

## Overview of Organization\*

What is the organization's mission?

The Okefenokee Heritage Center is an art center and local history museum for all people, which seeks to promote an appreciation of the arts and an increased understanding of history and development of the Okefenokee region through its cultural and educational programs, collections, and exhibitions. We are art and culture for the community by the community.

Briefly discuss the organization and its history and give a short overview of the type of services/programming the organization offers.

The earliest efforts towards an artistic center came in 1964 when a citizen initiative to save the first house built in Waycross led to the creation of a nonprofit. Mrs. Susan Lott Clark wanted to have a place for her children to expand their education and her community to participate in cultural events. With the help of her community, in May 1975, the "First Day at the Heritage Center" was held to inaugurate the building housing exhibits on the arts and history. Partnerships with the City of Waycross allowed the Okefenokee Area Museum to become a permanent structure and fixture of our community. Situated on 16 acres of beautiful park land between the Valdosta Highway and Highway One the Okefenokee Heritage Center, Inc. was born. We are now an educational, artistic and cultural center for the entire region. During 44 years of service we offer a variety of activities, events, and workshops, making this area more interesting and attractive for locals, tourists, potential new residents, and industry. We offer a variety of artistic and cultural programming throughout the year, including: Artist of the Month Exhibitions in our rotating art gallery, 8 OHC Guilds including classes and workshops in creative writing, photography, art, quilting, homesteading, music, history, and genealogy, Children's Summer Art and Drama Camps, art classes for adults, music lessons for all ages across multiple instruments, dramatic performances, and more.

Taking into consideration the economic and demographic standing of our community, our operations have adjusted in order to make programming accessible to our impoverished region. Most activities are free to the public, making it accessible for everyone, and while we make every effort to create new ideas toward expanding our audience and attracting members, volunteers, and participants, we still face financial concerns about the longevity of our nonprofit.

## Community Impact\*

Describe the community the organization serves. This community could be defined by geography, age, physical ability, gender, ethnicity, etc., or any combination of these or other traits.

Our organization promotes arts and local history in an 8-county area. Ware County, the home of the Okefenokee Heritage Center, is the largest in land area and one of the lowest ranked economically east of the Mississippi River. Our region includes over 200,000 people over 4,400 square miles with more

than 54% minorities and 48% in poverty, and 29% of the population is over age 55. These demographics are frequently overlooked in local programming. We operate on an annual budget of less than \$80,000 that is entirely funded through community support. The average annual income of our region is less than \$20,000, but our community still supports and sees the value of our organization in spite of this.

State budget cuts to our schools have dramatically and consistently limited art, history, and cultural programming in our area. To counter this trend, the Okefenokee Heritage Center has successfully endeavored to engage our community through art shows, dramatic performances, and events. Our school systems over multiple counties often request we bring our programming to them due to the lack of funding and activity available to them. The need and desire for arts and cultural programming in our area is beyond compare and completely necessary.

Our people are hungry for dramatic performances, art shows, cultural engagement activities, lessons in theater and art and music, and we are providing that to them.

In 2017 alone we engaged nearly 15,000 people to walk our 10 acres or engage in an outreach event with us in our community. Nearly 18,000 people engaged with us in 2018, in 2 years we have more than tripled our average annual attendance of 4,500. We have done a lot with a little to increase our reach through evaluation of our methods, research into marketing and advertising, creation and implementation of family friendly events, and hearing the cry of our local people to provide quality education and entertainment in an impoverished region that lacks access to these programs. Citizens of our area used to have to drive over an hour, and often out of state, to listen to live music, see local artists, learn about their craft, or watch a quality theater production. But not anymore. Now this programming is at their fingertips and we are struggling to meet the demand of our people. We need your help.

How does the work of your organization benefit the community you identified in the previous question? Provide specific data which confirms the value of your work in your community.

Over the last year the Okefenokee Heritage Center has worked to maintain a focus of unity in the community. African American cultural heritage is an area within our community that has received little to no support for years. Over the last year we have made a huge push for art and cultural programming focused on minority artists and themes. January, February, and March have become entire months focused on bringing programming to this overlooked demographic in a number of different formats and venues. In January we participate in the Dr. Martin Luther King Parade. In February we host a quiz bowl fused on African American History and Art and a performance of God's Trombones, a collection of 7 sermons originally used to bring the Word of God to the slaves. The biblical stories and sermons are

delivered in a nearly 200 year old African American Church, in costume and in character for this wonderful dramatic performance. Throughout the year we feature African American cultural programming with our Black Heritage Committee and find artists to teach classes and display their art in our gallery and satellite gallery sites at the local hospital.

Being aware that there is little to no art programming in our community we have worked to reach out to other organizations in order to promote art education and exposure. Our partnership with Memorial Satilla Hospital has allowed two galleries to be displayed year round, a children's art gallery and a display for our art and photography guilds. All three displays are changed out quarterly to expose those in the hospital to hope and light. Our guild system within the Heritage Center promotes classes and community collaborations with programs in art, drama, creative writing, and photography. We are proud to host these monthly gatherings of community members to inspire and encourage artistic creation.

Over the last year our major focus has been our youth engagement. Programs like Romeo and Juliet, Art Camp, Theater Camp, and now a Young Adult Theater troupe have all developed to provide a location for children to experience artistic engagement and creativity in a rural area that has cut most of the art and drama programs from our schools. Several of the schools, both public and private, partner with us for art shows, tours, private lessons, and more. We have been working diligently to provide even more programming to our youth as we develop junior guilds and work more closely with our county school systems.

Provide a specific example of a past program that had a clear impact on a person or people in your community.

This summer a middle school girl attended our drama camp. Kasen Guinn attended drama camp in 2017 on a whim and it gave her the bug for creation. Kasen continued with drama camp in 2018 and her passion for theater has only grown. She starred as Alice in Alice in Wonderland, inspiring other students and helping them learn their lines. Her passion extended into coming up to the center after hours to help sew costumes with her grandmother and painting the set. The arts are alive in Kasen not just during the summer, but throughout the year now.

Kasen's experience led her to participate with our art camp as well. Through art camp she learned to express herself in more rich ways, attending all three weeks. She talked about losing her parents and living with her grandmother with some of the staff and from the beginning of camp to the end it was like a light was turned on inside of her. Her family participated at our art festival downtown and took pictures of all the art placed in 14 visits for our temporary pop up exhibit to encourage our community to visit our local shops downtown. Over 200 people came to the downtown art festival, the first of its kind. And Kasen was able to have a flame fanned inside her that's resulted in participating in our Youth Drama Program and art programs at her school. We are proud that children like Kasen can help foster a

cathartic experience through art not just for herself and her family, but by building a team and a community with others.

How does input from the community influence your programming decisions?

In rural communities communication is by far the item we struggle with the most. There is one local daily newspaper in our community and one radio station. We are not featured on any local television networks or on a radio station that is nationally syndicated. Even billboards are a rarity in our community. Luckily with the dawn of the social media age we have found a way not only to communicate with our community but get instant, active feedback.

This year we have utilized social media in a number of ways. Our page has increased by more than double the number of followers and 8 times the number of engagements. By creating consistent live videos we are able to promote local art and history sharing anecdotes about the community, and information about our events. The live videos have become so successful in gaining feedback that we have also started online polls. Through our polls and comments we were able to plan and execute a Disney Sing-A-Long over Thanksgiving weekend and we were able to adjust the date for our largest annual event, the Christmas in the Cross arts and crafts fair. Through coordination with Main Street and Tourism we were able to postpone the event due to the weather and plan on a date where we could still reach hundreds of shoppers who wanted to support our local economy by purchasing from local artists, artisans, and growers.

Having a system of instantaneous, active communication with our community allows us to receive feedback regularly and adjust our programming accordingly. Tapping into this resource has been very time consuming for our staff, but essential to our growth as we attempt to meet our citizens where they are at with programming that is relevant.

How does the organization **actively** engage underserved audiences and develop ongoing relationships with these communities? How are members of targeted underserved communities involved in the planning of programs? (Underserved audiences are those groups that lack access to the arts because of any barrier, such as language, geography, economic status, physical ability, etc.) The answer should not focus exclusively on giving away tickets or using an ADA accessible facility.

The OHC creates programming for the community by the community.

In 2016 the Black Heritage Committee was formed in order to work on a project focused on historical preservation. As the Director became more involved with the group she noticed a desire for artistic programming focused on this group. A music festival sponsored by J-Fly was currently the only artistic programming focused on African American people, though they make up more than 54% of our region's population. Working with the Black Heritage Committee more programming was developed. Local composer Willie Character expressed a desire to unite people with a dramatic performance called "God's Trombones," and he composed and arranged African Spirituals to accompany each sermon. Music performances and classes developed, presentations from local authors were showcased, a game show style quiz bowl event emerged, and local African American artists are now vendors in our market style events.

African Americans are not the only underserved audience we engage. Since 2016 we have hosted Autism Awareness Day. This program is an opportunity for all children, whether in an isolated classroom or included in the main population, in 4 counties to have their artwork featured at the Okefenokee Heritage Center. Every year our art guild judges the contests without any information about the artists, and at least 1/3 of the awards end up going out to students with special needs, allowing them a moment to shine. We also host the Georgia Artists with Disabilities show and it is one of our most well attended programs as people from all walks of life engage in the program.

With lack of transportation in our impoverished region we have started doing more programs within our community not on our site. The art festival and pop up show took place downtown, the media literacy classes are at the school, and our leadership summit will take place at various places around the community. We continue to meet our people where they are at.

Outside of utilizing a physically accessible venue, how does your organization ensure that people with disabilities can participate in and benefit from your programs?

One example of programming focusing on people with disabilities is our Autism Awareness Day partnership. Kim Gibson is a parent of an autistic child who began the region's Autism Awareness Day. Although she had utilized other facilities to host nothing quite felt right. In 2016 she met with the Executive Director of the Okefenokee Heritage Center about bringing Autism Awareness Day to our grounds. Since that day the program has exploded. In 2017 Autism Awareness Day was attended by over 800 people and 400 students placed art from ceiling to floor in a building on our grounds. In 2018 the program continued to grow. We showcased graphic art, watercolor, acrylic paint, sketches, three-dimensional art, and more to our community. The Heritage Center Art Guild sent 5 representatives to judge the youth art in categories ranging from elementary to adult.

The members of the guild didn't know who made the art. They didn't know their ages or their stories. They didn't know their income or ability level or who had special needs. All the judges saw were the hearts and souls of our children, our future, poured out on construction paper, canvases covered in paint and tears, clay molded from tiny hopeful hands. The judges and our community saw the deep and desperate need of expression screaming to be released from within our youth. Without knowing anything about the artists, over 1/3 of the awards went to children with special needs. Children who are kept separate from their peers and told they don't matter or are ignored by society were raised above others in our community to be given value. Parents and children were in tears when they walked into our warehouse and saw the ribbons hanging.

Through the work of Kim Gibson and the OHC we leveled a playing field and fulfilled dreams. For a moment these young people were seen for their spirit and not what they presented to the outside world. For a moment they were equally honored among their peers. For a moment they mattered.

Describe a strong, meaningful partnership with another organization that helps/helped your organization reach new audiences or develop stronger relationships within your community.

Partnering with other local organizations is a big goal of the Okefenokee Heritage Center. This year we have worked with Ware County Schools, our local YMCA, an abundance of local agriculture vendors, Memorial Satilla Health Hospital, several churches and volunteer organizations like the Boy Scouts of America, Purlie Productions, Waycross Tourism, Waycross Main Street, the Ware County Chamber of Commerce, the RIVERS Foundation, along with many other local businesses, increased members, and volunteer services. However, two particular partnerships have really stood out in both their meaningful impact and outreach.

Over the last year two different campaigns have been developed with Hearts for Families and the Children's Initiative, formerly the Ware County Family Connection. Both organizations are working diligently with substance abuse prevention. In the Ware County community the youth substance abuse statistics are alarming with more than double the state average in consumption rates and the vast majority of the age of initiation being age 7 for binge drinking defined as more than 5 alcoholic drinks in 24 hours. Through our partnership we have been able to introduce a media literacy and art creation program into the 7th grade of both of our local middle schools. We're also developing a traveling Youth Action Team Summit where youth groups, clubs, and other after school organizations will be able to engage in a leadership development activity where the students will create videos and posters to talk to students about substance abuse and empower adults to not provide substance to underage youth. Our efforts are already causing a difference in our community. We took surveys of the media literacy students and several students talked about telling their peers and families about how to evaluate media and continued making youtube videos and powerpoints even after the class was over. Through our efforts we are using art to inspire, elevate, and educate our people.

### Artistic Merit\*

How will you ensure that the artists/instructors that your organization works with this year have strong technical abilities and the potential to have a deep impact on the community being served by your organization? Include the qualifications of the person/people making artistic decisions.

The Okefenokee Heritage Center showcases guilds focused on various art forms. Each guild has members with advanced degrees and years of experience teaching and creating. These members evaluate and create our programming. Over 100 members participate in various guilds that have created art or ran successful businesses based on their craft. These OHC guild members are often active in events to guarantee that our art is quality work. Programs include: presentation, framing, photography point and shoots, writers workshops, art critique, and more. Purlie Productions, our drama group, has members that have theater degrees and participants that have performed off Broadway in New York City. Their members coach and evaluate each performance. Members of Leadership Waycross and our Society Newspaper writer also review Heritage Center programming.

Along with the talented local artists, the Heritage Center is blessed to have a director with advanced degrees in Education – Leadership Development, and literature, marketing, history, art history, and performance. The Director presents programs to the board for advice and consideration. The board and the Director discuss why a program is selected, what community benefits will happen, who will it be aimed at, how will we get them here. Upon approval of the program, a committee comes together to execute the event.

After each event a post-mortem, including feedback gathered at the event, is presented. Evaluation by staff, volunteers, college professors, and people in the community are taken very seriously. Alignment with Georgia State Art Education Standards are also crucial. We want to provide excellent representation of classical forms of art and expand the art education, awareness, and appreciation in our area. Students from Savannah College of Art and Design have evaluated our programs and facilities last year to rave reviews of our artistic quality, historical preservation, artistic evaluation and merit.

Give an example of recent programming that demonstrates strong artistic merit.

Musicians, actors, artists, and directors have come together twice to present “God’s Trombones.” “God’s Trombones” is a collection of 7 sermons written by James Weldon Johnson that was recited to bring the Word of God to the illiterate African Slaves from 1700-1900.

Mr. Willie Character, composer, historian, and professor at South Georgia State College, composed the music and arranged the African Spirituals between each sermon. Barbara Griffin, noted director, actor, and orator, collaborated with over 15 local pastors to develop a cast of orators to dramatically reproduce these sermons. Antioch First African Baptist Church, the first African Church founded in our region in 1869 became the set for our event. To maintain historical accuracy no microphones were used for this production.

In the hallowed halls of Historic Antioch Church 7 African pastors and a negro choir were convened to transport participants back to the ancient days of the early Americas to share in stories about the bible in the African English dialect. With over a century of experience pastor after pastor stepped up to the pulpit to preach. Director Barbara Griffin, theater participant and advocate for over 20 years, watched as each preacher and the choir met their cues. Over 300 people cumulatively attended these events. Members of the crowd were interviewed by the Antioch board as well as members of the Okefenokee Heritage Center and the Black Heritage Committee.

“There’s so much experience and professionalism here we can just sit back and watch,” Lamar Deal said.

“It’s not just African History, it’s ALL of our History,” Centenarian C.C. Stephens said.

The audience wished repeatedly we could do this every weekend. They also said that they wanted to take it more places. Pastors from Claxton, Coffee County, and Camden County have all contacted the Okefenokee Heritage Center and Purlie Productions to create this performance repeatedly throughout the year.

#### Goals\*

List two significant, measurable goals for your organization in FY20. For each goal, explain:

- Why the goal is important to the organization and the community served
- How you will define success in achieving the goal
- How you will measure/evaluate your success at achieving the goal
- How the goal is tied to the larger goals in your strategic plan
- How does the goal intersect with GCA’s mission, which is to cultivate the growth of vibrant, thriving communities in Georgia

AT RISK YOUTH SUBSTANCE ABUSE PREVENTION

Youth substance abuse in our region is more than double the state average and the majority of students being introduced to substance usage at age 7.

Success in this goal will be continuing to work with Waycross and Ware County Middle Schools on our media literacy program, as well as beginning a Youth Action Team Summit where different youth organizations will go through a leadership course then create art and media to encourage substance abuse prevention for their peers and parents.

Evaluation of the goal will take place through surveys from student participants, fidelity reviews with teachers, and interviews with students and staff who helped with the program. As they discuss their impact and reach we hope our socially active and engagement programs will continue into the future.

Providing hope and resources to our community is integral to our strategic plan both for 2019-2020 and for our ten year goals. Engaging our community through evaluation of community needs and partnerships with local groups is essential to our success.

If students and parents are experiencing cathartic engagement through art creation and evaluation of their surroundings we will create a community that is more vibrant and engaged. Socially active and aware citizens participate politics, engage in their education, and provide economic support to the community through engagement with work. Since substance abuse in the rural community is the number one cause of job loss and unemployment we hope to begin to help this huge problem with these small interventions.

#### ART THERAPY PROGRAM

With the substance abuse rates high in our community we began trying to get involved with the jail to do an art therapy monthly. The staff suggested they would prefer worked with probationers in the halfway house we have been actively engaging the staff at the St. Illa Residential Treatment Center about creating a program to provide a release for their participants through art.

Success will be achieved by having a monthly program with St. Illa's residences and allowing art guild members to also go out and teach.

We will conduct surveys with staff members to gage engagement before and after each month's program since the clients rotate out each month.

Providing art programs to underserved people in our region showcases our passion to art outreach.

Engaging underserved and at risk people directly aligns with GCA's goals to create thriving communities focused on unity.

