



CITIZEN PATRIOT • KATIE RAUSCH

Rocco Landesman, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, center left, jokes with Jeff Daniels, center right, while on a tour Monday of the Purple Rose Theatre in Chelsea. Daniels founded the theater in 1991.

A city for artists

NEA chairman impressed by the role of arts in Chelsea

By Bill Chapin

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After tours of the Purple Rose Theatre and River Gallery in Chelsea, National Endowment for the Arts Chairman Rocco Landesman called the city "a poster child for everything we're talking about at the NEA."

"It's inspiring to be in this community and see how the arts are an engine for vitalization," Landesman told community leaders gathered for a roundtable discussion Monday at The Common Grill restaurant. "That's something I can take back to Washington."

Landesman made Chelsea part of Art Works, a six-month national fact-finding tour intended to highlight the role of the

arts in communities. He'll spend today visiting arts institutions in Detroit.

Most of the stops on Landesman's tour have been much larger cities than Chelsea, which has a population of about 4,000. He used the opportunity to announce the release of a new research publication that analyzes the ways people outside major metropolitan areas participate in the arts.

"The mission of the NEA is not just big cities," he said.

Having the head of the federal arts agency in town was an honor for members of Chelsea's arts community — even for a celebrity like Jeff Daniels, who sat next to Landesman at the roundtable. The actor and Chelsea native called it "a red-letter day for me,

personally."

"It's called national recognition," Daniels said.

Business owners at the discussion singled out Daniels' founding of the theater company 19 years ago as a primary factor in downtown Chelsea's revitalization. Each year more than 35,000 people attend plays at the theater.

"It really is a backbone of this community," said Pat Cleary, owner of Cleary's Pub. "We make a living based on the people that come" to see shows.

Two-thirds of the guests who stay at Chelsea House Victorian Inn are there partly to attend the theater, owner Jim Myles said.

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NEA official impressed

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Having a professional theater company in a city the size of Chelsea is "remarkable," Landesman said. He has toured cities 75 times larger than Chelsea with no professional theater, he said.

As the discussion turned to what lessons other communities can take from Chelsea, Landesman identified three factors necessary for success with arts development: a history of artistic engagement, a strong commitment from the private sector and "a local political structure that 'gets it.'"

"If you have the first two and don't have the third, you're not going to get any traction," he said.

He spent most of his visit

simply listening to Chelsea residents describe the city's arts initiatives. At the River Gallery, directors Deborah Greer and Patti Schwarz made a presentation on such events as the Sounds & Sights on Thursday Nights series, which stations musicians and other performers at various downtown locations. It draws 1,000 to 1,500 spectators each week.

Downtown Development Authority board member Mark Heydlauff credits the number of people visiting downtown as one factor that has allowed his appliance store to see record sales for the past two years.

"We've realized over the last 20 years what the arts can do for a community," he said.