



# C U L T U R A L

For four decades,  
the Community  
Folk Art Center  
has nurtured  
artists of the  
African Diaspora  
and served as  
a welcoming  
creative space  
for Syracuse  
residents of  
all ages



BY RACHEL SOMERSTEIN

# LANDMARK



CFAC founder Herb Williams (top left) welcomes a group of children to the gallery in the '70s. Inspiring children to explore the arts has always been a focus of the center (pictured above).

**K** heli Willetts '92, G'94, G'02, executive director of the Community Folk Art Center (CFAC) and a professor of African American studies, opens the door to the dance studio. In the darkened space, teenagers bounce to the music, smiling and laughing. The teens, students in CFAC's Creative Arts Academy (CAA), are practicing for their final performance of the year, the culmination of the three-and-a-half hours they've devoted each school day to studying visual and performing arts with professional artists. "It's a discipline," Willetts says. And it certainly is: In addition to the rigorous training they receive in ceramics,

dance, painting, and theater, as well as the competitive portfolios they develop in their chosen medium, students must maintain a C average in their regular studies. The discipline has other rewards as well: The program boasts a 100-percent college attendance rate among its participants.

CFAC, which celebrated its 40th anniversary this spring with a 300-person, sold-out gala two years in the planning, was founded on Syracuse's South Side by Herb Williams, a professor with dual appointments in SU's College of Visual and Performing Arts and College of Arts and Sciences. "At the time, you would have to look far and wide to find any public evidence that there were working





CFAC executive director Kheli Willetts '92, G'94, G'02 became involved with the center as a work-study student. Herb Williams (below and far right) chisels a wooden sculpture.



black artists," says Mary Schmidt Campbell G'73, G'80, G'82, one of CFAC's founders and currently dean of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. "They were not represented in museum collections, exhibitions, the literature, in American art history texts. They certainly weren't in the classrooms."

The same could have been said for SU. Williams came to the University as part of its affirmative action program, initiated in response to student protests about the lack of diversity among faculty and staff, as well as discrimination experienced by students of color on the football team. With the University's backing, Williams, who died in 1999, created CFAC as a result of discussions that took place during Art of the Black World, a course he taught in the newly minted African American Studies program. "Students were hearing about African American artists, and artists of the African Diaspora, but not necessarily seeing them," says Willetts, who currently teaches the course. CFAC—which, in its early days, was known as the Community Folk Art Gallery—was created to fill that gap: to provide students models of artists who looked like them, and to show all people the art-historical contributions made by members of the African Diaspora. Critically, at the same time that Williams and his col-

leagues aimed to diversify the art-historical landscape, they also intended to create opportunities for local residents to participate in the arts. "What continues to inspire me is they could have kept that on campus.... They could have just made it for themselves," says Willetts, who started her career with CFAC in 1990, as a work-study student. "Instead, they took it to where the community lives and where the community still lives, which is largely on the South Side of Syracuse." The original space was across from a bakery on the South Side, but in the decades since, CFAC would relocate three times: first, in the early '70s, to a storefront on South Salina Street and Wood Avenue; next, to the former Jewish Community Center building on East Genesee Street; and finally, in 2005, to its current location, 805 East Genesee Street, across from Syracuse Stage along the city's Connective Corridor.

Despite these moves, CFAC has maintained fidelity to Williams's founding vision. To that end, its shows have brought to Syracuse iconic examples of artwork made by people of African, Latino, Asian, and Native American descent as well as other heritages and many faiths. Exhibitions have featured works by sculptor and printmaker Elizabeth Catlett, a contemporary of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera; painter Romare Bearden; and, most recently, painter Beverly McIver. Similarly, although not a collecting institution, over the years artists and other patrons have donated work to the center, whose holdings now include the Smithsonian's first African



Creative Arts Academy dancers perform (left). Mint Condition (above) entertains the guests at CFAC's 40th anniversary gala.



collection, which that institution de-accessioned in the 1970s, as well as an important collection of pieces from the AfriCobra (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) movement. Launched in Chicago in the late '60s, AfriCobra "was about letting people know we're here," founder Jeff Donaldson, who died in 2004, told *The Washington Post* in 2000. "And I'm talking about both black and white people, most of whom never saw black people in art."

Equally important, as evidenced by the CAA and its other young adult programming, which ranges from workshops to film screenings, the center has maintained its commitment to using art for youth development, and to forging connections between Syracuse communities divided by racial, economic, geographic, and other divisions. But perhaps most notable is that, in the decades since its founding, as institutions like it closed down or were folded into other academic programs, CFAC—thanks to a committed team of volunteers, visionary leadership, and support from SU—has continued to thrive.

### A Passionate Vision

After earning an M.F.A. degree in ceramics from the University of Michigan, David MacDonald joined Syracuse University as a member of the ceramics faculty in 1971, a year before CFAC was first getting off the ground. A widely known—and widely shown—ceramist, MacDonald lives in the same home where he and his wife, Dorcas, a former librarian at Bird, raised their three children. "Herb Williams was a magnetic personality," says MacDonald, now a professor emeritus. "He was incredibly passionate about his vision. If you got too close to him, you got sucked into his orbit as a result of his gravitational pull. That's how I became one of the 'founders'—and I put that in quotes—because he needed individuals from the community, and also from the campus, to help bring this idea to fruition." Over the past four decades, MacDonald has been heavily involved in CFAC, setting up its ceramics program, teaching children's and adult ceramics, and, in recent years, sitting on its board. The center, he says, "gave me an opportunity to





Children have learned to throw clay on a potter's wheel for decades at CFAC.

get to know more about the Syracuse community, and to use my skills to benefit my community as well."

Other volunteers came from the city's black artists collective, which included local students and artists committed to making "the work of black artists more visible," Campbell says. Williams's vision for CFAC and the collective's "we'll-do-whatever-it-takes spirit were the perfect match," says Campbell. Volunteers curated, mounted, and installed exhibitions, wrote the text for catalogs and wall labels, and taught in CFAC's after-school programs. Jack White, a former Central New York visual artist now based in Austin, Texas, and one of CFAC's founders, remembers taking exhibitions on the road. For *Ten Above Manhattan*, a show he organized featuring New York artists, he packed sculpture and works on paper in wagons, which he drove through parts of Tennessee and Mississippi, installing the show at institutions throughout. Through CFAC, the artist also taught drawing and painting classes at the Auburn prison, and even showed some of the works produced at Auburn in shows at the center. "At the beginning you think anything can happen: These guys are murderers, rapists, anything you might think about," White recalls. "But nothing ever happened. They would hang on everything you say. They were great students." That the mostly volunteer organization "had so much vitality," Campbell adds, "was pretty remarkable."

Also notable is that CFAC provided an opportunity for its volunteers to stretch their legs professionally. At a CFAC opening, for instance, Campbell met the director of the Everson Museum of Art, who asked her to curate a show of black artists. "I had not curated a show start to finish in my life, but I'd done enough piecemeal work at the Folk Art Gallery to give it a try," she says. Her first curatorial foray resulted in an exhibition of works by Romare Bearden, who traveled with his wife to Syracuse to see it. "Two or three years later [Bearden] called me and urged me to come to a job interview for the Studio Museum in Harlem," says Campbell, who landed the post in 1977. "There's a direct link between the Folk Art Gallery and my first really big museum job." Campbell's husband, George Campbell Jr., G'77, H'03, also a founder, recently retired as president of Cooper Union; still other founders, such as Shirley Harrison '73 and Basheer Alim '74, went on to leadership positions in the corporate world (Alim is also currently an artist). "It was a great place to sink your roots as a burgeoning professional," Campbell says.

MacDonald adds that SU's African American Studies program has also played a decisive role in CFAC's continuity. At other schools, black studies courses and faculty have been absorbed into other departments. But at SU, African American studies is still a degree program, he says. "The fact that African American studies was allowed to remain a distinct academic unit is a very important difference from what has historically happened with black studies programs at other academic institutions. That structural concern enabled the African American Studies program, and through that the Community Folk Art Center, to maintain a certain amount of integrity and autonomy."

Finally, Campbell, MacDonald, and Willetts credit CFAC's survival to the University's support over the past 40 years. "I think it is to Syracuse University's credit that they had the foresight and vision to recognize that this was a real asset," Campbell says. Recently, MacDonald adds, the center has especially benefited from Chancellor Nancy Cantor's commitment to forging stronger relationships between the University and the community. "There was a considerable upgrade in facilities, a greater subsidy by the University in terms of staff salaries, and programming money as well," he says of CFAC during Cantor's tenure.

At the same time, CFAC has maintained its



connection to the local community. “When kids came in, we gave them classes, and if they were hungry, we tried to get them something to eat,” Willetts says of her experience at CFAC as a work-study student. “We had to nurture; we had to create a safe space. I would like to believe that we still continue to create a safe space.” To that end, and as it has for four decades, CFAC hosts a juried exhibition each year open to area teens; the organization still provides door-to-door transportation for students who attend its programs. Overall, Willetts says, the University respects CFAC’s autonomy in such a way that recognizes the organization as a fundamentally grassroots institution. In that way, CFAC is an early example of Chancellor Cantor’s Scholarship in Action vision. “We engaged in community engagement from the very beginning,” Willetts says. “This was their ‘community engagement’ idea before anyone coined it anything. It’s just what we did. We are literally a living, 40-year-old manifestation of it, which is why we know that idea works.”

### Bridging Communities

In the coming years, Willetts hopes to cultivate patrons—corporations and private donors—for long-term, sustained support. Because CFAC has only had its official non-profit designation since 2005, she says, the organization has not long been in the position to cultivate these types of relationships. She

also hopes to create memberships to CFAC, but in such a way that maintains the organization’s commitment to low- and no-cost access, and that does not “create a new sense of class division,” she says. “We don’t want to create a new barrier, because our job is to dismantle barriers.”

Willetts would also like to continue to forge connections throughout the community, which she says can be challenging. “No one asks why or why not they go to the Everson,” she says. “They go because they enjoy the space. But when it comes to the CFAC, people say, ‘I’m not black.’ OK. I’m not a ceramist—but I go to the Everson.”

MacDonald has observed a similar response about CFAC among some members of the art community. “Some people feel, ‘Well, that’s for the black people. That’s not for us,’” he says. In fact, one of CFAC’s objectives was—and continues to be—“to expose the dominant culture to aspects of the minority culture,” MacDonald says.

Or, as Willetts puts it, the relationship is about building bridges. “I really consider the Community Folk Art Center a meeting place, in that we build bridges between communities,” she says. “I love to continue to encourage people to explore.” ◀



Printmaker Amos Kennedy Jr. (top) teaches a workshop at CFAC. Visual arts instructor Eunjung Shin Vargas helps a youngster with paint at a CFAC summer camp.