of directors
- Experience with the dynamics of board/staff relationships and the boundaries of authority between them
- Proven fundraising success, and the confidence to ask for financial support and assist board members in soliciting such support
- A strong understanding of financial management and oversight experience with a comparable budget and staff
- Strong organizational skills and the ability to execute and direct many projects simultaneously
- The ability to research grant opportunities and write effective proposals

- Experience in networking with state organizations and artists to broaden programming choices and in negotiating contractual arrangements
- Experience in supervision of staff and in encouraging their best work
- An ability to engage and support the Board of Directors and its committees in meeting the financial goals of the organization with transparency and accuracy
- The political savvy to navigate public and private sector relationships and power dynamics to achieve results
- The ability to set direction, build partnerships, and cultivate the support of community opinion leaders
- Excellent communication skills, verbal, written, and electronic
- A strategic approach to organizational growth and a sensitivity to community needs and preferences
- The ability to motivate and appreciate volunteers and steward major donors
- A commitment to continued learning for all staff members including him/herself

TO APPLY

The Ashe County Arts Council is an Equal Opportunity Employer. Salary for this position is \$42,000 to \$56,000, commensurate with qualifications and experience. To apply, send an email including a resume in PDF or Word format, contact information (phone and email) for three references, salary requirements, and a letter of no more than two pages, outlining the reasons for your interest and your particular qualifications and experiences that fit this position. Send to Board President Wesley Barker: ashecoarts@gmail.com (email applications are required). No phone calls please, but you may email with additional questions.

NOTE: Please submit a video of up to three minutes in length introducing yourself to the selection team. Please tell us a little bit about yourself and your passions.

Communications will be treated with confidence, and resumes will be accepted until the position is filled; however, the active application period is now through July 2, 2021. Resume reviews begin immediately.