

# Culver City Observer -

## #CulverCityResilient, United by Art



By [Sandra Coopersmith](#)  
Feature Writer



The purpose of art? One take, per Pablo Picasso, is “washing the dust of daily life off our souls.”

And now, because of the pandemic, that dust has increased and coalesced into a heavy and almost impenetrable layer, given the severe economic hardships faced by so many. Concerned that the arts will be the last to recover from this crisis, the [Culver City Arts Foundation](#) (“Culver Arts”), a tax-exempt 501(c) (3) organization entirely run by volunteers, launched the Arts Resiliency Fund campaign.

Sehnita Joshua Mattison, Vice Chair of Culver Arts, explained that “we awarded 11 grants totaling just under \$10,000 total. The grants helped recipients focus on their art and bolstered their resiliency. All of them said the grants helped boost them financially and artistically, which is great to hear! We plan to raise funds for two more rounds of grants this year and expand the program to non-profits organizations with grants up to \$5,000 in the future.”

Several recipients of the first round shared their stories, some including their thoughts about art’s purpose.

### **Amie Williams:**

“As I reflect on it, I realize at its core the purpose of art for me is to question,” said Amie Williams, an independent filmmaker whose production company and non-profit, GlobalGirl Media, is based in [Culver City](#). “Art for me is to ask big questions of reality, the status quo, authority, even myself.”

She was out of paid work since the beginning of the pandemic, spent the time rebuilding her non-profit, which trains young BIPOC (Black, indigenous, and people of color) women in digital media, and also wrote two new short scripts.

“There are so many of us out of work, and at a time when women are moving into positions of leadership and power in media, we also need economic structures and systems that can better sustain those of us who work at the intersection of art and activism. That is my world, and while there is a catalytic explosion of social justice stories being told, we need to get through these pandemic times to the other side. I have spent much of my career covering conflict zones as a journalist and videographer. Much of my film work has focused on women and girls. From my early years teaching and filmmaking in East Africa, to founding the non-profit GlobalGirl Media, I think what I have learned over the years is how critical women’s voices and intersectionality are to making any kind of systemic change.”

Currently in Greece training young refugee and Greek women to tell their own story so that they can become agents of change rather than victims, she expressed gratitude for the grant she received through Culver Arts, stating that “it’s an honor to be recognized by the community you live in, and even more meaningful for this global girl, who may travel the world but is always thrilled to call [Culver City](#) home.”

### **Brenda Barniga:**

Brenda Barniga “fell in love with the use of art throughout our community right away. There is a chute that features a kid’s fence of art near Jackson Avenue in the Carlson Park area that I walk past every morning. There is a sign hung on top of the fence that reads ‘ART INSPIRES’ and it could not have been more perfectly placed. I’m in awe at the level of presence that the kids showcase through their work. I grew up in an area where art was not as prevalent, and living in [Culver City](#) and seeing how integral the arts are to this community fortified my interest in pursuing a career in the arts.

“I got a job on the Sony Studio lot just before COVID shut us down, I began taking acting courses at [Culver City's](#) Actors Circle in July 2020, and now I am volunteering my graphics services for a local LA organization called More in Music that promotes music education. Although this pandemic has tested our faith in various ways, my love for the arts has only flourished.”

As an actor and writer involved in entertainment production, much of her work was sourced through the live-event space, working in events such as the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival as well as many other Goldenvoice-affiliated shows. COVID restrictions in live-event operations severely impacted her ability to gain more contracts due to the majority being for live-event work. “Theatres have reduced staff or have completely shut down,” she said, “but many of the artists have taken to the internet and there has been a wealth of activity, with pre-recorded streamed productions and Zoom readings of plays. This meets the needs of artists to create and provides entertainment and relief to the general population, but unfortunately such activity has remained mostly a volunteer effort. Streaming and Zoom readings provide only a fraction of a revenue stream. Yet artists continue to create.”

### **Gregg Brevoort:**

A professional freelance theatre director, Gregg Brevoort has been a member of the [Culver City](#) Public Theatre since 2003. “I’ve directed five of their productions and have been a Board Member as well,” he said. “Live theatre was one of the first industries to shut down and will most likely be the last to re-open.” When all live theatre activity in the US ceased, it decimated his primary career and livelihood. While managing to pay his mortgage, the additional required HOA fee is a struggle.

“We were just about to open the latest [Culver City](#) Public Theatre production, Romeo and Juliet, directed by me,” he said, “when our production had to be abandoned. I have been mostly unemployed since March 2020, but continue to create work online and am constantly preparing for potential, post-pandemic projects. [Culver City](#) Public Theatre has been promoting new works via Zoom. I’ve also been a part of other Zoom shows. There is a lot of online content via YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok.”

### **Christopher Lyons:**

Fellow recipient Christopher Lyons was set to appear in that very production of Romeo and Juliet until the pandemic intervened. “Since then I’ve been part of their new works readings via Zoom. I’m an actor, but also a writer. While I’m pursuing an on-camera career, my background is in theatre. I haven’t been able to perform in live theatre due to COVID. I have seen people take to social media and find new ways to share their creative efforts online. It has been heartwarming and encouraging to see so many people share their creativity in its raw form, making tutorials on their processes, and asking for feedback on unfinished works. Isolation has made us long for connection and fostered our bravery to expose our artistic hearts in different ways, with people adapting typical stage performances into semi-abstract isolation plays, with clever editing and minimal sets. It’s been uplifting and inspiring to see how art has driven us all through the darkness.”

### **Rhianna DeJong:**

Having lived or worked in [Culver City](#) her entire life, Rhianna DeJong watched the plays in Carlson Park every summer while growing up, and a few years ago “came full circle to volunteer with [Culver City](#) Public Theatre as a prop and set designer for two productions in Carlson Park, as well as taking on a few secretarial duties. I spent a few years volunteering for The Actors' Gang as a sign artist and have also worked as one of the in-store artists for Trader Joe's in Downtown [Culver City](#) for 20 years.”

Her biggest financial pressure is rent. “I have made sacrifices of less necessary bills to remain frugal on my own,” she said. “I would love to upgrade my internet service to be able to participate in more online art fairs and Zoom gatherings with the artistic communities. I would really just love the breathing room to put my art on the ‘front burner’ for a bit and not stress over living expenses from paycheck to paycheck.”

She creates hand-drawn signage and illustrations, both freelance and through Trader Joe's. “I have a small business online, selling buttons, patches, jewelry and other handmade accessories,” she said. “A big factor in all of my work is upcycling and functionality. I love to practice any type of craft and constantly strive to learn new techniques because I am always able to incorporate new skills into projects to elevate my art and bring a unique element to everything I do.” She created a Marionette Band, a concept that started on a whim, and has faith that “by the time we are all free and clear to safely gather and celebrate, my creations will have a clearer purpose.”

She sees art as “a way to express ourselves without the need for a socially acceptable filter or a framework of experience that makes sense for the viewer. Art forms a language of its own that reaches inside and finds emotions without the need to go through the layers of logic first. It has the ability to create a bridge between each person, where we can relate through perception and find common ground to understand each other just a little better.”

### **Julian Ramirez:**

Julian Ramirez has performed at the Mar Vista Art Walk several times and has been a frequent contributor to the [Culver City](#) arts scene through music and visual art. But audio equipment is costly and “COVID has left me unemployed and struggling to make ends meet. I constantly live paycheck to paycheck with no room to breathe.” Despite the struggles the art community is facing, he is

happy that he's "seen more art being made and important art at that, art that comments on our current situation, expresses the emotions and provides relief."

### **Darlene Conte:**

Darlene Conte, a writer/playwright, lives in the Arts District. Her husband belongs to The Actors' Gang, her son goes to Linwood Howe Elementary, and she's on the beautification team at his school, including installing the Viking Ship out front. Her new play, "Worst-Case Scenario," became another pandemic casualty as it was shut down by the city two days before opening. "I've had to shutter the production, losing a year's investment in time and money in producing it," she said, and is hoping to remount it after COVID subsides. The set is in storage, a move that cost her \$1,800 in one year with a bill of \$150 a month. She needed help to alleviate this cost and hopes to bring her play back next year.

"We keep going," she said. "My painter friends are doing murals for free on buildings that are run down, I know The Actors' Gang is beginning some of their outreach programs again, and I personally have written two screenplays in the last year in lockdown. We persist."

"We don't pay much attention to art on a daily basis. We are too busy, too distracted, or even just surviving to get by. There are commercial projects, which do a wonderful job entertaining us, but that is not art. It is not the job of the artist to entertain. I believe the purpose of art is to reflect humanity, to remind us of who we are, to affirm or challenge our beliefs, to inspire each other and maybe, if we are lucky, to hold a beautiful truth that binds us together, if only momentarily. Anyone who has stood in a group of people staring at a work of art can tell you, when you are profoundly moved by it, you are not alone. In a world so divided, art is a bridge that we can still cross collectively."

### **Aneesa Shami Zizzo:**

Aneesa Shami Zizzo, who uses recycled materials to create fiber art, has worked with the Helms Bakery District on a few art events, including a month-long artist residency at the Helms Design Center in 2018 that included open studio hours and weekend workshops for the public. She also participated in the [Culver City](#) Art Walk at Helms, doing a weaving demo in front of the Rug Warehouse retail store, and took part in the #ProjectingPossibilities program featuring artists rotating weekly for a year-long art installation digitally exhibited at the entrance of the Helms Design Center.

"COVID has made it harder for me to teach workshops and private lessons, which is a major portion of income for my practice," she said. Paying her studio rent became challenging, and "while I can transition some lessons onto a virtual platform, most of the workshops require special equipment or tools that not everyone has access to." Despite the hardships, she feels that "people still want to be engaged with their creativity and COVID hasn't changed that – it's just made it harder for artists to move forward comfortably without struggling."

"Art has so many different purposes, which allows for great creative freedom. My art's purpose is to express my innermost self through beautiful imagery. I try to utilize universal themes that the viewer can connect with by referencing the sublime, drawing from world mythologies and sharing an otherworldly sense of the human conscious and subconscious. I think it is important to make art that brings people together and highlights humanity as a whole."

### **Jay Tran:**

"I am a full-time cinematographer and video editor," said Jay Tran. "To me, the purpose of art is to convey and share emotions humans can't explain only through words. Emotions such as joy, fear, and anger are one-dimensional until you truly experience them through art. A lot of what we experience can be felt through action and physical means. I think art humanizes experiences and allows people to be more empathetic. Whether it's through film, painting, music, dance, people can express feelings in organic and unique ways. I've experienced different feelings through the dance, music, and film industry. All those experiences can't be explained through words until you dive into those communities and try it yourself."

He has worked with many recording artists and companies for social media and film. "Aside from film, I am a music producer, musician, and dancer in the industry," he said. "My reason for applying was due to COVID and the effect it had on the entertainment industry. Many leads and work I had lined up were cut short due to LA's shutdown. I was laid off as an editor from my company and needed funds to pay rent as well as funding my film gear and expanding my business. The Arts Resiliency Fund helped so much, and I wouldn't have been able to have found out about it if it weren't for being in [Culver City](#). The area is filled with young creatives and I found out through word of mouth."

No one would deny that [Culver City](#), the Heart of Screenland, has strong creative roots, and Culver Arts is committed to nourishing that creativity. Recognizing the key role artists play, Dr. Janet Hault, Culver City's Honorary Artist Laureate for Poetry 2015-2019, addressed the city council in June, stating, "Your support of the [Culver City](#) Arts Foundation and its programs that assist the artists in [Culver City](#) is essential as it continues in its endeavors through programs such as the Arts Resiliency Fund to make certain Art is a large part of our city's heart."

Her presentation included her poem, describing art as a healing force:

Art, a vital part of our community

Helps us to embrace the unity

We need to deal with so many scars and sores

Left by a pandemic, brutality and prejudice

None of which any of us wish

To have to suffer any more

So let's nourish our artists' creativity

As they continue to help our city

As Dr. Hoult pointed out, art clearly has a place in our heart, so let's keep it healthy by supporting our artists. Donations can be made through <http://www.CulverArts.org>, or a check payable to [Culver City](#) Arts Foundation can be sent to [Culver City](#) Arts Foundation, P.O. Box 4521, [Culver City](#), CA 90230.

“Anyone who donates to us will receive a #CulverCityResilient lawn/window sign,” said Sehnita Mattison. “The power of our artistic community is what makes [Culver City](#) special. Now more than ever we need to unite behind our creativity to remain resilient.”

## **Connect With Us**

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