



# LEHIGH VALLEY ARTS + CULTURE 2025 THE POWER OF THE ARTS

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS for Lehigh Valley Arts + Culture 2025 **Michael J. Bobbitt, Executive Director, Mass Cultural Council** Lehigh Valley Arts & Cultural Alliance – Easton, PA – May 2025

Good morning, Lehigh Valley!

As someone who's not from here, I'm truly grateful to be a guest in your community. I've heard stories about Yocco's hot dogs and the mighty IronPigs—but what I've felt, from the moment I arrived, is something much deeper: a powerful sense of pride, resilience, and momentum. This region is alive with possibility—fueled by its young people, vibrant arts and culture, natural beauty, accessibility, and affordability. It's clear that local pride isn't just strong here... it runs deep.

Thank you so much to Sean King, Meg Mikovits, and everyone at the Lehigh Valley Arts & Culture Alliance for this invitation; to my pal Jason King Jones for recommending me; and to the community leaders, creatives, and funders.

I spend so much of my time with governors, legislators, municipal leaders, Secretariats... and I'm a weirdo and a theatre geek. Today, I feel like I'm amongst my people! Are there any weirdos in here today? Let me hear you!

It's an honor to be with people who understand the power—and the pressure—of building and sustaining cultural infrastructure in real time.

I bring greetings from Massachusetts, where the winters are wintry, the accents confusing, and the arts community survives on grit, grant writing, artificial sunlight, and hope. I serve as Executive Director of the Mass Cultural Council, the state's arts agency. Before that, I led two theatres and wrote a few musicals—with dancing ducks, reggae-singing birds, and a lasagna-loving cat. So yes, I'm fluent in arts nonprofit—bilingual in possibility and panic.

Let me start with a little story:

Peering out between two wooden, black-painted caged bars into a sea of wiggly public school children, teachers, and parents in NW Washington, DC, I took a deep breath. I gripped the splintery set with my little first-grade fingers and delivered a line I cannot, for the life of me, remember. But I do remember the moment.

The cafegymatorium fell silent. The world faded at the edges. I delivered my line... and then—uproarious laughter. The good kind. The joyous, belly-deep kind. My co-star Gretel was slapping her thigh in hysteria. The witch—staged ass-up in a crudely painted oven—was convulsing with laughter. And something in me snapped.

In that moment, the screaming fights at home disappeared. The stress of money and food vanished. The visits to prison to see my father faded. In that moment, I was Act Three Hansel. I had killed. The people screamed encore, cheered, threw flowers, and cried because of my performance. My mom had to be carried out of the cafegymatorium while she wept, “That’s my baby! That’s my baby!”

No, it wasn’t the other two Hansels—it was my performance that brought the house down. It was, in fact, the most talked-about elementary school production of Hansel and Gretel in the late 1900s.

That was the moment—even in my tiny six-year-old head—that I realized the arts had power. A power to transcend pain. A power to transform space. A power to heal. A power to rewrite a story in real time.

That’s what we need today: a rewriting.

Because despite our strength, the arts are struggling. And I’m told that Lehigh Valley knows this firsthand.

We are here because we believe the arts are essential. I believe they are an essential health and human service.

According to the Arts & Economic Prosperity 6 study by Americans for the Arts:

- The nonprofit arts sector generated \$171.4 million in economic activity in Lehigh Valley.
- It supported 2,590 jobs and delivered \$32.1 million in tax revenue.
- The average audience member spent \$31.75 per event beyond ticket costs.

That’s not fluff. That’s infrastructure.

Even more powerful? Over 82% of non-local attendees came specifically for the arts. That’s cultural tourism. That’s the sector pulling people into the region—and pulling its own weight.

And yet, while we work hard to put the oxygen mask on our communities, we’re suffocating. The work is fragile.

So—even though you’re doing well—how many of you still feel the arts world is fragile?

Lehigh Valley has shown resilience. Cultural GDP even outpaced broader economic growth in parts of 2023–2024. And still, we’re navigating post-pandemic precarity.

Maybe the world—the non-weirdos—don’t always see us as essential. Maybe we’re stuck in our own tragic second act... suffering from problems we helped create.

In the U.S., we’ve seen many arts organizations shutter. Lehigh Valley has had its own casualties. These closures are no longer rare, exceptional, or personal failures—they are systemic.

Because maybe... “it is the system—not the people—who are failing.”

We’re a sector built on creativity, yet we default to legacy models in governance, finance, and leadership. Innovation can’t stop at the rehearsal room or studio door.

A 2024 survey by the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council found that nearly 25% of artists reported annual incomes below \$15,000. Pennsylvania’s living wage for a single adult is \$45,656. The math ain’t mathing.

In Massachusetts, 28 of 36 arts disciplines earn full-time wages below the living wage.

We practice, celebrate, and promote the “starving artist” ideology like it’s a badge of honor. We’re operating in systems built for another century—rewarding scarcity over entrepreneurship, familiarity over innovation. We defend broken business models not because they work, but because they’re familiar.

And in times of crisis, we hear: “The arts are dying.”

But I promise you: the arts are NOT dying.

We. Are. Molting.

Molting is messy. It’s uncomfortable. It makes us vulnerable. But it’s necessary for survival. We must shed the old skin—not because we’ve failed, but because we’re growing.

So how do we molt?

We stop tweaking. We start reimagining.

We stop measuring success by ticket sales and start measuring by community impact, mental health outcomes, and joy-per-minute ratios.

Can we be the R&D lab for society’s toughest problems—housing, transportation, joblessness, racism, homophobia, ableism?

Can we reimagine our venues as cultural embassies, not just places to see shows?

Can we build the arts for the next generation—not just for the subscribers of the 1990s?

This moment demands that we not just sustain—but generate: new ideas, new audiences, new relevance.

Let's not be Kodak, Nortel, or Blackberry—stuck in a changing world.

You're slammed. You're under-resourced. You're afraid of risk. But if we don't get off the hamster wheel of insolvency and do something different, we'll stay slammed, stay under-resourced, and feed the fear.

Make the room.

Outdated business models, lack of tech adoption, inequitable labor practices, and homogenous leadership pipelines won't just disappear—they will compound.

The industries struggling the most are those clinging to outdated systems. Just ask higher ed, brick-and-mortar retail, journalism, and healthcare.

To adapt, we can't cling to sacred cows. Everything must be reimaged:

Season planning that lacks fiscal or programmatic nimbleness. Do the people we want to engage even know what they're doing next year?

Shift priorities from preserving the past to generating the future. The “old masters” were innovators, entrepreneurs, disruptors, not preservationists. They would be heartbroken to see us training audiences to only engage with revivals.

Rethink exclusive, fiscally wacky subscription models. What if patron loyalty looked more like coffee shops, hotels, streaming platforms, or airlines?

Let's reject the myth that artists don't need business training. Every arts degree should include:

Legal, advocacy, budgeting, marketing, pricing, negotiation, and policy tracking.

The market knows our business literacy. If we don't equip our artists, we send them into the world at a disadvantage.

Let's rethink government not just as a funder—but as a design partner.

Other sectors help write policy. So can we.

Let's embed creativity into legislation about workforce, housing, health, climate.

Let's make advocacy a core operational function, like HR, finance, and fundraising.

Let's work with our elected officials—and make sure every candidate has an arts platform.

Let me pause and say: I'm not asking you to abandon tradition.

Reimagining doesn't mean losing our roots. It means being brave enough to evolve.

Take joy. What if we made joy a strategic priority?

In Massachusetts, we did. Doctors now prescribe twelve doses of arts and culture to patients—with a companion ticket—covered by insurers, Medicare, Medicaid.

We're embedding arts in healthcare, education, climate action, housing, transportation, and economic development. Our cultural districts are tackling street safety and job creation. Employers are including arts in their benefits.

Because the value of the arts runs deep.

And we must think and behave differently to make sure every inch of this region knows it.

To do that, we need our greatest tools: imagination and creativity.

You may need to bring in other sectors—business, science—to supplement your artistry.

What if Lean strategy or customer segmentation were reimaged as dramaturgy?

What if optimizing rehearsal saved enough to hire another ASL interpreter?

What if audience data revealed a community waiting for you?

Growth doesn't mean selling out. It can mean 10 more high schoolers in your lobby.

Imagination is seeing the world differently.

Creativity is bringing that vision to life.

Art, design, and technology are products of creativity.

Creativity is your superpower. It bends energy. Heals trauma. Provokes empathy. Builds bridges. Helps us laugh in the dark. And makes us shake our booties.

Creativity got me to wear assless chaps to the Beyoncé concert!

It allows us to see what isn't there—and make it real.

You're not failing. You are molting.

So let's get weird, brave, and experimental:

Host dance parties in your lobbies.

Try weird ticketing schemes and patron loyalty programs.

Pilot new pricing models.

Create cultural asset scavenger hunts.

Bring data scientists and cross-sector partners into planning meetings.

Host "Artist Office Hours" in libraries, DMVs, barber shops, and bus stops.

Launch “Mystery Ticket” nights where patrons don’t know the show until arrival.

Serve breakfast theatre.

Invite transit engineers to rehearsal.

Offer creativity sabbaticals for local educators and healthcare workers.

Co-design programs with teenagers and grandmothers.

Track housing, climate, and transportation legislation—and advocate for arts inclusion.

Host “Civic Jam Sessions” where policymakers improvise with artists.

Partner with mayors to embed creativity in workforce development.

Think like an engineer. Work like an artist. Dream like a movement.

Design. Design. Design. Play. Play. Play.

Use today to begin a new covenant—a contract to fix what isn’t serving us.

Share your new designs at next year’s convening.

(And just like that—Sean King has a theme for 2026!)

Do this scary, reflective, essential work in your artsy, weird, beautiful way.

Because there are so many Act Three Hansels out there—not just waiting to be entertained, but waiting to be saved.

You’ve already proven that Lehigh Valley arts are essential.

You said, “We’re not done.”

That’s not just resilience. That’s rebellion through beauty.

Now make it louder. Make it bolder. Make it systemically embedded.

This is the work of molting. It’s scary. It’s uncomfortable.

But it’s the only way we can fly.

So repeat after me:

Our worth isn’t in the systems we inherited...

It’s in the impact we create.

That’s where our value lives.

Make Lehigh Valley the blueprint for the rest of the state.

Thank you for letting me join your beautiful moment, in your beautiful region.





Lehigh Valley Arts + Culture 2025 was generously supported by



