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# NACC names new executive director: Q&A WITH KEVIN LEARY

The Niagara Arts and Cultural Center's board of directors recently announced the appointment of Kevin Leary as the new executive director.

Leary joins the NACC after serving as the assistant director for the University at Buffalo Arts Management Program. Previous to his role at UB, Leary served as the managing director of Theatre of Youth. There, the NACC noted, "with the incredible artistic team and board of directors, he was able to increase earned and contributed revenues, and to grow overall attendance."

Before his career as an arts manager and university administrator, Leary enjoyed a career in theater, performing in national tours of "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang," "42nd Street," "The Music Man" and "Camelot."

NACC Board president Mary Ricciardi said, "Hiring Kevin makes me very optimistic about the future of this organization. He has the vision and the skills needed to transform the NACC from a local treasure into a regional destination."

Leary chatted with NFP GM/Managing Editor Joshua Maloni last week. An edited Q&A follows.

**Q:** Tell me how this opportunity came about for you, and what excites you about this new position?

**Leary:** I guess the boring response is I saw a job posting. I was looking to get back into the professional world. I applied, and here I am. I think that's sort of the standard process.

But what appeals to me about it, I think that's really where we get into the guts of this. What appeals to me – and I said this to the search committee – I've always wanted to have my artistic practice, or my artistic life, have an impact socially somehow. And so, when I was a younger guy, and I was touring in various musical theater performances, I thought it was by somehow going against the commercial Broadway theater. So, I distinctly remember sitting in a rehearsal of "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang" and saying, "Is it really about a \$2 million flying car?" And the answer is yes, it is about a \$2 million flying car. And so, I thought, "OK, the answer is go back to a master's program, get myself an MA in theater and arts management, and do some socially impactful work – you know, Peter Brook, Henrik Ibsen, all of this stuff."

And then I got out, and I got my masters, and I started directing and choreographing a lot, and it was like, "Oh, there's not really as big



Art – and the "Art of Beer": staples at the NACC. (Contributed file photos)

of a market for that sort of work as I would want there to be for the lifestyle that I want to live." And so, you start doing stuff that pays the bills, right? You do the commercial Broadway stuff again – not on Broadway or in national touring settings, but around Erie County. And so, you do that. But in the back of your mind, you're like, "How can I make an impact on the community with the work that I do?"

And when I saw the NACC, I thought to myself, "Here is an organization that is primed, sitting on a great, great piece of real estate right at the tip of the Pine Avenue/Little Italy neighborhood. Certainly, close to Niagara Falls, with all these tourists that come in every single year." And this area needs a boost, right? It needs an organization that will bring in people from around the world, people from around Niagara

County, people from around our region. And to bring all those people in, and when those people come in, they're going to need to have services. And so, I thought to myself, "You know, there is an organization that, if we turn this into a place that hosts hundreds of thousands of people a year, this neighborhood is going to benefit because of that" – because there will need to be private investment. There will be, hopefully, City of Niagara Falls investment. There'll be Niagara County investment. There'll be state investment. And all this money will pour into this community and make it better.

That's it. That's why we're here.

**Q:** Are you from Western New York that you had familiarity with the NACC?

**Leary:** I grew up in Olean, New York. I lived in Cheektowaga since about 2012. I actually didn't have

that much familiarity with the NACC before a colleague at the University of Buffalo mentioned that they worked here. And then I did some research on the organization; saw the potential; saw where they're located in New York state; and thought to myself, "They've got a lot of potential there. They've got a great group of tenant artists. And I think they're ready to do something special – and I'd like to be a part of that."

**Q:** It seems like the goals you mentioned are very much in keeping with the goals the NACC has expressed over the years, which I think certainly makes this a good fit. Our experience with the NACC has been that there has been a lot of creative people there. A lot of groups. We do work, for example, with the Greater Niagara Ballet Company; we know that they utilize services there. So, a lot of a lot of creative people on staff, but also a lot of creative organizations that are partnering with the NACC. There's been a lot of good events; a lot of significant community events. Certainly, everything was derailed for a couple of years there with COVID. But, it seems like maybe there's not that consistency. You talk about bringing in this number of people every year, and maybe creating a mechanism for that to happen, so that it's not like just a series of one-offs, but that you've got this steady stream of people coming and making the NACC a part of their lives. How do you see the NACC taking the next step to make that happen?

**Leary:** I think it comes down with planning – and I think it comes down with planning more than one thing at once. The big thing with one-off programming, I think that what that demonstrates, or what that shows, is a smaller organization that does not necessarily have the staff manpower necessary to compete at the consistent level that we want to. But I think, as we go forward, I think we're going to find that manpower. I think we're going to find that manpower through the community, through our volunteers. I think we're going to find that manpower through our board. And I think we're going to find that manpower through the existing staff.

I earlier today, actually – it's funny that you mentioned this – a tenant came in and they said, "You know, it's so nice to see so many people around right now. It seems like there's so many more people, so much more activity." And I think at our sort of like work level, our

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