

# Culture in common

How access to our Commonwealth's culture is essential for everyone

By Bethany Sales



**B**urton Chandler always enjoyed visiting the Worcester Art Museum (WAM), but he stopped going as he got older because he struggled climbing the museum's stairs. Like millions of people, Burton doesn't consider himself disabled, though he uses a cane to help him along.

WAM recently built a striking new access bridge to its main building that serves as an entryway for all visitors. Burton's wife, Massachusetts State Senator Harriette Chandler, praises WAM for "letting the world in" through its front doors, eliminating the need for people like her husband to take the stairs or a ramp at the back of the museum. Along with all other visitors, he can now enter WAM on a bridge as beautiful and immersive as the art inside.

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Brian Charlson visits one of Mass Audubon's "all-person" trails.

WAM, along with over two dozen organizations statewide, has joined the Massachusetts Cultural Council's UP Inclusive Design Initiative. The MCC, a state agency committed to connecting the arts, sciences, and humanities to everyone in the Commonwealth, introduced UP to support institutions that are breaking down barriers to inclusion.

The MCC is urging the state's cultural leaders to embrace the vision of Universal Participation. UP recognizes that to grow audiences, institutions should improve experiences for everyone. Greater access doesn't just benefit people with disabilities, greater access benefits all people — your friend with dyslexia, your cousin with the broken ankle, a child with behavioral issues, or you, tired from an afternoon well spent at the museum, in search of a seat.

**Creating trails so that no one is left behind**

**Mass Audubon Society**

Little else compares to exploring the woods by yourself. The first time Brian Charlson found himself alone on a trail at Stony Brook without his cane or a hand to hold was "such a rush." Brian lost his sight in an accident when he was 11 years old. His wife, Kim Charlson, who is also blind, says that before

they discovered Mass Audubon Society's "all-person trails", she and Brian had never been able to enjoy the outdoors independently.

Since 2008, Mass Audubon has developed 11 accessible nature trails with multisensory, interpretive content from the Cape to the Berkshires. In the years since, they've set a national standard for developing "all-person" trail experiences. Mass Audubon's trail content includes audio tours, tactile maps, as well as large print tour scripts and guidebooks. Wider boardwalks with impacted gravel have also been constructed, allowing all people — including parents with strollers, young children, and the elderly — to fully access these trails.

Lucy Gertz, education projects manager for Mass Audubon, says constructing accessible trails is "costly, but not complicated." It's an investment that, as the Charlsons say with appreciation, is "the right thing to do, rather than the required thing to do."

Lucy recalls one family who enjoyed bird-watching so much that they made a summer road trip out of visiting other "all-person" trails across the state. These innovative trails allowed the family, who has a son with cerebral palsy, to experience nature together. Stories like this prove that greater access always benefits more than just those with physical impediments.



Children from the Theatre's education program.

For the Charlsons, this kind of accessibility wasn't a given growing up, but that doesn't have to be the case for children today. As someone who truly believes in the progressive power of the MCC UP Initiative, Brian looks forward to the day when every child can "go to a public place and expect it to be accessible rather than not."

**Staging education programs for every child**

**Wheelock Family Theatre**

When you're a child, sometimes all it takes is a little fun and creativity to make your differences disappear. George Hasan is a 10-year-old with Autism, and though he struggles with language, he is an extremely bright, friendly boy who loves to draw and play the cello.

In 2014, George was spending his school days with children who struggled with learning disabilities and behavioral disorders. In 2015, he was given the opportunity to start at a new school, learning and playing alongside children his own age, as well as his two sisters. In just one year at the Theatre, George built up the communication and behavioral skills to join a regular classroom.

Through creative play and dramatic classes at the Theatre, children learn how to interact with each other and develop

communication skills. The Theatre's education programs accept all children, including those with physical, learning, or behavioral disabilities. Tee Hasan, George's mother, says that she wants to tell "everyone and anyone" that she's finally found an organization with a passion for inclusion.

Recently, George returned home from school and told his parents he wanted to take chess lessons. They weren't sure how he learned about the game — probably from one of his new friends.

**Making art of both form and function**

**Worcester Art Museum**

There are few times a 16-year-old girl wants to feel singled out, if any. Samantha Estes is too aware of how difficult it can be for her to access many places in her power wheelchair, often having no choice but to enter a building through the back door. Samantha was the first to cross the new Salisbury Access Bridge on the day of its unveiling at WAM. That day, she toured the historic Renaissance Court along with other visitors and visited several exhibits without being singled out for accessibility limitations.

As Burton Chandler will tell you, WAM is one institution that makes welcoming all visitors a priority.



George Hasan (left) role-plays with another student from the Theatre.



**Adam Rozan (left) with Matthias Waschek (right), director of Worcester Art Museum, in an international exhibition that's bringing more diversity to the museum.**

When thinking about accessibility, the museum goes beyond ramps and elevators to consider staff training, digital platforms, languages, and galleries, proving that how we access art should be as thoughtful and involved as the art itself.

Adam Rozan, director of audience engagement at WAM, says accessibility is “not for a few people, but for all people.” This sentiment inspired the design of the museum’s new ramp, often referred to as the “welcome bridge.” Looking at the bridge, says Adam, you can’t help but feel like “this is how you *should* enter the museum.” It’s a work of art.

Adam says that improved accessibility has made the museum more diverse. Many members of the community now visit the museum simply because they can. By anticipating a variety of common needs, like providing exhibition materials in different languages and enlarging the informational print beneath a work of art, the museum is

removing barriers to offer equitable opportunities.

For Adam and his team, accessibility “becomes easier” to implement when they think about it as something that should be available to everyone, no matter their physical capabilities. As the country’s demographics change, accounting for non-native English speakers and aging baby-boomers, for example, it’s imperative that the museum — and all cultural institutions — change with them. Adam says, “This is the new normal.”

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**“Accessibility isn’t just about accommodating, it’s about celebrating. It’s about creating diversity. When something is made accessible to everyone, it’s better for all of us.”**

Linda Chin,  
executive director of  
Wheelock Family Theatre

**The Theatre welcomes students of all backgrounds and abilities to experience the arts through its education programs.**

**Stand up with the  
Massachusetts Cultural Council  
and its UP Organizations:**

- Barrington Stage Company, Pittsfield
- Boston Landmarks Orchestra, Boston
- Community Access to the Arts, Great Barrington
- Danforth Art, Framingham
- deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln
- Historic Deerfield, Deerfield
- Liars & Believers, Cambridge
- Mass Audubon, Lincoln
- Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
- Museum of Science, Boston
- New Art Center, Newton
- Old South Meeting House, Boston
- Old Sturbridge Village, Sturbridge
- Open Door Theater, Acton
- Outside the Box, Boston
- Partners for Youth with Disabilities, Boston
- Paul Revere House, Boston
- South Shore Conservatory, Hingham
- The Berkshire Museum, Pittsfield
- The Boston Conservatory, Boston
- The Cape Cod Theatre Project, Falmouth
- The Discovery Museums, Acton
- Tower Hill Botanic Garden, Boylston
- VSA Massachusetts, Boston
- Wheelock Family Theatre, Boston
- Williamstown Theatre Festival, Williamstown
- Worcester Art Museum, Worcester

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