

# THE AUSTIN CHRONICLE

## Michael Kaiser Has Ideas About What's Next for the Arts

The arts management expert spoke to Austin arts groups about the future, and the key word is "community"

BY [ROBERT FAIRES](#), [FRI., JUNE 5, 2020](#)



*Michael Kaiser (Photo by Ilan Mizrahi / DeVos Institute)*

For 60 minutes, more than 40 Austinites representing 20 area arts organizations gave their full attention to one man as he talked about the future of the arts. And with good reason. This was Michael Kaiser, "the turnaround king" – so named for his role in rescuing Kansas City Ballet, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, American Ballet Theatre, and the Royal Opera House from fiscal calamity. The man who shepherded the Kennedy Center through 9/11 *and* the Great Recession, who led the center's post-recession Arts in Crisis initiative offering free arts management consultation to organizations across the U.S., who personally traveled to every state in the Union to share his expertise at initiative events, who founded the center's Arts Management Institute – now

the DeVos Institute of Arts Management at the University of Maryland, which he chairs. This is – to quote philanthropist and Broadway producer Marc Seriff as he introduced Kaiser to the Austinites on the Zoom call – "one of the best minds in arts management in the country."

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All of which explains why the country is clamoring to hear Kaiser's thoughts about the direction for the arts in this COVID-19 world. Fortunately, he's been quite open with them. Prior to May 20, the day of this call, Kaiser and his institute had already provided 431 hours of pro bono consultations to arts organizations anxious to know what to expect, what to do. Thanks to Seriff, who arranged the call, it was Austin's turn.

Kaiser wasted no time laying out his road map for what's ahead. As epidemiologists do when asked about vaccines, he sought to temper expectations for a swift recovery. He projected four phases: 1) shelter-in-place, which we've been in since March; 2) partial reopening, which we're transitioning into; 3) full reopening, which may be six to 18 months away; and 4) back to normal, which could be five years from now. Showing the positivity that's no doubt served him well when facing boards of arts groups drowning in debt, Kaiser commended organizations large and small for the "incredibly good job" they'd done of handling phase one, with all the postponed and canceled shows, furloughed workers, and loss of income. Given the enormity of the challenges and how quickly groups were forced to respond to them, that organizations of all sizes held on was "astonishingly impressive."

That said, Kaiser downshifted to the nitty-gritty, warning that the second phase could be the hardest one, because no one can predict how long it will last and, however long it does, the recession will tamp down income. The extra money that's been available in phase one – from the government, foundations, nonprofits, emergency funds, online benefits, and even money that patrons paid for tickets to canceled shows and didn't ask to have refunded – is likely to go down or go away as everyone's finances are squeezed. (Kaiser offered the interesting stat that more than one-third of the 431 organizations his institute has consulted with since April are better off financially now than they would have been if there had been no pandemic because of this additional income, reduced expenses, and forgiven debts.) Also, while arts groups may be able to open their doors and offer some programming with social distancing, audiences still may not feel comfortable enough to attend, meaning earned income will also remain low. How long, Kaiser asked, can organizations keep creating work without compensation – as many have during phase one – without burning themselves out?

The prolonged pressures of phase two could set up a chaotic start to phase three despite this ostensibly being an upbeat time, with a vaccine readily available and people willing to go to performances and exhibitions without social distancing – to be in crowds again. But those cabin-fevered patrons will all want to return to the theatres and concert halls and museums on essentially the same day, Kaiser suggests, meaning this could be a period of intense competition. If arts organizations want to take advantage of this rush, they need to have marshaled their resources and prepared something "remarkably interesting" for the moment everything fully opens.

Kaiser didn't address the rest of the third phase except to say that it will last years, because it will take that long for us to return to normal. Since the essence of phase four is living as we did *before* the pandemic, what matters most about this phase is what we learn *from* the pandemic. For the arts, Kaiser has identified four vital lessons:

- 1) Find a better balance between earned and contributed income, so if your source of earned income is suddenly wiped out, as happened with COVID-19, you still have a substantial amount of revenue to draw on.
- 2) Steward your relationships with your best donors, keeping close to and personal with them because of how much you rely on them in the worst of times.
- 3) Remember that cash reserves are your very, very, very, very best friend.
- 4) Know that there will always be a demand for good art, no matter how bad things are. People will need respite, entertainment, education, and inspiration. Create work with passion, excitement, and vigor, and the community will respond.

"Community" proved to be a key word in the hour Kaiser spoke to Austin. It showed up again and again as he addressed questions about planning for the future, raising funds, creating new work. Whatever an arts organization chose to do was not for its own need or benefit, it was for the community's. The point of artistic work was always to give to, to add to, to be there for the community.

Kaiser shared the story of being at the Kennedy Center on 9/11 and deciding to reopen it the next day. He took criticism for it – some from artists – who felt it was too soon to open, that it was disrespectful when the nation was mourning. But people came, and shows at the center sold out for weeks. The decision had been difficult, Kaiser said, but he believes the work artists do is "critical," it's "critical to our communities," and when that's the case, "then we've got to be there when our community needs us."

The pandemic is such a time of need, and many arts groups have stepped up by creating work online. But Kaiser suggested an alternative for serving the community at this time: personally contacting the people in your organization's "family" – donors, subscribers, and other stakeholders – not to solicit donations but to "express our humanity and find out how they are." With these people being isolated, lonely, and afraid, "we need to act like family to them right now," Kaiser said. And he urged people to make contact by phone because "this is a moment for us to emphasize our true human connections to other people."

This is also a moment to plan, for arts groups to think deeply about who they are and what they do for the community. That will be vital when the time comes for them to talk about what's next and ask for support. It will help them speak to their purpose, their values, and their direction in ways that reignite the excitement people feel toward the arts and their organizations, and to reinforce their place in society. For the arts to be valued in a post-COVID world, Kaiser said, "We have to be about what we offer, how it's important, why we do this work, and how our community benefits."