



Museum Director Nick Capasso is pictured in the gallery dedicated to founder Eleanor Norcross.

# Treasuring COMMUNITY

**Fitchburg  
Art Museum  
strengthens  
outreach  
programs  
in city**

**BY NANCY SHEEHAN  
PHOTOS BY CHRISTINE PETERSON**

**F**itchburg Art Museum is the foremost cultural institution in an aging industrial city whose struggles have only been exacerbated by the pandemic.

When one of the museum's major funders asked FAM Director Nick Capasso what he was doing to help the situation, he said the museum's efforts included a program to distribute free art supplies to kids and families sheltering at home. The funder, Bobbi Hamill, director of the Boston-based Cathedral Fund, pressed for more. "What are you really doing about it," she asked. "Kids can't eat crayons."



Out of that discussion came Fitchburg Families First, a pandemic-relief program that provides food and supplies to students in the Fitchburg Public Schools and their families. The effort was launched over the winter with a grant from the Cathedral Fund, a private arts engagement foundation.

"We've been able to find all kinds of things to put in these packages, primarily food but also grocery store gift cards, restaurant gift cards, winter clothing, school supplies, art activities, and hygiene products," Capasso said. "For each Saturday distribution we prepare 250 of these packages. We start distributing them at nine, the cars are lined up at eight o'clock, and we run out of everything by 11."

FAM is among a growing number of museums striving to be of greater service to their communities. It's a move the American Alliance of Museums has encouraged partly from a sense of social responsibility, but also because it's a sustainability issue. "We're simply going to become irrelevant if we don't realize that we exist to serve people and not just art," Capasso said.

Programs like Fitchburg Families First mark a striking change from the days when art museums viewed the art in their collections as their only client. "They felt their only mission was to show art, to protect art, and celebrate art," Capasso said. "But in Fitchburg we've decided that art is great, but we're using our institution in

any way that's going to serve people without devaluing the art, and when you think that way, when you start looking at your work and your community through that lens, everything changes."

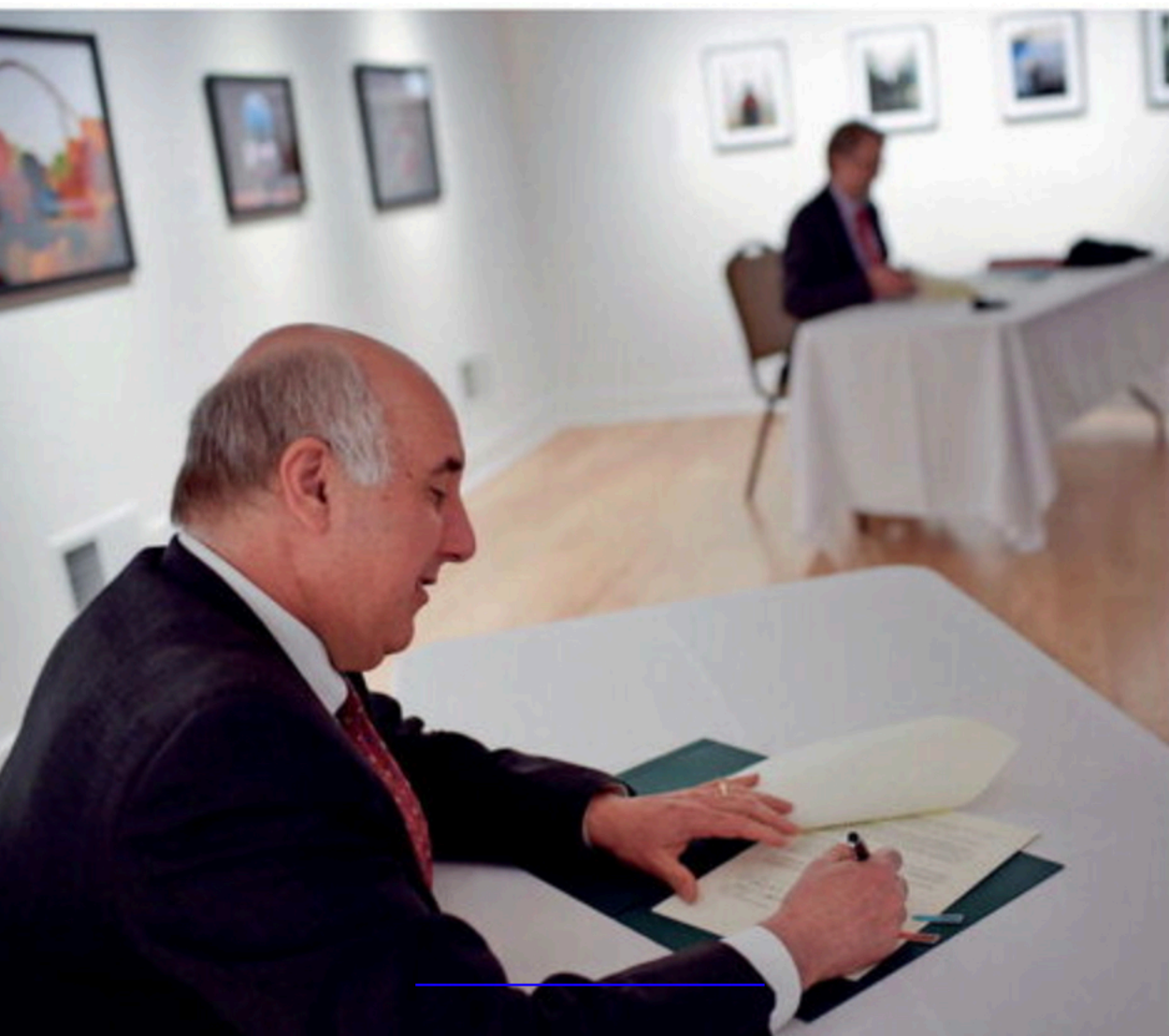
"Fitchburg Families First is an outstanding example of what our community can accomplish when we all work together," Fitchburg Mayor Stephen DiNatale said. "We're lucky to have great institutions like Fitchburg Art Museum that are ready to reach out and do their part to help take care of our residents."

An opportunity to begin refocusing FAM's mission away from the traditional art-museum stance came when the director's job opened up in 2012. The museum's board of trustees, in recognition of Fitchburg's status as a gateway city where many citizens lived in poverty, wanted FAM to pitch in more extensively with the community's ongoing revitalization efforts.

What Fitchburg has going for it that most other aging small gateway cities don't is an accredited art museum and a state university. The trustees wanted to change the mission of the museum to reflect community service and to work in partnership with the university and other entities for the overall good of the city. "This was the vision of the trustees, and this was the reason I took the job, because it was a real challenge and it would be really interesting — a job where I could learn



**Right:** Volunteers at the Fitchburg Art Museum in April prepare packages as part of Fitchburg Families First, a pandemic-relief program that provides food and supplies to Fitchburg students and their families.



**Left:** Fitchburg State University President Richard Lupidus, in foreground, and Director of Fitchburg Art Museum Nick Capasso sign an agreement extending their partnership on April 29.







Local business owners, politicians and residents celebrated the topping-off at the former BF Brown middle school November 2018. It's slated to become affordable housing and studio space for artists.

ASHLEY GREEN/T&G




something new every day," Capasso said. Considering that revisioning, FAM and Fitchburg State University began collaborating six years ago. Recently, Capasso and FSU President Richard S. Lapidus signed a memorandum of agreement which further strengthened the partnership between them.

The agreement gives free admission for all university students, faculty and staff and means FAM will participate in class and curriculum planning for a variety of university disciplines and offer high-quality internship opportunities.

"We have a great relationship with the museum. It's really a win-win opportunity for our students," Lapidus said at the signing ceremony in April. "We share resources. We share learning opportunities. I think, collectively, we are better than we were operating on our own."

Among FAM's other successful com-






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munity-oriented undertakings have been several bilingual initiatives, an important step in a city where about 30% of the general population and 70% of public-school students are of Latino heritage. "We figured if we're going to serve people in the community, we're going to serve all the people in the community," Capasso said.

Arriving at a concrete plan after the 2012 refocusing decision involved a thorough strategic planning process. "It wasn't just me and the trustees sitting down in my office with a lot of coffee and writing the plan," Capasso said. "It was about talking to everybody — the staff, the volunteers, our visitors, our community partners — about what they wanted in their art museum. Beyond setting goals, strategic planning is about alignment, and we wanted to make sure everybody was committed to these goals and to doing it together."

Like most museums, FAM offers art making classes and workshops. Many years ago, the museum even had a thriving liberal arts school, but it became hard to support as factories continued to shut down, shrinking the city's economic base. To accommodate the new realities, the museum decided to shift the education department away from teaching enrichment courses to instead developing programs geared to people and groups who really needed help.

"We did this by having conversations with people in the community," Capasso

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Volunteers putting together packages in April included, from left, Caroline Collins, co-president of Inform Fitchburg; Laura Howick, director of education at FAM; Luisa Fernandez, co-president of Inform Fitchburg and parent engagement liaison for Fitchburg Public Schools; and Jennifer Sheppard, Clementi Family Manager of School Programs at FAM.

said. "So now we have programs for senior citizens and their caregivers, for people in recovery from opioid addiction, and children in Head Start." The museum also plans to soon restart work on programs for people with autism and for foster children, which had been placed on hold when the pandemic hit.

Beyond the fun element, those programs use art in a therapeutic way and have been so successful that the museum is working to establish more formal relationships with art therapists. "We want to

embed art therapy in our programs, because that's how art can really help people," he said.

The museum also has built a strong relationship with the Fitchburg Public Schools. "When I got to Fitchburg, one of the first conversations I had was with our superintendent of schools," Capasso said. "I asked him, 'How many of your kids are coming to the museum?' And he said, 'Zero.' I said, 'Okay, so how are we going to fix that?' He said, 'Well, the problem is money. We don't have the money for the buses to

send the kids to the museum. In fact, we don't have the money ... Our kids don't go on field trips because there's just no money.'"

Soon after that conversation, FAM made a commitment to the Fitchburg Public Schools to supply bus transportation for the field trips. When pandemic safety rules again allow it, every 4th- and 7th-grade class will come to the art museum for a curriculum-appropriate field trip every year at no cost to the students, the parents or the schools. "We subsidize it because if we're not serving the kids in Fitchburg, what the heck are we doing?" Capasso said.

Future initiatives include rehabbing three boarded-up former municipal buildings across the street from the museum, including one that was gutted by fire in 2016. FAM is working with NewVue Communities, a local community development corporation, to transform the historic buildings from an eyesore into a 68-unit campus of affordable housing and studio space for artists.

"We've done all the local zoning and permitting and behind-the-scenes political work, and we fixed the fire damage," Capasso said. "Architects have designed the spaces and we just made our first application to the state Department of Housing and Community Development for more than \$20 million to do the project and the minute we get the check, we get started."

It takes a village to build an expansive new arts complex. "The great thing about Fitchburg is that while there's not a lot of money, what we do have is a very thriving culture of collaboration amongst institutions," Capasso said. "All of the community and economic development work that's being done here is completely coordinated by the city, the university, the art museum, NewVue Communities, the social services agencies, we're all working on this stuff in tandem."

Mayor DiNatale sees that collaboration as a source of civic pride. "I often say the City of Fitchburg does collaboration better than any other city in the Commonwealth," he said. "There are so many examples of effective collaboration among our agencies and institutions, and that's something all our residents can be proud of."

The Fitchburg Families First pandemic food distribution ended in early June, but going forward, FAM will continue to use the Fitchburg Families First brand for various events and programs for families. The first FFF Family Day will take place on Friday, July 9, and include an outdoor concert with Puerto Rican singer Andrea Cruz. ■



Left: "Fitchburg Families First is an outstanding example of what our community can accomplish when we all work together," says Fitchburg Mayor Stephen DiNatale.

Below: The packages include gift cards of all types as well as food, clothing and school supplies.

