

Knight Arts Challenge Slows Down to Ramp Up

Written by Anne Tschida, BT Arts Editor
June 2019

The application is still the simplest around



Anyone who hasn't lived under a rock knows how much the Knight Foundation has bolstered the arts in South Florida for almost two decades -- it literally transformed the cultural terrain and made Miami a significant player in the arts world. The foundation has done so through straight-up grants to major institutions, and also through funding for smaller, unique initiatives.

In support of the latter, the foundation created the Knight Arts Challenge (KAC) in 2008, which provides matching grants, to the tune of \$32 million to date, to individuals and groups, for a total of about 384 arts ideas.

In December 2019, KAC will announce the winners of its 11th challenge; the application process opens at the end of June and runs through July. The mission behind KAC is to support new ideas, and through the matching requirement, encourage new financial investment.

"We want to identify great talent and authentic ideas," says Adam Ganuza, program officer of the arts who is involved in the KAC grants in Miami and other cities where Knight is active; this year Detroit and Akron are also participating in the Arts Challenge.

KAC, says Ganuza, is purposely designed to involve the arts in philanthropic endeavors by making winners find matching sources of income to fund their initiatives. KAC also helps to reach communities that Knight might not otherwise have touched before, according to Ganuza, while leveling the financial playing field. For instance, it wouldn't be fair to pit a well-established

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“legacy institution,” such as the New World Symphony, which might receive a straight grant because of its successful history, with a startup group like the Nu Deco Ensemble, which aims to bring in new audiences with an innovative mix of classical and contemporary music.



To attract new ideas, says Ganuza, the Knight Arts Challenge application is intentionally simple and easy. Initially, an individual or smaller organization need only turn in a 150-word summary. No grant-writing experience or track record necessary.

Hence, one-third of the winners so far have never won a grant, and half aren't even 501(c)(3) non-profits. The three other requirements: (1) the idea must be for an arts project; (2) it must be, in the case of South Florida, within the boundaries of Palm Beach and the Keys; and (3) the applicant must match the Knight funding from another source.

Some successful KAC initiatives that Ganuza points to: the Borscht Film Festival (a 2012 Knight Art Challenge winner). Founded by a small group of artists and filmmakers, it started producing short films that now travel to numerous big-name festivals, and has sent about 18 to Sundance -- “a batting average that is remarkable” says Ganuza. “We provide the seed money to formalize an arts project,” which in turn is meant to expand and enrich the local community through the influx of new, creative enterprises.

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Then there's O Cinema, which began as a little alt theater that showed indie films in Wynwood, but with a matching grant from Knight grew into an organization with a much broader scope, including a cinema in Miami Beach and, sometime this year, a new, permanent theater in North Beach. It's now entering the realm of a midsize, "established" institution, receiving more Knight funding in 2018.



Another organization that can be seen as growing into a larger cultural arts anchor, or legacy institution, is O, Miami, a countywide program that brings poetry into the streets and diverse communities during April; one of its central venues, the Betsy Hotel on Ocean Drive, won a KAC grant in 2012, and recently O, Miami as a whole received a \$1.2 million Knight investment in 2018.

A slightly different model that Ganuza highlights is the Miami Light Project, founded back in 1989 to foster local performing arts and which won one of the first KAC grants in 2008. It went on to commission such projects as *Third Trinity*, written and performed by Teo Castellanos and directed by Oscar-winner Terell Alvin McCraney. Miami Light Project also established its Light Box theater in Wynwood. But ten years on, Miami Light will be moving out of that pioneering neighborhood. "It's almost come full circle," says Ganuza, as it keeps reinventing itself with the new money and today expanding into new territory.

The Knight Arts Challenge is also morphing; as of this year it will be a biennial award, with the next round set for 2021, giving Knight more time to evaluate existing funded programs and

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finding new and novel ones, according to Ganuza.

The Knight Foundation's history here began when the Knight Ridder newspaper chain moved its headquarters from Akron to Miami in 1990 (in 1974 it had merged with the Ridder group, making it one of the most prominent newspaper publishers in the nation). Early on, the Knight Foundation mostly gave grants to further journalism and education in general, then expanded into cultural grants in cities where the publishing company ran papers, and started community initiatives programs -- for instance, the Knight Foundation gave \$10 million for the rebuilding Miami-Dade after Hurricane Andrew.



In 2005, the Knight Foundation named Alberto Ibarguen, publisher of the *Miami Herald*, president, and the foundation's impact on South Florida ramped up to unprecedented levels. Since then Knight has infused \$165 million into cultural programs and projects in the area.

As KAC transforms into a biennial event, it is making an extra effort to reach out to communities where Knight has not previously had a large presence, sometimes more disadvantaged neighborhoods, to obtain feedback and, hopefully, new initiatives to fund. To that end, Knight will hold workshops and informational meetings to encourage in-person interactions, says Ganuza, and to let people in on the low barriers for entry into the granting process.

Starting June 24, informational sessions will be held at Area Stage in Coral Gables, but also Stephan Deli in Hialeah; on June 26 at the Koubek Center in Little Havana; and at the

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Motivational Edge in Allapatah on June 27. In July, sessions will be held in West Kendall, at MOCA in North Miami, and at the Hampton House in Brownsville. July will also open one-on-one office hours; go to kf.org/kac for more details. The application process closes July 26.

KAC is set up to enlarge and enrich the cultural ecosystems of the cities where Knight invests. “We don’t tell artists what to create or organizations what to present,” says Ganuza. “Their common thread is artistic excellence. We want to learn your perspective, amplify your voice, and through our investment, bring your idea to life.”

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