

## Agency for Change Podcast: Suzanne Wise, Executive Director of the Nebraska Arts Council

### **Announcer:**

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of change makers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

### **Kelley Peterson:**

Hello, everyone. This is Kelley Peterson, Vice President, Nonprofit Creative Director at KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of our Agency for Change podcast.

### **Kelley Peterson:**

Today's guest is Suzanne Wise, Executive Director of the Nebraska Arts Council. Each and every day, Suzanne, along with an enthusiastic board and staff, work together to promote, cultivate and sustain the arts for people in Nebraska. Suzanne, I'm eager to talk with you today, and learn more about the recent legislation passed that supports forming creative districts throughout the state.

### **Suzanne Wise:**

Hey, Kelley, it's good to talk to you. I'm excited to talk about creative districts.

### **Kelley Peterson:**

I bet you are, and reading the latest news, I just can't wait to learn more about it. Would you take a minute before we start in with creative districts, to tell us more about the Nebraska Arts Council and the work that you do?

### **Suzanne Wise:**

Well, the Nebraska Arts Council is an agency of state government. We're right in there with the Department of Motor Vehicles, and Health and Human Services, and other state agencies.

### **Suzanne Wise:**

We're the only state agency not headquartered in the state capitol. So that's an interesting story in and of itself that deserves its own podcast episode. We're in Omaha, down in the Old Market area, and that's where we've been since the agency became official as a state agency in the early 1970s.

### **Kelley Peterson:**

Well, I'll get that next podcast on the list. Well, Suzanne, recently there was legislation passed supporting the formation of creative and cultural districts as economic development catalysts in communities statewide. What does that mean for Nebraska?

### **Suzanne Wise:**

Well, it means that Nebraska is catching up with the majority of other states who recognized that having creative zones can do a lot to jump-start economic development. And it really stems from the writings of

Richard Florida, who wrote a very influential book a couple of decades ago, called *Rise of the Creative Class*.

**Suzanne Wise:**

In that book, he observed that creatives, and again, we're not talking just about artists or musicians, we're talking about website developers, we're talking about any sort of creative activity, the tech industry in many ways is a creative industry, and that they tend to group together. And when they grouped together, the economy of the area, it just takes off. And it also attracts other like businesses, interesting restaurants, local restaurants, pubs, and all of those things that people enjoy.

**Suzanne Wise:**

And when they're, say, visiting a downtown area or an area where they see there's a lot of interesting little shops and what have you, and they're all related. And he is the person that really connected the dots on that. So it became a movement. And again, when you're part of government, one thing that you can do is create official things. And in this case, to have an official creative district, one has to jump through a certain number of hoops to get to that point. And it really has a lot to do with community building and looking at what your community is and what you want it to be. And not just talking to people who think exactly like you do. To do this kind of work you have to talk to everybody, including the crabby shoe repairmen down the street who usually doesn't like anything. You have to find out what is his or her thoughts are as well, and you also have to involve your local government.

**Suzanne Wise:**

So once you get everybody working together and devising a plan, it's amazing what can take off. And there are just examples all across the country where this works.

**Kelley Peterson:**

I'm super excited about it. And I like how you called it a movement, because that's exactly what it is. And I think about creativity a lot because I'm on a creative team, of course, at KidGlov. And sometimes even in marketing advertising agencies, there seems to be a divide or maybe it's just a perceived divide that there's people within the creative departments and then there's account service. And KidGlov we always say, "There is no difference. Every single person is creative in their own way." So when you describe that as people that do IT, or maybe even the shoe repair person is also creative in their own right.

**Kelley Peterson:**

And it takes all of those people to be part of the community and to group together to do great things and build the economy within. So I'm very excited about it. In the recent news, there was an article describing a qualifying district as an area readily identifiable by some distinguishing concentration of cultural life and heritage. Can you explain that definition a little bit more?

**Suzanne Wise:**

Yes and no, because we really are looking for communities to kind of self-define what that is. And of course, the obvious would be, "Oh, well we have this museum," or, "We have this theater and we're going to build around that." But interestingly enough, they're finding that creative districts can be very successful and like a suburban strip mall. And it just really depends on how the community defines it. And we also ask or we'll be asking when the guidelines and the application are ready, which, by the way,

will be just in a couple of months actually, we'll be rolling this out 1st of September, but you have to kind of define what that area is.

**Suzanne Wise:**

And if there is something that doesn't connect in an immediately walkable way, "Well, tell us how this other outlying place is going to be part of that. And if it can make a compelling case, we'll accept that." But for the most part, it really has to be a walkable area. It can include historic homes. It can include the place where like if we were in Hastings where they cooked up the recipe for Kool-Aid. I don't know if that exists, but you could build a creative district around something like that. Imagine all the branding you can do around the idea of Kool-Aid, which Hastings does do. They do have a Kool-Aid festival, which brings me to the point that fairs and festivals can be part of this as well. So there are a number of communities that already have things like that.

**Suzanne Wise:**

Like the Irish festival is one that takes place every year and maybe they could build a creative district around that. So it's really, in a way, self-defined, but the obvious examples would be iconic cultural places in that community, but that doesn't necessarily always have to be the case.

**Kelley Peterson:**

Makes total sense. So creative districts will capitalize on a community's creative and cultural strengths, and you've already given us some great examples. Can you think of any more around maybe that even already exist in your mind as creative districts, but they would need to apply upcoming?

**Suzanne Wise:**

I often think about south Omaha on south 24th street where the South Omaha Business Association has already done... it's a wonderful street improvement landscaping with very bright, colorful design motifs, kind of based on Mexican and central American ethnic designs. So it makes it very charming and very colorful with planters full of colorful flowers in the summertime. And they really are just a series of businesses, primarily catering to the Latinx communities that occupied that area of Omaha. But they have a Cinco de Mayo festival that brings in visitors from as far as Denver and Kansas City. It's a very, very popular event, just speaking of Cinco de Mayo.

**Kelley Peterson:**

All right. Coming right up. That's right.

**Suzanne Wise:**

They also have a very significant mural program and what's really nice about it is that mural program also recognizes the cultures that lived in that area before it became heavily populated with Latinx people. So Lithuanians, Italians, it's each mural is honoring different culture that has been part of Omaha's history. And it's pretty extraordinary.

**Kelley Peterson:**

And that is a great combination of that creative and culture combined.

**Suzanne Wise:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Kelley Peterson:**

So that's great. When will the new creative districts program launch? You mentioned it a little bit before, but how can local communities apply once it does launch?

**Suzanne Wise:**

Well, they'll send us a letter of interest and when they do that, we will send them a digital packet if you will, that has a workbook that they will need to complete. And part of that are some of the things we've already talked about. How do you define it?

**Suzanne Wise:**

What are its boundaries? And if they're not walkable, how do you overcome that with visitors that may not be familiar with your community or neighborhood? And then they have to have business people in addition to the creative people who are probably the ones that are leading the charge on this, and also they have to have a city official involved, and then together, they have to go through and answer a series of questions and essentially take a look at their inventory of attractions. We'd call it a cultural inventory, but I think it can be a little broader than that. And once they complete this workbook, then they can go on to a second phase where they do strategic planning. And we really want them to do at least a five-year if not a 10 year plan and a lot of it depends on what kind of financial support they're going to be asking for.

**Suzanne Wise:**

So that process, once that's completed and it's done all successfully, and again, we will help them all along the way. We'll declare them a creative district. They'll get a cash award for that to start their project. And again, thanks to the generosity of the legislature this year, we can encourage them to think big. We can supply them with significant grants to make their dreams come true.

**Kelley Peterson:**

Ugh, I can't wait. It'll be here with time before we know it and everyone can get their plans and strategies put together.

**Suzanne Wise:**

It will be a lot of work. It'll be a lot of work. I have a feeling that some of them are going to be a little overwhelmed to say, "Oh no." So we'll be doing a lot of handholding, I think.

**Kelley Peterson:**

Well, and sometimes that's what's needed for a community to come together and do that.

**Kelley Peterson:**

It takes a village to make it happen.

**Suzanne Wise:**

It does.

**Kelley Peterson:**

And it's really great to hear about programs like creative districts moving forward especially just coming out of the pandemic and these unprecedented times. How have these times affected the Nebraska Arts Council?

**Suzanne Wise:**

It's not so much about us as it is about our constituency. As you probably know our primary purpose is to provide financial support to cultural communities of Nebraska and arts education is part of that. We have some very significant artists in schools and arts education initiatives, and because of pandemic and schools having to deal with, "Do we have kids in the classroom? Do we have them at home? Do we do a hybrid?" Things that we fund a lot, which often are artists residency's just simply fell by the wayside. So it's not only depriving the students, but it's also depriving this highly qualified roster of artists' livelihood.

**Suzanne Wise:**

So that's one way. We've been surveying the arts organizations that we provide support to and most of them that have staffs and this again, would be the larger arts organizations, roughly 50% layoff. So that's a lot of people. And I don't know that people think about not-for-profit organizations as having, that they are an industry and that they have often very significant stats, which pay taxes, and buy houses, and support their communities, just like anyone that's employed at an insurance company. So I think that has been stressful. And again, creative people, the reason they do what they do in many cases is that they want to share that, they want to communicate that and to have musicians that can't perform in person and really react with an audience, I'm not a musician, but I sure attend a lot concerts and that's tough.

**Suzanne Wise:**

And I think they're adopting, or they have adopted reasonably well to the kind of format that you and I are currently on, but it's not the same. It's not the same as seeing someone on stage. But I think they're getting back in gear and hopefully the people that they've had to lay off will be able to come back or they will be able to kind of restock if those individuals have moved on. And that would be a tragedy if they had to do that. But that's the reality of the pandemic.

**Kelley Peterson:**

So true.

**Kelley Peterson:**

I've been involved with the Lincoln Midwest Ballet Company as a performer for many years. And last December would have been my 10th Nutcracker. So to be able to... that we couldn't do that just was so unfortunate because it was everyone's part of their holidays for many people.

**Kelley Peterson:**

And it did involve many jobs and many things. So we were thankful that we were able to have Christmas in March this year. We did a live performance, one of the first live performances that we were able to do that we'd center at that time. But I know exactly what you're saying from a personal experience, but that doesn't mean that there aren't people, artists all over and especially nonprofit employees and staff that are affected by this in so many ways.

**Suzanne Wise:**

Speaking of the Lied, I think they are one of the organizations that really, I won't say they embraced, I'm sure Bill would not want me using that term, embrace the challenge, but he did. And the Lied was one of the first organizations to open up with very strict rules in terms of seating. They kind of mastered that whole preventive side of the virus and got the building up to speed on that.

**Suzanne Wise:**

They did their little concerts. I happen to be a Lincoln resident, I'm one of those commuters that kind of wave at the other side of the highway for the commuters from Omaha going to Lincoln. But I know in my neighborhood it was just wonderful. They peddled the little portable stage, and it was just so charming, and wonderful and connective for people to see live music going down the street in Lincoln. So I was really a big fan of the programming that the league did during the pandemic. I'm acting like it's done, it's not done, but they're also anxious those of us that were vaccinated, were ready to go and we still have to be very cautious.

**Kelley Peterson:**

Absolutely.

**Kelley Peterson:**

I was fortunate enough to interview Bill for another project and talked about how those stages pulled by bike went neighborhood to neighborhood.

**Kelley Peterson:**

And that they're really looking forward to doing more of those and bringing the arts to the people. And I think that's a neat thing that came out of the pandemic. Yeah. So it doesn't all have to be virtual. We can do things outdoors and still be safe, but they were the Lied Center for Performing Arts or as well as many, many others did a lot of pivoting that was successful and some things they're going to be able to keep which makes the entire state much richer because of it. So the Nebraska Arts Council has a virtual statewide conference coming up this summer. Tell me more about that.

**Suzanne Wise:**

Well, actually this statewide conference is going to be centered around creative districts because there has been so much interest generated about it. And some of the questions you've been asking me are exactly the questions that other people that are interested in actually pursuing a creative district are also asking.

**Suzanne Wise:**

So we thought the best thing to do was to have a conference that's really focused on that. And we'll invite speakers maybe from other states that can talk about how creative districts worked in their state. We'd like to provide them with examples because there's some important things about creative districts that people need to be aware of. And it goes back to Richard Florida, he called it the three T's and that is talent, tolerance and technology. And tolerance is something that has to do with your ethnic diversity, perhaps your sexual diversity, name any kind of diversity. And that's something that has to be recognized as being a critical component of a creative community. Because creatives aren't always cookie cutter in

the way they think obviously, or their appearance, or any other way. So we'll be talking about that. And we'll be talking about how to embrace these various elements in your community.

**Suzanne Wise:**

And I think particularly when Nebraska is one of those states that has just a few big urban areas and then some medium sized communities, and then some small communities, all of which can have creative districts, but their issues are going to be different. So we really need to address that on how to take what you have and turn it into a creative district.

**Kelley Peterson:**

Sounds like a good conference to attend.

**Suzanne Wise:**

We hope so. We hope so. I think the big challenge is we're all Zoomed out. So we've been taking copious notes on what to do and not do when you're trying to do a virtual conference. We all have very distinct opinions on that. So we're going to take the best of the examples and try to put those in play so that people don't get bored or start playing solitaire when they really should be paid attention to some very important pieces of information.

**Suzanne Wise:**

So I say that and just people can play solitaire as much as they'd like, that's fine.

**Kelley Peterson:**

Multi-functioning brains. They're everywhere.

**Suzanne Wise:**

Yeah, exactly.

**Kelley Peterson:**

Especially within creative people.

**Suzanne Wise:**

That is very true. That's very true.

**Kelley Peterson:**

They can do it. So Suzanne let's switch gears and talk about you for a little bit. How did your path lead you to promoting, cultivating and sustaining?

**Suzanne Wise:**

Well, I'm an art historian actually by training. So I came out of the museum world and I'm someone who pretty much a Nebraskan, but then went to Chicago and was the curator of the art gallery that's at Northwestern University and was able to take an advantage back in Lincoln which is my hometown. So at that point, several things happened, including a child which meant not being able to kind of swing in

doing everything at the same time. My husband actually knows, what was a quarter time job at a place called the Nebraska Arts Council to be the public art person.

**Suzanne Wise:**

Because that's another thing we do is manage the state's public art program. So a lot of the art that you see on the university and state college campuses are the results of a 1% for art that's been set aside to put public art in new buildings or renovated buildings. And that was my job for a while. And it kind of went from there. I had no idea I would be a good fit in government. I had no idea I had any capacity to work with the legislature. So it was a learning curve that I actually enjoyed. And one thing led to another. And in 2003, I became the director and the rest is history.

**Kelley Peterson:**

So from a quarter time to full-time.

**Suzanne Wise:**

Yes.

**Kelley Peterson:**

Sounds like it sounds like a big changemaker to me.

**Suzanne Wise:**

It's been a great ride and it's one of those things, and this is such a hackneyed phrase, but it really is true in my case that it's just a great fit for me.

**Suzanne Wise:**

And I'm really, really lucky. I wish that for everyone and I know that's not true for everyone, but for me the skill set just seemed to fit. And I would have never predicted it. I'm not someone who people would invite to a career festival or career day because they want you to tell them to make a plan. And I'd be just the opposite saying, "That doesn't work. You have to kind of look at lots of different things and you just follow the path that makes the most sense to you." That's usually not what guidance counselors want you to say.

**Kelley Peterson:**

I think that, "be ready for opportunity" is the life lesson that you had going on maybe.

**Suzanne Wise:**

Yes and you said it better than me.

**Kelley Peterson:**

What advice do you have for other leaders who want to make a difference in the world?

**Suzanne Wise:**

I think that you have to keep your passion and your honesty intact but you also have to be willing to compromise and be a pragmatist as well. Idealism is wonderful, but it's very rare that things are going to

go the way you would like to see them, especially when you're working with other people. So you have to take a more pragmatic view of what is possible. And I think that's a really critical part of it. But you never want to lose your vision. You never want to lose your commitment to doing the right thing and knowing what that right thing is. And in my case, my gut tells me, if you don't have art, you don't have anything. And that's kind of the north star that keeps me headed in that direction. And I never forget that.

**Kelley Peterson:**

That is so fun that you said that because in my mind, as you were talking, I was thinking that, "That's her north star," and you said it, "It's my north star."

**Kelley Peterson:**

We're very connected.

**Suzanne Wise:**

Yes.

**Kelley Peterson:**

So true that there needs to be art. Yeah. And I'm very thankful for art. Both of my parents, my mother was a fine artist along as being a financial planner and then an architect. So I always feel like I say, "I was born with Crayolas in my cribs."

**Suzanne Wise:**

So is that why your shelves behind you are so well organized?

**Kelley Peterson:**

I do. I have a right and a left brain going on at all times and that helps me along the way that organization piece and then the creativity piece says, "That's a guide and you can always go outside of the guidelines." That's what I love about creativity.

**Suzanne Wise:**

So very well said, and actually to come to work at the Arts Council you have to be right and left brain.

**Suzanne Wise:**

And it really doesn't work unless you have a kind of balance there because often people say, "Oh, it's the Arts Council, I want to work there." And then they find out a lot of what we do has to do with math and developing guidelines and dealing with statistics and a lot of that. But you also have to have a passion for arts. So it's a balance. And not everybody has that, which is just fine. It's just for the work we do. It's a really critical component. And then the way you were articulating it for yourself, that's just the way it is.

**Kelley Peterson:**

Yeah, it is. And I think that all of that hard work that you do every day to build the canvas for the creatives all over the entire state is phenomenal. And you do all of that hard work so people can engage where they can engage and live out their strengths and their culture. And I'm very excited to see what's

to come for all the things that the Nebraska Arts Council does, but especially this new initiative with the creative district.

**Suzanne Wise:**

Well, thank you, Kelley.

**Kelley Peterson:**

You bet. One of the things that I really love and I'm inspired by along with the visual arts is visual words and words that we hear and we call those things motivational quotes sometimes. Could you give us a few of your own words of wisdom for our listeners?

**Suzanne Wise:**

I'm not really good with quotes, but the only one that always sticks in my mind and it's really less about my work and really more about how I live my life in that was the William Morris quote about not having objects that aren't useful and that you love. And that's a misquote, but essentially it really means that you hold dear that that has functioned to you, but also is beautiful. And to me somehow that transcends beyond picking a coffee mug into other areas of my life as well. So it has to do with how you live your life in a way to be, to be thoughtful about it and to hone it in on the things that truly matter and that are important to you. And aesthetics play a big role in that. And it's not necessarily just aesthetics having to do with the beautiful organization of your shelves, but it also has to do with how one pursues their life and their passions.

**Kelley Peterson:**

I completely agree with that. And for someone who isn't into quotes, I think those words of yours rather beautiful.

**Suzanne Wise:**

Yeah. Well, I should have quickly because one thing that's nice about working at home now is that we happened to discover a cache of monitors that are... I bet this monitor has to be 15 years old. It's kind of fixed here. And we were all able to take them home. And for people that are listening to this that don't do the kind of work that both of us do, not having two monitors is really a problem because you're constantly, especially if you write a lot, you constantly are looking things up and where do you look it up? Well, I have something next to you. So if I'd been smart, I would have quickly dialed up useful quotes, and then I could have used one of those and riffed off of the-

**Kelley Peterson:**

I think your words were way better. And that's what we're looking for. So for our listeners who would like to learn more about your work and how to support you, how can they find out more about you and the Nebraska Arts Council?

**Suzanne Wise:**

Well, you can always go to our website, which is [artscouncil.nebraska.gov](http://artscouncil.nebraska.gov), or if you don't remember that just Google, Nebraska Arts Council, it'll send you to the right link. And because we're a state agency, your tax dollars already support us as do your tax dollars that go to the federal government. We get a big grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. But there's another way and that is through the

Nebraska Cultural Endowment, which is a very unique partnership with Humanities Nebraska and Nebraska Cultural Endowment raises money and invests it so that we are a healthy organization and humanities is a healthy organization in perpetuity. So by supporting them, you support us. Also support your local arts organizations and your local artists.

**Suzanne Wise:**

That's really critical.

**Kelley Peterson:**

I'm also a big fan of the Nebraska Cultural Endowment. As we wrap up our time together today, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work you're doing?

**Suzanne Wise:**

I think it's important to remember that we work on your behalf and it's not about us. It's about the organizations and the individual artists, musicians, actors that we support in collaboration with you. Arts people are really the storytellers of our civilization and our society. They're reflective of whatever is happening to us. And I think, in particular, thinking about the last few months of the pandemic, where musicians would come out on their balcony with their cello and play a little impromptu concert for their community to lend a comfort to who was experiencing loss. That is like the most poignant example I can think of that concept, but you have to support them. You support them by purchasing a ticket to go watch them, watch them dance, watch them perform, and you will get so much more in return. And that's a really important part.

**Kelley Peterson:**

It is. Suzanne, I fully believe that the world needs more changemakers like you. Thank you for taking your time to share with us today.

**Suzanne Wise:**

You are welcome Kelley. It's been wonderful having the conversation with you.

**Announcer:**

We hope you enjoyed today's Agency for Change. To hear all our interviews with those who are making a positive change in our communities, or to nominate a changemaker you'd love to hear from, visit [kidglov.com](http://kidglov.com) to get in touch. As always, if you like what you've heard today, be sure to rate, review, subscribe, and share. Thanks for listening. And we'll see you next time.