

## July 2014. Vol. 18, No. 3. – Growing a Lotus in Indiana/Lotus World Music & Arts Festival: Developing a Volunteer Cohort – LuAnne Holladay and Tamara Loewenthal; John Fenn, Guest Editor



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By CultureWork, on July 17th, 2014

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### Growing a Lotus in Indiana

[LuAnne Holladay](#)

#### About Lotus

Conceived as a one-time multicultural music festival, the initial Lotus World Music and Arts Festival took place in October 1994. The founders—a rock musician, an Iranian musician and academic, and a music promoter—developed the one-night event with a budget of about \$10,000. It drew between 700 and 800 people across three venues. Rapturous audience response pushed the planners to design a future for the festival. In 1995, the Lotus Education and Arts Foundation incorporated as a 501(c)3 organization and a small, grassroots arts nonprofit was born.

Lotus now spans five days in eight to nine venues every September, with attendance estimates for 2013 at about 12,000 (1). Footage of the 2013 Lotus World Music and Arts

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Festival is highlighted here:

The organizational budget hovers around \$400,000, with nearly 50% of income from ticket sales and other program intake. The remainder comes from a combination of sponsorships, grants, individual giving, and an annual benefit event. A staff transition is in effect, from founders to next generation, and Lotus has three full-time staff (executive director, development director, outreach director) and two part-time staff (volunteer coordinator and communications coordinator) (2). The board of directors currently numbers 16, with their responsibilities weighted toward fundraising.

Additionally, Lotus now runs a robust springtime educational outreach program called [Lotus Blossoms](#), which has had an aggregate audience of more than 100,000 people (mostly K-6) since its inception in 2001. Outreach activities expand beyond the student base, and in 2013 Lotus produced activities for 26 local groups, from social service organizations to senior centers. Program content includes performances by international artists, art-making activities in workshop formats, and performer Q&A sessions and demonstrations. All Lotus outreach is free to the public, or offered at low cost to schools.

Based in Bloomington, Indiana (population ~ 82,000) (3), Lotus has a small permanent administrative office but no performance space of its own. All programming takes place in rented or donated venues. The city is also home to Indiana University, which has an annual student population of more than 46,000 (4).

## Finding a Fit with Potential Partners

Connecting with partners whose missions, program priorities, and organizational calendars mesh with Lotus has been a consistent theme. Some relationships are born of expediency and can develop into more substantial affiliations. Lotus's involvement with a local food co-operative, [Bloomingfoods](#), began with the need for an official food-and-beverage provider for festival venues. Today, the co-op is both the festival food vendor and a ticket outlet; but, it also donates products and staff to key Lotus events beyond the festival. Bloomingfoods staff have also become members of strategically important festival planning committees.

[WFHB](#), the community radio station sitting at the heart of the festival precinct in downtown Bloomington, became the principal on-air media "voice" for the festival early on, in part, because of its proximity to festival events and ready access to performing artists. The station devotes an intense few days to live and recorded interviews and live performances: the rich content Lotus delivers to its media partner is then broadcast as a key element in festival weekend promotion (5).

## Channeling Communication

Lotus's longest-lasting partnerships began as personal connections between key staff on either side. However, such personal connections have shifted into administrative processes that are less dependent on particular individuals so less susceptible to collapse when one or more original contacts moves on. This evolution can be a challenge, requiring intention and forward thinking—processes sometimes lost in a nonprofit's day-to-day "tactical" work. Lotus is in the midst of a leadership transition that is moving longtime staff into less-prominent roles, and mentoring of new staff necessitates careful stewardship of existing contacts and partnerships.

Because Lotus occurs in an active cityscape (instead of on a fairground at the city periphery), clear channels of communication between Lotus and city staff are crucial. While not heavily dependent on the city for monetary support, Lotus depends on close cooperation with the city when it comes to logistics of creating a festival environment in an urban center. A half-dozen City departments are part of the festival planning process, and the director of Bloomington's Entertainment and Arts District is a key liaison to Lotus, providing strategic advice.

## Program Development

With partnerships, Lotus has delivered mission-driven programs clearly aligned with our “brand” and quality. An affiliation with [Indiana University’s Mathers Museum of World Cultures](#), for example, has yielded events resonating with both organizations’ missions (for example, Bharata Natyam Indian dance performance, African-American storytelling, Lakota flute and storytelling). These events are free, promoted by both organizations in a way that shares costs. The Mathers, in turn, provides program elements for two of Lotus’s signature outreach events: a two-day world cultural experience for elementary students held in the spring; and a large free event associated with the festival, Lotus in the Park, where Mathers activities anchor an “arts in the park” area. The museum’s Head of Programs and Education works with Lotus staff as an active program planning partner, tailoring activities to match Mathers’ mission and goals and Lotus’s event needs. With independent event schedules that often overlap in their focus on international arts and culture, the two organizations are able to share audiences and amplify promotion of related or co-sponsored events (6).



Bassekou Kouyate, photo by Jim Krause



Sonia and Miguel Poveda, photo by Keven Atkins

Now on the cusp of its third decade, Lotus is a node in a complex network of relationships in Bloomington. At the urging of the Mayor’s office, we are examining the processes underlying our most successful and productive partnerships with other organizations in order to offer peer education workshops in 2014 focused on community engagement and collaborative work among nonprofits. Appropriately, Lotus is structuring those workshops as discussion roundtables led by Lotus staff, individuals from the community who have been key volunteers and planners, and staff from partner organizations. In this way, the structure of the workshop itself reflects the nature of Lotus’s engagement with its community.

A nonprofit’s approach to relationship-building and community engagement is unique to its own mission and contingencies. However, Lotus’s most successful relationships have had several elements in common:

- The “fit” is right—because our missions resonate, or because we have goals (short- or long-term) that match up. Mutual benefits are easy to identify.

- We have established reliable channels of communication and administrative contact.
- With these partners, or with their support, we have delivered mission-driven programs that clearly reflect the Lotus “brand” and quality, and expand our reach to new audiences.

Successful collaborations are usually based in long-term process. At its 20-year mark, the Lotus Education and Arts Foundation sees collaboration and community engagement as a strategic commitment.



Mucca Pazza, photo by Jeffrey Hammond

## Author Note

For more than 15 years, **LuAnne Holladay** has been an arts administrator with the Lotus Education and Arts Foundation. While she has worn many hats, LuAnne’s work has focused on building organizational infrastructure and institutional memory, event design and management, marketing and communications, and most recently leadership transition. She is also the author of a book, *Bringing the World to Our Neighborhood: The Lotus World Music and Arts Festival* (2005, Indiana University Press). Her current job title is “communications guru.” She says, “The best thing an organization can do is learn to tell its own story, concretely and authentically. Good marketing and promotion grow from that foundation.”

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1. Based on ticket sales and audience counts at free events and venues. This is a conservative estimate.
2. The organization is in the process of leadership succession implementation, with Williams transitioning from a full-time omnibus position of executive/artistic director to part-time artistic director.
3. According to 2012 [U.S. Census estimates](#).
4. As of [Fall 2013](#); undergraduates, graduate, other.

5. The station has produced a series of CDs from its archive of live, on-air recordings by Lotus artists.

6. The two organizations missions are highly resonant. The Lotus mission, in its entirety: *To create opportunities to experience, celebrate, and explore the diversity of the world's cultures, through music and the arts.* The Mathers Museum's mission, while far more detailed (as it is a university-based entity with university-directed priorities), includes this principle: *In all of its activities, the Museum strives to further its audiences' understanding of both the diversity of the world's specific cultures and the underlying unity of culture as a human phenomenon.*

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