Newark Arts’ new director talks plan to support city’s cultural future

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Felicia A. Swoope is making her rounds to learn more about the many arts in Newark as she assumes her new role.
By Jacqueline Cutler | For NJ Advance Media

It’s Felicia A. Swoope's second day on the job. While she may not know where everything is – yet – she has the essential part of the position down.

The newly minted executive director of Newark Arts already has a deep appreciation for the wide range of arts offered in and supported by the city. For over 40 years, Newark Arts has worked with artists in the city and neighboring towns across all media.

The nonprofit awards grants aimed at fostering performing and visual arts. One of Newark Arts’ major undertakings, the Harriet Tubman statue, will be erected in Washington Park. (A date has not yet been announced.)

The opportunity for Swoope to work with all types of artists in her new role fuels an almost tangible enthusiasm.

“I could not be more excited,” she says.

Swoope, 52, explains how her lifelong love of dance and working in many aspects of theater, from ushering to fundraising, led to this moment. Growing up in Cleveland, Swoope studied ballet, tap, and jazz dance.

At Dartmouth University, she was an English major but laughs, explaining that was a cover for spending so much time in dance studios. She then earned an MFA in dance from NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts.
Dance is what brought her to Newark the first time. In 2010, Swoope was the first director of Ailey Camp, where she worked with 100 middle schoolers.

“And I learned about Newark through its children,” Swoope says.

Settling into her office on Academy Street, where she succeeds Jeremy V. Johnson and an interim director in the post, Swoope spoke recently with NJ Advance Media to talk about all that’s to come. What follows is edited for clarity.

**What are you doing first?**

“The most important thing, as I drew closer to my start date, I realized is for me to learn about the city and to create new relationships and forge new relationships with the stakeholders and indoctrinate myself and to listen and find out how can we serve. How can Newark Arts serve this great city? I am currently on my listening and learning tour of Newark, all things Newark, so I am not coming into the city with my own goals and aspirations.”

**Why does Newark need an organization like Newark Arts?**

“Newark Arts is such an incredible place that puts artists and the community of artists first. This is an organization that raises funds and helps drive the economy through the arts. (She cites that the organization distributed $800,000 to 132 grantees last year.) The arts are already, in my opinion, powerful because of what they represent, but the arts cannot survive if they don’t have support. That is what I struggled with for many, many years in New York City.

If we had had a mayor like Mayor (Ras J.) Baraka, a poet in his right, and raising money and creating opportunities for us, my whole career would have been different. When I first got to New York City, it was Mayor Dinkins and then Giuliani and then Bloomberg. And thank God for Bloomberg – he was the reason I had the dance showcase at Aaron Davis Hall. (Bloomberg Philanthropies supported E-moves, a dance showcase for choreographers of color from 1999-2004.)”

**So the initial goal was to dance?**

“After leaving Tisch, I really had no idea exactly how to break into the dance world, and I was really just trying to figure out which route do I take. I was always interested in teaching and arts administration. I knew if I took a job, it would have to be in the arts, and that led me to Aaron Davis Hall (now Harlem Stage) at City College. That was a way to support my interest in becoming a dancer without having to work odd jobs in the evening — if you are a dancer, you need to stay awake.
Fortunately, when I came to New York, it was more affordable. There were different places in the city open to artists. If you had several part-time jobs and a dance job, you could survive. That’s where I consider I got my second master’s degree, unofficially, from the amazing arts administrators who took an interest in the younger assistants and wanted to teach us about arts administration.”

**The vital lesson is that as an artist, a dancer, you understand there has to be business to sustain that art. How did you learn the business of arts?**

“Over a period of many years — really by mistake. Definitely beginning at the Public Theater on a very junior level, first as a telemarketer and as an usher. At Aaron Davis Hall, I worked for the general manager and eventually became a curator and presented a dance showcase presenting emerging and established artists. At Dartmouth fundraising, I was not making the actual asks.”

What is your wish list for Newark Arts, and arts in general?

“I would love for the rest of our nation and the rest of the world to understand this is truly a city of the arts where they are produced and supported and thrive and where we help artists from a very young age into retirement, where we help them and support them. This is a beacon of hope for all artists and a beacon of hope for the city and for all artists, of all disciplines and all races, it is just a wonderful presentation of what is possible in this country.”

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