

"Where the Buffalo Roam" or How Partnering with the Arts Can Benefit Your Community

After attending the auction dinner for the Buffalo on September 5, 2003 in Casper, I was impressed by the partnership created by the Nicolaysen Art Museum and the City of Casper. I have asked the City of Casper, the Nic, an artist, and a sponsor to address what the collaboration meant to them. Why did they participate; what benefits did they find it brought to their community?

Holly Turner, Executive Director Nicolaysen Art Museum and Discovery Center

Wow! What an exciting summer (June-Aug) it was in Casper with 30 life-size, 100-pound fiberglass, artist-embellished, buffalo roaming the city. I had been told what an incredible project it had been for many other communities that had done similar projects, but nothing prepares you for the actual response and fervor that accompanies this event.

The Nicolaysen Art Museum and Discovery Center had three goals with this project: to merge art and commerce, stimulate community pride and to raise funds and awareness for the NIC's exhibitions, children's programming, endowment and to pay off past debt.

The "Where the Buffalo Roam" event took about six months of planning before the finished buffalo hit the streets. It would not have been possible without our sponsors who paid \$3,000 to have the buffalo placed in front of their business. The buffalo were painted by local and regional artists after a long selection process. Over 40,000 maps were given away to people who wanted to go out on their own buffalo hunt. The event culminated with a Gala Dinner and Auction on September 5 with over 580 attending on a beautiful fall evening under a tent in front of the NIC. The night was magical; community pride and spirit were very present, for many had come to see that these buffalo would not leave the community, and their bidding proved that. Over \$300,000 was raised and the town is still abuzz: "Never has there been such an event in Casper."

In retrospect you ponder on why it was so successful. Everyone was part of this project, young and old, rich and poor, local, regional and national visitors; all went on their quest of the buffalo. Our relationship with the city was vital. We went to them early in the planning to explain what it would require and what had been done in other cities. The city was a wonderful partner. They helped us with the zoning issues and we spent days with the transportation and zoning officials to place the buffalo where they would not interfere with the public's safety and traffic. The city placed all 30 twelve-hundred-pound cement bases so that the notorious winds could not move the Buffalo. Both the city and the county commissioners/Natrona County International Airport sponsored a buffalo. One was placed in front of city hall and the other placed in the Airport to welcome all to Casper. As excitement mounted during the summer, all were truly pleased that they had sponsored and helped to underwrite this project.

As the project came to a close we heard many say "We don't want them to leave," and to our delight most will remain in Casper. The City of Casper purchased the one they had sponsored by Laramie artist Linda Lilligraven.

We could not have accomplished the project without the support of the city, county, community businesses as well as the artists, board of directors, staff and many volunteers.

We invite you to come and see our buffalo still roaming the streets of Casper.

City of Casper, Carter Napier City Manager's Office

When the staff at the Nicolaysen proposed the "Where the Buffalo Roam" fund-raising program, the Casper City Council not only saw this as a unique opportunity to generate needed funds for the Nic, but to also effectively promote the City of Casper. The City Council decided to put their partnership with the Nic to work and paid \$3,000 to sponsor one of the buffalo at City Hall and \$7,500 for a buffalo to be permanently displayed at the Casper Events Center.

The investment the City made in this program did not end with cash outlays. The City contributed the staff necessary to lay out the locations throughout downtown Casper in order to ensure that the buffalo were safely outside the public right-of-way. The City also contributed the manpower needed to set the concrete pads that the buffalo were anchored to. When the concrete pads need to be disposed of, the City will take the pads and crush them for use in the City's street projects.

The small investments Council made in the "Where the Buffalo Roam" program have paid off well. Not only did the Nic exceed their expectations and raise a significant amount of money for their needs, the community was enriched with 30 pieces of exclusive art that otherwise would not have had a home in Casper. Throughout the summer, visitors from around the State were drawn to downtown Casper to see what the heralded buffalo "stampede" was all about. Indeed, each participating artist has a following that can now add Casper as a potential stopping point. From the City's perspective, the visiting and local public now have

a unique work of art at the Casper Events Center that not only communicates the rich history and culture of the area, but also speaks to the wonderful benefits that come from a healthy partnership between government and a non-profit agency.

Bucky Walker, Public Relations

When asked why the McMurry foundation chose to partner with the Nic, Public Relations Director Bucky Walker responded: "The philosophy of Mick and Susie is quite simple. They invest their time and capital in innovative ventures as well as established community programs that have the potential to make a lasting difference to the citizens of Casper and the State of Wyoming.

You ask why the involvement? To quote Mick, "We just want to pay it back." They have adopted the "Pay it Forward" philosophy: Show kindness and compassion to others and hopefully it will be passed on by example.

Mick and Susie are generous, caring, and compassionate people who love the State of Wyoming. Through the McMurry Foundation they support programs and organizations that benefit the residents of Wyoming. They give in the following areas: Education, Religion, Children and advocacy for children, Health and human services, and Arts and humanities."

Lynn Newman, Buffalo Artist

From the perspective of an artist, the buffalo project was an opportunity to think outside the artist's box and partner not only with the Nicolaysen Museum, but with the community of Casper. Working in isolation, shipping work off to shows, and then beginning this process over again usually allows little or no public involvement in the "creative process."

When approached by the Nicolaysen, I was hesitant to jump on board simply because of the logistics involved in getting a 5x8 foot buffalo back and forth from Cheyenne to Casper. Additionally I wasn't sold on the idea that thirty artists all painting on the same armature would allow for individual expression. My twelve year old daughter, Drew, thought the project sound like fun however, and that I should jo in the program.

I struck on the idea of using a poem by the wonderful Kiowa artist and writer, Scott Momaday. The poem, *The Delight Song of Tsoaitalee*, speaks of connections to the land, children and to a love of heritage. Drew and my son Nathan helped get the buffalo started by painting some of the pictograph image. The work came together for

me when I realized I needed to include more from a children's point of view. The fourth grade class at Jessup Elementary School in Cheyenne was studying pictographic art, and the buffalo project seemed like a natural extension. With the help of Drew, her best friend Nicole, and a wonderfully supportive staff at Jessup, the fourth graders put the finishing touches on the buffalo with their handprints. It was magic! The connection to children of all cultures became the connecting element in the buffalo design.

The buffalo, which Drew named "Pueblo," had then taken on a life of its own. Along with the other buffalo strategically placed around Casper, the Nicolaysen displayed Pueblo at the Casper Airport. The involvement with the public took on another aspect I hadn't anticipated. I received e-mails from people I'd never met who wanted me to know they'd seen the buffalo and appreciated the effort. When discussing the project with other buffalo artists, I was struck with one comment on how proud the artist and her family were to drive by Casper billboards displaying renditions of the buffalos by local artists.

Too many people view art as something in galleries and museums unrelated to what they think, do or say. The buffalo project was a unique opportunity for the Nic to take art to the public. As evidenced by the Buffalo Auction of September 5, 2003, people from all over Wyoming wanted to be a part of that experience. Nic director Holly Turner and her staff had created a moment for all of us. It was the most connecting art moment I've ever participated in. It was an opportunity for children, artists, the community and the Nicolaysen to come together behind a unifying metaphor that became a reality. The final satisfying moment was finding out Pueblo's destination would be the Boy's and Girl's Club of Central Wyoming.

From this artist's perspective, the Buffalo Project was truly the ultimate connection... a reminder that the arts are a part of the glue that can bring a community together.



Drew Newman working on "Pueblo. "