

2019

PONCHO: Because the Arts Can't Flourish on Imagination Alone

Justine Deacon
Seattle University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/poncho>

Recommended Citation

Deacon, Justine, "PONCHO: Because the Arts Can't Flourish on Imagination Alone" (2019). *Patrons of Northwest Civic, Cultural and Charitable Organizations (PONCHO)*. 1.
<https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/poncho/1>

This Case Study is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts Ecosystem Research Project at ScholarWorks @ SeattleU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Patrons of Northwest Civic, Cultural and Charitable Organizations (PONCHO) by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ SeattleU. For more information, please contact eriksend@seattleu.edu.

PONCHO: Because the Arts Can't Flourish on Imagination Alone

Justine Deacon

Seattle University

Seattle Arts Ecosystem Research Project

March 19, 2019

Abstract

Patrons of Northwest Civic, Cultural, and Charitable Organizations (PONCHO) was formed in 1963 by a group of civic leaders who banded together to host a gala fundraiser to rescue the Seattle Symphony Orchestra from bankruptcy after their production of *Aida* during the 1962 World's Fair left them \$35,000 in debt. When that first event raised over \$100,000, PONCHO continued to host annual galas to support arts and cultural organizations. PONCHO is credited with creating the charitable auction industry in Seattle. The organization raised \$35 million for over 200 organizations during its 50-year history. Ceasing operations in 2013, it became a legacy fund of the Seattle Foundation which supports the Pacific Northwest Ballet, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle Opera, Seattle Repertory Theatre, Seattle Symphony Orchestra, and a K-12 arts education initiative.

PONCHO: Because the Arts Can't Flourish on Imagination Alone

The Century 21 World's Fair was a pivotal moment in Seattle's history and is credited with revitalizing the city's cultural ecosystem. According to Space Needle Writer-in-Residence Knute Berger (2011), "The fair, and the Needle, changed how the world sees Seattle, and how Seattle sees itself." "Seattle's fair left the city with a permanent cultural nexus and major infrastructure" (Berger, 2012). The World's Fair lasted from April 21 to October 21, 1962 and put Seattle on the map as an international destination, drawing more than 9.5 million visitors (Berger, 2012). The fair gifted Seattle with the Space Needle as a souvenir and tourist attraction. "[The Needle] was a conduit for Seattle's aspirations to be a modern city of art, technology, architecture, and refined fare" (Berger, 2012).

In the Beginning

The arts were showcased during the World's Fair despite the fair's heavy focus on the future, science, and technology. The fair saw the conversion of the Civic Auditorium building into an opera house where the Seattle Symphony staged its first ever opera production of Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* (Riddle, 2013). According to Blecha (2002),

Conductor Milton Katims states that Verdi's classic was selected because *Aida* is the 'grandest of grand operas' and notes that it was the piece that had been featured at the Grand Opening of more opera houses around the world than any other.

The production featured 333 performers, including an orchestra of 75 musicians, six principal singers, a dance corps of 28, and 160 extras (Blecha, 2002). Despite selling out all three of the June performances, *Aida's* \$185,000 production costs far exceeded the ticket revenue. The symphony was left in danger of bankruptcy with a deficit of \$35,000 (Riddle, 2013).

In an effort to save the symphony, Ruth Blethen, a member of the Seattle Symphony board, approached Paul Friedlander, a prominent businessman, civic leader, and member of the World's Fair Commission (Norton, 1994). The two then met with arts activist Kayla Skinner and formed a group called Patrons of Northwest Civic, Cultural, and Charitable Organizations (PONCHO). In Margaret Riddle's 2013 essay for HistoryLink, she credits Friedlander with the idea for a fundraising auction:

Friedlander remembered that Portland had staged an auction called ZOOMSI the previous year and had successfully raised funds for the Portland Zoo and Museum of Science and Industry. Blethen recalled Friedlander's words, "If Portland can do it for animals, Seattle can do it for people."

Friedlander consulted with Portland's ZOOMSI and became the first president of PONCHO. They assembled a board of trustees made up of eleven friends and civic leaders and incorporated PONCHO as a 501(c)(3) charitable organization on January 25, 1963.

Pioneers of the Seattle Fundraising Gala

PONCHO set up an office in the Washington Building and began planning an auction with the goal of raising \$100,000. According to Lorna Kneeland, PONCHO Executive Director from 2008 to 2013, "From what we understand, we believe this was Seattle's first gala auction" (personal communication, March 8, 2019). The auction took place on April 27, 1963 at the Seattle World's Fair Fine Arts Pavilion. Attendees paid \$150 to "dine, have drinks, listen to live music, and bid on more than 200 auction items" (Riddle, 2013). The auction raised \$124,875, which allowed PONCHO to pay off the Symphony's \$35,000 debt and use the remaining funds to establish the Seattle Opera. Riddle says, "So successful was the auction—and so great was the citizen support for the cause—that PONCHO decided to continue its fundraising to support arts

and culture in the Puget Sound region. The event soon became Seattle's party of the year" (2013).

Friedlander remained as PONCHO president for the first three years, after which presidents served for one year with the vice president moving into the president's position following each annual gala (Riddle, 2013). PONCHO's board members were "movers and shakers in the community and their connections and optimism drew strong media coverage from the start" (Riddle, 2013). According to Carol Munro, PONCHO Executive Director from 1995 to 2003, "A lot of people volunteered their time [at the gala] because they wanted to connect and kind of rub shoulders with the who's who in Seattle... it was just a very prestigious event" (personal communication, March 14, 2019). Kneeland added, "We would not have been able to do absolutely anything without the commitment and passion of the volunteers. The Board of Trustees took their role very seriously" (personal communication, March 8, 2019). Judith Whetzel was PONCHO Executive Director from 1981 to 1995 and one of the first arts lobbyists in Washington State. She believes that "the volunteers, board members, and president were all advocates, so being advocates for the arts... articulating the importance [of the arts] was essential to our city. Providing funding made it clear how important the [arts] organizations were" (personal communication, March 12, 2019).

Volunteers continued to play a pivotal role as the annual gala grew. PONCHO hosted the gala every April and used the funds raised to support organizations like the Seattle Symphony, Seattle Opera, Seattle Art Museum, Pacific Northwest Ballet, Seattle Repertory Theatre, A Contemporary Theatre (ACT), Seattle Children's Theatre, and Cornish College of the Arts (Riddle, 2013). Each gala had a different theme until 1995 when the theme for the next five years became "PONCHO, because the arts can't flourish on imagination alone." This phrase was vital

to Whetzel. “‘The arts can’t flourish on imagination alone’ says a lot about what we believed in and we believed [the arts] must be fully funded and supported because of how much we value [the arts]” (personal communication, March 12, 2019).

According to Kneeland, “Everything was done with the intention of raising funds for the arts while having a lot of fun and bringing the community together to rally around supporting the really talented actors and artists and musicians and everybody here in town” (personal communication, March 8, 2019). Kneeland even remembers hearing about PONCHO as a child and seeing her friends’ parents get ready to go to the “big party” (personal communication, March 8, 2019). The gala location eventually settled at the Sheraton Hotel in downtown Seattle, attracting 1,000 guests and 500 volunteers. “Donations of goods and services came from individuals and businesses, and items ranged from very good deals to bizarre items” (Riddle, 2013). With around 200 live auction slots, PONCHO auctioned off a wide range of items, including art, cruises, a house, a train caboose, and live animals. Kneeland remembers, “When they first established PONCHO, they had what they called the PONCHO Zoo, and so they literally auctioned off live animals, so dogs, cats, llamas, and mini horses—obviously, I don’t think we could do that today” (personal communication, March 8, 2019).



PONCHO members receive a caboose to auction, Seattle, May 12, 1967. Courtesy MOHAI, Seattle Post-Intelligencer Photograph Collection, 2000.107.170.33.02.



Guest petting dog at PONCHO annual auction, Seattle, April 26, 1986. Courtesy MOHAI, Seattle Post-Intelligencer Photograph Collection, 2000.107.170.34.01.

In the late 1970's, PONCHO added a disco party and auction that ran for two years but then was abandoned (Riddle, 2013). During the organization's 50-year history, PONCHO added a garage sale, art auction, and international wine auction; events held throughout the year to raise additional funds and take some of the pressure off of the annual gala. Board President Carl Behnke initiated the PONCHO International Wine Auction in 1991, which became a more permanent fixture compared to other, smaller events that PONCHO attempted. By 1995, PONCHO's annual contribution to the arts in Seattle reached \$1,250,000 (Riddle, 2013).

Challenges

With the addition of the Wine Auction, procurement, already a large part of the workload for the annual gala, became a year-round process. When asked about the biggest challenges faced in her time at PONCHO, Munro said,

There was never any downtime because you really wouldn't start working on the wine auction until the gala was over, which means, you know, in May, and then you have to deliver a full-on event by October. It was always just non-stop—there was really never any good downtime. (personal communication, March 14, 2019)

Whetzel added that another challenge was surpassing the previous year's success. She said,

You always want to outdo the last. You want to increase your funding every year and that was my highest priority, along with an understanding in our community and by [its] citizens of what the value of the arts are in our city and to us as human beings. (personal communication, March 12, 2019)

PONCHO's staff faced high expectations for each event and pressure to increase arts funding year over year. Munro said, "The biggest challenge is always just the workload. [You

have a] small staff and [are] very mindful of a small budget, and... the expectations of what the staff had to do were really high... it was very easy to get burnt out” (personal communication, March 14, 2019). Although PONCHO had a large volunteer base, the organization’s paid staff never exceeded six people: an Executive Director and individuals in charge of office administration, finance, production, procurement, and marketing (Munro, personal communication, March 14, 2019).

In that model, each person [was] in their own position and there was really no place to go... there was no growth opportunity... And, you know, when you’re in a place where you don’t see growth opportunities, you just have to be prepared that it’s going to be a revolving door for staff. (Munro, personal communication, March 14, 2019)

Despite these challenges, “It was rewarding at the end of the day, when... all was said and done and you raised the money and [the arts organizations] got the grants. I mean, it was *so* rewarding” (Munro, personal communication, March 14, 2019).

The Finale

The Seattle arts ecosystem changed drastically between PONCHO’s founding in 1963 and the 1990’s:

When PONCHO began, major cultural groups in the area included Cornish College of the Arts on Capitol Hill, the Seattle Art Museum at Volunteer Park, the Cirque Playhouse, the Seattle Symphony, and the Seattle Repertory Theatre... In the next 15 years, Seattle would see the creation of dozens more arts and cultural organizations such as ACT, The Pacific Northwest Ballet, Northwest Chamber Orchestra, Seattle Opera, and Intiman Theatre. (Riddle, 2013)

While the growth of the arts and cultural environment positively impacted the city, it meant competition for PONCHO from other fundraisers. “By the 1990s Seattle’s cultural scene had matured, with hundreds of art groups, and PONCHO’s gala was no longer the city’s biggest annual event. The group needed to find where the needs were greatest” (Riddle, 2013).

When Lorna Kneeland became PONCHO’s Executive Director in 2008, PONCHO was a vastly different organization than when it was formed in 1963. She said, “The participation was still really active in terms of people attending the gala, but the revenues weren’t necessarily decreasing, but they weren’t necessarily increasing [either]” (personal communication, March 8, 2019). Moving the annual gala to the Sheraton in 1984 initially provided advantages that later became challenges. “At the Sheraton, more dollars were raised but the cost of staging became increasingly expensive; though the net results were larger, fewer dollars were left to give to the beneficiaries” (Riddle, 2013).

According to Riddle (2013), “the 2008 economic recession severely impacted Seattle’s arts organizations as well as school arts programs.” In 2012,

PONCHO launched “the Youth Philanthropy Project (YPP) intended to educate young people about arts issues and grant-making; the Youth Program Quality Initiative, an out-of-school arts program, and the Saint Therese Catholic Academy Arts, in partnership with Arts Corps, collaborating with teachers to help develop student creativity and critical thinking. (Riddle, 2013)

This expansion of PONCHO’s original mission of supporting arts organizations, to include support for arts education also created a challenge for PONCHO’s future.

As Executive Director, Kneeland presented two options to the board: “Do we go towards this new direction and establish this new organization? Or do we declare victory, \$35 million

over 50 years?” (personal communication, March 8, 2019). She adds, “PONCHO was at a real tipping point as an organization, and so the two [questions] that the board and I tried to answer [were]: is PONCHO relevant? And if so, are we sustainable?” (personal communication, March 8, 2019). Ultimately, the PONCHO board decided that the organization was no longer sustainable:

If the symphony has a \$22 million budget, and we’re giving them \$250,000 of their \$22 million budget, and we’re going to the same donors, it seems like if we removed ourselves from the equation, that will allow more donors to go direct to the organizations because at that time, [the donors] were funding both. (Kneeland, personal communication, March 8, 2019)

Munro added, “All the organizations had development departments, they were raising a ton of money, so that was the Achilles heel for PONCHO... it just became harder to justify a need for two organizations” (personal communication, March 14, 2019).

On February 23, 2013, PONCHO announced that it would continue to support the city’s arts scene by becoming a legacy fund within the Seattle Foundation (Bauman, 2013). According to the Seattle Foundation’s website, the PONCHO Legacy Fund will

...enrich the quality of life in this region through increasing resources and community support for the arts [and will] help secure the financial future of six of our greatest community arts and cultural treasures: Pacific Northwest Ballet, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle Children’s Theatre, Seattle Opera, Seattle Repertory Theatre, Seattle Symphony Orchestra, and a portion will support a K-12 arts education initiative. (Seattle Foundation, n.d.)

The Legacy

Whetzel looks back fondly on her fourteen years as Executive Director of PONCHO, referring to it as a treasure. She says, “Being able to increase our funding every year because we still valued the asset [of the] creative arts meant so much to our community and to our citizens, and the creativity and commitment [of] individuals... was really inspiring” (personal communication, March 12, 2019). In its 50-year existence, PONCHO raised \$35 million in support of over 200 arts and culture organizations in the Puget Sound Region. “PONCHO was a major influence in establishing and continuing a thriving arts scene in the region, and the organization can count as legacy the building of the charitable auction industry, of which Seattle has been a world leader” (Riddle, 2013). Munro adds, “[PONCHO] was filling a need right from the very beginning. These were dollars that the organizations would not have had without PONCHO and I’d say it’s been a significant piece of the backbone of the arts community in Seattle” (personal communication, March 14, 2019). Kneeland agrees that PONCHO had a lasting impact on the Seattle arts ecosystem after the World’s Fair: “People were very proud to be part of PONCHO, and they should be” (personal communication, March 8, 2019).

Method note:

This case study was developed by Justine Deacon, MFA 2019, as part of Seattle University’s MFA in Arts Leadership applied research seminar focused on the Arts Ecosystem Research Project. Interviews were conducted with Judith Whetzel, PONCHO Executive Director 1981-1995 and longtime Washington state arts advocate and lobbyist; Carol (Evans) Munro, PONCHO Executive Director 1995-2003, arts advocate and marketing executive; and Lorna Kneeland, PONCHO Executive Director 2008-2013, now Director of Engagement and Board

Relations at Swedish Medical Center Foundation; as part of this research during Winter quarter 2019. Susan Kunimatsu provided editing.

References

- Bauman, V. (2013, February 21). PONCHO closing its doors, becoming a fund within Seattle Foundation. *Puget Sound Business Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.bizjournals.com/seattle/news/2013/02/21/poncho-closing-its-doors-becoming-a.html?page=all>
- Berger, K. (2011, April 17). Space Needle Writer-in-Residence: Knute Berger lands the coolest gig ever! *Seattle Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.seattlemag.com/arts/seattle-arts-profiles/space-needle-writer-residence-knute-berger-lands-coolest-gig-ever>
- Berger, K. (2012, February). Back to the future: Why Seattle's world's fair mattered. *Seattle Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.seattlemag.com/article/back-future-why-seattles-worlds-fair-mattered>
- Blecha, P. (2002, July 6). Seattle Symphony debuts opera with Verdi's *Aida* on June 7, 1962. Retrieved from <http://historylink.org/File/3881>
- Norton, D. (1994, July 1). Paul S. Friedlander, made name for self as civic leader. *Seattle Times*. Retrieved from <http://community.seattletimes.nwsouce.com/archive/?date=19940701&slug=1918275>
- Riddle, M. (2013, April 5). PONCHO (1963-2013). *HistoryLink.org Essay 10360*. Retrieved from <http://historylink.org/File/10360>
- Seattle Foundation. (n.d.). Targeted fundraising efforts supported by Seattle Foundation philanthropists: PONCHO Legacy Fund. Retrieved from <https://www.seattlefoundation.org/nonprofits/communitycampaigns#poncho>