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My Turn: Thanks, CHAMPs, for promoting the arts

By Benjamin Brown

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If you were downtown at all this past week, you may have come upon Alaskans wearing with little white buttons saying “CHAMP”.

These people were not all claiming to be victors in some unnamed fight, nor was it a case of mass narcissism. The acronym stands for Culture Humanities Arts Museums Partners, an advocacy effort by those who believe Alaskans should have ample access to artistic and cultural resources and activities as an integral part of their lives in the Last Frontier.

The Alaska Arts & Culture Foundation (AACF) partnered this year for the second time with several other cultural entities to make CHAMP happen early in the legislative session. The first of these entities is the Alaska Humanities Forum, a private nonprofit that puts the humanities to use to tell Alaskan stories and impact Alaskans' lives. It has a number of unique programs that bridge the gap between rural and urban Alaska and strengthen the historical and cultural structural supports of Alaskan society. The Forum doesn't receive any regular operating support from the state; it is funded entirely by a federal appropriation from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and is a great CHAMP because of the close relation between its work and its partners in the arts and museum sectors.

Museums Alaska is a consortium of cultural facilities across Alaska, including major museums in the largest communities and smaller places from Anaktuvuk Pass to Delta Junction to Wrangell. By linking like-minded institutions dedicated to the acquisition, conservation, preservation and public enjoyment of artistic, cultural and historic resources, Alaska's museums are more than the sum of their individual parts. Museums Alaska was the major organizer of CHAMP this year, and it brought a nationally recognized expert in effective museum advocacy to train all the partners. Learning the differences between lobbying and advocacy makes for more effective communication in the halls of the Capitol.

The most important part of CHAMP is direct legislative outreach, allowing participants one-on-one time directly with their representatives and senators to explain the importance of support for the arts and humanities and the economic returns they make to Alaska. Complementing the schedule was a lunchtime forum attended by legislators and staff in the Capitol, organized by Juneau Representative Cathy Muñoz. The Butrovich-Fahrenkamp room on the Capitol's second floor was close to standing-room-only as short presentations about each component of CHAMP were made. The first presentation was about the Yupiit Piciryarait Museum

in Bethel, followed by the Alaska State Council on the Arts (on which I serve as chair), the Humanities Forum, and the Alaska Historical Society. There was even a little surprise music by some visiting Anchorage musicians.

The only piece of legislation specifically addressed by this year's CHAMP is House Bill 52, which has been formally endorsed by Museums Alaska. Sponsored by Bethel Representative Bob Herron, HB 52 would establish a museum construction grant program in the Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development to help meet the costs of major renovations by eligible Alaskan museums, institutions able to match state grant dollar-for-dollar. This program is similar to one that currently exists for Alaska libraries. The bill doesn't actually appropriate any funds at this time (a realistic strategy given the current fiscal climate) but it creates a ready-made mechanism for the time when more money will be available for museum projects.

We know here in Juneau from our long wait to replace the aging Alaska State Museum how helpful it will be to have a predictable and reliable source for this specific category of cultural capital projects. We are extremely fortunate that the new State Museum was funded in its entirety last year and won't have to compete for any scarce dollars in what promises to be a very lean capital budget.

CHAMP culminated Thursday evening at the Governor's Awards for the Arts & Humanities in the Juneau Arts & Culture Center. All in attendance were grateful for the presence of Gov. Bill Walker and first lady Donna Walker, and each and every awardee charmingly shared a personal story upon being given the award by the governor. Live musical and dance performances accentuated the evening beautifully, and best of all it was broadcast live on public television and on the Internet, and captured to allow those who missed it to see it still.

For the second year in a row, Juneau has successfully hosted both CHAMP and the Governor's Awards for the Arts & Humanities, and we can look forward to continuing this new tradition in 2016.

- Benjamin Brown is a lifelong Alaskan and an attorney who lives in Juneau. He is chairman of the Alaska State Council on the Arts.