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Across the U.S., Artists Go to Work to Build Connections between Rural and Urban Communities

To Counter Politics, New Initiative Taps Artists in Colorado, Kentucky, Michigan, and Minnesota to Develop Stronger Rural-Urban Bonds

November 1, 2024, St. Paul, MN — As many politicians exploit rural-urban tensions this election season to sow discord, some artists are taking a different approach. A four-state partnership, led by Minnesota-based Springboard for the Arts, launched a [Rural-Urban Solidarity](#) initiative today, supporting artist projects in Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, and Colorado, using the arts to push back against polarization and develop shared solutions.

The pilot initiative launches with four partners: Minnesota-based Springboard for the Arts, Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange (RUX), CultureSource in Michigan, and RedLine Contemporary Art Center in Colorado. Each brings a wealth of experience and innovative approaches to bridging community divides through the arts. These organizations will distribute small grants to support artist-led projects fostering understanding, interaction, and compassion across geographical boundaries. Over the next three months, more than 35 artists will debut projects across the four states. Drawing insights from this initial cohort, Springboard for the Arts aims to expand the initiative in 2025, reaching more states and artists to further the mission of rural-urban solidarity.

"Rural and urban communities need each other," says Michele Anderson, Springboard for the Arts Rural Director. "Artists are natural connectors and storytellers who can hold space for complex conversations. They offer depth and nuance where media and political narratives often present oversimplified views of urban and rural life."

Laura Zabel, Executive Director of Springboard for the Arts noted that the Rural-Urban Solidarity Initiative launches at a time when there is a growing need for stronger connections between rural and urban communities. Beyond enhancing civic discourse and human connections, this interdependence is evident in pressing national issues. Extractive businesses like payday

lending and dollar stores prey on both urban neighborhoods and rural places, food systems link rural farms to urban consumers, water security relies on rural watersheds and urban conservation efforts, and the energy transition requires both rural land and urban innovation.

"By witnessing each other's daily lives, stories, and concerns, we can counter the misinformation that seeks only to divide us and strip us of our power and agency," Zabel emphasized. "These artist-designed projects are both a signal that things can be different and an invitation to question simplistic narratives and truly learn about one another."

Highlights of the projects receiving the Rural-Urban Solidarity grants include:

- Denver-based artist Libby Barbee's "My Sky is Your Sky/Your Sky" is a mobile installation that will tour communities where she grew up in rural La Junta, Colorado. The artwork uses political propaganda aesthetics to prompt viewers to consider shared realities across geographical divides.
- In "Crossing Lines: Connecting Rural and Urban Voices," artists Maddy Bartsch and Drew Arettia will set up two interconnected phone booths: one near rural Northfield and another in urban Minneapolis. Designed to evoke the comfort of home, these private booths will allow participants to engage in honest, anonymous dialogues across geographical divides.
- Malcolm Davis's "A Living History" is a showcase and discussion for young adults in Louisville focusing on Affrilachian historical figures. The project challenges typical regional understandings and connects Black Kentuckians across urban and rural divides through shared history.
- Rosa Zamarron's "Day in the Life" zine is a photographic exploration of the daily lives of two individuals—one from Detroit, and one from rural Marcellus, Michigan. The zine will highlight the contrasts and shared experiences between urban and rural life.

"We are excited to be able to support artists working across rural and urban communities in Michigan," says Omari Rush, Executive Director of CultureSource, "we know that supporting creativity and culture is essential to building understanding, interaction, compassion, joy, and solidarity between rural and urban communities."

"For a decade, RUX has brought Kentuckians together from 65 counties, proving that meaningful experiences can overcome bias and build durable relationships across geographic, racial, and economic differences," says Savannah Barrett, Co-Founder of Kentucky's Rural-Urban Exchange (RUX). "Being part of this national network and pilot allows us to demonstrate the critical role artists can play in this effort, and scale up a model of rural-urban connection that has transformative potential for communities across the nation."

Springboard for the Arts, with dual headquarters in Saint Paul and rural Fergus Falls, has spent over a decade advancing rural-urban solidarity in Minnesota. Its innovative approach includes the [nation's only and longest running guaranteed income pilot for both rural and urban artists](#), its

annual [Rural Futures Summit](#), and a [fellowship program](#) for Rural Creative Leaders across the Midwest.

About Springboard for the Arts

Founded in 1991, Springboard for the Arts is an economic and community development organization for artists and by artists. Based in St. Paul and Fergus Falls, MN, Springboard's mission is to support artists with the tools to make a living and a life, and to build just and equitable communities full of meaning, joy, and connection. Our vision is of a world where artists are essential; local economies are vibrant and just; and the systems that surround us are human-centered. Springboard's work has been featured in the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Stanford Social Innovation Review and The Guardian and directly impacts over 22,000 artists each year in our home state of Minnesota. Through national tools and training Springboard's programs have been replicated in over 100 communities across the U.S. and internationally. Learn more about our work at: www.springboardforthearts.org.

About the Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange

A program of Art of the Rural, the Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange (RUX) is a nationally celebrated creative leadership program using place-based cultural exchange to develop the skills, networks, and capacity of rural and urban leaders to bridge divides and make change. The RUX network now includes 300 Kentuckians from 65 counties and 32 Minnesotans from 16 counties and Native Nations. <https://www.kyrux.org/>

About CultureSource

CultureSource is a member association for non-profit arts and cultural organizations in Southeast Michigan serving Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, Washtenaw, Livingston, Monroe and St. Clair counties. As a regional service organization, they work through hosting professional development workshops, presenting programs that provide space for exchanging ideas about arts and culture, and leading initiatives that bring together stakeholders interested in the public accessing creative expression. <https://culturesource.org/>

About RedLine Contemporary Art Center

RedLine Contemporary Art Center fosters education and engagement between artists and communities to create positive social change. Founded in 2008 in Denver, CO, RedLine provides a two-year residency with studio space, a supportive network, and career advancement for socially-engaged and community-responsive artists. RedLine has helped to launch the careers of over 130 artists, supported artists experiencing homelessness or financial hardship, and helped to distribute funding to artists through many cross-sector and creative grant programs. <https://www.redlineart.org/>

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