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OPINION

Arts matter

Children need, deserve access to all of the arts

WEDNESDAY WILL BE a banner day for the performing arts in Eastern Oregon.

On that one day in the McKenzie Theatre not only will the Grande Ronde Symphony be offering its Youth Festival program featuring soloist winners of the annual concerto competition and a collaboration with the Grande Ronde Youth Orchestra, but throughout the day a wide variety of performances will be taking place, featuring musicians from throughout the region.

In the early afternoon the Grande Ronde Symphony will be performing its first Young People's concert for area fourth-graders. The concert will be the first chance many of these kids will have to hear live symphonic music. Also, during the day bands and choirs from throughout the region, involving literally hundreds of young musicians, will perform for adjudication in the Oregon Music Educators Association District 6 Large Ensemble Competition.

It will be an exciting day, one that showcases dynamic young virtuosos, a plethora of well-trained ensembles and collaboration and cooperation between many different arts organizations.

Those of you who join us for our Wednesday evening concert will get to see the best of what is going on in music here in Eastern Oregon. Each of our soloists — Beth Youngblood, violin; Jeanette Rampton, voice; Ann Wharton, cello; and Roberda Warner, horn — is from the region and the excellence of their artistry is a fine reflection of the many opportunities for study and performance this area offers.

The Grande Ronde Youth Orchestra, which will be sharing the stage for the concert's finale, features musicians ages 10-18 for whom the youth orchestra provides their only opportunity to study and perform symphonic music. These young musicians come from communities throughout the area and represent a wide array of backgrounds.

SO YES, THERE IS a great deal of good news in the arts for our young people. Arts organizations and educators work tirelessly to reach out to young people, to give them an opportunity to benefit from all that the arts have to offer. Research has shown that students who study music, art, theater and creative writing do better in school and in life. Participating in performing arts organizations helps them to learn teamwork and problem solving, it spurs the creative thinking and instills discipline and flexibility.

In an age when we are constantly reminded of the violence and despair some of our children are faced with through the horrifying events in places like Jonesboro and Columbine, we ought to remember that the arts, as well as sports, clubs and other extracurricular activities are proven vehicles for improving the emotional well-being of young people.

The fact is we could be doing much better in meeting the needs of our young people. There is so much talent in the young generation and a profound sense of excitement. I am constantly amazed and inspired at the eagerness of kids to study, to push themselves, to experience new and remarkable things. Why is it then that the funding of the National Endowment for the Arts, an organization whose primary mission is to encourage arts education and outreach, is a source of contention every year?



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THROUGH THE NEA tens of thousands of young people have the opportunity to go to the symphony or have musicians, painters and writers come to their schools for residencies. The seed money provided through the NEA not only funds vital outreach programs, but generates enormous amounts of economic growth.

A major study last year found that government spending on arts organizations generated more economic activity per dollar spent than money spent in any other area. Another study found that attendance at performances of symphony, ballet and opera organization was substantially greater than that at all the major professional sports leagues combined.

The total budget of the NEA costs only 64 cents per person per year and touches the lives of millions of people every year. Generations of sculptors, poets, dancers and musicians have worked long and hard to eradicate the spurious notion that the arts

are an elitist enterprise serving a small minority of the public. In fact, artists of all kinds have contributed to the fact that there are more people under 18 involved in active participation in the arts than ever before.

If this is the case, then why is it that our school boards and legislators are constantly cutting back funding for the arts? Even here in La Grande, we have eliminated the teaching of string instruments in the public schools. Why? Do our kids not deserve the best and most effective education we can give them. Should they not have access to NEA-sponsored residencies? Should they not be able to attend symphony concerts in their home town?

THIS YEAR THE SYMPHONY is working with Arts for All to increase our community outreach to young people and offering our Young People's concerto for area fourth-graders. Unfortunately, we don't have the resources to arrange to play for all our area kids, and a visit to the symphony should not be a once-a-year event. We would like to be able to perform for all the students in the region every year, so that by the time they complete their education they will have had the opportunity know what makes concert going so fun and enriching.

We would like to support musical residencies in the schools, but we simply don't have the resources. We would like to see master teachers of all the orchestral instruments in the region, but right now we are not able to offer comprehensive training on all instruments through the youth orchestra. As a result, students who don't have adequate access to lessons become frustrated and give up, and their talents go undeveloped.

The facts are that it costs very little to give young people a first-rate arts education, and the benefits of such an education are well documented and last throughout life.

I hope you will join us next week and be inspired by the extraordinary talent and dedication of the young artists on stage. They need our support and encouragement so that they will carry the torch of fine music to the next generation of young musicians.

See you on Wednesday night.

KENNETH WOODS is music director of the Grande Ronde Symphony Orchestra and a professor of music at Eastern.