

THE ROANOKE TIMES

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'A wonderful shift in thinking': Roanoke Valley nonprofits work together to meet pandemic needs

By Mike Allen

The worried man on the phone asked Anne Marie Green whether he could safely make himself a ham sandwich.

The call had come in on the 211 line during the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic. Under a contract with the Virginia Department of Social Services, the Council of Community Services in Roanoke runs Virginia 211, a helpline that refers callers to health and human service agencies that can meet their needs. Administrative staff, including Green, the council's president, were personally fielding calls about COVID.

"As the pandemic started, and the governor started having all his press conferences, he then would say, 'Call 211 for more information,'" Green said. "We were blown out of the water."

Call after call came in. The man calling about the sandwich wanted to know whether he needed to wash his grocery packages, since the check-out clerk had touched them. "This is the kind of questions people were asking back then," Green said. "They were lonely, and they were scared."

In March 2020, as the stark reality of the COVID-19 pandemic took hold, Roanoke Valley nonprofits dedicated to providing for the needs of the most vulnerable in society had to leap feet-first into the crisis, even as funding dwindled and volunteers became scarcer. A year and a month later, most of these organizations are nimbly managing the challenges brought on by the pandemic, though some face uphill trudges.

"I think the greater beauty and strength of that nonprofit network shone through during the pandemic, in terms of people's responsiveness, their willingness to work together, and their commitment," said Abby Hamilton, president and CEO of United Way of Roanoke Valley.

The earliest weeks were the toughest. However, between influxes of federal aid and benefactors recognizing and responding to dire circumstances with deeper giving, some organizations have been able to expand, hiring more staff and acquiring a level of resources that wouldn't have been achievable in an ordinary year.

"We found a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get funding to replace some much-needed depleted equipment, and we did," said Pamela Irvine, president and CEO of Feeding Southwest Virginia. "We were able for the first time in our history to get resources that we weren't able to get otherwise."

For an unfortunate few, the economics of the pandemic had more drastic consequences. JDRF, dedicated to raising money for Type 1 diabetes research, no longer has a Roanoke office after the national organization reduced its staff by half in response to revenue losses. Going forward, the organization's efforts in this region are completely in the hands of volunteers.

“We’re still working hard, we’re still raising money, we’re still working towards the vision,” said Sally Southard, chair of the outreach committee for JDRF in Virginia. “There’s been a lot of hardship and sadness along the way.”

Many organizational leaders in Roanoke cited a silver lining: an unprecedented level of cooperation and coordination of services in response to the evolving needs.

“We’ve really done a lot of moving, from silos to systems,” said Amanda Nastiuk, executive director of West End Center for Youth.

Most of that collaboration was made possible by United Way of Roanoke Valley, which led conference calls that included government agencies and health care, human services and faith-based organizations. In the beginning, those calls took place weekly; now, they’re monthly.

“The United Way did a really great job of bringing all of us that are used to doing our own thing our own way together and saying, ‘How about we try and do it together and meet this need?’” said Mark Johnson, president and CEO of YMCA of Virginia’s Blue Ridge.

Yet with a fundraising model built on office campaigns and paycheck deductions — and thus directly affected by the recent surge in unemployment — United Way in Roanoke is struggling to meet a \$2.5 million fundraising goal.

The shortfall threatens to hamper United Way’s coordination of services, “sacrificing the efficiency that would come out of people working together rather than in their own separate buckets,” Hamilton said.

Working toward full throttle

During the first three months of the pandemic, the nonprofit sector lost about 1.64 million out of 12.5 million jobs nationally, according to tallies reported by the Center for Civil Society Studies at John Hopkins University.

As of the end of March, about half of those jobs had been recovered. The center estimated that it will take 1½ years for the sector to reach pre-pandemic levels of employment.

Arts and culture nonprofits have been hurt the worst, with nationwide jobs that numbered about 356,000 in February 2020 reduced by almost a third, according to the center’s statistics. The largest nonprofit category, health care — which includes Carilion Clinic — is arguably the healthiest category, with 243,000 jobs lost out of an estimated 6.8 million prior to COVID-19.

The Johns Hopkins center’s tallies show that other categories of nonprofits, such as education and social assistance, are operating with a workforce reduced by an average of 9%.

In Roanoke, some human services nonprofits avoided deep job cuts by temporarily reassigning idled workers to new tasks when programs were shut down.

When Habitat for Humanity in the Roanoke Valley closed its ReStore, the nonprofit kept its home construction and renovation projects on schedule with help from store staff, as the pandemic reduced Habitat’s volunteer numbers by half. The ReStore has since reopened with reduced hours. “We’re not full throttle, you know, we’re not where we were,” said Karen Mason, Habitat Roanoke’s executive director. “But we’re getting there.”

“We originally ended up laying off our store employees. Our stores were closed, obviously,” said Mary Ann Gilmer, vice president of mission services for Goodwill Industries of the Valleys. “Then, fortunately, we were able to offer everyone the opportunity in our retail stores to return. Our workforce training programs, those folks all went to a work-from-home environment.”

As the shutdowns began, YMCA of Virginia’s Blue Ridge laid off four of its 44 full-time employees and had no hours to offer 475 active part-time staff such as fitness instructors and lifeguards. Contemplating the next steps, “we said we’re going to hold on to our full-time staff as long as we can,” Johnson said. The message to employees was, “Whatever your duties were, right now your duties are all the same.”

The YMCA focused on emergency childcare with social distancing protocols in place. “It was a lot of staff to not many kids,” Johnson said. “Early on, it was financially not helping our bottom line.”

Y staff asked to help Meals on Wheels, as the Local Agency on Aging, which runs the program, had developed a shortage of volunteers. Y staff also did grocery shopping for older Y members who couldn’t go out. “We just tried to stay in touch with the people that were part of who we were and and continue to support them in as many ways as we could,” Johnson said.

At moments when it seemed the Y might be forced to make drastic staff reductions after all, support from the board of directors and influxes of federal aid staved off disaster. Also, about 1,200 of the Y’s 18,000 members allowed bank drafts to continue, essentially donating their membership fees while facilities were closed.

Right now the Y’s five branches have reopened, and about 400 part-timers are back at work. However, the Y also lost about 5,000 members. As Johnson put it, the Y is operating at 70% of its pre-COVID income with 87% of its former expenses, though membership numbers are slowly rising.

“Every time the governor talks, we’re trying to figure out what the next adjustment is,” Johnson said. “You’re going to learn some things in this type of environment that you probably could have never learned any other way. How do we take that forward and serve the community better than we ever have?”

Fortunate for now

Smaller nonprofits such as NAMI-Roanoke Valley and On Our Own of Roanoke Valley, which provide support groups and activities for people with mental health diagnoses and their loved ones, have moved most of their meetings to virtual platforms like Zoom.

“We’re doing karaoke over Zoom on Fridays,” said On Our Own executive director Robin Hubert.

“We’re able to have presenters from everywhere come and present and we have had just the most unbelievable presentations,” said Shey Dillon, president of NAMI-Roanoke Valley. “It’s opened our eyes to maybe some new ways that we could utilize technology and utilize the skills we’ve had to develop.”

NAMI had arranged meetings so parents could come and participate without distraction while volunteers minded their young children. Losing that extra help makes virtual meetings harder for those parents, Dillon said. Lack of face-to-face peer support can also making coping with mental illness and substance abuse difficult.

Though On Our Own’s drop-in center on Elm Avenue is still closed because of COVID-19, the nonprofit’s crew of eight part-time employees has been setting up outdoor activities like bingo and lawn games, Hubert said.

Other drop-in centers, like one run by Salvation Army of Roanoke Valley, have also closed. “We just didn't have the funding to keep that open,” said Salvation Army Lt. Matthew Tidman.

Turning Point, the unit's secure shelter for survivors of domestic violence, has continued to operate. “We had to make sure that clients and staff were wearing masks,” Tidman said. “We also had to institute a policy of any new families that came in had to quarantine.”

Because of safety concerns, “we had to close our day support programs for individuals with significant disabilities. Our day support staff was laid off,” said Gilmer with Goodwill Industries. “Those programs have been a little slower to return. As we're seeing individuals get vaccinated that are in the program, they're coming back.”

RAM House, the Roanoke Valley's largest day shelter, run by Roanoke Area Ministries, still serves from 80 to 120 meals a day, though because of social distancing, every once in a while guests have had to wait outside and applicants for aid had to wait in their cars for enough space to open up.

Roanoke Area Ministries executive director Melissa Woodson and marketing director Molly Archer had only been on the job about a month when the pandemic shutdowns began.

“We really rallied around together as a team and figured what are the guidelines that we need to do to keep everybody safe,” Archer said. “We have a very vulnerable volunteer base. A lot of our volunteers are senior citizens who've been with us for decades.”

A fair portion of RAM House's guest traffic comes from the Roanoke Rescue Mission. That traffic was reduced the couple of times that the Rescue Mission, despite extensive cleaning and social distancing protocols, had to go on lockdown.

“We've been very, very fortunate,” said Lee Clark, the Rescue Mission's CEO. “Back in the summer and early fall, we were running about 140 people a night here in our programs, and in our emergency shelter. We didn't have our first case of COVID amongst our general shelter and program participant population until September.”

The Rescue Mission established dedicated quarantine spaces within its buildings. “When we did start to have some cases, we've been able to keep those very isolated,” he said. The doctors and nurses who volunteer at the mission's Fralin Free Clinic have been able to provide guidance and monitor those who have tested positive or have been exposed.

“Luckily and fortunately, we haven't had any individual experiencing homelessness pass away from COVID during the pandemic, and really have had a limited number of cases,” said Matt Crookshank, human services administrator for the city of Roanoke.

Since April, under Crookshank's management, the city has used federal and state COVID relief funds to create a program that puts homeless people who are at high risk from the virus into hotel rooms.

That process has been overseen by ARCH Services, a Roanoke organization that merges two longtime shelters: Bethany Hall, for women seeking substance abuse treatment, and Trust House, a homeless shelter with a focus on veterans. As part of this arrangement, ARCH has used Trust House as a place to quarantine homeless clients who need it while housing its usual residents in hotel rooms.

At most the hotel program could serve 90 at a time. “We’ve served 269 total individuals going back to last April,” Crookshank said.

With vaccinations winding up, the hotel program is winding down, no longer admitting new participants and placing the current ones in permanent housing. “We’re planning to have it totally phased out by the end of June,” Crookshank said.

Meanwhile, the Rescue Mission’s daily population has been rising toward 180, about the same number that were staying in the shelter before the pandemic. “A lot of the population that we’re serving, they were maybe the hardest hit from job loss,” employed in industries such as service and retail, Clark said.

Nonprofits that focus on homeless assistance are bracing for what will happen when the eviction moratorium imposed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention finally gets lifted. In March, the moratorium was extended to June 30.

The Council of Community Services, in charge of the Community Housing Resource Center that helps families that have been evicted find new homes, received a \$140,000 state Homeless Reduction Grant in March.

When the moratorium ends, “it’s going to hit the homeless provider community just like a cannonball — I can’t imagine — because there are so many people that are behind in their rent,” said Green, the council director.

Tighter funding, greater needs

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southwest Virginia formed in 2002, a merger of two smaller organizations based in Roanoke and Blacksburg. And in December, with problems from years of dwindling revenue accelerated by the pandemic, the nonprofit shut down for good.

Total Action for Progress in Roanoke stepped in to take over the defunct organization’s signature one-on-one mentoring program.

TAP President and CEO Annette Lewis said that “TAP was pleased to be contacted and asked to operate the mentoring program.” Because the fees to remain affiliated with the national Big Brothers Big Sisters program were too costly, TAP expanded its Super Hero Kids youth program and formed Super Hero Kids Connection to foster and build the matches that were handed over.

Much as Feeding Southwest Virginia benefited from an unprecedented level of emergency funding and donations, multiple federal grants allowed TAP to expand programs and hire additional staff to better meet the education, training and employment needs of struggling families, Lewis said.

TAP’s Head Start programs, which serve 1,000 preschool-age children, required the nonprofit to negotiate the same obstacles that public school systems faced. “Our challenge was to reduce classroom sizes and have the required number of staff-to-student ratio,” Lewis said. TAP began offering Head Start in a hybrid model in September, with parents having the options of on-site or virtual classes.

In southwest Roanoke, West End Center, which has 10 employees as opposed to TAP’s 326, faced the same issues with COVID-19 protocols when the facility reopened in June. The center, which runs summer and after school programs, can accept 180 children at full capacity. During the pandemic, it has served as a virtual learning center, assisting children with online classes.

“We have 80 enrolled. We’re seeing about 60 kids a day, on average,” said Nastiuk, who became executive director after longtime leader Joy Parrish retired last May. “The risk to our children to not open was just so much greater than the risk of opening. Our staff have their masks on. Our staff are washing their hands. We’ve been extremely fortunate.”

In 2020, the center held two two-week shutdowns out of an abundance of caution after getting notice of the possibility of exposure, even though state health officials advised that the circumstances did not require lockdowns, Nastiuk said.

All the valley’s nonprofits that hold large scale annual fundraising events either had to cancel them or re-imagine them in an online format. For West End Center, that meant turning the annual Spring Bling gala at Hotel Roanoke into a virtual silent auction. “We did almost as well as we had done, when we had the live event, which is really saying something,” Nastiuk said. The next virtual Spring Bling starts Friday and runs through Sunday.

Other virtual fundraising efforts have not done as well, however, and West End Center ended up doubling weekly tuition fees from \$15 to \$30 to stay viable. The nonprofit allows parents to volunteer in exchange for tuition credit and can offer scholarships. “We’re not going to lose a family because they can’t pay,” Nastiuk said.

The loss of traditional fundraising channels has been tough to make up for. United Way of Roanoke Valley is trying to match the \$2.5 million raised in fiscal year 2019-20, “knowing that needs would be greater with more families struggling because of the pandemic,” Hamilton said. As of mid-April, with three months left in the fiscal year, the United Way has raised \$1.8 million — \$700,000 shy of its goal.

Hamilton, who describes herself as a “glass half-full” person, said the United Way is doing everything the organization can to reach every possible donor. Adding urgency to these efforts: United Way is processing the results of its latest ALICE household survey.

The acronym stands for “asset limited, income constrained, employed,” and the survey’s goal is to measure the pandemic’s economic effects on households that were already struggling financially and what the needs of those families are.

Unlike grants, which can have restrictions on how they’re spent, pledges to the operating fund will allow the United Way to continue helping other nonprofits connect and share resources.

The COVID community response calls that United Way presided over were extremely valuable, said Ahoo Salem, executive director of Blue Ridge Literacy. “Everybody would come together. There would be information about everything that was changing so rapidly back then, but also all these other resources that are there to help organizations to meet the demands of their target population.”

“There’s really a wonderful shift in thinking,” Hamilton said.

THE ROANOKE TIMES

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The show must come back

By Mike Allen

The Roanoke Valley Children's Choir sopranos filled most of the parking lot at the American Legion in Salem, not because their numbers formed a huge crowd but because they had to sit so far apart in order to safely rehearse.

"Go a little faster," said choir director Kim Davidson as she led the teenagers through their warm-up exercises. "Come on, singers!"

All the singers wore face masks and stayed 10 feet from each other as Davidson conducted, her voice amplified through a wireless headset. "Somebody got their eighth notes and quarter notes mixed up. Just today, right?"

The children's choir would go on to join forces with Opera Roanoke and essentially kick off the first post-pandemic performance season in the Roanoke Valley, in a sold out May 2 concert that had singers from both companies spaced out across the full length of the Salem Football Stadium field.

Such concerts had been nearly nonexistent over the months since March 2020, a fraught time for arts and culture nonprofits nationwide. With COVID-19 related restrictions on audience sizes loosening, the region's arts organizations are emerging with their operating budgets reduced by an average of about 21% and questions hanging in the air about whether supporters will feel safe turning out for in-person events.

Signs have been promising so far.

Take for example Local Colors, which returned May 15, to River's Edge Park North instead of Elmwood Park, with food vendors but without the multicultural parade the festival is famed for. Although attendance of about 2,000 was well below capacity for the park, director Lisa Spencer declared success. "Food lines stayed long throughout the day and people camped out," she said. "You could tell everyone was glad to be out!"

In the Roanoke Valley and beyond, canceled shows and closed exhibitions littered the landscape in the weeks immediately following Gov. Ralph Northam's orders in March 2020 to shut gatherings down. Though locked doors and lost revenue were soon followed by layoffs, the organizations met the crisis with thoughtfulness rather than panic.

"Organizations moved at the pace that was right for them," said Roanoke Arts and Culture Coordinator Doug Jackson. "They worked with their boards very closely to tailor their response."

The Science Museum of Western Virginia switched from operating as a museum to operating as a learning lab, with classrooms held throughout their facility. The Taubman Museum of Art and Center in the Square's children's museum, Kids Square, came up with activity kits.

Most organizations concentrated on virtual offerings of some kind, be it tours, plays, concerts, movies on demand, even entire festivals reimaged in video format. Southwest Virginia Ballet and Local Colors forged new partnerships with Blue Ridge PBS to share videos connecting their missions with bigger audiences.

While online offerings gave arts and culture organizations opportunities to keep in touch with the patrons they serve, they were often streamed free, and what income they did occasionally produce fell well short of standard ticket sales.

"I haven't heard anybody say, 'Wow, that concert that we saw through YouTube was like being there,'" said Roanoke Symphony Orchestra Executive Director David Crane. The symphony's first live concert

since the pandemic began, played for free May 8 at Elmwood Park, had all 1,200 available reservations claimed within 36 hours.

A number of nonprofits involved in either putting on or presenting music, art, theater and cinema events are having to hurry up and wait. Many different types of organizations are eligible to apply for a Shuttered Venue Operators Grant, which were created in the Dec. 27 federal economic aid act signed by then-President Donald Trump and further modified and expanded in the American Rescue Plan Act signed March 11 by President Joe Biden.

Loaded with \$16.2 billion in potential aid for a variety of arts-related organizations and businesses, the grants were supposed to be open to applications April 8, but the launch failed when the website malfunctioned. The application portal relaunched successfully April 24. Regional organizations that have applied are still awaiting results.

Originally venues were not allowed to apply for both shuttered venue grants and paycheck protection loans, but the new rescue plan changed that. Now, the amount of any PPP loan awarded a business will be deducted from any SVOG grant received. Payments could start arriving at the end of May.

“The grant was extensive and very challenging, but we feel confident that we’ve done it correctly, so we’re hopeful,” said Jefferson Center Executive Director Cyrus Pace.

Accelerating recovery?

In terms of jobs lost, among all the different kinds of nonprofits, arts and culture organizations were proportionally hit the hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic, according to statistics tracked by the Center for Civil Society Studies at John Hopkins University.

The Johns Hopkins center’s tallies show that the nonprofit sector lost about 1.64 million out of 12.5 million jobs nationally during the first three months of the pandemic. As of the end of April, a little over half of those jobs had been recovered.

The largest nonprofit category, health care, remains the healthiest, with 236,000 jobs lost — or 4% — out of an estimated 6.8 million prior to COVID-19. By contrast, arts and culture nonprofits, with nationwide jobs that numbered about 356,000 in February 2020, were still down about 99,000 jobs, or 28%, at the end of April.

The center’s figures show the arts and culture sector regaining jobs at an accelerating rate over the past three months, with additions of about 5,100 in February, 10,000 in March and 14,000 in April.

Data compiled from 26 Roanoke Valley and three New River Valley arts and culture nonprofits that responded to a Roanoke Times survey indicates that regional organizations saw a combined job loss of 38% when comparing February 2020 to February 2021. Nationally the same comparison shows a 35% loss.

In terms of employment impact, the real regional toll is likely higher, as not all answers included contract performers such as musicians, technicians and actors. Arts institutions attached to parent organizations like churches or universities were not surveyed.

Center in the Square kept a commitment to retain all 13 full time employees, said president and general manager Jim Sears.

In March 2020, Mill Mountain Theatre went within two weeks from preparing to launch a new season to furloughing 10 employees. On March 29, the professional theater company announced new hires and rehires for about the same number of positions.

With operating budget reductions and layoffs of full time employees that exceeded 60%, Roanoke Symphony Orchestra appears to have been proportionately affected most by the COVID-19 shutdowns.

“We have not been producing concerts, which have a very large expenditure to them,” Crane said. “It’s not just the musicians. When we don’t do pops concerts, we don’t hire the vendors, the sound company, the light company, we don’t rent the hall, we don’t spend dollars on marketing, advertising, travel.”

He described RSO’s navigation of the pandemic as treading water and making an unpleasant but necessary choice to reduce expenses to a minimum. “There’s a bit of a yin and a yang to all of that, right? The income’s not in but the expense is not out.”

Having offered virtual performances during the past few months, the symphony is prepared to resume live concerts again, with plans for a new season announcement come mid-June. “That’s very exciting,” Crane said.

The Grandin Theatre had 20 part-time staffers in February 2020 and two in February 2021, a result of a three-month closure followed by a drastic reduction in the amount of screenings held.

However, the Grandin has won praise for the innovative ways that the nonprofit movie theater continued its mission during the pandemic, such as offering private rentals of its main theater, lobby and art gallery and holding single sold-out showings of popular and classic films instead of multiple screenings that would increase the amount of cleaning needed.

As of last week, Gov. Northam’s loosening of restrictions allowed the Grandin to sell 150 tickets per show instead of 90, said Ian Fortier, executive director of the Grandin Theatre Foundation. Private rentals, for now, are still capped at 50 people.

The Lyric Theatre in Blacksburg, too, has been offering its 447-seat theater for private rentals. A local ordinance has restricted audiences for movie showings to 50. “We’ve been open for five days a week,” said Lyric Executive Director Susan Mattingly. “Finding new and interesting films that aren’t available on a streaming platform has been very challenging.”

The Lyric acquired equipment that allows the movie house to livestream musical performances. Plans for renewing the theater’s music series, Live at the Lyric, are underway, Mattingly said. “We are optimistically booking a fall season and hope to have some announcements ready soon.”

5 Points Music Sanctuary in Roanoke has organized outdoor concerts at Wasena Park and continued its music therapy program with social distancing protocols in place.

“The market conditions make it difficult to plan too far out,” said 5 Points Director Tyler Godsey. Despite the many uncertainties, 5 Points has tentative plans to expand its operating budget from \$190,000 during the pandemic year to \$300,000 in the upcoming fiscal year. “We have been somewhat successful improving our fundraising efforts,” which encourages a hopeful outlook, Godsey said.

3 museums, 3 paths

In a remarkable bucking of trends, the Science Museum of Western Virginia increased its budget by 21% in the 2020 fiscal year and added four full time employees. A dramatic pivot made that possible — for the past 10 months, the museum was closed to visitors, using its spaces in Center in the Square for classrooms instead.

The aim of this education program, called The Lab @ SMWV, was “to create a space that was safe and that was structured,” said Koren Smith, the science museum’s director of marketing.

The Lab provided an alternative to virtual learning for parents, Smith said. “We did our best to replicate what kids would do in a classroom. We wanted to provide them with educators who could guide them through all of their assignments and take that pressure off parents. We also wanted it to be a space where they would be around their own peers, so they could continue to develop those social skills that are so important at this age.”

In March, museum instructor Kat Hill led a group of second graders in an activity that involved building a miniature mine lift, meant to teach her pupils about minerals and pulley systems.

Now, with most students back in school classrooms, the Lab only happens on Fridays, and in the meantime the staff has shifted to preparing new exhibits and revamping old ones for when the science museum officially reopens to visitors June 1.

The science museum used this opportunity to replace a number of long-in-the-tooth exhibits with about 10 new ones, including some designed in collaboration with Virginia Tech, said Rachel Hopkins, the museum’s executive director. One new exhibit ties into the impact tests done at Tech to determine the effectiveness of sports helmets, while another that Hopkins called “pretty timely” deals with microbes.

“There’s a lot of new things we’re introducing other than exhibits,” Hopkins said. “Every Wednesday and Saturday now we’re going to have live animal demos. That’s always been something we’ve done for like school programming, but now it’s going to be something on the floor. You can depend on it.”

The combined History Museum of Western Virginia and O. Winston Link Museum inside the old Norfolk and Western passenger station across from Hotel Roanoke has been open since July 31. Both museums are operated by the Historical Society of Western Virginia. The history museum moved from Center in the Square to the Link Museum site in 2017.

During the pandemic months, the historical society’s two full-time employees focused on organizing their newest exhibit, the largest to be debuted since the museums were combined. Opened April 24, “Botetourt County: 250 +1 Years of Delight” was originally intended to tie into the county’s 250th anniversary celebration in 2020, which was derailed by the COVID-19 crisis.

Because the history museums’ show was only loosely connected, they pursued it on their own, with three years of advance planning culminating in four months of set up that started in January.

“We’re lucky we had this exhibit. I think it pushed us through,” both because it provided a goal and because it drew in grants and sponsorships, said museum curator Ashley Webb.

The two-story exhibition features a range of Botetourt-centric crafts and goods, from furniture to rifles to quilts, from the art found on antique can labels to creations by contemporary Botetourt artists. In a nod to crowd restrictions, the joint museums have not held a grand opening.

The historical society hopes to unveil a catalog for the show in July and hold an event to celebrate it, Webb said.

The Taubman Museum of Art, one of Roanoke's largest arts nonprofits, reduced its operating budget by 35% during the first fiscal year of the pandemic and reduced a full-time workforce of 28 by seven.

Open to visitors on reduced hours, Friday through Sunday, with its Art Venture activity center for children closed, the art museum has continued to mount new exhibitions. The Taubman also launched several collaborative art programs and assembled more than 75,000 activity kits that have been distributed through partnerships with Feeding Southwest Virginia, Roanoke Rescue Mission and others.

The Taubman's efforts received national notice, as Crosby Kemper, director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services, selected Roanoke's art museum as one of 30 finalists for the 2021 National Medal for Museum and Library Service.

Though the Taubman did not ultimately win a medal, Kemper said that all the nominees were being honored for their extraordinary efforts through the pandemic months "to serve, heal, and bring together our communities."

Taubman Executive Director Cindy Petersen said the museum is still evaluating whether it's feasible to hire more staff or increase visiting hours. The museum is about to resume staying open until 9 p.m. on the first Friday of each month.

A future safety net

Federal aid packages helped almost all of the larger arts and culture organizations in the region to stay afloat to some degree, and even the all-volunteer nonprofits responding to the survey that got none of that aid in 2020 — such as Showtimers Community Theatre in Roanoke and Attic Productions and Buchanan Theatre in Botetourt — have continued to operate in some way.

Without that federal aid, though, the outlook for the arts and culture scene could be quite different now.

Roanoke in fact has an organization set up that's meant to provide help with this sort of crisis — but the Roanoke Cultural Endowment is still years from being able to give grants. Created in 2014 as a public-private partnership, the endowment will start giving grants to Roanoke arts organizations for assistance with operating budgets once it reaches \$20 million.

As of February, RCE had raised \$3.2 million toward that goal, said Shaleen Powell, the endowment's executive director. The endowment has also secured a \$5 million legacy gift, though those funds are not yet in hand.

Not wanting to compete with the organizations the endowment is meant to serve, RCE put fundraising on pause in March 2020. At the end of 2020, the endowment sent out its first ever appeal for donations via mail, which helped connect RCE to new benefactors, Powell said.

As for the public portion, in the 2019-20 budget, Roanoke's city government allocated \$125,000 to the endowment but cut those funds out in 2020-21. The original proposal was for Roanoke to contribute \$250,000 a year.

The Roanoke Cultural Endowment is a piece essential to solving the sustainability puzzle, Powell said. "We're living through exactly what financial support will look like in the future ... Something is going to

happen again. It's life, right?" Once RCE achieves, and hopefully surpasses, its \$20 million goal, "we'll be poised to contribute, we'll be poised to provide grants."

Meanwhile, the endowment has kept in touch with arts leaders. "We've been trying to highlight through our newsletters some of the work that they're doing," she said. "Because ultimately that's who we want to support someday."

Though things are looking up, Jackson, Roanoke's arts and culture coordinator, cautioned that arts and culture organizations can't be declared out of the woods. "You can run a bare bones organization, but can you run a bare bones organization that's able to still have some muscle memory and strength in order to put on events? When you start ramping up, is the organization going to bear the weight of it?"

"Maybe the real gift of the pandemic is that people will be kind and say, here's someone doing the best they can with what they know at this time, and let them be," Pace said. "Celebrate them, that they're trying to figure it out."