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Doing their part to help the arts

Volunteers' business expertise helps nonprofit organizations.

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As chief technology officer for the Blank Rome law firm in Center City, Larry Liss must meet the computing needs of 1,200 lawyers and support staff in Philadelphia and seven other offices in the U.S. and abroad.

That means about 1,500 desktop computers, several hundred laptops, thousands of printers, and, routinely, Liss says, 60- to 70-hour work weeks.

So when does he have time to volunteer?

"It's difficult to carve out time," Liss acknowledged. "Sometimes you just put it on the calendar . . . I've found that you can do whatever you want to make the time for."

Liss, 62, has been carving out hours since 1981, sharing his expertise with needy arts and nonprofit groups as a volunteer for the Arts & Business Council of Greater Philadelphia.

For small arts and cultural groups that cannot afford to hire staff or specialists to assist them with a variety of tasks, the council provides a way to stay current - and alive - in an increasingly competitive world.

A nonprofit affiliate of the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, the council has brokered mutually beneficial relationships between the arts and business since 1981. That bond, the council says, has generated more than \$22 million in goods and services for regional arts groups.

The council has also placed more than 2,000 business professionals in leadership roles in arts groups.

Last year the council announced a new partnership as an adviser to Advanta Corp. in the credit-card company's program to distribute \$525,000 to 80 qualifying small arts and cultural groups in 11 counties in Southeastern Pennsylvania and South Jersey.

But the council's chief work is in four volunteer programs:

Business on Board, business professionals who serve internships on nonprofit boards.

Business on Call, nonmanagerial business people performing temporary "hands-on" volunteer work with arts groups.

Business Volunteers for the Arts, upper- and mid-level managers who help arts and nonprofit groups with operational and management issues.

Technology Connectors, computer and technical experts who advise arts groups on high-tech issues.

With an Internet presence crucial nowadays, council president Karen B. Davis said Technology Connectors volunteers were in high demand: "There has been a tremendous need for technical assistance among arts and nonprofits."

Davis said the assignments expand the volunteers' outlook and help the arts groups.

"There is a tremendous ripple effect," she said.

A 2005 survey of 209 council volunteers showed that 56 percent subsequently attended more arts and cultural events. Seventy-five percent increased their financial support, giving up to \$1,000; 29 percent gave more than \$1,000.

But for many volunteers, it's about the satisfaction of "giving back."

"It's been really great," Liss said. "It is so gratifying when you can use your business talents to help them."

Liss has worked with the Arts & Business Council since it began. His first post was helping the Philadelphia Zoo create a database of its collections.

At the time, Liss was working for the old Philadelphia Savings Fund Society and he said then-PSFS chairman M. Todd Cooke supported the idea strongly. "He always tried to get people to volunteer. He thought it was a great idea to be able to share the knowledge we had," Liss said.

Most council assignments are short-term, but some become permanent. Several years after Liss worked at the Wharton Esherick Museum in Paoli in 1991, he was asked to join the board and is now president.

Rob Leonard, the museum's executive director since 1990 and virtually its entire staff since then, said the museum - the home and studio of the early 20th-century craftsman and sculptor - had benefited from the council's help several times.

Liss helped bring the museum into the computer age, and volunteers helped develop a new market plan and produce a new brochure. A council volunteer is helping the museum set up its first Web site.

"There is no way we could have afforded to pay someone to do this work," Leonard said.

Another beneficiary is the Hedgerow Theatre, the repertory company founded in 1923 in an old Rose Valley grist mill.

Penelope Reed, a Hedgerow alumna who returned in 1990 as producing artistic director, credits the council volunteers' expertise with helping Hedgerow prosper and grow after a 1985 fire that gutted the company's 167-year-old building.

Council volunteer Barbara Bosha, who has a graphic design studio, helped devise a new marketing campaign and redesigned and standardized logos and brochures.

The council also helped remake Hedgerow's board of directors from an all-arts board to one with more links to business and community.

Council volunteer Megan Kennedy, a certified public accountant and senior fund administration officer for Aberdeen Asset Management, was a volunteer and then moved to the Business on Board program.

Kennedy has been with Hedgerow's board for three years and is executive board secretary, planning Hedgerow's 85th anniversary gala, and on the finance committee.

Her work recently helped Hedgerow win a William Penn Foundation grant - \$374,000 over three years.

"This is just a wonderful resource for nonprofits," Reed said. "These people are high-high-level who want to help their community and give something in return."

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