

CONTACT US
Erick Bengel | Weekend Editor
ebengel@dailyastorian.com

WEEKEND BREAK

FOLLOW US
facebook.com/
DailyAstorian

Why we need the National Endowment for the Humanities

A local remembers an agency-funded fellowship in Alaska

By **DENISE REED**
For EO Media Group

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson created the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act was the culmination of a movement calling for the federal government to invest in culture, as it had invested in science. Thus, science and the humanities became our country's most significant pillars of cultural advancement.



Denise Reed

Without these two fields our society becomes less civilized, and unable to support the cultural development of the diverse peoples that make up the U.S. The NEH funds cultural institutions

— such as museums, libraries, colleges, universities, public television and radio stations — and, frequently, individual scholars.

I don't consider myself a scholar, but I, along with 12 other educators from eleven states, received NEH fellowships for a project in Alaska during the summer of 1988.

After completing a rigorous vetting process, and completing preliminary study requirements, I was off to the University of Fairbanks. The title of our seminar was "Orpheus: A Creator's Myth." We were charged with investigating the work of composers, authors and oral histories that contained references to Orpheus, the poet-musician of Greek mythology.

The grant provided me and my NEH fellows with the opportunity to study the myths of First Nation peo-



Submitted photo

Denise Reed (far left, second from top) and the group of "Orpheus fellows"

ples and those of other cultures that, in some way, incorporated the Orpheus story, which speaks to the power of music to shape thoughts and beliefs. The group's musicians conducted an extensive study of the early operas on this subject.

As essential as ever

What an experience! The seminar involved four full days of study, which sometimes carried on into the late evening. And why not? It was still light out at 11 p.m., and there was an annual Native American ceremony, occurring on the university campus, that boasted continuous drumming over a period of two to three 24-hour days.

Weekends,

meanwhile, were filled with discovering Alaska, which I later realized was part of what NEH intended to support, along with our formal study.

The fellowships changed our lives; as educators, we would come to fulfill the agency's goal: to strengthen teaching and learning in schools and colleges, provide opportunities for lifelong learning, preserve and provide access to cultural and educational resources, and fortify the institutional base of the humanities.

I will never forget, or be able to release, the influence this opportunity had on me and, subsequently, on my students. I returned from the seminar with knowledge about myths, First Nation peoples and the ways in which many cultures approach the mysteries of life. And I returned having had adventures in what was then the last frontier. I watched my students' eyes

widen when I told them about the permafrost, and described what it felt like to walk on it.

In a New York Times column, Nicholas Kristof asked: What could the humanities be in a digital age?

"Our world is enriched when coders and marketers dazzle us with smartphones and tablets," he wrote, "but, by themselves, they are just slabs. It is the music, essays, entertainment and provocations that they access, spawned by the humanities, that animate them — and us."

Today, the humanities are as essential as ever, as is the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The agency is essential to the nurturing in our society of individuals and groups who still need honest and relevant information from public media, who receive an education from teachers in the humanities, and who seek to empathize with all members of society using the knowledge gained from the humanities.

Keeping us human

We need the NEH to continue to do all of this and more through their numerous grant programs. Our society should never accept the possibility of these agencies disappearing.

I was elated when, on May 1, I received an email from the Americans for the Arts Action Fund that shared the news that — because of grassroots arts advocacy, and because people contacted their representatives — funding for the NEH and NEA would continue, and would, in fact, increase in some areas, instead of being cut as predicted.

But let us not become complacent. It is still possible that some of these programs may be cut in the coming years. The humanities are essential to the growth of civilization. It's what keeps us human, keeps us questioning and trying to make sense of our existence, and it is what fosters critical thinking about the meanings of justice and peace.

Denise Reed is the conductor of the North Coast Chorale and a member of the Oregon Humanities Board of Directors. She teaches opera and music appreciation, along with world music and the histories of some of America's popular styles of music at Clatsop and Tillamook

Denise Reed in Alaska, 1988.
Submitted photo

The humanities are essential to the growth of civilization. It's what keeps us human, keeps us questioning and trying to make sense of our existence, and it is what fosters critical thinking about the meanings of justice and peace.

Denise Reed
conductor of the North Coast Chorale and a member of the Oregon Humanities Board of Directors