

# AWP Job List

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## Bloom Where You're Planted: Five Steps to Creating a Community Art Project

by Nadine Pinede

**A**cross the nation, arts funding is in trouble. School and community arts programs have been slashed, and artists are scrambling for funds to keep their current projects afloat. Yet during an economic downturn, there *are* ways to turn crisis into opportunity.

As a grantwriter, former grants panelist for a state arts commission, and emerging fiction writer, I've had the good fortune to peek into the kitchen and "see how the sausages are made." It isn't always pretty, but knowledge is power. What I've discovered is that there are some common mistakes writers make when applying for grants.

In this challenging economic climate, many funders in the arts are looking for projects that cut across disciplinary boundaries and involve community partnerships. They want the most bang for their buck. Unfortunately, we're often fixated on the traditional big-ticket funders, like the NEA or Guggenheim Foundation, but this is also where the competition is fiercest. If you can think locally and are willing to start out small, there are plenty of other

grantmakers out there ready to invest in you and your work.

Finding "investors" is the opposite of begging for a handout. Instead, envision your project as a chance to give funders the opportunity to participate in something exciting and new. Here are five steps to help make that happen.

### I. BE A SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR

The word "entrepreneur" comes from the French word for "to undertake." A social entrepreneur, in the lingo of philanthropy, is someone who identifies a social problem or need and creates a new way of addressing it.

How can we writers apply that to our situation? Back in the Depression, the Federal Writers' Project put writers to work creating guidebooks for their states. Writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Saul Bellow, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, John Steinbeck, John Cheever, and May Swenson wrote in-depth articles that are still worth reading today. Use your imagination to ask how you can serve your own community.

Even without the support of government programs, you can still use your writing to engage your community in creative ways. My inspiration is 41 Places, a citywide art installation of true stories in Brighton, England: [www.41places.org](http://www.41places.org). The project began when William Shaw, a nonfiction writer, wandered around Brighton and asked people what they were doing at that very moment. From those interviews, he wrote up short pieces. Working with designers and artists, he then created artwork throughout the city that displayed these texts and became something of a treasure hunt for stories that ultimately helped increase cultural tourism in Brighton.

"The project is a great example of community art," says Bruce Holland Rogers, author of *Word Work* and *The Keyhole Opera*. "All over Brighton, there were visitors like me following the maps to find and read the various stories. Strangers paused to share their opinions about a story. Businesses were delighted with the extra foot traffic." In fact, Rogers enjoyed his experience so much that he is planning a project inspired by

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41 Places. He plans to use multiple interviewers to collect stories based on locations near various stops on the Helsinki and Budapest metro lines.

There are many ways you can adapt this model to your own community and make it your own. The key is to start where you are and use the local as inspiration.

### 2. CHOOSE YOUR PARTNERS WISELY

As I mentioned earlier, many grantmakers are looking for evidence of collaboration in a project proposal, both to maximize the project's impact and to avoid duplication of services. It's a good idea to identify prospective partners before you approach your funder.

First, I'd suggest looking around at those organizations that are already on your radar. Consider both individuals (other writers and artists in other disciplines) and institutions. In my own case, I work as an artist facilitator for a statewide network promoting careers in the arts for people with disabilities. Our institutional partners include the state arts commission, a university center on disability and community, and the state branch of a national organization for artists with disabilities. Locally, we partner with the city government through its director of arts and economic development. Examine your existing network and see which organizations might serve as the best partners for collaboration.

Next, get out there and extend your network. If your community has a writer's group or center, be sure to

join it. Do the same for visual arts, musicians, playwrights, storytellers, poets, librarians, and arts educators. Reach out to nonprofit leaders, educational institutions, municipal government offices, and local businesses that can gain valuable publicity from their connection with a public art project.

I live in Bloomington, Indiana, home of Indiana University's flagship campus. We're fortunate to have a strong arts community and our own glossy magazine whose editor is very active in promoting the arts. In fact, he recently sponsored a flash fiction contest that required stories to be set in the local county. Working with your partner artists and organizations, you can brainstorm and find more creative solutions for meeting the need you've identified.

### 3. FIND THE RIGHT FUNDER FOR YOUR PROJECT

Like targeting the right literary agent, you've got to do your homework to find the right funder. That means there's no escaping the need for research. Your job is to find a funder who will be most excited about investing in your project. This is why steps 1 and 2 are so important. If you haven't identified a need and located the best partners to fill that need, then your proposal will not be strong. If you have done the necessary footwork, then even if one funder rejects your proposal, you will still have a strong case to take to someone else. Besides contacting your state arts commission and

local arts agencies, there are some excellent free resources for finding funders, such as the Foundation Center ([www.foundationcenter.org](http://www.foundationcenter.org)), the New York Foundation for the Arts ([www.nyfa.org](http://www.nyfa.org)) and Mira's List (subscribe at <http://miraslist.blogspot.com>).

After your initial research, begin identifying your homegrown funders, whose names pop up on concert programs or as underwriters for your local public radio stations. They are there, and they are willing to invest in the right projects. Put yourself in their shoes and really think about their goals in supporting the arts in your community. Last but not least, follow your funders' directions exactly. Nothing turns them off more than sloppy applications done at the last minute without any reference to the guidelines. If that's how you treat their application, how can you be trusted with a grant?

### 4. IDENTIFY YOUR SITES: LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

A community art project should be accessible to the public, so this part of your work is very important. Yet this is often the least well-thought out part of literature panel grant applications I've reviewed. How will you decide which sites to include?

For instance, I'm intrigued by the nearly invisible history of African Americans in Bloomington, which was divided during the Civil War but also served as a stop on the Underground Railroad. What would life have been like for a white resident housing a runaway? How did the runaway view his or her situation and decide to trust a stranger?

Our county's historical society recently put together an exhibit on the history of African Americans, and one outcome was a map of Black History sites. This map would make a handy tool for a site-specific community art project. For example, in 1874 a "Colored School"

was erected, but this was “replaced” in 1915 by a Carnegie library. My partners and I could create a short introduction giving some historical context and then follow it up with contemporary nonfiction based on an interview with someone who currently works in this building, or with a short story, poem, or song inspired by the imagined lives of the students and teachers in the Colored School.

Local resident and author Scott Russell Sanders (*A Private History of Awe*) did a fine job of combining music and literature in just this way in “Wilderness Plots,” his collaborative musical ensemble piece. This project originally began as a book composed of fifty brief tales that chronicle the period of settlement of the Ohio Valley, from roughly 1780 to 1850. Local musicians Carrie Newcomer, Tim Grimm, Krista Detor, Tom Roznowski, and Michael White were inspired to write and record songs based on these stories. In 2007, they released an album of 19 songs that evolved into a touring ensemble show performed across the country and broadcast on PBS: <http://indianapublicmedia.org/about/wilderness-plots/>.

## 5. SHARE YOUR PROJECT

How you do this will depend on what kind of project you’ve chosen. You might be working with musicians or photographers or visual artists to make this happen. “Wilderness Plots” was distributed on multiple platforms. In *41 Places*, Shaw used his beautifully designed website to share his work, along with a hardcopy version of the stories. Some of them are also available as audio files on iTunes. In your own case, you might also take advantage of technology to create a website, podcasts, YouTube videos, and other methods for sharing your work.

If that’s not possible, you can share your stories on your local radio

station and with your public library. You can work through a Writers-in-the-Schools program or in retirement communities, homeless shelters, other social service agencies, or in prisons. Get creative about spreading the word. Involve your community in as many ways as you can. The point is to make what you’ve created as accessible as possible.

indication that the artist who is asking for the money has a track record of following through. They are more likely to trust you with a larger grant when you’ve first proven yourself with a not-so-big grant. And they are more likely to invest in your project if you can show that your grant will have an impact not just on you, but also on your community.

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*41 Places* is an excellent model for this. The project ended up having an important impact on Brighton’s cultural tourism. Is there some way in which you can link your project to your community’s economic development? If there is, you have a good chance of finding someone to invest in it. The City of Bloomington has a staff person dedicated to economic development and the arts. See if you can connect with people like this in your own community.

Remember to keep track of anything that documents your project’s impact on your community: media coverage, school visits, website hits, etc. Too many people forget that funders need something tangible on which to base their evaluations. You should be thinking ahead to that final report and to finding a sustainable way of continuing what you’ve started.

Don’t forget that funding begets funding. Successful grant applications often come from applicants who have won grants before. Funders want some

Does this sound like a lot of sweat, blood, and tears? Working through the difficulties of finding and applying for a grant and then collaborating for its success will be worth it. In all that you do, remember that the process is as important as the final product. In the words of Scott Russell Sanders, “The deepest American dream is not the hunger for money or fame; it is the dream of settling down, in peace and freedom and cooperation, in the promised land.” The stories of place you gather can foster a genuine sense of belonging. They may even help repair the frayed fabric of our national life.

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*Nadine Pinede, PhD, is a grantwriter and a prize-winning fiction writer. She is a two-time Indiana Arts Commission grant recipient, an Elizabeth George Foundation Scholar at the Whidbey Writers Workshop MFA program in Fiction, and a contributor to Haiti Noir, edited by Edwidge Danticat. She lives in Bloomington, Indiana.*