LETTER FROM DIRECTOR

In 2020 we were changed forever by a pandemic, experiencing loss of life, loss of jobs, deep political division, and heightened awareness of the ways Black, Asian-American Pacific Islander (AAPI), immigrants, and other communities of color are mistreated and marginalized by systemic white supremacy.

Sheltering in place, many of us drew upon traditional and cultural knowledge to inform how we care, love, celebrate, and make ritual. We found comfort in the kitchen, sharing recipes and remedies over social media, or made masks for strangers, or played virtual concerts for others as acts of care. In this way, the unimaginable impacts of the pandemic enabled a return to the familiar.

And yet the challenges remained. At the Southwest Folklife Alliance, we faced the seemingly impossible task of mounting a public folklife festival in a time where no gathering could happen. As an affiliate of the University of Arizona, our organization experienced campus-wide budget cuts, furloughs, and a hiring freeze. Artists, culture-bearers, and communities across the Southwest found themselves without a marketplace or viable means of support. But with the support of our trusted partners, funders, and donors, we found regenerative and redistributive ways to continue our work with traditional artists, culture bearers, and communities.

In this report, we share with you the intentional forms of mutual aid, adaptive programming, and leadership that helped SFA bring light to otherwise dark days. Together we have reimagined ways to meet our mission—ways that have transformed us and will have a lasting impact on our organization for years to come.

In community,

Leia Maahs, Managing Director

(Cover) Ray Madril’s hands mixing adobe during UA College of Social & Behavioral Sciences Community Classroom course with SFA 2019 Master-Apprentice Artist Awardee David Yubeta, adobe brickmaker. Photo by Kathleen Dreier

(top) Charlotte Nsabaka, 2020 TMY Folk Art Marketplace artist. Photo by Steven Meckler

(bottom) David Yubeta, 2019 Master-Apprentice Artist Awardee. Photo by Steven Meckler
We Stimulate the artisanal economy (and the pandemic didn’t stop us).

When the pandemic reached Arizona in spring of 2020, we mobilized to support traditional artists and culture bearers who were hit hard by stay-at-home protection measures, losing dependable audiences, students, and markets to support their work. Most immediately, we created the **Traditional Artist and Culture Bearer Emergency Relief Fund** to raise funds from individual donors. We acquired matching resources from the Arizona Commission on the Arts ($10,000) and Community Foundation for Southern Arizona ($10,000) and by the end of 2020, we made awards of $500 to 58 artists who were experiencing loss of income due to COVID-19. The fund continues to solicit donations and make awards.

Given the pandemic, we could not produce our 47th annual **Tucson Meet Yourself Folklife Festival** in quite the same way—drawing 150,000 people to downtown Tucson over three days. But we remained committed to supporting TMY artists and “re:framed” the event as a virtual experience, with a handful of safely distanced, in-person events. Musicians, dancers, folk artists, food producers, and tradition bearers from both the Tohono O’odham and Pascua Yaqui community shared their work in over 45 online conversations and performances. A pilot online folk arts marketplace offered high-end work from nine traditional artists for sale to the public. Three weekends of “Tucson Eat Yourself” allowed food vendors (5-10 booths each weekend) to sell culinary cultural creations in distinct locations throughout the city. More than 4,000 people stopped by to pick up from TMY vendors.

As the designated Folk Arts partner of the Arizona Commission on the Arts, supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, we provide direct support to 10 traditional artists in the State of Arizona through our annual **Master-Apprentice Artist Award**.

In 2020, through this partnership we were able to increase award amounts from $2,500 to $5,000 to better support artists, build greater equity, and more effectively preserve traditional cultural knowledge in Arizona.
Stories are critical for the transmission and celebration of culture. While we are forever interested in stories of tradition and heritage, we understand that culture is always changing, adapting, reinventing. Our monthly online journal, BORDERLORE, reported these changes in a tumultuous year. We responded to current events and stay-at-home measures by shifting to a weekly publication for several months to report more timely stories about “Folklife in the Age of Pandemic.” We also took advantage of virtual gathering opportunities to introduce the public to four traditional artists (recipients of our Master-Apprentice Artist Award), who shared stories of resilience in LIVE ONLINE INTERVIEWS.

We partnered with several sister organizations across the United States to co-produce two national “From the Source” online panels featuring the voices of master traditional artists.

Recognizing that the climate crisis might be the single most important issue of our time, we began an investigation of how culture and climate intersect. Funded by Arizona Humanities, CLIMATELORE shared stories about the impacts of both stronger rainstorms and drought on adobe brickwork, Hopi drylands farming, and O’odham basket weaving, and how artists and culture bearers are finding ways to adapt to and mitigate those changes.

Covid brought the reality of illness and death closer to home for nearly everyone this year. At SFA, we have long been engaged in documenting END-OF-LIFE (EOL) TRADITIONS AND RITUALS as members of the Arizona End of Life Care Partnership. This year we launched a special initiative to shine light on the work of home caregivers through our EOL Ethnography Project. The project trains and pairs ethnographers one-on-one with caregivers for an eight-month investigation into this critical, often-overlooked work.
Since 2019, we’ve been working with Surdna Foundation’s Thriving Cultures Program as a partner in the Radical Imagination for Racial Justice Program. Using the tools and methods of folklore and ethnography, we are helping to build local, on-the-ground capacity for documentation, analysis, and research that leads to social impact in communities where Surdna’s program funds are invested. Our methods prioritize first-person narratives, community asset mapping, cultural celebration, and storytelling as ways of understanding the power.
and capacity that already exists within communities experiencing inequitable policies, invisibility, social and/or economic injustices and of identifying strategies for change.

Our work as folklorists and celebrators of arts and culture helps us bring both a supportive and critical eye to community cultural development. In partnership with the **ARIZONA CREATIVE COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE (AZCCI)** and the Fronteridades project at UA Confluence Center we mentored and offered training for project teams from Flagstaff to Douglas, Yuma to Globe, using arts and culture to animate rural and urban places, bring disparate communities together, beautify public space, and address critical community issues.

We are working with the Ford Foundation’s newly launched **RECLAIMING THE BORDER NARRATIVE INITIATIVE** to help document, codify, and analyze how popular and recurring narratives of the border and of immigrants circulate through media channels and how artists, journalists, and human rights activists who live and work in the region are challenging and re-fashioning new messages. We are working in partnership with Ford, Borealis Philanthropy, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, the National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures, and the Center for Cultural Power.

Gathering stories of traditional practices can help change the future. Through our VozFrontera program, we worked with Startup Unidos and the UA Office of Sustainability on **“WASTE NOT.”** helping Nogales, AZ youth to to celebrate sustainability traditions and launch their own start up business using food waste.
Our 2019 Tucson Meet Yourself festival was one of the best ever in terms of artists supported and public attendees. And from the shift in numbers for 2020, one might think something didn’t hold. Indeed, circumstances changed as a pandemic pushed us to re-think a public festival of over 150,000.

What the numbers don’t show is how we pivoted the festival to a digital platform, providing financial compensation to over 50 artists to share their artforms with the public and working with a dozen or more traditional food vendors to connect with a public “hungry” for good eats and fellowship, at a distance. We remained faithful to our mission, finding new ways to connect traditional artists and culture bearers to audiences and markets.

To help carry on our programs, we contracted local producers and suppliers—sound and video technicians, photographers and videographers, and cleaning crews—and paid competitive wages for their labor.

Numbers can give us how many and how much, but can’t tell us the care and patience involved in being an equitable cultural facilitator.

(left) D’s Island Grill at the 2020 Tucson “Eat Yourself selling Jamaican food-to-go. Photo by Kimi Eisele
FINANCIALS

2019
Total earned revenue $325,572.92
Total contributed revenue (includes UA in-kind) $1,442,983.00
Total Operating Expenses $837,777.33

Revenue by source: *
  20% Earned
  80% Contributed

Expenses: *
  18% Administrative
  12% Artist Honoraria
  70% Programming

2020
Total earned revenue $73,275.28
Total contributed revenue (includes UA in-kind) $828,926.81
Total Operating Expenses $688,698.75

Revenue by source: *
  8% Earned
  92% Contributed

Expenses: *
  25% Administrative
  17% Artist Honoraria
  58% Programming

*approximately
-financial data in accrual

(right) Projections of VASA Swedish Dancers and other performance brought Tucson Meet Yourself “Re-framed” to life. Photo by Kimi Eisele
Three trends held SFA’s financial outlook steady over the past two years.

1. **Multi-year grant awards to “weather the storm” and establish sustainable programming.**

   In 2019, SFA received a 3-year grant as a research partner in the Surdna Foundation Thriving Cultures: Radical Imaginations for Racial Justice program, an initiative of cultural and racial justice work supporting 11 BIPOC organizations and hundreds of artists and communities nationally. In 2020, the Ford Foundation launched Reclaiming the Border Narrative, supporting SFA in a 3-year ethnographic study of artists, journalists, and immigrant rights groups working to change narratives about the border and immigration. In 2020 the David & Lura Lovell Foundation renewed support to SFA for 3 years to support training, story sharing, curation, and leadership in the Continuum: Multicultural Expressions in End of Life program and Arizona End of Life Care Partnership. We thank these foundations for their vision and willingness to invest in arts and cultural organizing long-term, helping us build our capacity and the capacity of the communities we work with.

2. **Equitable and responsive action is essential to pandemic recovery efforts.**

   In 2020, Federal CARES Covid-19 relief funds distributed by NEA, WESTAF, and AZ Humanities grants helped SFA maintain existing staff positions as we faced campus-wide UA budget cuts. The Community Foundation for Southern Arizona and the Arizona Commission on the Arts (ACA) invested in SFA to establish a donor-matched Emergency Relief Fund for Traditional Artists, supporting artists and culture bearers deeply impacted by the income loss due to the pandemic.

3. **Adaptability is key to long term partnership and capacity building.**

   In 2019, ACA Trustees and Executive Director Jaime Dempsey created a direct partnership agreement with the Southwest Folklife Alliance with support from the National Endowment for the Arts. As the ACA State Folk Arts Partner, SFA will continue to grow programs impacting Arizona’s folk, tribal, ethnic and traditional heritage-based communities. The partnership signifies a commitment to engaging artists and culture bearers in decision-making about resource allocations and the way we reframe post-Covid support initiatives with regenerative and holistic economic analysis. Together ACA and SFA have been listening to the communities we are in partnership with and those we impact to serve all residents of Arizona with equitable distribution of resources.
In 2020, the world discovered folklife. People organized virtual happy hours with friends; essential workers recorded dance videos while delivering packages or tending to the sick; folks baked, walked, meditated, sang, and embellished their quarantined spaces.

This trend of collective ritual-making will continue to grow even as we return to “normal” times. But as the health and economic crisis made clear the value of artists, cultural organizations, the traditional arts, and heritage knowledge—part of the fabric that makes a community whole—it also revealed key lessons that must inform our work moving forward.

While SFA can take pride in how it modeled and celebrated these practices prior to the pandemic, the persistent lesson from our COVID days and the racial justice awakening of Summer 2020 is humility. We must commit to an organizational culture of self-critique and ongoing learning. We must look inside and challenge our blind spots; our work must orient towards justice, always. (cont.)
Three lessons stand out:

- **Nothing about us without us.** The era of top-down programming on behalf of artists and communities is permanently over. Although SFA and TMY have lived and practiced this high ethical standard for many years prior to this moment, we must recommit to it. Our work must prioritize what matters to those we aim to serve. The leadership and wisdom of those most directly impacted must guide how we plan, budget, produce, and evaluate all SFA programs.

- **Disarrange the categories.** Thinking about art and culture as separate from livelihood, health, family cohesion, material stability, and spiritual wellness is no longer helpful. SFA must create flexible mechanisms to support artists and communities holistically—whether that means funding for art supplies, performances, or groceries.

- **Invest boldly.** Opportunities for creative vitality may appear in places and through partnerships that we had not previously considered. Engaging a wide range of “investors” in our vision, from large philanthropic sources to cooperatives of neighbors, can expand and deepen the sharing of traditional culture, and ultimately, our mission.

-Maribel Alvarez, Director, Tucson Meet Yourself
Associate Dean of Community Engagement,
UA College of Social & Behavioral Sciences
University of Arizona Jim Griffith Chair of Public Folklore
BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Bryan Falcon
(Chair)
Artistic & Managing Director, Scoundrel & Scamp Theatre

Elizabeth Stahmer
(Vice-Chair)
UA / Social & Behavioral Sciences Research Institute

Lynn Hourani
(Secretary)
Islamic Center of Tucson

Maribel Alvarez
(Treasurer)
Director, Tucson Meet Yourself; Associate Dean of Community Engagement, 
UA College of Social and Behavioral Sciences; 
University of Arizona Jim Griffith Chair of Public Folklore

Vanessa Bechtol
Visit Tucson

Teresa Bravo
Pima County Attractions & Tourism

Francisco Pedroza
UA / College of Social & Behavioral Sciences

Dr. Praise Zenenga
UA / Africana Studies

Dr. Jim Griffith
Board Member Emeritus, Folklorist/Author/Founder Tucson Meet Yourself
LEADERSHIP & STAFF

Leia Maahs  
Managing Director

Nelda Ruiz  
Program Coordinator

Kimi Eisele  
Communications Manager

Kate Jewett-Williams  
Administrative Associate

Tim Escobedo  
Director of Operations  
Tucson Meet Yourself

Selina Morales  
Folklorist

FUNDDERS

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA  
Agnese Nelms Haury  
Program in Environment and Social Justice

The David and Lura Lovell Foundation

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS  
arts.gov

Community Foundation  
for Southern Arizona

AZ HUMANITIES  
EXPLORE SHARE EXPERIENCE

Surdna Foundation

WESTAF

PIMA COUNTY
WE BUILD
more equitable and vibrant communities by celebrating the everyday expressions of culture, heritage, and diversity in the Greater Southwest.

RECIPIENTS OF SFA'S 2020 MASTER-APPRENTICE AWARD  photos by Steven Meckler