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Jon Bernstein:

Welcome to PNC C-Speak: The Language of Executives. I'm Jon Bernstein, regional president of PNC Bank in New England, alongside my co-host Carolyn Jones, publisher of the Boston Business Journal.

Carolyn Jones:

Thanks, Jon. It's great to be with you on PNC C-Speak. Each podcast features local executives talking about relevant and timely business topics. This knowledge sharing platform showcases leaders with forward-thinking approaches that disrupt the status quo and cause us to think differently.

Jon Bernstein:

Our guest today is Michael Bobbitt, executive director of the Massachusetts Cultural Council and one of the Boston Business Journal's 2023 Power 50 Movement Makers. Michael, congratulations and welcome to PNC C-Speak. Thrilled to have you with us today.

Michael Bobbitt:

I'm thrilled to be here, and thank you so much for that honor. My mom was very, very proud.

Carolyn Jones:

Oh, that's good to hear. That's the most important person

Michael Bobbitt:

She posted on social media, so now everyone knows. It's great.

Jon Bernstein:

That's awesome. Michael, could you tell us about the Mass Cultural Council and your work there today?

Michael Bobbitt:

Yeah, the Mass Cultural Council was enacted by legislation some five decades ago to really support the creative and cultural sector of Massachusetts. We do so through a number of initiatives. One is that we provide grants to individuals, organizations, and groups all over the whole state and municipalities as well over the whole state to do arts and cultural activities across the whole state. But we also try to advance cultural policy. We try to build relationships with other state agencies that may have services and programs that support the creative and cultural sector. And now one of our big strategic initiatives is to build relationships with other industry and other sectors in Massachusetts. We know that arts are great for supporting people's health needs and their education needs, but also great for business. So the more we can build those relationships with our sector and those sectors, the more everyone will benefit from having this deep infusion of arts and culture.

Carolyn Jones:

100%. The creative economy, and there's been a lot of books written on this, is a critical piece of a thriving community and really important to the business community as well. So I wonder, you have really a fascinating career path and you do, even now, a lot of really cool things outside of work. So what was the career path that led you to what you're doing today?

Michael Bobbitt:

Good, I will talk about that, but since you mentioned creative economy, I'll give you some impressive numbers since [inaudible 00:02:31].

Carolyn Jones:

Oh, good.

Michael Bobbitt:

The viewing audiences are businesses. The sector in Massachusetts is a \$27.2 billion industry. Many people don't know that, but we are three times that of transportation and about 4 billion more than construction and actually tied with retail. So it's a huge, huge, huge industry. One of the other statistics I like to point out is that for every one ticket sold to a sporting event, five tickets are sold to arts events around the state. So we're big, big industry and it's the reason why the agency is put in place to support it.

My own personal pathway into the arts goes back to the late 1900s when I start in the third act of Hansel and Gretel and my school play. There were three Hansels. My mom said I was the best Hansel and she has absolutely no biases. But from there, I continued to sing and dance and do theater, and did that all the way through high school and went to college on a trumpet and singing scholarship and realized that wasn't my path as a performer and moved over to the dance world where I trained at the Washington Ballet and the Dance Theater of Harlem. That also became not my path, and eventually moved over to musical theater where I trained as a musical theater performer and performed in national tours and regional theater all over the country, settled in DC, which is where I was born and raised, and decided to just focus on theater as my main business.

I did that for a few years until I adopted this beautiful baby boy from Vietnam when he was eight months old and decided to retire from performing because I missed tucking him in at night and focused on teaching and directing and choreographing. Eventually, that led to running a couple of theaters and I moved to Massachusetts to run a theater and then was called by the search firm looking for the mass cultural council's newest executive director.

Carolyn Jones:

That's quite a journey. Do you have a favorite musical, ballet? What's one of your faves maybe that you were in or just that you enjoy watching?

Michael Bobbitt:

That's like splitting my babies in half.

Carolyn Jones:

I figured that.

Michael Bobbitt:

I got this chance to adapt to Bob Marley's music into a new children's play. So I worked directly with the family to use all of his songs. And the play I wrote is called Bob Marley's Three Little Birds, and it performed at my theater in DC that I ran, and then it transferred off Broadway and sold out at the new Victory Theater on 42nd Street, and then it went on a national tour and now it's licensed by a script licensing house and people produce it all over the country. And so I hear about five or six productions every year all over the country about this play that I wrote. So that's one of my favorite pieces that I think I've worked on before.

Jon Bernstein:

That's an incredible combination of both your artistic skill as well as your investment and growth that you're performing in building in the communities and where you're serving. And the data you just shared with us about the impact of the arts on the economy and the community was amazing. And at PNC, we believe that arts are an engine for economic development. Could you share a little bit about that economic development focus at your current work working for the governor?

Michael Bobbitt:

Yeah. I mean, beyond the fact that we bring in lots of money and contribute to the state's GDP, if you think about... And I love the fact that you say it's an driver because if you think about when people consume arts, sometimes they will get their hair done or get their nails done or buy a new outfit. They're often commuting to the arts venue, so they're driving, they're parking, they're putting gas in the car, or they're using public transportation or ride-share. They're often not going by themselves, so they're going with a few other people, and so they have dinner beforehand and drinks after. Some of them hire babysitters. So all of that secondary spending that goes around the consumption of art is contributing to all these other businesses out there. Not to mention that arts organizations use banks and they use printers and they use IT services and web hosting services. So the amount of money that we're generating as an industry is pretty massive.

So the economic is big and I like to talk about that, but I also like to talk about the health benefits and how we can contribute to people feeling like a sense of belonging to a community. If you think about the quintessential things that make Boston Boston, arts are probably in that picture. So the benefits are great, and my goal is to make everyone see how essential, how valuable arts and culture is as an essential health and human service and use it to integrate it into the businesses that they're doing because they're going to benefit greatly from it.

Jon Bernstein:

Is there anything else you're working on that we should currently be aware of?

Michael Bobbitt:

I'm adapting another thing into a musical, and it's actually by a Massachusetts native. I got the rights to Bobby Boris Pickett's catalog of songs. And if you know Bobby "Boris" Pickett, he's famous for writing the Monster Mash. And he kept writing songs, but they were all monster novelty dance numbers, and he wrote for about 20 years. So there's the Werewolf Watusi, the Sinister Stomp, and the Transylvania Twist. He just was like, "I have a hit in this Monster Mash song, so let's keep writing that same song." So I have the whole estate of songs and I'm adapting it into a musical. And we're going to be doing a workshop in New York for investors in the spring and hopefully we'll see the Monster Mash premiering somewhere soon.

Jon Bernstein:

Anything else that you're working on at the Massachusetts Cultural Council that you'd like to share with us?

Michael Bobbitt:

This is a great way where arts and health can support each other. We have been beta testing for a few years. This program we called Culture RX. It's basically arts on prescription, so we've had many healthcare providers prescribing arts and culture activities as a supplement or compliment to medicine. It's been great. The doctors have loved it. One of them said he feels like he's prescribing beauty into someone's lives. Other one said he felt like he was giving out a Willy Wonka golden ticket. The patients have loved it. And typically, the prescriptions are written for the patient and someone to go with them or

the patient and their whole family, and they get prescriptions to everything from theater tickets to museums to writing classes to help with their social isolation and mental health issues.

We are in the process of scaling that right now, and we're very excited that soon we'll be announcing our first private insurer. Also, partnerships with major healthcare systems. We've also been working to see if we can secure Medicare and Medicaid to also do the reimbursements and it's looking really, really good. But this to me is a game changer. This is a zeitgeist thing, and Massachusetts has been leading on this. And as soon as we sort of scale this thing with the first announcement, I'm hoping other insurance providers and hospital systems will join aboard so that every resident of the state can potentially have their arts and culture experience when needed be underwritten by underwriters.

Carolyn Jones:

That is so innovative. That's amazing.

Michael Bobbitt:

Yeah, super excited about it.

Jon Bernstein:

That's amazing. That's awesome. Michael, diversity, equity, inclusion are so important in our lives and our work and has been core to your work at the council. Could you tell us about that and about how that plays into your leadership?

Michael Bobbitt:

In my own personal life, as I mentioned, I have this beautiful, he's 22 now, this beautiful Vietnamese child that I raised. My husband is white and Jewish, and so in our own nuclear family, we are this... I tell people, I jokingly tell people we're like a Benetton ad from the '90s, but our lives have been so, so enriched by our connection to each other from a multicultural perspective. We are essentially our own culture, but we get to experience each other's cultures and it's brought so much richness to our life.

As an arts leader at the Council, I really believe that diversity, equity, inclusion, anti-oppression, all these things that we have names for, these are all acts of love, showing love to people that have never been loved before by this country, and that motivates us a lot. And so that's been a part of everything that I've done as an arts leader.

The reason why I'm in the arts was because I had such a rich background as a kid. And truthfully, if it wasn't for the arts, I don't know where I would be. My family struggled with poverty, trauma in the household, incarceration, addictions, and the arts saved me from all that because I could go to school every day and have play practice or band practice or music practice and forget about all those things. So I am obsessed with making sure that every child, especially children that look like me, gets to experience the art because it may save them.

At Mass Cultural Council, what we've done is we make sure that every single program or grant that we have is designed for the people who need the help the most. So we are making sure that the applications are simple, that you don't have to have grant writing experience, you don't have to have a mastery of the English language and that you will be super successful in applying for these programs. And that's benefited everyone because those people that do have grant writing experiences or do have the master of the English language, still have an easier application to fill out.

I'm happy to say that after a couple of years of doing this, we have exceeded the state demographics in our grant making and we're continuing to dig deeper. We have put out a racial equity plan and separate because I do believe the different kinds of needs out there deserve their own kind of plan. Often we do DEIA plans, but disability equity is different than racial equity. And so those need expertise. So we've put

out a racial equity plan. We're about to put out our disability equity plan, also a Native American equity plan, and we have future goals of building out a rural equity plan and a citizenship equity plan as well. So a suite of plans.

Carolyn Jones:

Author and inspirational speaker, Simon Sinek, he talks about the importance of an organization identifying its why. Why does your company exist? Why do you get out of bed every morning? So what is your why? Could be personal or professional or the two together.

Michael Bobbitt:

I mean, my big why is that I want every single person to feel the benefits of consumption of art or participation in the art and what it could do for your soul and your spirit and in many ways your wallet. So that's my own personal why. The agency exists. We're a public agency. And so if we weren't there supporting the creative and cultural sector, we'd have to rely on private industry and individuals to support the arts, which means that support for the arts would be relegated to the wealthy elite, and then access to the arts goes away. Diversity of the arts goes away. And so we have to have public support for the arts because if we don't, then all the arts and all the diversity and the benefits of the diversity of the arts would completely disappear.

Jon Bernstein:

Michael, these past couple of years have been challenging. And in what ways has the changing landscape shifted how you lead and how you approach your work and life?

Michael Bobbitt:

Well, everything. One is, from a personal perspective, I have found myself digging more into my own self-care, healthcare, wellness routines. I'm a whole food plant-based eater. I don't eat meat and dairy and sugar and junk processed food. I get to yoga a few times a week and go lift at the gym, really focusing on mental, physical, spiritual, emotional, cultural, racial health that has made me feel grounded, and live in a state of contentness for most of my day. But as an industry, I think that everything we've gone through, everything from the pandemic to the racial reckoning to political unrest, has deeply impacted the art sector.

The art sector was the first sector to closed during the pandemic and the last sector to open during the pandemic. And at the same time, we all realize how much we depend on the arts. I mean, consumption of streaming and reading and writing and all the new crafts that people learned when they were shut up in their homes grew. But it also made us realize that our business models need to be refined and radically reimagined because we were so vulnerable during that time.

And so I've been thinking about systems change. I've been thinking about as a large industry, there's not a lot of cultural policy out there either regulating us or supporting us. And on a federal level, we're a trillion-dollar industry. The size of that industry would have more regulation if it wasn't for the fact we're the arts. And so I've been thinking about that and thinking about how mindsets and a lack of cultural policy may contribute to our instability and how we can gain more stability if we had more of that. It's a lot of things to think about, and it's a lot of things to pull my sector into and get them to understand that the more we have relationships outside of our sector, the stronger we could be.

Carolyn Jones:

Let's talk a little bit about our region, the Commonwealth. So from your perspective, why do you see Massachusetts as a great place to work, live, grow a business, and what do you think are some of the things that need work and attention perhaps in addition to some of the things we've already touched on?

Michael Bobbitt:

Yeah. I mean, if you can look at the top 10 reasons to live in a certain location, any of those lists that get put out there, arts and culture is one of the top 10 reasons up there. It attracts businesses, it attracts residents, it attracts visitors. And so I think we have a really great thing going here in Massachusetts. We have a few of the world's first artist colonies. We have many organizations that are the longest running or the first or historic.

I remember going over to Daniel Chester French's studio, historic studios, and Daniel Chester French is a sculpture that we all know, but we don't know we know him. He's the guy who did all the sculpture at Grand Central Station and designed the Lincoln Memorial statue in his studio, with the six-foot version of the Lincoln Memorial statue is in our state. So we have all those things. We have a rich, diverse culture of things, and there's not a day or a city or a town in the state where you can't experience some really amazing and profound arts and culture. So that's a great thing.

I do think the state needs to spend a little bit more money marketing its cultural tourism sector. I think we rank somewhere in the mid-forties as far as how much we spend on marketing the sector. That's an opportunity for us to double down. As I mentioned to you, \$27.2 billion industry, the state, the legislature gives me about 25 million every year, which I'm so grateful for. But that's a \$1 they give me, I put \$10 back. So that's an opportunity from a business perspective to double down and maybe make more money off the creative and cultural sector that can go to solve some of the other problems that we're dealing with in the state.

So we have all this wonderful stuff here. We want to get the word out to people that are potentially visiting here, and then we'll see the dollars rolling in.

Jon Bernstein:

Michael, are there any unique or innovative approaches from the creative community around how to support, inspire and encourage artists to pursue the profession in Massachusetts?

Michael Bobbitt:

The mindset about arts as a career... I was just talking to someone this morning who's of African descent, and she was saying that in her family, it's not a career path. And it was the same thing in my family. It wasn't something we talked about around the dinner table because I think there's a mindset out there. We joke about starving artists when honestly some of our wealthiest people in the world are artists, like Beyonce and Taylor Swift. So these are legitimate careers, but because there's not a lot of cultural policy and a lot of infrastructure for them, we have some work to do. I do tell anyone who's pursuing the arts to also really take some time to learn about civics and learn about business acumen because those two things added to your artistic practice will help you grow yourself as a business. So we have some work to do, but I got some plans.

Carolyn Jones:

Can you talk a little bit about yourself? What drives you? Where do you find inspiration? Where do you get your personal motivation to do the things you do in your life?

Michael Bobbitt:

I think it's from getting the chance to travel around the state to all these beautiful cities and towns and seeing these arts organizations and individual artists doing amazing things, and my overwhelming desire to help them do that, these beautiful nooks and crannies. I'm going to be going to Lawrence. There's a Dominican group that makes all these wonderful two story size costumes to celebrate their culture. All

these people coming over here as first and second generation immigrants that are trying to find a sense of belonging and bring their arts and culture here, that motivates me a lot.

The other thing that motivates me is, and this is where I think the value of the consumption or proximity to arts is, is that creativity right now is still considered a soft skill. And I think it's a hard skill. And I think, in my mind, imagination is seeing the world differently. Creativity is bringing the imagination to life, and art is one of the products of creativity. And all of us need creativity in our lives. The way we're going to solve the world's problems is through creativity.

And I think about the business world and how often we don't vet people for creativity when we're hiring, but when they get the job, we often get upset with them when they don't have ideas or they're not being creative. And so I'd love to see the business world add to their interview process and their applications must be creative, and find out in the interview, what have you done to explore creativity in your practice? Because that's going to help everyone make more money and do more stuff in the world. So that motivates me a whole lot.

Jon Bernstein:

Michael, an open-ended question here. What are lessons from artists that you would apply for the business community that you could share with us today?

Michael Bobbitt:

The ability to think on your feet, design thinking. All of us get stuck and we need some way to expand our mind. The ability to see the future, it's weird, but we can literally see the future. We can look at a blank canvas and see all the things on that canvas that mere mortals cannot see. We can open up a blank document on our computer and see a play or a book or a poem or a screenplay. That's incredible. That is what the business community can use.

I think there's a really great natural connection between the business community and the creative community. I just spoke with a bunch of leaders of chambers of commerces and I said, talk about the same things I just talked about, about the value of creativity, but also some tangible ways that we can use art in our regular day life.

So when you're meeting with new clients, meet them at the gallery. Grab the coffee, and then go to the gallery. If you want your team to have some great connections, do team building workshops around arts and culture. My old theater used to do a lightsaber stage combat workshop with corporates. They would love that. That sense of play was amazing. The talk about retention is a big conversation in the corporate world. And I've been telling people, "Why don't you try doing an arts benefit for your employees? Give them each 250 bucks a year to spend on arts." There's so many ways that the business community can learn from the arts, but the biggest thing is just to free your mind up to think creatively about the product that you're selling or the business expansion that you want to do. Artists can do that, and proximity and consumption of art can help you expand your mind to the creative process.

Jon Bernstein:

Michael, we'd like to close with some rapid fire questions. So off the top of your head, are you ready?

Michael Bobbitt:

Yep.

Jon Bernstein:

All right. What are you currently reading or watching?

Michael Bobbitt:

I'm reading a book about Ella Baker, who was a civil rights activist in the 1960s. She used to fight Martin Luther King and Malcolm X because she didn't believe in the single leader model. She believed in the organizing principles.

Jon Bernstein:

Who's a Boston leader or organization that we should watch?

Michael Bobbitt:

There are so many. I'm digging my friend Imari Parish Jeffries, who built the Embrace Boston. He has literally changed the face of Bostons, right? And I think he's building an empire and we'll all be loyal subjects to his empire.

Carolyn Jones:

Love that. Our previous guest said the same person.

Michael Bobbitt:

Yeah, yeah. He's a rock star.

Carolyn Jones:

He's trending, for sure. He's awesome.

Jon Bernstein:

What's your favorite spot in our city?

Michael Bobbitt:

I just adapted Robert McCloskey's Make Way for Ducklings, the state's official children's book. I adapted it into a musical. I worked with his daughters to do this, and so I'm really digging... If you know the story, a lot of it takes place in the public garden. So I'm really digging the public garden, especially in the spring when the flowers are blooming.

Jon Bernstein:

Amazing.

Carolyn Jones:

My favorite place.

Jon Bernstein:

If you could have any other job in the city, what would it be?

Michael Bobbitt:

Professional tourist or vegan food critic.

Carolyn Jones:

Yeah, that sounds like fun.

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Michael Bobbitt:

It'd be cool. Yeah, it'd be cool.

Jon Bernstein:

That would be fun. And finally, what's a wish you have for Boston?

Michael Bobbitt:

That everyone really sees, I'm going to stay on point, but everyone really sees the arts not as leisure, but as an essential health and human service and human right, and find ways to integrate it into their regular life because it just will benefit all in so many ways beyond economic. It's going to benefit the health. It's going to benefit your sense of belonging. It's going to help you understand other people. It's going to be a way to document your past. It's going to be a way to expand your mind to the greater process, and everyone will come out of it better.

Jon Bernstein:

And that wraps up another episode. Thank you so much for joining us, Michael, and for sharing your insights.

Michael Bobbitt:

Thanks for having me.

Jon Bernstein:

I'm Jon Bernstein.

Carolyn Jones:

And I'm Carolyn Jones. And this is PNC C-Speak: the Language of Executives. Our guest today was Michael Bobbitt, executive director of the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

Jon Bernstein:

You can find PNC C-Speak at bizjournals.com/boston or in any of your favorite podcast platforms. Until next time.