

Festival Partnerships

by Diana Parker

You might think that after 34 years, producing the Smithsonian Folklife Festival would have a standard formula. While some systems have become routinized over the years, each year is different — both because of the content of each Festival program and because of the particular team involved in its production.

The Festival is an intensely collaborative project. A strong Festival program requires an intimate knowledge of the community being presented — its traditions, history, aesthetics, current issues, leadership, and funding possibilities. Our own staff lacks the expertise needed to curate three to five programs a year — while following up on prior programs and planning new ones. Nor would it be desirable to research and design programs totally “in house.” It is far more eye opening and engaging to work in intellectual partnership with the communities featured. This means working with people who are daily involved in understanding and interpreting their own traditions, and with varied members of the community — political and civic leaders, sponsors and supporters, educators and cultural advocates. This engagement improves the quality of our work.

This year provides good examples. Washington, D.C., is home for many of our staff, several of whom have done long-term research in the city. But to comprehend the full breadth of the city’s artistic expression is a full-time job belonging to Tony Gittens, Executive Director of the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities, who first proposed the program. With the able leadership of Michael McBride on the commission’s staff and John Franklin on ours, a curatorial team was put together that includes Brett Williams of American University and Marianna Blagburn, a cultural anthropologist based in D.C. More than 45 researchers from community institutions and universities in the District

worked for over a year and compiled cultural documentation on hundreds of potential Festival participants. Then they tackled the ticklish task of making a coherent statement about our multi-faceted city.

The *El Río* program had to work with a more widespread community. Staff curators Olivia Cadaval and Cynthia Vidaurri worked closely with scholars, educators, and cultural workers from communities along the length of the Río Grande in Mexico and the United States. Among those involved were Juanita Garza of the University of Texas-Pan American, Jorge Ibarra of the Consejo para la Cultura de Nuevo León, and Marico Montañón of Colorado College. Together they compiled case studies of particular ways that human culture interacts with the river basin environment. Community culture-bearers, like educator, drummer, and musician Arnold Herrera from Cochiti Pueblo, New Mexico, and the Layton *conjunto* group from Elsa and Edcouch, Texas, participated as interpreters of their own traditions, history, and contemporary actions.

In *Tibetan Culture Beyond the Land of Snows*, the partnership was also widespread, with collaboration from scholars and Tibetan refugee cultural organizations, and financial and in-kind support from people around the world. The Conservancy for Tibetan Art & Culture initiated fundraising drives and activities highlighting cultural concerns. More than 1,400 individuals and foundations contributed the funds to ensure the program’s viability.

Finally, a very important partner in a Festival presentation is you — the audience. Dance to the music, eat the food, introduce yourself to the storytellers, and question the craftspeople. We and our partners have worked for years to bring you something extraordinary. We invite you to engage it.

Diana Parker is Director of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.