

CULTURAL CONFIDENCE

A legacy for future generations

Building the confidence of our community happens as good practice accumulates and diffuses outwards. When leaders in our community limit urban sprawl, we feel more pride. When the streets are safe enough for children to walk to school, our confidence grows. And when a new museum opens in our neighborhood, we build a legacy for future generations.

Miami Dade College opened a small but significant gallery in Doral recently. Located at MDC's West Campus, it is the area's first public gallery, and it opens the door for people in that community to express their love of art. Appreciating art and beauty is not an esoteric exercise; it builds character, culture, and community. The act of appreciation humbles us and builds our wisdom.

A cultured community is also an educated community, and those communities make better, wiser decisions. Our college chose to emphasize the importance of cultural education through a new set of goals for all graduates.

Two of MDC's 10 Learning Outcomes call for graduates to "demonstrate an appreciation for aesthetics and creative activities" and to "demonstrate knowledge of diverse cultures, including global and historical perspectives." By interacting with works of art and history, students become better thinkers and therefore better citizens.

In contrast, a lack of stimulating cultural activities drains a community's spirit and sets the stage for unrest. As a young city, Miami has had its share of growing pains and has struggled to gain its foothold in our nation's cultural landscape, but something transformational has happened in recent years. Instead of a one-dimensional mentality, our area has emerged with a regional identity – a cultural gateway to the Caribbean and the Americas.

The word "international" in our book fair and film festival titles is not perfunctory; it is accurate. Authors and directors from around the world feel welcomed in Miami because no one can claim the privilege of majority status; all of us are minorities (it is a small world, after all). The embedded presence of Hispanics from across Latin America demonstrates that differences are accepted here.

Diversity is growing within Miami's Latin community as well, as evidenced by the transition of Little Havana into a mixed community where Cubans no longer represent the majority of residents. "International" in Miami may be tinged with Caribbean and Latin flavors, but it opens the door for all.

Access is the key word when it comes to the arts, and our college has lived that word through its festivals and other cultural offerings throughout the community. Far from cheapening these affairs, increased access and affordability has built unstoppable momentum.

Only a few years ago, it would have been unthinkable to consider Miami as a "mecca" for art, film, and book lovers; now the likes of Tom Wolfe are singing its praises. Who would have thought in the early 1980s, when Miami was embroiled in upheaval, that 25 years later we would be celebrating the silver anniversary of both the book fair and the film festival? Fortunately for us, a few savvy souls saw potential where before there was a vacuum.

The Miami International Film Festival, starting this month, offers a best-case spectacle for our community. It makes foreign film more accessible to all residents, and it showcases our community's assets to an industry that deserves more than the prescribed Hollywood pigeonhole.

The festival manages to be fiscally responsible and cutting-edge, efficient

and glamorous, traditional and surprising. In what might be called the medium of the Americas, film has found its foothold on our sandy soil.

Miami Dade College benefits greatly from hosting the festival, and the benefits extend well beyond the discounted tickets for students and employees. Each film offers a journey into another person's mind, into another perspective on life and love, and these journeys build our intellect.

This broadening of our minds extends through our fingers and reaches into the mundane, quotidian world of our offices and our homes, thereby transforming them into richer and wiser places. With over 70,000 people attending the festival, there are 70,000 more opportunities for our community to grow.

Keeping the momentum of the arts is a constant challenge, because audiences become more demanding over time and the issues of our time constantly evolve. Keeping the arts fresh is a challenge that we should continue to embrace, because it makes us well-rounded as individuals and as a community. It also keeps us sane. Outside the gallery may be chaos, but inside we can find our way to peace. Redirected, that inner peace can translate into better schools, better streets, and a better place to live.

Never underestimate the inherent value and the transformational power of the arts. ■

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