

OPEN CAPTION:

Rethinking Accessibility in Cleveland's Arts and Culture

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Research. Strategy. Connections. Advocacy.

Poster by John G
inside!



COVER IMAGE

MANDEM, "Hypermobility: Meg" (36" x 48" — oils/mixed media on canvas), <http://MANDEMart.com/hypermobility>

Image of this work generously provided by MANDEM

MANDEM is a working team of artists, each of whom identifies as disabled, chronically ill and/or neurodivergent. One of MANDEM's members lives with the genetic disorder Ehlers-Danlos syndrome (EDS), which causes disabling failure of connective tissue. As a conglomerate we deal with this painful reality with full-throttled aestheticism. The *Hypermobility* series recenters disability as a form of beauty via a signature reclamation of the classical realist tradition of figure painting. Using only studio models with connective tissue disorders, the series captures moments where joints hyperextend or dislocate and the body moves into broken-seeming, impossible configurations. Technique-oriented mixed-media/oil paintings over thick, scarred textile surfaces explode the line between medical documentation and art.



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Girl with Down syndrome in blue dress with gold sparkles leaping across stage with her hands in the air. May 2019. Photo courtesy of North Pointe Ballet; photo credit, Left of Center Photography

FOREWORD

In early 2020, when we were composing this report detailing the findings of our arts and accessibility research study, arts and culture in Cleveland, and around the country, was active and robust. Then, the covid-19 pandemic hit, utterly upending all plans and everyone's lives. The report publication date had been set to anticipate the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), on July 26, 2020. Now, as we publish in October, the state of arts and culture — in Northeast Ohio, in the United States and around the world — is radically different. Now, it isn't only people with disabilities who are exceptionally challenged to attend arts events: Now, we all are.

Given the stark contrast between how we lived at the beginning of the year and how we live now (and will be living for some time), we considered revising the report introduction to reflect our newly prevailing reality. In the end, we decided not to. Because there's every reason to believe that one day, albeit not in the immediately foreseeable future, we'll again be able to safely gather en masse in public venues to hear music, watch a play or dance concert, absorb a literary event or experience visual art.

In the meantime, this crisis-generated shift away from physical participation has serendipitously resulted in greater access for people with disabilities as arts and culture finds a new home in the digital realm. When it's once again safe for a lot of people to be together in a building, we must appeal to arts-and-culture leaders not to return to the "old normal" by reducing or eliminating this online programming. Instead, let's shift to the "next normal" by retaining it in addition to resuming live performances and exhibits.

With the sector, generally, and arts-and-culture groups, specifically, in survival mode, it may seem like the wrong time to be thinking about accessibility. But we suggest it may be exactly the right time: Precisely because organizations are re-evaluating their long-term planning in the face of this crisis anyway, why not begin reshaping that planning — and the vision for the organization it represents — to increase accommodation for people with disabilities?

—Arts Cleveland
October 2020

INTRODUCTION

Arts and culture thrives in Cleveland. Whether you're a resident or a visitor, you can take in acclaimed local and national theater productions; you can attend performances by world-class orchestras or tap the energy of a vital music scene; you can partake of soul-expanding literary events; you can be moved by arresting dance performances; or you can visit high-quality museums and ground-breaking galleries.

Or, what if you can't?

What if you want to catch a play, but you're deaf, and the production doesn't offer sign-language interpretation? Or you're blind, and no audio description is available of what's happening on stage? Or you navigate life via wheelchair, and the venue doesn't have open



Photo courtesy of Oberlin Center for the Arts

audiences and arts organizations, many of our cultural gems are out of reach for segments of the population because of ordinary barriers, including cost, location, transportation, etc. But people with physical and/or mental disabilities can face extraordinary hurdles when they try to avail themselves of arts and culture. Compounding matters, the issue of access to arts and culture for people with disabilities is both widespread and often invisible. And people with disabilities regularly feel excluded from the general conversation around diversity and inclusion.

As human beings, we instinctively comprehend that arts and culture is essential and central to all of us, but there's also evidence for this: Research has continually shown that arts and culture benefits those who participate in it. Therefore, everyone must be able to access it: Its myriad advantages are available only to those who can.

According to Arts Cleveland's own research and ongoing exchange with the region's artists, audiences and arts organizations, many of our cultural gems are out of reach for segments of the population...

seating space? What if you're an artist with a disability who, in addition to coping with one or more of the barriers mentioned above, has to fight to be seen as an artist, not as a person with a disability?

According to Arts Cleveland's own research and ongoing exchange with the region's artists,



Ally helps Sarah paint using her foot. Photo courtesy of Youth Challenge

For this reason, Arts Cleveland, a data-driven champion of arts and culture in Greater Cleveland, has partnered for several years with Art Possible Ohio (formerly VSA Ohio), the statewide service organization for the arts and disability, and Cleveland's Services for Independent Living (SIL) to consider a cohesive solution to the subject of arts accessibility. This association led to a 2018 working group among the organizations that revealed numerous worries about and discrepancies in access for people with disabilities throughout the arts-and-culture sector. For example, organizations of different sizes encountered vastly dissimilar problems of accessibility. Also, some organizations were focused primarily on how best to provide targeted programming, while others concentrated on the logistics of physical access. The working group's discussions ultimately generated a collective desire to obtain more information and gain a holistic understanding of the subject. Thus, Arts Cleveland applied for a research grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to do exactly that.

In January 2019, the grant was awarded, launching a research project to

- evaluate Cuyahoga County's landscape of arts-and-culture access,
- identify and define barriers faced by persons with varying abilities and
- work with cross-sector allies to recommend practical, cost-effective solutions that organizations and individual artists can implement.

This report presents information gleaned from that research, which comprised a key interview process, a survey and a think tank, and discusses what we learned from it. The goal of this report is to inform the county's arts-and-culture organizations, individual artists and people with disabilities on the state of accessibility for individuals with disabilities and to provide recommendations that can be used as a starting point for strengthening accessibility efforts.

ARTS-AND-CULTURE ACCESSIBILITY

The dimensions of accessibility in this region are significant. According to the July 2019 Population Estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, 8.6% of the total U.S. population under age 65 years reports living with a disability. For the city of Cleveland and Cuyahoga County overall, these percentages are higher than the national rate, at 16.5% and 10.9%, respectively. Thus, there are approximately 63,000 individuals with disabilities in the city of Cleveland alone; the number rises to almost 135,000 persons with disabilities for Cuyahoga County overall.¹ According to Art Possible Ohio, while some individuals may identify strongly with their disability, others may not see themselves as disabled and may never have been officially diagnosed as such.² When friends, family and/or caregivers of individuals with disabilities are added, the number of those affected increases.

The definition of what "disability" means has expanded in recent years, now comprising the categories of mobility disability; blindness/visual disability; deafness/hearing loss;



Gasia and Melina create an abstract print using clay at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Photo courtesy of Youth Challenge

developmental/cognitive/intellectual disability; sensory disability; hidden disability; acquired brain injuries; and mental health disability.³ These broadened categories reflect the evolution from the original, medical, model of disability,⁴ which "define[d] an illness or disability as the result of a physical condition"⁵ and focused on medical interventions to alter the disability. Today, the social model of disability emphasizes inclusion in society, and international bodies have codified the human rights of people with disabilities. The culmination of this occurred in 2006 with the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.⁶

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics. U.S. Department of Labor. American Community Survey. *Quickfacts Population Estimates: Cleveland and Cuyahoga County*. Retrieved July 2020. Available at <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/clevelandcityohio,cuyahogacountyohio,US/PST045218>

² Art Possible Ohio. *Cultural Access Guide*. 2020. Available at https://artpossibleohio.org/wp-content/uploads/CulturalAccessGuide_2020ed.pdf, 13.

³ Ibid, 16–17.

⁴ Leslie Francis and Anita Silvers. "Perspectives on the Meaning of 'Disability,'" *AMA Journal of Ethics* 18, no. 10 (October 2016): 1025–1033. Available at <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/perspectives-meaning-disability/2016-10>

⁵ Art Beyond Sight. "Social and Medical Models of Disability: Paradigm Change." 2014. Available at <http://www.artbeyondsight.org/dic/definition-of-disability-paradigm-change-and-ongoing-conversation/>

⁶ World Health Organization. "Chapter 1: Understanding Disability," in *World Report on Disability*, 1–17. 2011. Available at https://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/report.pdf?ua=1. Also, United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Disability. "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)," 2016. Available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

Today, the social model of disability emphasizes inclusion in society, and international bodies have codified the human rights of people with disabilities.



In the United States, public policy legislation related to disability began to be enacted during and after World War II, in response to veterans with disabilities facing possible employment exclusion when returning from the war. During the 1970s, the civil rights movement began to influence policies related to equitable access for individuals with disabilities and expanded protections to other public goods, such as housing, transportation and education.^{7,8} Notably, the NEA played a key role in educating arts-and-culture organizations, regional arts organization staff and state arts agencies on accessibility standards throughout the 1970s and 1980s before the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990.⁹ The passage of the ADA required museums and other public spaces to “become accessible to all populations ... open[ing] the door for new audiences by providing guidelines for museums to make their spaces and program offerings more physically accessible.”¹⁰ When the ADA was implemented, arts-and-culture venues began to administer “accommodations and programs to enhance accessibility and inclusion for visitors with a range of abilities,” going beyond the obligations of the ADA and emphasizing the tenets of community, diversity and inclusion.¹¹

Photo courtesy of Services for Independent Living

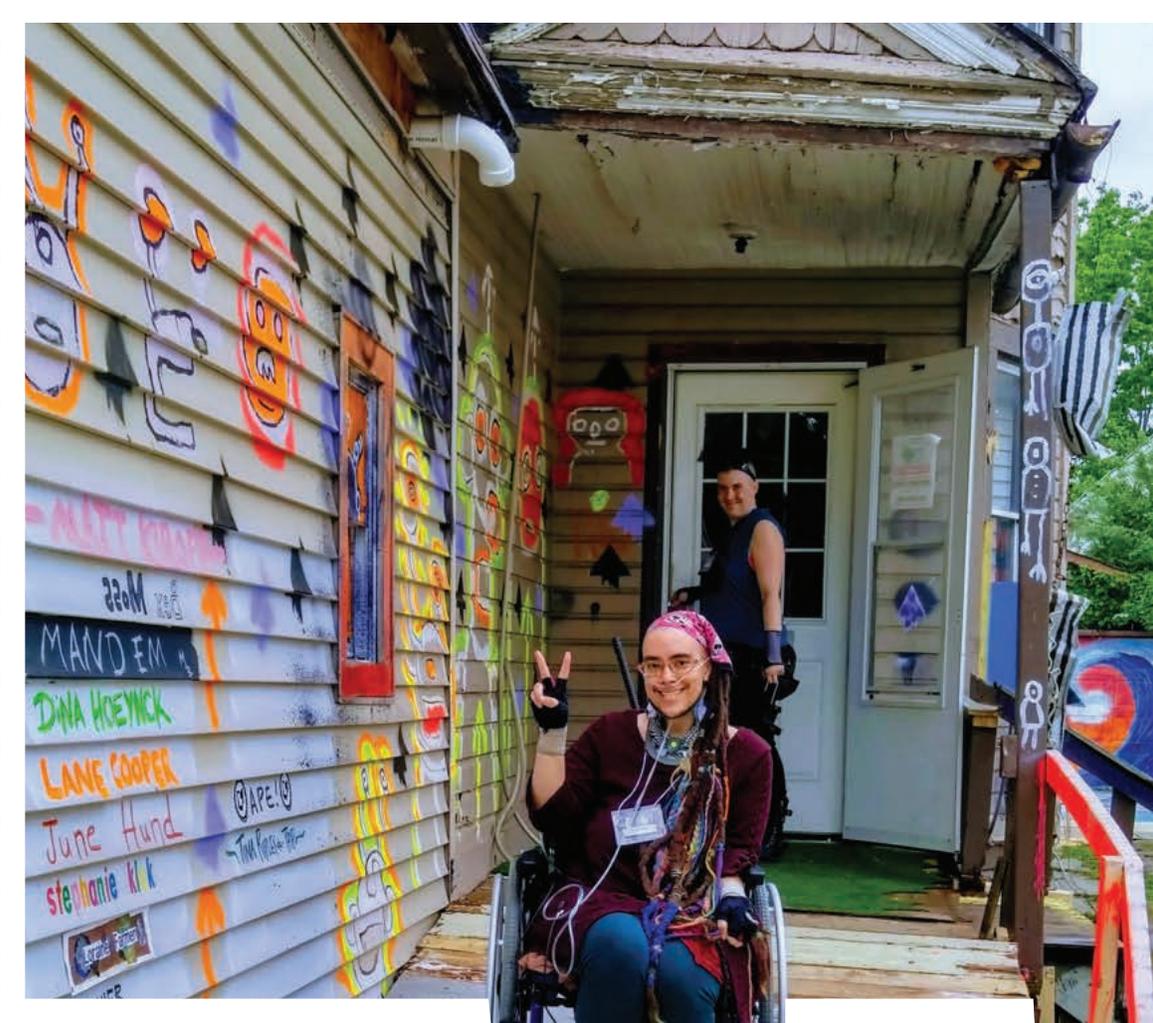
⁷ Leslie Francis and Anita Silvers. “Perspectives on the Meaning of ‘Disability,’” *AMA Journal of Ethics* 18, no. 10 (October 2016): 1025–1033. Available at <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/perspectives-meaning-disability/2016-10>

⁸ The 2020 documentary *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution* is drawing greater attention to this period by exploring the confluence of civil rights for individuals with disabilities and accessibility policy. The film observes a camp for teenagers with disabilities that was started during the 1970s civil rights movement. For more information on the film, visit <https://cripcamp.com/>

⁹ Beth M. Bienvenu. “#FlashbackFriday: Promoting Accessibility in the Arts.” *Art Works Blog*. July 26, 2019. Available at <https://www.arts.gov/stories/blog/2019/flashbackfriday-promoting-accessibility-arts>

¹⁰ Caroline Braden. “Welcoming All Visitors: Museums, Accessibility, and Visitors with Disabilities.” *University of Michigan Working Papers in Museum Studies*, no. 12 (2016). Available at <http://ummsp.rackham.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Braden-working-paper-FINAL-pdf.pdf>

¹¹ *Ibid.*



RTL Ramp. Photo courtesy of MANDEM

THIS STUDY

The generally broadened perception of disability has, in turn, enlarged the view of what being accessible means for facilities and venues, for artists with disabilities and for arts-and-culture participants with disabilities, around the country and in Cleveland. Further, individuals with disabilities and organizations agree on what “accessibility” means: simply, an absence of barriers. All of this has had concrete effect: Many arts-and-culture organizations are aware of accessibility issues and actively working toward increasing accessibility for people with disabilities, desiring to open their doors to as many people as possible. But what barriers do individuals with disabilities still experience when taking part in Greater Cleveland’s arts and culture? That’s what Arts Cleveland, through this study, set out to explore.

Evolving Practices: Key Interview Findings

During the summer of 2019, Arts Cleveland conducted in-depth interviews with 16 stakeholders throughout Cuyahoga County to discuss the state of accessibility in the arts-and-culture sector for individuals with disabilities.

Several major themes emerged from the key interviews:

- Organizations and individuals share a common definition of “accessibility” — most simply, as the absence of barriers and the equal ability of all people to participate or connect with their environment.
- Arts-and-culture organizations are recognizing the need to improve accessibility for individuals with disabilities and make their programs accessible to all, including those who attend events in the company of individuals with disabilities, such as personal assistants, caregivers and parents of children living with disabilities.
- Arts-and-culture organizations are applying the social model of disability and recognizing the role their organizational structures play in posing barriers to participation for individuals with disabilities, including a lack of staff training and ineffective marketing and communications.
- Boards of directors play an important role in championing accessibility initiatives within arts-and-culture organizations, because they control budgeting approval and strategic planning.
- Location and transportation issues can be major obstacles affecting accessibility to arts and culture.
- Organizations want to strengthen their cultures around greater inclusivity and a broader definition of disability, but are challenged by staff capacity, which limits, in turn, the availability of accommodations and staff training.
- Tension exists between arts-and-culture organizations’ available budgeting resources and their desire to apply accessibility best practices and be responsive to individuals with disabilities — a point expressed by organizations of all budget sizes, but described differently by small organizations than by large organizations.
- Interviewees with disabilities expressed feeling excluded from the general conversation around diversity, equity and inclusion. They further noted that many arts-and-culture organizations don’t acknowledge accessibility in their definitions of “inclusivity,” which generally focus more heavily on race.

Audience Perspectives: Survey Findings

As a complement to the interviews, Arts Cleveland developed a survey to capture feedback directly from individuals with disabilities and their caregivers and companions. The survey was conducted October–December 2019 and yielded 84 responses. It contained questions about the survey takers' demographics, general arts-and-culture attendance/interests and experiences with arts-and-culture accessibility. The survey also encompassed several open-ended questions. Main findings are detailed below.

- Survey takers were active arts consumers, with almost 50% (36 responses) taking part in arts-and-culture offerings once a month or more at a wide variety of locations. These most frequently included traditional arts-and-culture venues such as theaters and museums, but also educational institutions, outdoor venues and other community locations. The most commonly cited reasons for not taking part in arts-and-culture offerings were related to cost, a venue/facility not being accessible, lack of available information on accessibility services, timing of events, weather conditions and distance to venue. Survey takers learned about available arts-and-culture events primarily from online sources, including social media, websites and e-mail, as well as from word of mouth. Survey takers age 45 and older also named online venues as main sources, but frequently cited television, newspapers and radio as additional sources.¹²
- Several questions were asked to ascertain whether accommodations had been requested by survey takers, and if so, which ones, as well as the respondents' opinions on accessibility services provided by the arts-and-culture sector. The table on page 17 shows survey takers' reports

of which general accommodations they requested at arts-and-culture venues.

- The relatively high number of “other” responses (e.g., having more accessible seating and information about parking, signage and physical access) to the accommodations questions reinforces the necessity for organizations to work individually with each patron to identify his or her specific needs and to be flexible and prepared to respond to accommodation requests. When accommodations have been requested at arts-and-culture events/venues, respondents indicated they've been of good to average quality, while customer service was rated somewhat more favorably.

Open-Ended Responses: Key Themes

The main points raised in the open-ended responses are the following:

- While older venues have historical and community value, newer facilities often are more up-to-date and have more accessibility features. Respondents cautioned that organizations using older buildings should be mindful of accessibility trade-offs, particularly whether such spaces can be adequately retrofitted to enable accessibility or will ultimately exclude attendees with disabilities.
- Events aren't marketed far enough in advance to individuals with disabilities, who must plan outings somewhat or very thoroughly, depending on their disability, the event and the venue. Also, marketing often doesn't have information about accessibility services and where/to whom to direct questions regarding them.
- Staff training regarding customer service on accessibility and accommodations should be improved and made universal.

continued on page 17

¹² It's important to note that the primary distribution method for the survey was online; therefore, it's likely that the survey was skewed toward those with online access, which may have affected the responses to this question.



THE PATH TO ACCESS

**BONUS TEAR-OUT
POSTER BY JOHN G**

INSTRUCTIONS:

- 1** Pull this poster out of the summary.
- 2** Hang in a visible spot as a reminder of the ways YOU can enhance your accessibility and awareness practices.
- 3** Admire.
- 4** Presto! You've just taken one more step toward making our arts-and-culture spaces and communities more accessible.

THE PATH TO ACCESS

WELCOME TO YOUR MORE ACCESSIBLE ARTS ORG

INCLUDE DISABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY INTO YOUR DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION PLANNING.

A DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION AND ACCESSIBILITY

CONSIDER ALL TYPES OF WITH MULTIPLE DISABILITIES EXHIBITIONS AND PERFORM 'ONE SIZE FITS ALL'; EVERY

START HERE

YOU MADE IT

MAKE REGULAR, CONCRETE AND ONGOING EFFORTS TO WELCOME PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES INTO ORGANIZATIONAL CONVERSATIONS ABOUT ACCESSIBILITY AND DIVERSITY.

ALSO: DON'T BE AFRAID TO ENGAGE PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES WITH YOUR TEAM

REALIZE THAT IDENTIFYING CHANGES FOR ACCESSIBILITY PROCESS THAT'S BEST DO

QUARTER FOUR



EXPAND YOUR ORG'S STAFF TRAINING. WORK ON AWARENESS AND PROCEDURES THAT ACCOMMODATE PEOPLE WITH A WIDE RANGE OF DISABILITIES.

MAKE ACCESSIBILITY PLANNING A STANDARD PART OF YOUR ORG'S PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT.

ACCESSIBLE ART SPACE
USING MORE 'INCLUSIVE'
EXHIBITION TERMS
EVERYONE CAN EXPERIENCE

MARKETING, INFO, TRANSPORTATION AND FACILITIES ARE ALL IMPORTANT FACTORS.

KEEP GOING

DISABILITIES AND FOLKS WITH DIFFERENT NEEDS. ACCESS IS NOT ONE SIZE FITS ALL.

PROVIDE PERFORMANCE AND EXHIBITION OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES.

DON'T STOP

PLANNING AND EXECUTING NEEDED. ACCESSIBILITY IS AN EXTENDED PROCESS IN STAGES.

SMALL STEPS ARE GOOD STEPS!

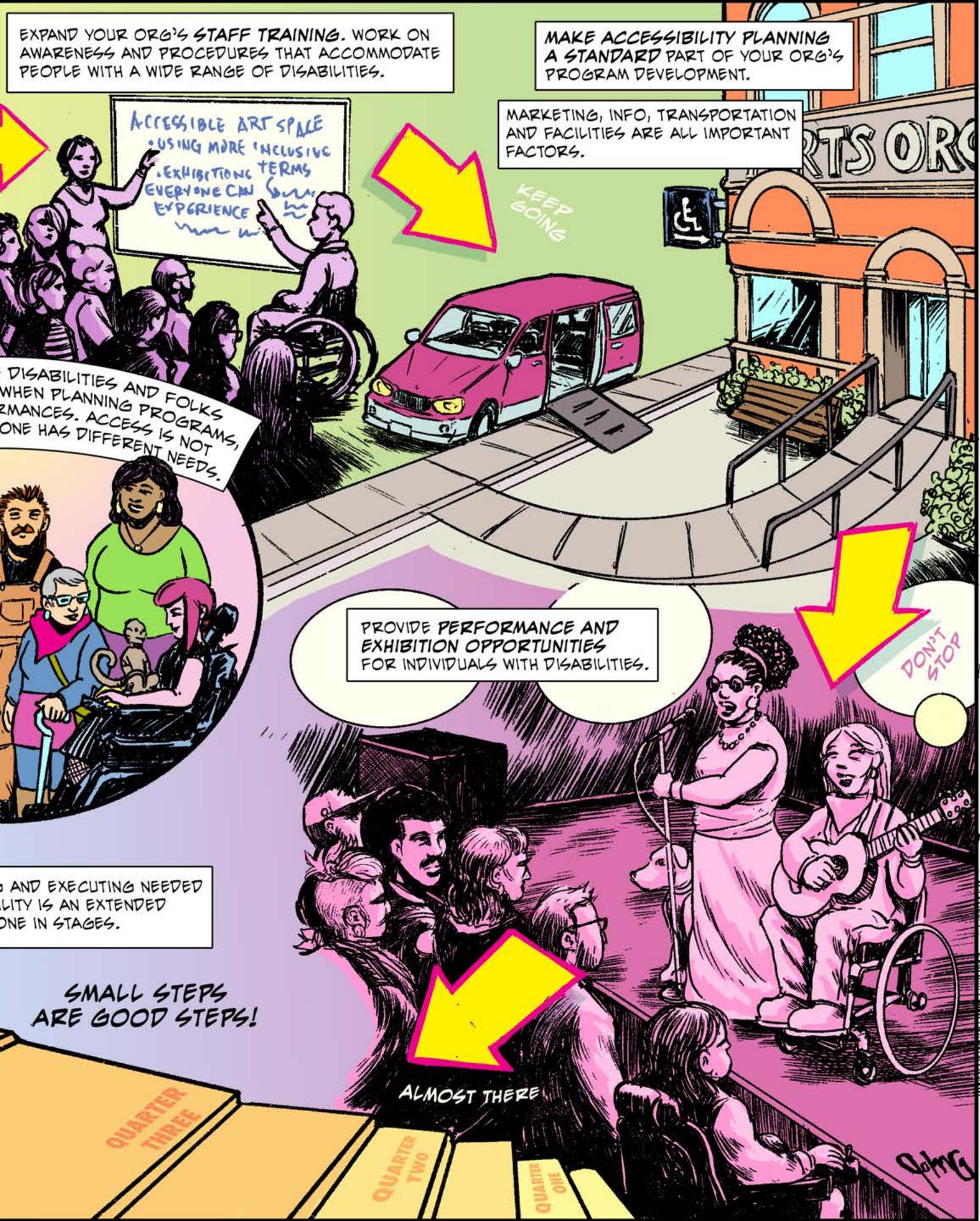
ALMOST THERE

QUARTER THREE

QUARTER TWO

QUARTER ONE

Q. JONES





JOHN G is an iconic Cleveland illustrator and comic artist who's been actively contributing to the Northeast Ohio arts and comics communities for nearly two decades. John creates his own original comics, is the co-founder of the annual small press and independent comic convention, Genghis Con, participates in local and national artist residencies, creates poster art for local businesses, teaches workshops, engages in panel presentations and also happens to live with a mobility disability.

John was an integral part of the creation of and data collection for *Open Caption*. He provided insights as a key interviewee, participated in the Accessibility Think Tank focus groups and presented in one of Arts Cleveland's preliminary workshops on accessible customer service in the lead-up to this research. In addition to being an active artist, John is a disability rights advocate and created a comic, *Tales to Demystify*, based on his experiences as a person living with a disability in our modern society. Check out more of his work or contact him at <http://shinercomics.net/>

"a lot nicer than he looks," a self-portrait by John G.

TABLE ES1

When attending events in Cuyahoga County what general accommodations do you request, if any? Please select all that apply.

ANSWER OPTIONS	% OF RESPONSES	# OF RESPONSES
Companion seat	37.33%	28
Wheelchair seat	36.00%	27
None	28.00%	21
Aisle seat with removable armrest	24.00%	18
Sensory/Autism friendly	17.33%	13
Large-print materials	13.33%	10
Captioning (CART services)	8.00%	6
High-contrast materials	6.67%	5
Tactile displays/exhibits	6.67%	5
Audio description	5.33%	4
Assistive listening device	4.00%	3
American Sign Language interpretation	2.67%	2
Braille materials	1.33%	1
Electronic materials	1.33%	1
Tactile interpretation	1.33%	1
Dementia friendly	1.33%	1
Other (please specify)	17.33%	13
Answered		75
Skipped		9

- Organizations and venues vary in terms of compliance with ADA standards and the resulting caliber of accommodation and experience for patrons with disabilities. Investments in higher-quality resources and a wider variety of services are needed throughout the sector to create more uniformity among arts-and-culture venues. Specific suggestions were broad ranging, from concrete methods for making performances accessible to problems with seating to expanding organizational awareness of different types of disability.
- People with disabilities are often left out of conversations about diversity, equity and inclusion, and survey takers emphasized that organizations should involve more individuals with disabilities in discussions about facility design, marketing materials and accessibility services. Respondents also strongly encouraged organizations to view their venues and programs more holistically, through the lens of having a disability.
- Despite the above, the survey takers indicated that the local arts-and-culture sector is doing a good job of addressing accessibility in ways that align with the ADA, including providing ramps, multiple entrance options, elevators and signage. Some respondents mentioned that facilities are generally welcoming to individuals with disabilities and are making efforts to address their accommodation needs.



Cleveland Play House
Presents
Shakespeare in Love

CASE STUDY

The Play's the Thing: Increased Accessibility at Cleveland Play House

By Laura A. Gold, JD

Laura Gold is the Community Services Specialist at Services for Independent Living, a nonprofit agency that provides services and advocacy to individuals with disabilities in Northeast Ohio. She has more than 20 years of experience in providing advocacy, consulting and training on the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), accessibility, disability rights and disability-related issues. Laura has presented numerous workshops and presentations on the above issues. She also oversees SIL's Leadership Academy, an eight-week program designed to help individuals with disabilities develop practical skills needed to actively participate on nonprofit boards, community coalitions, task forces and system change committees in a meaningful way. Laura received her Bachelor of Arts degree from Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts, and earned her Juris Doctor degree from Cleveland-Marshall College of Law in Cleveland, Ohio.

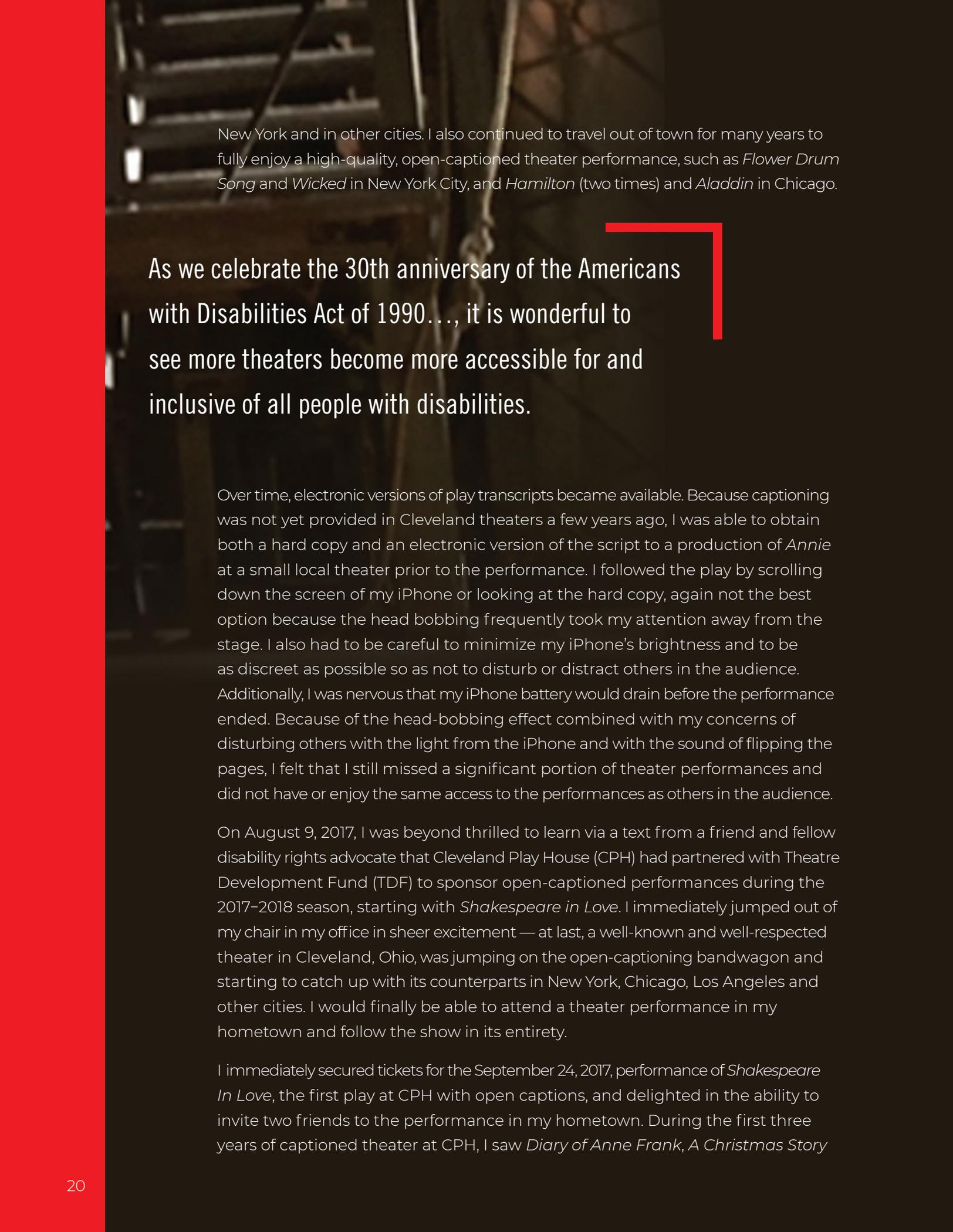
I love live theater. Attending the theater, however, has been a lifetime challenge until the advent of open captioning and its availability at theaters.

I write this article about theater accessibility from three distinct yet simultaneous perspectives: 1) personally — as an individual who has been profoundly deaf since birth and who relies on lipreading, spoken language and bilateral cochlear implants to communicate with others; 2) professionally — as a disability rights advocate; and 3) socially — as a companion of friends and relatives who are also theater lovers.

As a child and young adult, I generally relied on utilizing the flashlight-and-written-script method to follow plays. Although many productions provide American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation, my sign language skills are not adequate to enable me to benefit from ASL interpreters. I saw several productions such as *Miss Saigon* and *Les Misérables* in London in 1990, and *Sunset Boulevard* in Toronto in 1995, often armed with a small flashlight and copies of the play scripts. Utilizing a small flashlight to read the scripts is not the most effective, enjoyable or healthy way to follow a play because it involves significant head bobbing throughout a performance.

As an advocate and as a longtime user of CART (Computer Assisted Realtime Translation, a.k.a. captioning) in a variety of settings including law school, lectures, meetings and conferences, I had the wonderful and rewarding opportunity to work with others in the fall of 1997 to successfully encourage Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn, New Jersey, to provide open captioning for the performance of *Applause*, starring Stefanie Powers of *Hart to Hart* fame. The captions were provided on a 19-inch television monitor, and the first few rows behind the television were reserved for individuals who were deaf or hard of hearing. Since seeing *Applause*, I have watched the subsequent evolution and improvement of open captioning in theater venues on Broadway in

Although many productions provide American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation, my sign language skills are not adequate to enable me to benefit from ASL interpreters.



New York and in other cities. I also continued to travel out of town for many years to fully enjoy a high-quality, open-captioned theater performance, such as *Flower Drum Song* and *Wicked* in New York City, and *Hamilton* (two times) and *Aladdin* in Chicago.

As we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 . . . , it is wonderful to see more theaters become more accessible for and inclusive of all people with disabilities.

Over time, electronic versions of play transcripts became available. Because captioning was not yet provided in Cleveland theaters a few years ago, I was able to obtain both a hard copy and an electronic version of the script to a production of *Annie* at a small local theater prior to the performance. I followed the play by scrolling down the screen of my iPhone or looking at the hard copy, again not the best option because the head bobbing frequently took my attention away from the stage. I also had to be careful to minimize my iPhone's brightness and to be as discreet as possible so as not to disturb or distract others in the audience. Additionally, I was nervous that my iPhone battery would drain before the performance ended. Because of the head-bobbing effect combined with my concerns of disturbing others with the light from the iPhone and with the sound of flipping the pages, I felt that I still missed a significant portion of theater performances and did not have or enjoy the same access to the performances as others in the audience.

On August 9, 2017, I was beyond thrilled to learn via a text from a friend and fellow disability rights advocate that Cleveland Play House (CPH) had partnered with Theatre Development Fund (TDF) to sponsor open-captioned performances during the 2017–2018 season, starting with *Shakespeare in Love*. I immediately jumped out of my chair in my office in sheer excitement — at last, a well-known and well-respected theater in Cleveland, Ohio, was jumping on the open-captioning bandwagon and starting to catch up with its counterparts in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and other cities. I would finally be able to attend a theater performance in my hometown and follow the show in its entirety.

I immediately secured tickets for the September 24, 2017, performance of *Shakespeare In Love*, the first play at CPH with open captions, and delighted in the ability to invite two friends to the performance in my hometown. During the first three years of captioned theater at CPH, I saw *Diary of Anne Frank*, *A Christmas Story*

(twice), *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, *The Royale*, *A Woman in Black*, *Sweat*, *Tiny Houses*, *Pipeline* and *Clue*. With the exception of one play where the monitor was positioned too close to my seat, I loved the ability to follow the performances effectively and to laugh and cry with fellow audience members via the provision of high-quality captioning displayed on a four-foot LED monitor adjacent to the stage. The captions are generally in sync with the actors' dialogue. Because the monitor displays the text in real time for all to view, audience members are not required to utilize or have any equipment for viewing the text.

It is a joy to be able to attend the theater with friends or family, including my parents, who were long-standing subscribers to CPH. CPH works hard to make its programming accessible to patrons who are deaf or hard of hearing. The company reserves a certain number of seats in front of the monitor for individuals who require captioning and offers the tickets at a discounted price. I have learned that I prefer seats around the seventh row because not only does the proximity to the monitor allow me to see it comfortably without being too close, but it also affords me the opportunity to try to lipread the performers while reading the captions. Not only are the theater performances captioned; the pre- and post-performance discussions are captioned as well. Feedback forms are provided to the audience after each open-captioned performance. One downside of CPH's captioning is that captioned performances were* held only on Sunday afternoons, which meant that you had to arrange your schedule around those shows. Playhouse Square also provided captioning services on request. While I have yet to see a captioned theater performance at Playhouse Square, I had the opportunity to see Michelle Obama in *Becoming: An Intimate Conversation with Michelle Obama* as part of her book tour for her autobiography *Becoming*. I requested captioning in advance, and it was provided on a laptop computer placed on a tripod in front of me.

When people think about cultural accessibility, they often think about physical accessibility, such as ramps and accessible toilet stalls. Communications accessibility is typically not considered or addressed. The importance of providing a range of accessibility options for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing cannot be emphasized enough. Individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing simply want the same opportunity to attend theater performances that others have and enjoy. Moreover, individuals who are late deafened and individuals who are learning English as a second language also benefit from open captioning at theaters. As we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, it is wonderful to see more theaters become more accessible for and inclusive of all people with disabilities, and I look forward to enjoying many more open-captioned theater performances in Cleveland.

* Past tense is used because at the time of publication, theaters in Cleveland and around the country were closed in response to the covid-19 pandemic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Opening the arts-and-culture sector to all individuals, including those with disabilities,

enhances all parties: People with disabilities are aided by expanded participation in arts and culture and from opportunities for cultural expression, and in turn, the arts-and-culture sector broadens the audience for its work and widens the lens through which it sees its audience. The main actions arts-and-culture organizations can take are reported below; see the full report¹³ for detailed suggestions.



1 Prioritize incorporating disability and accessibility into diversity, equity and inclusion planning.

2 Develop, or expand, organizational definitions of “disability” and “access,” and incorporate them into definitions of “diversity.” Because forms of discrimination are intersectional, it’s critical that these conversations not be decoupled: There’s often a high degree of overlap between the ways in which disparate groups are unwittingly marginalized or made less welcome.



3 Expand training and organizational procedures for assisting and accommodating individuals with a wide range of disabilities.

4 Engage individuals with disabilities — including staffers with disabilities — in regular and direct interaction with board and other staff members.

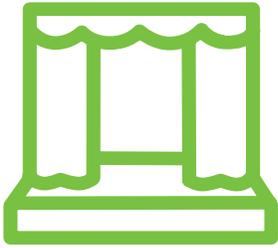
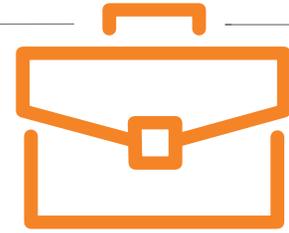


5 Make accessibility planning of all types — marketing/informational, transportational, physical/facility and programmatic — a standard part of program development.

¹³ A PDF of the report is available at <https://www.MyCreativeCompass.org/OpenCaption>; printed copies are available from Arts Cleveland, 1900 Superior Avenue, Suite 130, Cleveland, OH 44114, or by calling 216.575.0331.

6

Understand that arts organization staffers with disabilities face the same barriers as patrons with disabilities, and adapt the workplace accordingly. This can inform improvements to internal culture related to accessibility, such as hiring practices, the language used when referring to disabilities and workplace accommodations.

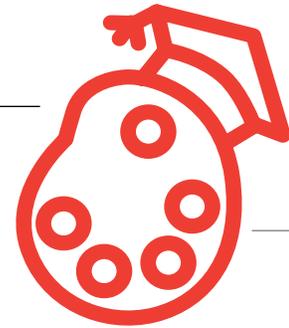


7

Provide performance and exhibition opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

8

Provide greater academic opportunity, generally, for individuals with disabilities, including arts education opportunities, specifically.



9

Collaborate with peers on systemic issues affecting accessibility to arts and culture.

10

Develop partnerships with cross-sector allies.



11

Realize that identifying and executing needed changes for accessibility is an extended process that's best done in stages.

12

Make regular, concrete and ongoing efforts to welcome people with disabilities into organizational conversations about accessibility and diversity.





*Dancing Wheels
dancers. Photo courtesy
of Dancing Wheels*

CONCLUSION

People with disabilities face tremendous challenges when trying to access arts and culture. This is patently unacceptable for numerous reasons, but among the most compelling are:

- Engaging in arts and culture, whether as artist or audience, enhances all aspects of human well-being, from the psychological to the cognitive to the social to the physical.
- The advantages noted above may be especially profound for the community of individuals with disabilities. For instance, self-expression and self-efficacy, social cohesion and a sense of belonging, and even vocational training can all be mediated through arts-and-culture participation.¹⁴
- Full inclusion in arts and culture is, as Art Possible Ohio points out, “The (civil) right thing to do: Your organization has legal responsibilities but this work is more than just meeting the letter of the law. Access promotes equality, community, and connection. There is a strong probability you know someone with a disability and you want them to enjoy cultural experiences and the community. There is also a chance you will be directly impacted by disability and want to be a lifelong participant of the cultural sector. Thinking and acting inclusively benefits everyone.”¹⁵

Achieving this goal requires a sector-wide cultural conversion toward proactive accessibility planning and execution. This planning should establish standards in service that individuals with disabilities can expect throughout the entirety of the arts-and-culture sector and should prepare organizations to provide additional accommodations when needed.

Fortunately, our research also shows that local arts-and-culture organizations of every stripe want to attain that ideal, and that many have already taken steps toward doing so. We believe the data and recommendations contained in this report will be a resource and a catalyst for shifting organizations’ cultures and practices closer to true inclusivity for individuals with disabilities.

Last, it matters more that your organization begins to implement change than it does how or where it changes. If you haven’t started working toward accessibility, start wherever it makes sense. If you have started, build on whatever you’ve done so far. With every shift your organization achieves, you’ll be making your venue and programming more accessible to more people, more truly inclusive. Your organization will get there.

Working together, we all can.

¹⁴ Crystal Finley, “Access to the Visual Arts: History and Programming for People with Disabilities.” *Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities*. 2013. Also, Sarah Harris, “Ability Through the Arts: Disabled adults find creative expression in local programs.” *DeseretNews*. December 4, 2017. Available at <https://www.deseret.com/2017/12/4/20636820/ability-through-the-arts-disabled-adults-find-creative-expression-in-local-programs#from-left-conor-kristensen-madeline-rencher-and-samuel-rencher-of-tanner-dances-elevate-theater-company-take-a-photo-in-costume-for-their-may-2017-performance-of-press-start>

¹⁵ Art Possible Ohio. *Cultural Access Guide*. 2020. Available at https://artpossibleohio.org/wp-content/uploads/CulturalAccessGuide_2020ed.pdf

ABOUT ARTS CLEVELAND

Our job at Arts Cleveland is to advance arts and culture in Cuyahoga County. But mostly what we do is make connections. Over the course of its 23-year history, Arts Cleveland has driven change in the way the community interfaces with arts and culture through innovative cross-sector investigations and partnerships focused on areas such as business, neighborhood development and healthcare. Intent on highlighting these “creative intersections,” Arts Cleveland’s cross-sector work stems from its 2008 white paper *From Rust Belt to Artist Belt*, which resulted in a number of significant publications, events and activities exploring intersections with arts and neighborhood development. Arts Cleveland subsequently carried out two more cross-sector investigations: 2014’s *Creative Minds in Medicine* white paper and convening, focused on health and human services, and 2016’s Creative Intersections speaker series, focused on safety.

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Arts Cleveland also extends its sincere gratitude to contributor and editor Kay Mallett for her work to help shape this piece and to designer Maryanne Hiti for her visual design.

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