ON SERVICE LEARNING: A CIVIC ACTION GROUP INTERVIEW
June 15, 2018 — Leah Barto, correspondent for OPERA America, speaks with Cam Bexten, Holland Community Opera Fellowship Coordinator at Opera Omaha.

Leah: Today we are exploring artist-led initiatives. In opera, it is more common for producers or directors to shape and drive new works. Or, in cases of partnerships, it is more common to see administrators who are taking the lead. Today we are learning about a program where artists take the lead and applying their skills to serve a community need. Today we are talking with Cam Bexten. Could you share with me an overview of the fellowship program?

Cam: The fellowship program is in its inaugural year at Opera Omaha. We started with two fellows, and these are young professional artists that go through a rigorous audition and interview process. It is a two-year term, August-May, for two years. They come to the company primarily to do what we call core community programming.

To talk about that a little bit more, we really designed the fellowship to be not only artist-led, but community-led. We have a large engagement program, but this is very different for the industry and for the country. The artists, we definitely use them as professional artists, but they are not part of mainstage production because the primary reason for them being there is to develop and foster meaningful community relationships. In this program, we have identified through a community panel, the needs in the community and developed relationships with a range of partners working with youth and adults. The artists sit in meetings with the community partners and collaboratively develop programming for that partner. So everybody sits at the table and the idea is to serve the community and have that be a collaborative process.

Leah: I think it’s wonderful how you are facilitating the environment for community leaders to speak directly with artists. Who serves on the community panel and what is their role as it relates to the program?

Cam: This first year, we had ten community panel members and they actually ranged from social service organizations to the arts. To give you an idea, we have Nancy Williams, the Co-Founder and President of No More Empty Pots, which addresses food deserts. We work with Collective for Youth, who oversees afterschool programming, Girls, Inc. which is an afterschool program, Paula Wallace, a community artist and activist, Mike McGuire, a member of One Omaha, the neighborhood association of Omaha, and a variety of other people.
Leah: It's wonderful to hear of such a cross section of Omaha representing some of the pressing social needs that are important to your community. I am curious about where the idea for the program came from, and how this program got started.

Cam: That happened before I was brought on. Opera Omaha went through a large strategic planning process in 2015-16 which changed the organization to be more community-centered. The fellowship is designed—if there were a Venn diagram of the organization—the fellowship is designed to be the center of that. So we have our mainstage production, the art we produce, education and the fellowship spans all of that.

Leah: I learned that you have a background in service learning and I would be curious to learn more about that.

Cam: That background has served me well. I came to the opera from the UNO Service Learning Academy and the University of Omaha Nebraska campus prides itself on the community being the campus. One of the pillars of the university is community engagement, and service learning is a tremendous program. When we talk about service learning, we are talking about experiential learning to benefit the community. When we talk about it at the university level, we are talking about university professors getting students in the community doing work that is directly related to the curriculum. It's not volunteerism, and the purpose is to serve the community in some way. I have had the ability to develop and help manage projects that combined the Joslyn Art Museum with college geology students and engineering students with public speaking—a variety of different things.

There is the traditional model which is the college class with the nonprofit or community organization. We also have the P16 model, where we have the nonprofit or community organization, the college class and the K12 classroom who all come together to serve the community partner. When that happens there is a lot of magic with working with a variety of different students from different ages, there is a lot of teaching and learning on all sides. We are able to enhance learning on all levels and create a sense of community ownership in all ages of students.

Leah: I love how you demonstrate how integrative an approach it is. The learning on both sides, I think that is key. It seems to be imparted here at Opera Omaha in terms of what the artists are learning, what the organizations are learning. What do you look for in your potential fellows?
Cam: That is a great question. This is the first year, and we just finished our process of bringing on the next two fellows. There will always be a senior and junior level of fellow as they come in so they can learn from one another. The process is rigorous and we will continue to develop it.

One of the things we look for on a resume is other involvement outside the arts. We like to see what their life experience is. It is a challenge, as you know, with professional artists. We want a high quality artist, but we also look for a well-roundedness in the artist. We understand that this is a very different program and it is groundbreaking in terms of what we are asking for. We encourage for the artist to think outside the norm, and if we don’t see it on the resume, then we really probe in the interview process about that.

In how they articulate themselves and their view on things, we really like to see an outward view of relation. That it is not just a lot of “I” statements, and that there are “we” statements, and that there is perspective on the greater good, instead of just themselves as an artist.

Leah: What kinds of professional development are you offering? It seems distinctive from other artistic training programs that focus on the artistic skillset.

Cam: The artists are coming with a tremendous amount of training and we want them to continue with their artistry, but we want to provide them with opportunities to learn about the other spectrums they are working in. For instance, with Collective for Youth, they have a ten-part series that helps people who are working with schools and with after school programs to learn how to program and work with youth in a positive way.

They also get the opportunity to network and work with a lot of people in other organizations working with youth. We have done trauma-informed training to learn about what trauma does to the brain, not only for adults, but for children. The fellows are then able to go into different situations informed and able to work productively in a variety of situations.

One of the things we heard from our community and our panel is that it is very important for people working in the community to become a part of the community and there should be an investment there. When the fellows come, one of the first things I do is set up neighborhood tours, to make sure they are comfortable there and are familiar with the history of the city.

As we look into the second season we are going to add design thinking training so they have a better framework for this kind of program. We feel that that is going to give them a leg up.
We also provided facilitator training for the current two fellows and we will continue to do that and do that earlier in the season.

One of the other partners we work with is called Inclusive Communities, which goes out to businesses and organizations and works on inclusivity and talks about topics that are difficult to discuss. We have the fellows go to their community roundtables and we thought it beneficial to have them go to facilitator training.

Leah: What a well-rounded experience you have created and a network of partners that you have established to create so many mutually beneficial experiences. I am curious; I know you are wrapping up your first year, if you could reflect, what has Opera Omaha learned about inviting artists to take into a leadership role?

Cam: I think we have learned that this is a tremendously positive experience. When you get the right people in this role they really flourish in it. When you see artists as well-rounded individuals and allow them the opportunity to explore that is extremely positive. The growth you see in the artists is tremendous, and we are providing them with opportunities to live in a much more multi-faceted and community-engaged way as they move forward in their careers.

Leah: A great illustration of how an opera company is thinking flexibly about the assets they can deploy to serve their community. Where can our listeners go for more information on this program?

Cam: They can visit https://www.operaomaha.org/community/holland-community-fellowship. We will be updating the website with more information as we move into the next season.