

# Symphony director touts community benefits of the arts

By ARLA SHEPHARD  
MASON COUNTY LIFE

When Matthew Blegen moved to Mason County around 15 years ago, he fell in love immediately with the vistas, the recreational activities and the all-around sheer beauty of the community.

And yet, he regularly encountered a persistent stigma about his new home — the idea that Mason County is a backwards community in the hicks, with little to offer its residents or visitors.

“Being a newcomer and seeing the community with fresh eyes, I didn’t understand why this was a narrative we told,” Blegen shared with members of the North Mason Chamber of Commerce, at the chamber’s Jan. 28 luncheon. “What are the stories we tell ourselves?”

Blegen is the new executive director of the Bremerton Symphony and is working on a doctoral degree from the University of Washington, where his research focuses on how arts participation can build community economically and educationally.

He encouraged North Mason business owners to think about how working with arts programs might positively impact their business and the economy of the greater community.

While many studies show the positive impact participating in arts can have on an individual’s stress levels, depression and even immune system, not many think of the arts



PHOTO BY ARLA SHEPHARD

*Matthew Blegen, executive director of the Bremerton Symphony, explains how music and the arts can improve the economic health of a community, at a North Mason Chamber of Commerce luncheon, Jan. 28, at the Mary E. Theler Community Center in Belfair. Blegen’s doctoral research at the University of Washington focuses on how arts can help redefine a community’s narrative and build stronger relationships among businesses.*

as critical during tough economic times.

“We tend to think of arts as a ‘get to have’ and not a ‘need to have,’ it’s more the sprinkle on top,” Blegen said. “More and more research shows that communities with a higher degree of arts participation are more resilient during tough times.”

One such body of research comes from the nonprofit Americans for the Arts’ “Arts & Economics Prosperity IV” nationwide study,

which found that in 2010, a year in which unemployment hit 9.7 percent, the arts industry generated \$135.2 billion in economic activity.

Of that \$135.2 billion, \$61.1 billion came from nonprofit arts and culture organizations directly, while \$74.1 billion, or nearly 55 percent, came from revenue generated by audience members spending their money elsewhere, like on hotels, restaurants and travel.

This type of research fascinated Blegen and correlated with what he himself experienced on the local level in Mason County.

As the former director of the Anna’s Bay Chorale in Union, Blegen motivated people with a wide range of musical abilities to work together and challenge themselves, in the process forming strong relationships with one another that strengthened the community.

In 2012, the chorale was invited to perform Handel’s “Messiah” at the Lincoln Center in New York City, an eye-opening trip for many of the members, some of whom were high school students who never dreamed that being from Shelton they’d get to be part of something like that.

“Arts participation is one of the most effective ways to break up that (negative) narrative,” Blegen said.

Small business owners can take this knowledge and use it to their advantage, continued Blegen, who has a background in marketing.

Some businesses “soft sell” items, meaning they sell the type of product that an indi-

vidual might buy at any given time, such as household products or dinner out at a restaurant, while other businesses have “hard sell” items, such as cars or legal services, that an individual doesn’t need until they’re in the market for a new car or lawyer.

Businesses selling soft sell items need only to be at the right place at the right time and business owners can offer incentives and deals to entice new customers, Blegen said.

Meanwhile businesses with hard sell items might rely on more long-term branding, so that when someone is in need of a new car, they think immediately of that particular business, he added.

When it comes to the arts, a business selling a soft sell item might think about partnering with an arts organization, for instance a restaurant might offer a dinner and a show deal with a local performing arts group.

“When a visitor tries out a local establishment while they’re in town for an event, it increases the likelihood by 22 percent that they’ll come back within the next 12 months,” Blegen said.

A business with hard sell items could think about sponsoring or supporting an arts event to get their name associated with a positive community contribution.

“I would just encourage you all to think about how you partner with schools and music programs,” Blegen said. “The point is to make our community healthier and to have more community pride.”

the middle school band or grade school bands and music classes.

The booster club has purchased new marching band uniforms for the high school marching band, a new equipment trailer that the band can take with them on the road to house bulky instruments and equipment, and new T-shirts for the elementary Mallet Masters percussion group.

The club continues to pay for contest entrance fees for the high school jazz and

marching bands.

“Not everyone is an athlete and I think the band kids get so close,” Johnson said. “Quality equipment and quality uniforms are important, it helps them care more. The kids really come together in band, and that’s partly due to (band teacher) Chris (Drewry).”

Superintendent Dana Rosenbach reinstated the music teachers’ budgets this school year, but the booster club still wants to continue to support the schools.

For the past three years, the club has consistently talked about setting up a music scholarship, and this year, the budget finally seemed to be healthy enough to support that, Johnson said.

“As my oldest daughter got closer to graduating, we started looking around for scholarships,” he said. “We realized there really aren’t any music scholarships. Our group has always said we should do it. It’s time. We’ve gotten to

the point where we’re solid now.”

The club’s comedy night fundraiser is the first time the club has held an event outside of the high school and it’s also the first time the club will be able to serve beer and wine.

“We’ve tried many different fundraisers, like a hamburger feed and pasta night,” Johnson said. “We’ve got high hopes for this one. Theler has more visibility and they’re pro-school.”

Tickets for the event cost

\$20 per person and include smoked brisket, homemade scalloped potatoes and Caesar salad.

Canal Heating and Cooling, Manke Lumber and John L. Scott of Belfair have been ongoing sponsors for the booster club.

Next year, the booster club will likely focus on raising money for new uniforms for the middle school marching band.

“New uniforms and equipment, it does make a difference,” Johnson said.

“The kids feel better about themselves and when they see their parents put in the extra effort to support them, they put in the extra effort to succeed.”

To purchase tickets for the comedy night brisket dinner fundraiser, which also includes a dessert and silent auctions, visit nmmbccomedy.bpt.me or call Gene Johnson at 275-8276.

For more information on the North Mason Music Booster Club, visit the club’s Facebook page.

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