

February 3, 2026

Dear Members of the Delaware General Assembly,

As a filmmaker, journalist, and lifelong storyteller, I have come to understand the arts not as a luxury, but as essential civic infrastructure. Arts funding matters to me because it shapes how communities see themselves, care for one another, and find language for experiences that are often carried silently—especially pain, resilience, and healing.

In my forthcoming PBS documentary *Friends & Neighbors*, Congresswoman Sarah McBride reflects, “When we allow ourselves to be vulnerable and heal, we give other people permission to do the same.” That idea sits at the very center of why I believe so deeply in the arts. To me, art is public vulnerability. It is the act of taking what is private, painful, or difficult to name and offering it in the open—not for spectacle, but for connection.

My forthcoming Broadleaf Books on men and mental health continues this work by confronting stigma, emotional isolation, and untreated trauma that quietly affect families, workplaces, and communities across our state. These projects are not abstract creative exercises; they are tools for public good. They invite conversation, reduce shame, and help people feel less alone. Arts funding is what allows this kind of work to reach broad audiences—on public television, in libraries, schools, and community spaces.

My 2025 DDOA didn’t enable me to write my book, but it did help me create the space by offsetting some of the financial risk months before I landed my book deal. Moreover, it helped find a community of writers, painters, and performers telling the kind of personal stories that capture universal experiences. My three decades of experience at MTV News and Facebook, I’ve seen how these stories shape behavior and culture at scale. When local, values-driven storytelling is underfunded, the narratives that fill the void are often louder, rife with agenda, and low on accountability.

In Delaware, investing in the arts strengthens civic life, supports mental health, fuels local economies, and ensures that diverse voices are not just heard, but valued. Funding the arts means investing in people—and in the shared vulnerability that allows communities to heal and move forward together. Now more than ever, it’s a vital investment.

Respectfully,

Benjamin Wagner

Joint Finance Committee Hearing Presentation
Mary Jane Vanvestraut
The Music School of Delaware
February 4, 2026



Good afternoon. Thank you, members of the Joint Finance Committee and the Controller General's Office, for the opportunity to speak today. I am here to thank you for your recent investments in the arts and to advocate for continued funding through the Delaware Division of the Arts that builds on this momentum.

My name is Mary Jane Vanvestraut, and I am a Delaware constituent who serves as the Director of Community and Operations with The Music School of Delaware. We serve students across all three counties through our campuses in Wilmington and Milford, and through partnerships that expand access into more rural communities.

I want to briefly share a story that illustrates the impact of your investment.

At our Milford location, we work with families who might otherwise have to drive over an hour for high-quality individualized music education — or go without it. One of our students, a middle schooler from Sussex County, began lessons with the help of financial assistance. What started as weekly violin lessons has grown into class participation, community performances, leadership skills, and confidence that shows up in school and at home.

Behind that student stands one of our full-time faculty members — a professional musician who has built a stable career here in Delaware because of institutions like ours. The Music School of Delaware is one of the largest employers of musicians in the state, and the only accredited community music school with full-time teaching artists. That means your investment doesn't just support programs; it supports sustainable careers.

When the State funds the arts, you are strengthening small businesses, stabilizing nonprofit employers, and ensuring that geography does not determine opportunity. You are helping us keep tuition accessible, offer financial assistance, and present free public concerts that bring families into our downtown communities. I invite you see that in action on Sunday, February 22nd, when our students and families come together for our I Love Music Month performances at our Milford Campus.

In today's challenging nonprofit environment, public funding provides critical stability. It allows us to retain exceptional educators, serve rural communities, and contribute meaningfully to Delaware's economy, cultural significance, and overall quality of life.

Thank you again for your leadership and for recognizing the arts as both a cultural and economic driver in our state. I respectfully ask that you continue to prioritize funding for the Delaware Division of the Arts so we can build on this momentum together.

Thank you for your time today and for your ongoing service to Delaware.

MJ

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THE MUSIC SCHOOL
OF DELAWARE

Good afternoon. Thank you to the Members of the Joint Finance Committee and the Controller General's Office for the opportunity to speak today.

I am here to thank you for your recent investments in the arts and to advocate for continued funding through the Delaware Division of the Arts that builds on this momentum.

My name is Cony Madariaga. I live and work in Wilmington, Delaware, and I am in Representative Kimberly Williams' district. I am a visual artist, teaching artist, and curator, as well as a 2023 Delaware Division of the Arts Emerging Artist Fellow. I work with organizations such as the Delaware Art Museum, the Delaware Institute for the Arts in Education, and Mariposa Arts.

State investment in the arts has had a direct impact on my career and my community. Support from the Division of the Arts has allowed me to build a sustainable artistic practice and continue working as a teaching artist. Being in classrooms and community spaces matters deeply to me, especially when young people can see that the arts are a real and possible future. In recent years, I was able to lead a Delaware Institute for the Arts in Education residency at my alma mater, A.I. High School, and experience firsthand how powerful it is for students to see someone who was once in their position working as a professional artist.

Additionally, with support from the Delaware Division of the Arts, I have continued to grow my artistic practice and career. Over the past three years, I have curated exhibitions centered on Latinx and emerging artists, creating opportunities for artists to be seen and for communities to connect through shared experiences.

Without the support of the Delaware Division of the Arts, I would not be where I am today. I am grateful for that investment, and I respectfully ask that you consider increasing funding so artists across Delaware can continue contributing to our communities.

Thank you for your time and consideration.



Joshua M. Freeman
FOUNDATION

Good morning. My name is Darren Silvis and I am the Director of Development for the Joshua M. Freeman Foundation, based in Selbyville. We operate Freeman Arts Pavilion, an open-air performing arts venue, and I am honored to be here today to advocate for more support for the arts in Delaware. We are a public charity committed to providing high quality arts experiences for all. Like my colleagues in the arts here today, I am here to thank you for your recent investments in the arts and to advocate for continued funding through the Delaware Division of the Arts that builds on this momentum.

At a very volatile time for the arts on the national level, Delaware has the opportunity to sustain and grow its commitment to residents and visitors. The arts are essential to Delawareans. The arts break down barriers and bring people together, they increase the quality of life for all, support development in children and are an economic driver for our communities. The Joshua M. Freeman Foundation has utilized the state's funds to bring live arts at Freeman Arts Pavilion and free programming into all Sussex County schools. With continued generosity and investments from the Delaware Division of the Arts, we have expanded programming, and developed a robust arts education program for Sussex County school children in grades PreK – 12. We also work with the underrepresented communities to ensure all can experience live arts performances. We are proud that 50% of our performances each year are free and open to the public.

Since our inception in 2008, over 1 million patrons have enjoyed live arts experiences including over 250,000 children. With your support, in just 19 years, we have put Southern Delaware on the map as an arts destination and are the largest arts organization in Delaware, and also first in the number of children we impact with our programming. In this short time, we have fueled more than \$150M into our economy and support local small businesses which are the backbone of Sussex County. According to a study conducted by the Biden School of Public Policy and Administration at the University of Delaware, each dollar that the Freeman Arts Pavilion spends results in another \$1.90 of economic activity in the County. The arts directly support tourism. Local residents and families can enjoy free programs and we are grateful for our corps of 280 volunteers who annually support our mission.

As demand in Sussex County for the arts continues to skyrocket, our expenses and operations have increased to respond to this demand. We are creating jobs and keeping pace with increased presenting costs. We also have invested in more safety and security measures and equipment to have a venue where people feel safe to enjoy live arts experiences. Our budgets are funded by the generosity of the public, including donors, foundational grants, the State of Delaware, and from fundraising events. We are incredibly appreciative that the state consistently invests funds year after year, and we hope you will consider the requested increase by the arts sector in order to sustain and strengthen operations and community impact. Thank you.

Advancing arts access for all through performance, education and advocacy.

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