

ARTS IN UTAH » KENNEDY CENTER PRESIDENT

# Arts education funding is 'crucial'

By **BEN FULTON**  
The Salt Lake Tribune

Like a general on tour from command headquarters, Michael Kaiser dispensed the best strategies of his 25-year arts-management career to the beleaguered troops of Utah's nonprofit arts organizations.

Kaiser spoke at Kingsbury Hall on Thursday as part of a 69-city "Arts in Crisis" speaking tour.

Never cut programming, even during times of recession, he advised arts activists. Make your performances, exhibits and productions as exciting and transformative to your community as possible. Plan five years ahead. And

always, always talk about what your nonprofit offers, not the money you need.

Even the children of the impoverished Soweto township in South Africa were able to raise money, eventually helping to build an internationally recognized dance company. They did so, Kaiser said, by connecting with their community in ways that mattered. "One of our problems today is that we've disenfranchised large numbers of people from believing they can contribute to the arts, or that arts are not relevant to them," Kaiser said.

A bigger economic fear than the current recession, Kaiser said, is the ever-shrinking arts education



FRANCISCO KJOLSETH | The Tribune  
President of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Michael Kaiser, addresses the current challenges facing nonprofit performing arts organizations Thursday at Kingsbury Hall.

funding in public schools, which he believes is

"absolutely crucial."

"There is no systematic arts education in our schools, and if there is, it's not consistent," he said. "Imagine if your child came home and said, 'My fourth-grade teacher isn't teaching math because she doesn't like it.'"

Kaiser cited a study showing that children who receive arts education maintain that interest up to age 15. Interest then tapers off during college and into the years spent building careers and family until about the age of 35. Any interest in the arts that people preserved through those years typically resurfaces in the late 30s, when they have more discretionary time and money. Arts education in

schools ensures that those who appreciate the arts survive this period of hibernation to become the arts audience of the future.

Advocates should emphasize to business leaders the role arts play in creative problem-solving. Future job growth rests on professions that require creativity, not manufacturing skills, Kaiser said. Economic downturns come and go, but a viable audience for arts can only be built over time.

"We need [arts education] for our children, we need it for our economy," he said.

In the meantime, arts nonprofits must find new ways to connect with their community, Kaiser said. As an example he pointed to the "Art-Prize" event organized in Grand Rapids, Mich., which drew 1,500 visual artists to the city during two weeks; local businesses agreed to donate walls for exhibition

space. Residents voted for favorite works online. One participating artist launched 100,000 paper airplanes from city rooftops.

"Not surprisingly, donors are lining up to fund another 'ArtPrize,'" Kaiser said.

Reaction to Kaiser's presentation, hosted by Utah Division of Arts and Museums director Margaret Hunt, was positive. "He's on track in so many ways," said Gretchen Dietrich, interim director of the Utah Museum of Fine Arts, who invited all her board members to attend the event, with a board meeting to follow upstairs in Kingsbury Hall.

Kathleen Gardner, development director of the Utah Humanities Council, said she was struck by how Kaiser emphasized repeatedly the idea that marketing must precede fundraising.

[bfulton@sltrib.com](mailto:bfulton@sltrib.com)

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