



SOUTHCOAST Artists Index

This story was collected through our partnership with the SouthCoast Artist Index, led by Ron Fortier.

These transcripts were produced using the Zoom transcription feature.

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Ron Fortier

Hello, my name is Ron Fortier. And I'm your host. The Artist Index podcast is brought to you by the Artists Index website Project, putting artists in their place for history. Our guest is a very special guest and I'm going to let her introduce herself and as with every guest on the artist index. I'll ask her how to spell and pronounce her name.

Candace Lee Heald

So my given name is Candace Lee Heald. The Lee is LEE, and I'm pretty much known as Lee Heald. Serve like one word. I'm also known as Mrs. Aha. It's funny because my I have two sons, identical twin sons who are now 26. And I'm actually a PhD, so when I was the mom in the neighborhood, I was called Doctor Lee, and for a long time I had it on all of my frequent flyer cards, and I realized that when the plane went down, I'm actually not a medical doctor. I'm a doctor of. Adult learning, really. And so I thought when the plane goes down, all I'm going to be able to do for people is help them experience the whole thing. I'm actually not going to be able to medically help them. So a lot of people don't know I'm a PhD. So there you go. But I'm. I'm called Lee Hill, and I think Phil Paleologos was the person who gave me the moniker missus. Aha. And so when I introduced myself. Actually, I will always say, Oh yeah, no, actually I misspell aha and people laugh immediately and smile, which is a great reaction. And then I always say it's like being Mrs. Santa Claus because everyone loves you. And like all of the claws family, you make a list. And you check it twice and that is kind of the ongoing formula of having a successful ongoing monthly event. You make a lot of lists, you check them twice and you make sure you've got all your details together.

Ron Fortier

Lee, what are some of Ahas highlights over the past 20 or so years?

Candace Lee Heald

There are 9 replication projects of AHA, actually in Massachusetts and it stands for arts, history and architecture. When it came out of a program at the regional Community Congress which started in 1997. And the idea behind that and there was a movement throughout the States, I think we copied Louisville. It was run by Bill Kennedy,



who was the publisher of the Standard Times at the time as a community project. And the idea was to involve people from all sectors of the community. So it was. Arts and culture. It was Health and Human services. It was the environment, education, business and communities of faith. So 6 sector. And each sector had their own kind of meeting group. And then we got together and did walls of dreams and all of the things that are popular at that voting with colored dots and all of the ranking and that kind of stuff. And out of that notion, which started off really with the idea of. Regaining the idea of New Bedford as a hub of the region and you see things like the South Coast Region moniker coming out of that long. Term, but it was to sort of think about what are the relationships between all of the parts of this area with New Bedford, because historically New Bedford was the port and there were foodstuffs and wood and ships and different kinds of articles coming into New Bedford. But New Bedford was the hub and I think. It was an effort to regenerate, which is a bit of a popular term and regain. That and in the end of the day, AHA was actually the only project that came out of that. There's a little bit of the Film Festival that Culture Park runs, but I always said it was because the arts and culture meetings were so well attended. They were held at the Whaling Museum we provided. Lunch and you have to eat lunch sometime and we actually still do that for the AHA meetings. It's a regular meeting every second Wednesday, and then we pretty much provide lunch. And so people actually come to the table and it is that sort of notion of sharing food and sharing community that really builds the program over time. And I think. Over time, it has been a model for what are now called Gateway Cities, popularly known as gateway cities, and a lot of the like. The mass development has TDI initiatives in the gateway cities, and this whole notion, the Irving Foundation writes about it, that the whole notion of the way that the Rust Belt or the cities that. Were superseded by both suburban and rubian development. These essentially manufacturing cities that kind of hollow themselves out and have problems with housing and education and infrastructure. That one of the ways that these areas are able to recreate, regenerate, fill up their souls is really thinking about programs that bring voice to the table that think about inclusion and really programs with arts and culture. Because the AHA program never purported to be. Only professional artists or artists of note, we really looked around a continuum of K through 12 and a continuum of emerging artists. And I think that that is one of the things that has always drawn a strong professional core to the table because everyone wants to mentor and connect and really think about their experiences over time. And so those kinds of. Cultural program. So it's kids singing songs about their culture. It's the young Portuguese dancers that come out for kids rule it's it's ways that people present their culture and aha is free. And most of the performers actually come to the table with gifts to give their community. And so it is this very receptive. Giving and sharing of culture and ideas, and it's a platform. It's become a community platform that people recognize and that is one of the things over time that I think has helped not only New Bedford but other communities of like New Bedford rebuild their core in over 20 years. The first AHA night was in July of 1999. Over 20 years, you see. When we started, we were part of a Community Economic development grant from Mass Cultural Council and then it became very popular with Richard Florida promoting the creative economy and the creative class. And then once you really see these places take off, this this whole notion that the any national movement for the arts. India has promoted of creative placemaking, so now we're not just having cultural events, but we're. Really, I think in particularly in New Bedford, changing the way people think about their area, changing the way the landscape looks, changing the opportunities. And two years ago, New Bedford was recognized by the Mass Cultural Council as the most creative community in the Commonwealth. It's a biennial award. And I say it's not that we are the wealthiest. In the Commonwealth, it's not that we're Cambridge or one of those those communities, but New Bedford was recognized as a community which has used arts and culture to rebuild its core and the importance of arts and culture in the cities. Not only cities, economy, but the city's psyche. That is what we are recognized for. And I think it's a distinct honor and really looks at 20 years of community participation at all levels in the program.

Ron Fortier

Given the current boom of artists within the South Coast creative community, the amount of art. Being made, coupled with a lack of commercial galleries, do you have any idea where art is being sold and shown?



Candace Lee Heald

That's a big question. I was still on the. I still think this. I was going to say I think the Star store is one of the anchors of downtown and. While AHA predated those things, I think that all of that that administrative energy was in the four and the same people who sort of were the backbone of getting aha going. I think we're also the backbone of the things like the Star Store Center, Montigny bill and the the National Park with Tony and Elsie and the. Same kind of cruise. So we always want to give them recognition. The well deserved recognition. UM. You know, I think it's it's an interesting thing and so. I'm intrigued. I think with the things that are going on in downtown New Bedford and the wider regions, and I think it's a good development, it's a little tricky to parse out because in the larger society you have everyone saying retail is dead because everyone's on Amazon. UM, and you know that's dead because everybody's shopping this way, you know, and whatever. So I think that in the wider world, you kind of look at how people buy, sell and the Etsy moment, I do think that there's something that is unique and special about. Arts and artists because it's not. Always a commodity. And of course there's a range of craft and you know up to quote UN quote Fine Arts. It's always tricky. It's not so much a commodity. It's a relationship. So I think that New Bedford has absolutely been the right place early. I mean, AHA, was the sponsor of Open Studios originally. And then it went off on its own. I think that hatch. Is doing some great stuff with sort of not only spaces to work, but ways to meet artists and then rope works has places to work, live and meet artists and see their works for their open studios. And so I think that there's that whole range of relational pieces. With arts and artists and that's important not only for the retail component, but for the. The health of the community and the connection people are sharing, studios and Co branding and Co marketing. The coming studio downtown just have the whole big thing about people who want to collaborate and show and do pop-ups. People like Alison Wells, who has a very successful gallery downtown, usually has pop-up people, so she's usually. Featuring someone else, the Art Museum does that. And so I think that there are a whole range of relations and permutations. I guess of ways that art is created and. Marketed and sold and connected. And you know, you mouse and the CVP, the star store really focuses on kind of marketing and knowing and being out there. They've done some really interesting work this fall with the local colleges project, which is largely community connected, but very. Well funded by foundations and grants. And if you look at some of the work I'm on the board of the Art Museum. So I say that, but the creative courts project that's been done with the Community Foundations Creative Commonwealth project, I mean, that is money coming in from the outside to do to Commission and do fabulous work in the Community. And then you have the wicked cool program from the mayor. That is for largely programs. But again, the you know the visual and performing artists so that they're performing artists and musicians. And they're also funding a basketball court with the artists. And so there's, I think there are lots of different ways that art is not only sold, but that art is funded. And I think what's coming new to New Bedford is that whole notion of the audience. For your art is not necessarily the individual consumer, and that art will go off into a private space, but that there is a funding opportunity that. Supports artists so that work can be held in common and in public, so the mural, Ben Ben Rose and the murals in Wings Court was super flat is doing a great amount of work and so I think that as we were just on the cusp, now we're on a funny cusp because you would ask me about. Retail and you know most most people are thinking about public art. And so New Bedford is interesting because it still supports retail and galleries in that sense. And then it has places like City Hall has a gallery. It's a non market gallery because it's a display gallery but not a sales gallery. Although you can see the person in sell you know, I mean there are all these permutations of, you know there are green bean acts as a gallery. Poor farm acts as a gallery and so I think it's. A very fluid. Environment and space. My guess is it depends on your medium and your age in terms of your comfort zone, what you're producing and your customers. You know someone like Bob Duff was at downtown, then left, then came back and is now kind of in his own private space again. I mean, I think that people have come and gone. So it's I I probably haven't answered your question, but those are kind of my thoughts around. That's those are my thoughts around how it.

Speaker

No, I mean it's the, it's the.



Candace Lee Heald

How it's happening?

Ron Fortier

Yeah. As far as commercial galleries, it's probably just. We've seen the end of, I mean, we're going to alter alternative spaces. Hybrid spaces.

Candace Lee Heald

And in New Bedford, so if you ask that same question, I think of someone who's on Cape Cod, where not only is the search for what they're buying very different, but the financial backing of that is very different. So it's a price point. It's a probably, if you're looking at. Certain places in Florida, Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, the Cape, I would say North Shore. And I think that you'll find pockets that the traditional. Gallery culture is doing quite well and then I think that you'll find pockets in New York and I've just got back from Boulder, which is alive with fabulous galleries that you know, part of its economic and part of its kind of taste. So. But I think New Bedford. It's this really interesting mix of evolving public private partnerships as well as artists who work in public and private spaces.

Ron Fortier

What will the next five years bring to the AHA table?

Candace Lee Heald

I think it's a great time to be in this area because New Bedford has. One of the few unspoiled really 19th century port views. And so we're talking about arts and culture, but we. As a community are still, you know, the leading fishing port for value of catch land, that there's a lot of industry coming in. And so I think New Bedford both in terms of geographic location and and topography really has a huge. Advantage over places that have been overdeveloped too soon, so particularly for the arts and culture community, I think it's very it's exciting. New Bedford has attracted the attention of funders and funding. Which is a credit to everyone who has worked so hard over time. There are several institutions doing capital campaigns to improve their physical infrastructure and their offerings. The National Park remains a great partner for all of the things we do and gives U.S. National recognition. Lee Blake's work with the Underground Railroad has really brought distinction to the community in a variety of ways. So I mean, I think New Bedford is really not only has it arrived, but it's poised to do more and interesting things. And what I love about it is it's a really diverse and inclusive voice. And I don't see that changing because I think the past 20 years has given both permission and motivation to the people coming up the 30s and the 40s to really stand their ground and. Be productive and and most of the people I have seen and worked with are enormously community oriented and dedicated to New Bedford. It's not a way stop New Bedford is seems not to be a place that you pass through on your way to something better. Different, whatever. People get caught and really fall in love or grow up here and it makes sense to them. And so that is one of the, I think, amazing things and we're always promised the train is coming through so. All of. Yeah. Well, you know, there you go. So that still seems to be on the table for 2023 and I, you know, I just I think that there's a huge amount of opportunity and I see great leadership. I think that people are very conscientious both from the university. Level from the city political level, from the economic development level, from the Community Foundation and philanthropic side of it, from the cultural organizations that are up here. I just think the leadership has been. And smart fashion forward and has really positioned Bedford to continue its trajectory of success without losing the vision of inclusion and community voice. And that's something that. I am. I am honored to be a part of.

Ron Fortier

What do you see for aha and New Bedford specifically in the future?



Candace Lee Heald

And for New Bedford, I see.

Ron Fortier

And you know, because one is.

Candace Lee Heald

I see. I see new. Bedford, with increased opportunities, I would hope that the opportunities that we see on the street. Connect with the population growing up here. So I mean, I have high hopes for, you know, K through 12 opportunities for the kids to stay and be here and to be able to, I mean every community wants the kids to be able to stay home and make a living and not have to go away. And so I see that not only in New Bedford, but kind of regionally. So that would be one of my hope, because I think that that's one of the markers of a good economy, that it's multi generational and in inclusive of all in the way that provides that kind of thing. And I know that it's a mix of education and economic opportunity and that arts and culture aren't going to fill that. Niche necessarily, but it's well, it's part of the. It's it's it's, it's always part of the frosting on the cake and at some point it is part of the cake. Also I think more and more there's. Opportunities. That's not. Maybe a fine artist, maybe a graphic artist, maybe, you know, maybe this, maybe that you're in advertising. There's a lot of art in the advertising business. There's a lot of and you know, there's so much that's transportable now. So New Bedford, I think is still relatively more affordable than some other markets for live work. And so I think that that's increasingly. And just I was on the when I went out to Boulder, I was on the plane and I always talked to people about what they're doing, and it was a a young man who lived in Iowa because it was so affordable. And, you know, and told me about the house and the kids and the, that's the. But he runs a the marketing department of a fairly substantial. So mail order House, but he comes to Boston once 1/4 and runs the rest of his house. He said. You know, you take a Boston salary and you put it in a a down market down home environment and you're doing really well. And I think that particularly if a train comes through that New Bedford has a lot of opportunities to be one of the. Within an hours commute opportunity, it's one of the last ones that's not developed because we haven't had. Good public transportation. If one more meeting in Boston says, please take public transportation. You know you you sort of say I'm. I'm on that. Yeah. I'll. I'll be with you in a while. So I think that that's going to be a huge opportunity for New Bedford to grow how we're in the middle of kind of doing some strategic planning and transition planning because we think. As you say, we've been flexible and mobile and we kind of want to be the best service organization in some ways and best connector that we can be and we're kind of looking and doing some community interviews to. Sort of help us think through what's the best way to be useful to the most amount of people and to kind of be able to maintain that open community platform and move forward because the nature of platforms changes and and so we're we're actively thinking about that. We have a good team working out, so I mean.

Ron Fortier

Right.

Candace Lee Heald

I don't know the answers. I mean, people always say five year plans are actually two year plans that you think about you wish for five years, but you've kind of so I mean every 24 months or every three years you're kind of re envisioning yourself. Yeah. And I think being able to. Embrace, embrace, change and embrace the opportunity and change without losing your values. Because I think the values that we have are critical about what we wanted to do with New Bedford and where we want to be in New Bedford and how we wanted to be in New Bedford. I don't think that those values and our. Mission have changed. We've orchestrated a little bit differently, but and we've changed up the graphics and the look a little bit, but our core values I think will stand us in good stead.



Ron Fortier

What would you like to be remembered?

Candace Lee Heald

For, I'd like to be remembered. For working with AHA and fostering A collaboration that made a difference, and I, you know, my elevator speech would always be, you know AHA contributes about \$1,000,000 yearly and earned revenue to the. Community, we are diverse, we are inclusive. We are free to the public. We offer people an opportunity to give gifts. We have been a great brand for New Bedford overtime we have been at the forefront of really thinking about how to work collaboratively, develop a relationship of trust, develop a narrative that is new. Bedford and really stick our flag in the whole notion of creative place making in a public event, and I would like to be remembered in conjunction with that collaboration.

Ron Fortier

What are some of the AHA moments? Some of the highlights, or some of the individuals that helped over the last 20 years?

Candace Lee Heald

There been many individuals who have contributed mightily. I will always say that, but I think the fun thing about AHA is it's really a collaborative. So we have 70 partners, people have come and gone from the street, as it were, because we're really dedicated to the folks that are there 24/7. And so I think of some of our major themes, I think that kids rule, which is the July theme. So every month is a different theme and I should backtrack to say at the time that AHA started, there was a hope it was before the National Park was up and going. It was before the Star store was up and going. So I mean, you know, walk back in history. Me and there was kind of a hope that New Bedford would be known for more than whaling and as always, and as still the whaling museum. Occupies a large and important place in the community, but. Particularly then less so now. It doesn't tell the whole story of everyone's expectations or hopes. And so there was a a hope that we would be. I always laughed that we and went over and scouted Providence for gallery night, and we came back and think, well, that's really interesting. But we actually at that point didn't have enough galleries, took us about 11 years before we could actually have a gallery. And so we came up with this idea of themes. And so early years were pumpkins or this or that, but it was a way to, again invite people in to participate. It was a way to think about arts, history and architecture. It was a way to kind of level the playing field a little bit so it all didn't have to be about big things you knew about and the funky themes over times have been ways to allow different kinds of groups to enter into the. Conversation and be part of the mix, and so the kids rule theme has been fun. Every year. July, it's kind of we mark it with the camps and the schools. It's a way to have families come down and really think about the resources of New Bedford. Throughout the time one of my favorite months still is may because it's we are at New Bedford and it is the time that we host or Co sponsor with the public schools. So the Bedford host, the largest school child student art exhibition. In the Commonwealth each year, it's about that it's been between 35 and 3000 pieces of school kid art at the Rodericks building, and it draws about 3 to 5000 people and families. There's music, there's award ceremonies, and it's really a way for us to share. There and to highlight and to sort of think about pathways to get people involved in the community and to kind of think about New Bedford is coming way down. You know, all the way down the hill because as you know the rodericks building was built on Charles Morgan's homestead and his St. his front lawn looked all the way down to his. Chips on the harbor. And so it's that wonderful kind of connecting piece and the Seaport cultural district has just been really expanded to sort of think about that whole space. So I mean, I think of the, you know, in April is the earthy parade. And so we have the Commonwealth largest people powered parade. You wear it, you push it, you. But you drag it and we have about 17 floats. We have the middle school marching band. It's their field trip. Domino's always feeds them pizza on the front steps of the library. So I mean, I go from month to month and each month has real highlights of fun and expectations. And different kinds of audiences and different kinds of voices. And so I really think about the. Collaborative views. I think that we've been able to pull off and bring some different events to the downtown that we're not as



highlighted and we've done stuff with fiber arts. We've done stuff with, we've done some stuff with Frederick Douglass and different cultures in New Bedford. September usually highlights the different cultural voices of New Bedford, the Cape Verdean music and Portuguese cultures. So I mean, we've kind of looked at. What the opportunities are for not. I used to work at Plymouth Plantation. We'd always say that the street is really made-up not only of the William Bradfords and the, you know, the John Aldens, but the the average pilgrims. They're just the normal people. And I think that that's one of the strengths of Ahaz. It's a community spirit where. There it celebrates people where they are and what they want to bring to the table and the themes kind of change up and and let. That be possible.

Ron Fortier

Yeah, I mean it's diverse and inclusive. There's no complaints there.

Candace Lee Heald

Never has been we've we've I would knock on wood, but it would just disrupt the sound. But we've been very fortunate and I will say that we've always been family friendly. And when you think about the conversation that exists in contemporary society about free speech and free rights and free this and free that, and that all of the artists have always been all of the performers have always been all of the participants have always been. Enormously respectful and concerned about the fact that from 5:00 to 9:00 it is totally and absolutely family friendly and they have self edited and self monitored the content because they say you know, we want everyone to enjoy and feel comfortable downtown. That is our gift. And so we've been very lucky. There's stuff, you know, it's so funny because now we have, aha. After 9:00 when we first started, there was nothing. After nine there was, you know, people rolled up their carpets. But we began to see. The eateries and bars kind of advertising, music, music on AHA night and we thought, Oh well, fabulous cause after 9 is a whole different vision. And so now we advertise AHA after 9, which is not necessarily the same criteria for family friendly. I mean remember that 20 years ago you could smoke. In the bars. And so the bars used to be non-smoking on aha night because they were supposedly family friendly from 5:00 to 9:00. I mean overtime we've seen such huge changes in the downtown landscape. And the downtown opportunities. So we've tried to stay up and say, oh, yeah, no, we'll capture that. Uh, after nine Thursday night. Absolutely.

Ron Fortier

After 20 years, how have things changed? Continue to change, continue to evolve. And currently are continuing to progress to another step in level.

Candace Lee Heald

Mary Jenkins, who was our program officer for 19 years, we were the longest continuously funded project for the Mass Cultural Council. By the time they sunset at the Adams grant. And they actually at the time said if all of the grants ended up looking like, aha, we'd still be going, but not all of them situated themselves in ways to be as. Impactful if I can use that word in their communities. What she always said was a has like an amoeba, you know, you sort of look at it one way and then all of a sudden it's shifting and you kind of sort of look at your audience and then you're in another place and you've done another strategic partnerships and. Carrie Cox, from Medium Studios and I always talk about, you know, we started out, we were all print media, the the social media, the Internet and we've really shifted over time. We're cognizant of which audiences look at which kinds of materials. But I think in general, you know that flow, it's a whole new generation. When we had been going for 16 years, uh, I was at a Sherpa Teen focus group around public transportation. And they asked the question of the kids what they did and what they wanted to do when they came downtown. And it was clear at that time that more people, more of the kids knew about and had been to aha than any of the other cultural pieces, which is not to diminish the other cultural pieces. But it is to say, it occurred to me at that moment that we have raised the first generation of kids. Who? Think of it as their birthright to have this fabulous cultural mix, not just aha, but all of the other programs that are going on downtown and in New Bedford that that is really their sense of their identity with the city and the opportunities that that offers. And the connections and the branding, you know, it's



kind of a cool place. And so as you kind of go through a generation of understanding, the people who started out with, ah, I think we're here to build community and sort of prove some things. And I think this next generation has a very different sense of what the opportunities. Are in New Bedford because there's a lot of. Entrepreneurship going on in New Bedford. There are. There's lots more funding coming into New Bedford for arts and culture. There's a lot more emphasis on connecting with youth opportunities and youth groups to get them connected in. You know, the mural that's just been done at Ben Rose. And there are lots of. So it's really spread out as both. An understanding and an opportunity and AHA tries to keep up with that because we are still the recognized community platform that's open and free and predictably every second Thursday. I'm very proud that this year we were recognized as one of the top 25 things to do in. Massachusetts and we were actually ahead of Fenway Park. So, you know, that's, you know, yeah, no, I'm, I'm sticking with that.

Ron Fortier

Lee Hield, thank you very much. We'd love to have. You back real soon.

Candace Lee Heald

Oh, thank you for talking about aha.