

state - 'A slap in the face': Morehead laments plan to cut funds - for Kentucky Folk Art Center



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Morehead

Standing on the second floor of the Kentucky Folk Art Center, Matt Collinsworth admired the center's most recent rotating exhibit, a selection of art pieces created by a couple dozen Kentucky public school teachers.

The exhibit, which opens this week, represents a variety of styles, moods and colors, some more traditional, others edgy.

"I think it'd be a great tragedy if this place closed," said Collinsworth, the center's director. "(For now) we're going to continue to do our work."

The center, housed in a two-story brick building at Morehead State University, is number 18 on the list of 70 programs that would lose state funding under Gov. Matt Bevin's proposed budget.

To people who know the center well, the news came as a blow to the cultural history of art in Eastern Kentucky and the state at large.

"A slap in the face," said Grant Alden, co-owner of CoffeeTree Books in Morehead.

The center, opened in 1985, relies on \$200,000 from the state each year to operate its museum, art collection and educational outreach programs.

With that allotment and additional money from donors, it maintains a museum that displays and records the history of folk art from a region with no other comparable museum or resource.

Its walls hold about 1,500 pieces of art, ranging in medium from paintings to plaster and wooden walking sticks, many of which were created by Kentucky artists with little or no formal training.

Its educational outreach programs serve about 10,000 K-12 public school students a year and have provided thousands of dollars in art supplies to teachers who could otherwise not afford them.

"I don't understand how they would turn their back on something like that," said Mark Francis, an artist who

launched his career from prison, with the help of the Kentucky Folk Art Center. "The state of Kentucky really deserves that place."

Francis credits the center and its director, Collinsworth, for helping him launch a career that has taken him to exhibits around the world.

In the center's small and crowded collection room Thursday, Collinsworth stood surrounded by brightly colored paintings and wood carvings that he has come to love during his 15 years as director.

He said he knows the story of pretty much every piece and every artist.

"It's a treasure," he said.

He wasn't surprised by the news that the center might lose state funding. State-level cuts to higher education, along with a push toward science and technology courses and away from the arts, didn't bode well for the center's future.

Funding cuts led to a major staff reduction at the center in 2016, and now, with only two permanent employees, grants for outside revenue have been harder to obtain.

Bevin's budget proposal is a guide for the state House and Senate, which will craft a final budget proposal to be passed by the legislature. Some of the 70 programs cut in Bevin's budget could receive funding if the legislature decides to allocate it.

Collinsworth said he wouldn't be able to replace the loss of state funding over the long term.

"That amount of money has a real impact," said Jennifer Reis, gallery director at Morehead State University and coordinator of the MSU Arts Entrepreneurship minor program. "The Kentucky Folk Art Center has had a huge impact on our cultural economy."

By organizing art fairs like "A Day in the Country" and "Appalachian Holiday Arts and Crafts Fair," the center gives Reis and other working artists venues to sell their art, and brings tourism to local restaurants and other businesses.

Reis said many of her students have received training from or have worked for the center. That, she said, helped those students land jobs and get into graduate programs.

Closing the center would be "basically taking away a career path for somebody," she said. "I hope it doesn't come to that, because that's going to be a real shame for our community and for the region of Eastern Kentucky."

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Caption:

John Flavell

Matt Collinsworth, the director of **Morehead State University's** Kentucky Folk Art Center, stood with the center's permanent collection. Faced with a proposal by Gov. Matt Bevin to eliminate funding for the center, Collinsworth said the center couldn't survive long term.

The Kentucky Folk Art Center is housed in a brick building at **Morehead State University**.

A piece by former inmate Mark Francis at the center. Francis credits the center and Collinsworth with helping him launch a career that has taken him to exhibits around the world. "I don't understand how they would turn their back on something like that," Francis said.

A detail of a piece created by a Kentucky high school teacher at the center. Gov. Matt Bevin included the center among 70 state programs he wants cut.

A folk art piece at **Morehead State University's** Kentucky Folk Art Center.

John Flavell

A piece by former inmate Mark Francis, who said: "The state of Kentucky really deserves that place."

Director Matt Collinsworth said he knows the story of pretty much every piece and every artist.

Folk art from Elliott County native Minnie Adkins is on display at the center.