

Advocate for the arts

Tod A. Kniazuk, new point man for local cultural groups, has already seen success in restoring government funding

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On Nov. 18, less than two weeks after Erie County Comptroller Mark Poloncarz beat incumbent Chris Collins in the race for county executive, a quartet of arts supporters gathered in the chambers of the Erie County Legislature.

At the center of the discussion, intended to convince the Legislature to reverse Collins' controversial funding cuts to cultural organizations, was a 6-foot-4 figure well-known to the cultural and political communities but far less to the outside world.

From his seat in the front row of the chambers, Tod A. Kniazuk, the newly anointed executive director of the newly formed Arts Services Initiative, delivered an eloquent, point-by-point argument about investing in the cultural community.

Kniazuk's pitch, in concert with other efforts and an arts-friendly county executive-elect, seems to have worked. On Tuesday, the Legislature voted to distribute \$931,841 to art and cultural groups, from Shakespeare in Delaware Park to the Langston Hughes Institute— an amount above and beyond what Kniazuk was pushing for. That vote is expected to be finalized Dec. 13.

And if the new arts leader's performance in chambers is any indication, the fortunes of Western New York's vibrant but beleaguered art and cultural communities may be looking up.

“This gets us back to the starting point,” Kniazuk said. “Our position has remained consistent. We’re in favor of process-, data- and fact-driven investment in the arts based on our economic impact, our educational value and our addition to quality of life and tourism.”

This kind of succinct, digestible message — backed up by a deep understanding of the cultural sector and broad support from regional arts groups — is news in the regional arts community.

The demise of the Arts Council in Buffalo and Erie County last year—after years of ineffective leadership — left an enormous gap in local advocacy for the arts. The Arts Services Initiative expects to fill that and expand into advocacy and capacity- building for large and small arts groups across the area.

However, its current mandate was forged in the crucible of last year’s cultural funding crisis.

The group brings together the efforts of Greater Buffalo Cultural Alliance and Arts Partners for Learning, a new coalition of arts-in-education groups spearheaded by Young Audiences of Western New York.

It has been orchestrated and funded by the John R. Oishei Foundation, the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo and several other local foundations that make up the Fund for the Arts, with significant input from the GBCA (which is now included in the ASI makeup), Give for Greatness and other cultural stakeholders.

Its goal: to “provide a regional approach to strengthening Western New York’s arts and cultural sector, initially in Erie and Niagara counties, and followed by the remaining six counties.”

That tough mandate appeals to Kniazuk, 40, who has long straddled the worlds of local government, regional thinking and the arts and cultural sector.

“In addition to an in-depth immersion in the local arts scene and a vibrant public and private sector network,” said Randall Kramer, ASI chairman, GBCA co-chairman and MusicalFare Theatre director, in a statement, “Tod brings the right blend of policy analysis, government affairs and advocacy, collaborative programming and strategic planning experience that will be essential to the realization of ASI’s vision.”

Kniazuk attended the University at Buffalo, where he worked on the Spectrum and Generation student publications and took an acting class led by Stephen McKinley Henderson. He graduated in 1995 with a degree in urban and public policy. Two years later, he was hired by Brian Higgins, then the Erie County Legislature’s chief of staff, to serve on the Legislature’s majority staff.

Kniazuk’s work on issues related to regionalism eventually won him a leadership role with the Niagara-Erie Regional Coalition, a public-private partnership where he served as executive director until March.

Kniazuk gained increased visibility on the cultural scene in 2007, when he became the first executive director of Music Is Art, the local rock festival and educational organization founded by Goo Goo Dolls bassist and Buffalo-booster Robbie Takac. Since then, Music Is Art has grown into one of the more successful cross-cultural festivals in the region.

In 2007, Kniazuk founded the Big Easy in Buffalo concert series, linking New Orleans musicians to Buffalo. (Kniazuk is a harmonica player and die-hard devotee of New Orleans musical culture.)

One of his main goals as the full-time head of the ASI (he left Music Is Art in September), Kniazuk said, is to ensure that culture becomes a central part of any conversation about the future growth of the Buffalo Niagara region.

“I want us [to be] in the room in government, in economic development, in tourism, in transportation, in business,” he said. “A big leap forward is that I want us in those rooms not just when there’s an issue that affects us, but when there’s an issue of regional importance, when there’s an issue of community importance. We’re regional leaders.”

His first actions as ASI director, he said, will include fostering arts groups’ participation in the Cultural Data Project, operated by the Pew Charitable Trusts, and creating a central online resource director for the groups. Soon after, he said, he’ll move on to the nitty- gritty work of improving the health of arts organizations and forming a strategy to advocate for them on the local, state and national levels.

ASI, now in an office building on Perry Street, is scheduled to move to the second floor of the Central Library by spring and will soon welcome two more staffers. By then, Kniazuk said, he expects to be well on his way toward bringing art and culture to the center of the conversation.

Kniazuk’s arguments are locked and loaded, like live ammunition.

“You’ve got your art for art’s sake, you’ve got your quality of life, you’ve got your economic, you’ve got your tourism, you’ve got your education piece,” he said. “Then the last piece of the argument — and I’m probably forgetting a dozen other good ones — is [drawing] businesses and the creative class.”

“Quite frankly,” he continued, barely pausing to catch his breath, “it’s a model that other sectors of the economy should probably be trying to emulate.”