



Art-Reach Launches Independence Starts Here Cultural Calendar



Since 2004, Art-Reach has partnered with Amaryllis Theatre Company/VSA arts of Pennsylvania on a communitywide cultural-access initiative called Independence Starts Here. This fall the initiative takes an exciting step forward with the launch of the Independence Starts Here Cultural Calendar.

“The Independence Starts Here initiative works on two tracks,” said Art-Reach Executive Director Michael L. Norris. “One is helping cultural organizations to become more accessible; the other is to build audiences for accessible arts events. Amaryllis leads the first track, and Art-Reach, which has been connecting audiences to the arts for over 23 years, leads the second. The new Cultural Calendar is a great way for Art-Reach to build awareness and audiences for accessible cultural events.”

Until now there has been no centralized way for audiences to learn about all the accessible events that are available to them. The Independence Starts Here Cultural Calendar is a one-stop resource for programmatically accessible cultural events that feature captioning, audio description or American Sign Language interpretation. Maintained on the Philly Fun Guide, the region’s go-to resource for entertainment and cultural events, the calendar lists all the events offering these services and allows audiences to quickly and easily purchase tickets. In conjunction with the calendar, Art-Reach has also launched an email club for audiences who want to sign up for monthly

ticket discounts and other special promotions. To see the calendar and join the email club, log on to www.PhillyFunGuide.com/access.

The calendar features over 20 different events that demonstrate the richness and diversity of the Philadelphia cultural community. Cultural organizations and venues represented on the calendar include Amaryllis Theatre Company, Arden Theatre Company, the Academy of Music, Enchantment Theatre Company, InterAct Theatre Company, Mural Arts Program, National Constitution Center, Opera Company of Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia Theatre Company, Philadelphia's Magic Gardens, Scott Arboretum, Theatre Alliance of Greater Philadelphia, Walnut Street Theatre and the Wilma Theater.

The Cultural Calendar serves not only people who are blind or deaf but also those whose vision or hearing is deteriorating due to age or other factors. "There are many people whose enjoyment of the arts can be enhanced through services like captioning and audio description," Norris said. "We hope the calendar is as much a resource to them as the blind and deaf community."

The [Independence Starts Here Cultural Calendar](#) is not only a great resource for audiences interested in accessible programming. It also serves cultural organizations by promoting their accessible events. As James Haskins, Managing Director of the Wilma Theater, says: "We'd like to find ways to increase the use of our services given the commitment we've made to being accessible." In addition to maintaining the calendar itself, Art-Reach is implementing a multi-layered marketing campaign to build awareness and drive audiences to the Fun Guide. This campaign will include direct-mail, advertising and media relations, along with grassroots distribution and word of mouth. Printed pieces for the campaign will also be accessible, featuring Braille and large-print type.

"We hope that more cultural organizations will want to provide these types of accessibility services once they see everything we're doing to increase awareness and build audiences," Norris said. "And in addition to Art-Reach's marketing efforts, Independence Starts Here also helps cultural organizations to provide access since Amaryllis now has an

audio-description system and an open-captioning system that are designed to be shared across the community and can be rented at little or no cost.”

The Independence Starts Here Cultural Calendar represents an extension of Art-Reach’s mission into a new population: underserved audiences who are not necessarily affiliated with its member agencies. “While serving our members will always be our number-one priority,” Norris said, “last year our board articulated a goal to try to reach deeper into the community as part of our new strategic plan. The Cultural Calendar is a great way for us to do just that.”

Like all Art-Reach programs and services, the Independence Starts Here Cultural Calendar is built on partnerships with other organizations that share its goals. The primary partner on the calendar is the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, which maintains the Philly Fun Guide website and is providing related marketing services. The Theatre Alliance of Greater Philadelphia is providing online-ticketing services through its Tessitura ticketing consortium for organizations on the calendar that don’t already have online ticketing. Art-Reach has also designated five Community Partners for the calendar, which will help promote the calendar to their constituents. Community Partners include: Associated Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired, the Deaf-Hearing Communication Centre, the Hearing Loss Association of Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf and the Philadelphia Corporation for Aging.



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