

The Art & Soul of West Virginia

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Photographed by Nikki Bowman

“Art is a nation’s most precious heritage. For it is in our works of art that we reveal to ourselves and to others the inner vision which guides us as a nation. And where there is no vision, the people perish.”

– Lyndon Johnson, on signing into existence the National Endowment on the Arts

Two weeks ago, I attended a ceremony, sponsored by the Tamarack Foundation, honoring my friend, artist and blacksmith Jeff Fetty, for being named "One Of The World's Seven Premier Metal Designers." It is an honor that is well deserved—an accomplishment that has only been achieved by six Americans. Because of this designation, he is featured in the *2012 International Metal Design Annual*—and I encourage everyone to get a copy of this book.

As I looked around at the large gathering of distinguished guests, including many national, state, and local politicians, I was reminded that our artists are important ambassadors for our state. Artists make our heritage tangible, creating collectible pieces

that adorn houses, office buildings, and outdoor spaces around the world—pieces that can be passed down for generations. Through their art, the world experiences West Virginia. When someone purchases a piece created by one of our artisans, they are not just taking home the artist’s story, but also our state’s story.

I was also reminded of something former Chicago Mayor Richard Daley once said, “Politicians don’t bring people together. Artists do.”

The event was hosted by the Tamarack Foundation, of which I’m a board member. The Foundation’s mission is to nurture and help develop our state’s artists by helping them turn their craft into a creative entrepreneurial enterprise and by helping them identify markets for their work so that they can make a living doing what they love. The Foundation has done an incredible job—but there’s much work still to be done. Jeff’s recent honors and success drive home the importance of art and culture and the foundations that support them.

Art is not just a luxury; it is big business—one of the fastest growing sectors of the economy. Art can improve a community’s competitive edge—folks want to live where art and cultural activities abound. Art helps establish a sense of place. It contributes jobs, and serves as an engine driving tourism.

I’m the co-owner of two stores called WV LIVING Marketplace that sells only West Virginia-made products. Retail is a hard business—and only selling West Virginia-made products makes it even harder. As Jeff addressed the crowd about his journey, with the incredible verdant vista of Spencer at his back, I felt a renewed sense of pride in our artists and our cultural heritage and a deepening determination to help champion the economic importance of art.

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