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COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS: A CIVIC ACTION GROUP INTERVIEW

June 1, 2018 — Leah Barto, correspondent for OPERA America, speaks with Cayenne Harris, vice president, Lyric Unlimited at Lyric Opera of Chicago.

Leah: Today we are focusing on the process, rather than products. As Roberto Bedoya says, "In engagement work, it is not a noun, it's a verb." Opera companies are so used to delivering productions and coming to community groups with programs in hand, but civic action is really about listening to community needs, and building on partnerships with shared ownership. This is a process that takes time and a somewhat different mindset.

Today I am here with Cayenne Harris, vice president of Lyric Unlimited. What are the ways that Lyric Unlimited has developed new relationships with other community organizations?

Cayenne: Well, we have worked over our six years of existence to develop relationships with a wide variety of organizations throughout the city of Chicago. They have ranged from large cultural institutions and educational institutions to community groups, both informal and formal. Each one is approached with a specific purpose in mind. Whether it is a project that we are interested in undertaking, or if we are wanting to connect to a cultural community in Chicago and we are trying to make that connection as a first step, or maybe second or third step in deepening that relationship or opening doors.

Leah: What struck me is that many are non-arts organizations who may have different organizational cultures. What are some strategies that you have used that are effective at the beginning stages of building those relationships?

Cayenne: It is really essential to spend time getting to know a partner organization. What are their stresses? What are their goals? What are their recent successes? What are challenges in the communities they are working with? What is it that we might potentially do together, that neither of us could do alone? It is really about having those foundational conversations. Listening, that is an essential component to establishing a collaborative relationship.

Leah: What I am inferring from what you are saying is that these beginning stages happen at their pace. What is your own approach for allowing the time?

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Cayenne: Time is an essential component; when you can, to let things unfold in their own time, that can be the healthiest. There are circumstances where there is a time limitation and sometimes conversations with partners are accelerated when there is something that needs to move forward rather quickly. There's also an element that if you take too much time, an idea can lose steam. We recently had conversations with partners very early on that were very general, "We are interested in you, we'd like to find out more." Years down the line, that collaboration has come to fruition. In other situations, an introduction is made and we are able to quickly have a conversation about a potential project or something that is mutually beneficial and move it to a project that gets up and running.

Leah: So I am hearing it could go either way ... How have you approached Lyric Unlimited's infrastructure to allow both phases of that?

Cayenne: That's a great question, Leah. That is one of the many unknown factors that are inherent in the kind of work that we do. Some things you cannot move forward more quickly than they are able to unfold. Sometimes you have every intention of partnering with an organization and it turns out that you are not able to have the dialog that you need to facilitate that. I try not to see that as a deep disappointment and simply understand that we couldn't force it at this time. So I don't know, in terms of infrastructure, it's hard for me to articulate. One thing I can really say is that we work very carefully to read the signals and understand when the gas is on and everyone is cooking and also to understand when we need to put the brakes on. We try to build in the flexibility to scale up and down or press pause when we need to.

Leah: I think that speaks to the need for reflection. Are there examples of partnerships where you've made sure to build in time for reflection? What did that look like?

Cayenne: I am thinking of a partnership we just completed with the Puerto Rican Arts Alliance. Our earliest conversations were years ago. We had been working deeply with the Mexican American community in Chicago. We had some early successes, and we also got some strong feedback from leaders in the community that it would be a mistake to ignore some of the other large Latino populations, such as the Puerto Rican population. We were introduced to the head of the Puerto Rican Arts Alliance and had a wonderful initial meeting that was wide-ranging. We didn't go in with a specific project in mind, but with the idea that there could be a potential opportunity to collaborate. The partner was pretty eager to collaborate and get going right away, and we weren't quite ready. In that case, we said we weren't sure we were ready.

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Luckily he had the flexibility to put the brakes on a little bit. Fast forward to this year, and we were able to bring to fruition a really beautiful idea, collaboratively designed, and it exemplified what I'd hoped might be possible to do together. It was a long arc, and it doesn't represent the end of our work together.

Leah: What a good illustration of focusing on the process, and what that looks like for both partners involved, rather than starting from defining the ownership of the project on the opera company. What advice would you give to other companies when they are faced with deadlines? In reflecting on your own process, what would you recommend to your peers?

Cayenne: I think it is really important to think about what it is that you really want to achieve. A collaboration is really a device, a tactic, to achieve another goal. That goal might be access to a community that is traditionally under-represented in your theater, or access to another art form or a set of skills you don't have. It can be a wide variety. So, if you find yourself in a position where a potential partner organization and your own company aren't quite aligned and ready to go... I think it is critically important to step back and remember what the goal is. Decide whether or not forging ahead will help you achieve the goal or if it will do more damage. If it will do more damage, then it is the time to put on the brakes. There might be another way to achieve that goal. There might be another way to extend that goal. Communicate with your funders. I have found funders to be receptive to the reality of the situation. I don't hesitate to reach out to the funder. I have never had a funder say, "You have to move this ahead anyway." They are very understanding that things can change.

Leah: Great tips for agreeing on that shared vision and having that as the basis of your decision-making, and for having open communication with your supporters, who are really there to support the work. Thank you.