Oral history interview with Cecelia Fitzgibbon, November 11, 2011

Fitzgibbon, Cecelia
Arts administrator

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CAITLIN: Caitlin Davis interviewing Cecelia Fitzgibbon. Okay, so I guess the first question how did you become involved with the DSAC?

CECELIA: It was called the Delaware State Arts Council at the time, there was no distinction between the Division of the Arts and the State Arts Council, that was something that I did under my leadership. So my husband and I were—I was working for the American Council for the Arts in New York as the finance manager and membership director and my—I had a conference to go—that by the way is now the American City Arts, so you might—it might sound familiar. And I had a conference to go to in DC and my husband was looking at a gallery in Annapolis and so the choice was did we go to—on the way back to New York—did we go to Assateague to see the wild ponies run or did we go to this very cool little place that he had found—heard about—called Historical New Castle? So we went to Old New Castle and unbeknownst to us, we didn’t know it was the day after Day in Old New Castle so the place looked—I don’t know if you’ve ever been there, but they wrap it up to make it look beautiful for these house tours and so everything looked perfect. And we’re both from New England and thought okay, this looks like home. So I called the head of the Arts Council then who was Anne Hausman. She was a—she was leaving to go be a principal at the school which was her background.

CAITLIN: Is it H-A-U-S—

CAITLIN: M-A-N.

CECELIA: And she was the second director of the State Arts Council which had been formed and set in 19—around 1970. And I said here’s my background, I’m interested in leaving Manhattan and are there—we fell in love with Old New Castle—are there people in the Delaware arts scene that I might talk to as a—to do informational entries. And she said, “my job is opening up. I’m leaving and they are about to close the application procedure for my position. Why don’t you apply for it?”

CAITLIN: Oh, that’s great.

CECELIA: And then I did and came down to Delaware several times to be interviewed, and I was interviewed by a whole bunch of people who that I’m sure are on your list, Carol Balick and Barbie Riegel, and basically at the ripe age of 28 I was made head of the State Arts Council. And then I got married in New York and came down here at the beginning of October in 1984.

CAITLIN: Okay. 1984, let me write that down.

CECELIA: And I was the last external candidate that they ever hired unfortunately.

CAITLIN: Now they hire from within?

CECELIA: Yes. Well, actually Peggy Amsterdam was hired as part of the organization but they have never hired anyone outside of Delaware subsequently, and they hadn’t actually before then.

CAITLIN: Why do you end up leaving?

CECELIA: It’s a good question. The—I had served—I started when [Pierre] Pete du Pont was exiting as governor and I worked primarily during Mike Castle’s term and it seemed to me as if it was responsible to recognize the arc of one’s capacity to contribute to an organization. And I was actually head hunted to go to the New England Foundation for the Arts. New England still was home, we had this big notion that New England was home and so it was an opportunity for—for my professional development which turned out did not work out as I had expected. But life doesn’t usually turn out that way. And so—and so it was time, I had accomplished what I could imagine accomplishing. Unfortunately—I mean fortunately, Peggy Amsterdam succeeded me and sustained the momentum of the institution I would say that that is not the case now.

CAITLIN: And how long did she stay for?

CECELIA: She was there—she was there—well, I hired her—I hired her in I think 1987 and she stayed until she went to the Cultural Alliance in Philly. God, let’s see, I can do this, I know I can—

CAITLIN: It’s okay if you don’t know the exact date.

CECELIA: It’s more—it’s likely that she left in ’95 to go to the Cultural Alliance but you can check-up on that, so it’s around that many years so she was there a long time.
CAITLIN: Okay. So I visited now it’s the DDOA and they have no archives whatsoever, everything’s in big scrapbooks.

CECELIA: Really?

CAITLIN: Yes, which is difficult because like when you were there what was the reporting standards? Did you have to write down every grant that you got and everything like that?

CECELIA: Well, sure. And the state archives too, you know. We—everything was registered in the state archives or in the files of the institution, but they moved and I think they must have pitched stuff. Now remember when I worked there, this was pre-computers as all—and when we first got a computer it was a word processor, it wasn’t a database so we did everything by hand and therefore—

CAITLIN: Probably pitched.

CECELIA: Yeah, yeah, most likely. The primary places we got grants when we first—when I was first there, there was a state function called Grants and Aid, which was basically a slush fund for the legislators. “Whams” would be another common way of referring to it. And the Grants and Aid was an opportunity for the legislature to go outside the standard appropriation to fund—fund local projects. I don’t want to seem cynical so—I was going to say favorite projects, but local projects—and what happened, was just as I was getting there many cultural organizations were going individually to the legislature for grants and aid support, which was perfectly legal. And we all—we convened them and said, “Look; this is hurting the State Arts Council and subsequently hurting you. If you agree to not go to Grants and Aid, we can then get the legislature to transfer the amount of dollars that are coming through Grants and Aid and probably increase them.” So that rising tide raises ships. So we had this tacit agreement with the cultural organizations that they—the Grants and Aid would be—and approaching their individual legislators—would be hands off, and that we would coordinate and run all of—all of the appropriations for arts and culture—I would say arts into the State Arts Council.

Then over time—at that time we were under the Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs and Nick Cannon who was the head of one of the New York banks who has—I mean Nick has been at so many banks, I can’t—I can’t exactly remember. The big one, it wasn’t—before it was First USA and before it was Chase, it was that big building on the corner by the Riverfront. Anyway, he—they were reexamining—he was part of the Arts Council and they were reexamining our salary structure because they functioned—they functioned like a board but not like a board and he looked at what was being made—making and it was terrible. And the only way to change our salary structure was for us to become our own organization under the Secretary of State, so that was a happy thing, because as long as we lived under the umbrella of Historical and Cultural Affairs we were dominated by Dover and also—and also kind of Dover like thinking, bureaucratic like thinking, as well as there was a priority for historical affairs and so we never—we never were able to achieve any direct relationship with the state legislature so we decided—we worked with the Secretary of State then, Mike Harkins to get him to separate the two. The Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs still existed and then became the Division—now we’re the Division of the Arts. Yeah, lots of politics; I loved every minute of it.
CAITLIN: That’s great, that’s great. What projects that you were involved with were most memorable?

CECELIA: Well, really what you’re talking about is building a cultural infrastructure which—there were—and this was not inconsistent with the role of other state arts agencies at the time, it was a very big growth time. The Delaware Reinvestment Fund had happened under Pete du Pont, they redesigned the structure for credit card companies so many of the credit card companies came here and located, and what that meant was—and DuPont was still viewing funding local arts and culture as part of their civic responsibility. There was a much different corporate sense of civic responsibility, so you had this confluence of circumstance that allowed for both the growth of our agency as well as that spurting the growth of—the corporate sector spurting the growth of the cultural infrastructure. So I would say the first thing was just restructuring how we did business, tightening up what we were driving the cultural institutions to think about around existing the public trust and their connection to the public. They were coming off the ‘70s and this idea that really it was all about the art and there’s still that pervasion, there’s not this understanding—and you took institutions—it has taken some institutions a long time to understand where the intercept of the public and their own interest in preserving and presenting art lies, where that intersect lies. So I would say looking across the state and trying to understand the cultural landscape and making strategic investments in that cultural landscape to make sure the culture was everywhere, that arts were everywhere, and that was sometimes hard particularly downstate. Just that two or three possible players and going [inaudible] art thing so there were—it was—and downstate didn’t look the way it looks now. You didn’t have all the Washington retirement communities—where I’m going to kick myself is not buying property—so that was number one. And number two was okay then what do we do. So one of the things that I was the proudest of and I remained this way for all of my career is to try to think of things systemically, which is not thinking that happens as much as it should. So then the question became, what do we do to augment what is not here? Without creating institutions that then have to be sustained. So for instance we came up with the idea—Peggy actually came up with the idea of doing this dance residency which we—

CAITLIN: Okay, yeah, that was actually my next question. So that works perfectly.

CECELIA: So you know, for ten years we brought top name dance companies into the state, toured them everywhere, had them do master classes, had them—had them do performances in gyms and they were game. They—it was—at that point is, was really about what—how do we build an interest for dance in the long term?

CAITLIN: How did you do that?

CECELIA: By having these people develop even short term relationships with communities, so the communities could say oh wow, this is really cool, this is—I—this is something that we need to engage in and we weren’t trying to make Garth Fagan and live in Delaware, because the fundamental problem with Delaware is there is not the economies of scale to support a whole spectrum of arts and culture that can be sustained in [inaudible—shuffling in background]. So the question is; so what is the role of a state agency whose job it is to attend to cultural
development? Okay, I can honestly tell you that’s not the way people think anymore—here
anymore unfortunately, but it’s the way I was trained. I was one of the few people in the country
that had a graduate degree in arts administration and so that’s the kind of thinking I brought. I
mean, I don’t usually pat myself on the back but you’re asking. And I assembled people who
could think that way on our team, so in addition to that—to Peggy’s work we also had a very
good team of people doing arts and education. Now a lot of the arts and education work was
driven by how the endowment was changing their orientation towards arts and education, so
when I first got here it was artists in the schools which is—that was million years ago, that was
in the ‘70s and you were here.

CAITLIN: And that looked like CETA right?

CECELIA: Yeah, well there was—they took CETA—they combined CETA money—that’s how
Steve Bruni got his job—at this institution, he was a CETA worker. CETA was the best thing
since sliced—you would be doing CETA right now if CETA existed. My husband worked as an
architectural designer in Florida under CETA. So where was I going? Just they took CETA
money and they also took endowment money and combined it and the idea it came—the history
of it as I understand it from the NEA was artists—it was sort of like our artist residency, our
dance residency, but then the endowment started shifting toward more integration with
curriculum, which made sense because even then K through 12 education here in the state did
not—was not savvy about the impact of arts. And so what we did is we created a—both an
opportunity for artists to work in the schools but also for them—for the artists to understand their
role as educators and to begin to speak the language of educators so that they could be viewed
not in service to, but as complements to what was happening in the classroom. Because it was
very clear that that was the only way we were going to get in and so we did a pretty good job on
arts and education.

We also looked at, as I said before, at cultural development. So I hired—they call it—I think it’s
Susan Nash—a circuit writer. But a circuit writer comes from the western perspective. Out in the
west they used to have somebody who’s like a circuit judge. They’d give them a horse, they’d go
from place to place to place to connect with what was happening in those communities and—so
in two years before I left, I realized that we weren’t as successful at understanding what was
happening in Milton. And so we needed somebody who was going to be there some of the time,
and so we did that, and they had at their disposal small grants that they could give seed money to
seed activity. I will say that as a mistake at that time, the prevailing thinking was let’s start
organizations. If I had it to do over again I would just seed activity, we don’t need any more non-
profit organizations. So does that help?

CAITLIN: Yes.

CECELIA: Let’s see, what else did we do? Well, we ran that gallery for a long time and then
actually—

CAITLIN: Yeah, it’s—that—also one of my questions.
CECELIA: We did the fellowships, we had—we ran—we administered the individual artist fellowships up until Peggy’s tenure went in the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation to come over, but I think in some ways it’s better—it would be better if it was done again in-house because you’re really not attending to the community by—and artists in Delaware have a terrible time, very bad access to markets. It’s not an active retail environment. Not very many institutions believe that it’s part of their job to be cultivating artists in the community. There’s only a couple really. But what we did do, is we ran a gallery. And the gallery was a very interesting thing because—it was there before—when I got there.

CAITLIN: It was gallery one and two, right?

CECELIA: Yeah, downstairs and up because we were—at the time we had our offices on the first floor and then—but outside the cafeteria in the Carvel building on the second floor there was this really quite nice space. I don’t—I think they still have that, I’m not sure—that’s—I haven’t been there in a really long time. And that was a place where artists get their work seen, and then John Gatti will tell you that he started first Friday, but of course I did. And I said I want—what I did was I said to him, “I wanna do this, you go do it.” He figured out how to do it but—

CAITLIN: It was your idea.

CECELIA: Yeah, tired of people taking the credit because I’m so not about me that I just don’t—if I have the idea and somebody—

[Crosstalk]

CAITLIN: That’s fine.

CECELIA: Yeah. That wasn’t my job and I don’t think that that’s the job of anyone in the State Arts Agency. Our job is to make—build the cultural community. So anyway, we did the first Friday thing and that was good because it was a new idea. It took off on—there was actually a bus loop for bars that was—it was called the loop and that happened, I don’t know when, but it seemed to me as if, well, if the bars could do it why can’t the galleries do it? And it turned out to be more of a party. People coming for the free wine, but there was a group of artists who would go and support one another. And then when I—the year that I was leaving, the Secretary of State then who had just taken office, Ed Freel—wonderful man, he’s worked—he teaches at the University of Delaware now in political science, Ed had come from being Senator. He was actually Congressman [Thomas] Carper’s at the time—nobody ever—people just changed jobs in the government—Congressman Carper’s administrative assistant. And they—Carper was coming to Delaware to be the governor and Ed was coming along and he was going to be the Secretary of State. So this was right during the cultural wars, I mean this was high—this was 1993 and we happened to have in the gallery upstairs—there were 20 foot canvases with male genitalia in neon colors and they had been chosen by a gallery selection committee so they were up. I thought you know what? I’m on my way out, this is a great opportunity for me to take Ed around and show him what we do in a potentially controversial situation. He was fine.
CAITLIN: Oh, good.

CECELIA: And I was afraid that having come from Washington with all the Jesse Helm’s nonsense that was going on that he would have drank the Kool-Aid, but he’s a Delawarean and particularly unflappable and would not have bowed to pressure. Plus we had a state of building—I mean we’re talking state workers here clocking in and clocking out and they loved it. They loved going to the gallery, they loved having the opportunity to see the art. And they would say what the heck is this? Wow, really? But we would do gallery walks and things that tried to enlighten—that’s a snobby word—but tried to expose—

CAITLIN: I know what you mean.

CECELIA: Expose, make accessible the work.

CAITLIN: How was the work chosen?

CECELIA: There was a gallery selection committee—

CAITLIN: Who were they made up of?

CECELIA: Original artists and people who ran arts organizations. So at the time, it was Steve Lanier at the Delaware Center for Contemporary Arts and I think we might’ve had somebody from here, and then a couple of artists who would sit. And people would present their work to be shown. What we did was we took the slides from people who had applied for a fellowship and asked—and had them check off on this bill, “do you also want to be considered for a show?”

CAITLIN: Oh, okay.

CECELIA: Then we—the visual arts coordinator was Barbara—oh, man, this was before Gatti—pre-Gatti—he’ll remember who he succeeded, the first name’s Barbara—they would convene the selection committee and choose the artists.

CAITLIN: Oh, right, and then would you—they would curate it themselves or?

CECELIA: Yeah, they’d help the artists—the artists would curate it and they would choose the artists. The artists would present a body of work and the show would be based on the artist’s work.

CAITLIN: Do you remember any favorites that you had?

CECELIA: Well, my husband showed there once. Scott Cameron is his name. Oh, gosh—

CAITLIN: I know we’re trying to track down this man named Tom Watkins and we haven’t been able to find him, but I know that he had a show there with xerography in—

CECELIA: When?
CAITLIN: ’87.

CECELIA: He was probably—usually what happened was some of the best works were graduates of Delaware and they would maybe submit their senior stuff. Colleen Zufelt showed there, her clay work. Graham Dougherty showed there; we had this wonderful glass artist. Oh, my God, she was so good! I bought a piece of hers and she moved to Florida; I don’t remember her name. They don’t have those archives?

CAITLIN: No, I asked them if they have who was at the galleries, or like every grant that was given, every fellowship, and they said we don’t have anything like that. So they gave me five scrapbooks of news journal articles that I had to sift through which doesn’t really help at all because that’s just a lot of information.

CECELIA: That’s impossible, who’d you talk to?

CAITLIN: I don’t know—Roxanne Stanulus, I don’t know her exact position but also we weren’t allowed to make copies of anything or—so I’m going to have to go back in again.

CECELIA: Call Paul [Weagraff].

CAITLIN: I should.

CECELIA: Just call him up and tell him Cecelia said that that information exists and it could be at the state archives.

CAITLIN: I’ll write that down.

CECELIA: But call him and say, “look, I need to make Xerox copies of that stuff.” That’s not—you can go to the archives of the News Journal, it’s all in there too but they have it on microfiche I bet you.

CAITLIN: Yep, they do. We’ve been in contact with them and their archives aren’t open to the public and it’s all on microfiche.

CECELIA: Well, I don’t think you’re going to get anything different than microfiche from the state, that’s all there was.

CAITLIN: Yeah. I mean, better than nothing though, because I’ve been told that they don’t have anything.

CECELIA: But call Paul—that’s baloney.

CAITLIN: Maybe it’s just they don’t know where it is.

CECELIA: They don’t know where it is, they don’t know where it is—it’s in the state archives if anything. So then the question—here’s the question: where did the files go when the DDOA moved? That’s the question.
CAITLIN: Yeah, that’s the question.

CECELIA: Did they go to Dover; did they go to the state archives, where did they go?

CAITLIN: Because that would really help us determine what organizations were getting funding and everything because we don’t have any of that information.

CECELIA: Really?

CAITLIN: Yeah.

CECELIA: Well, I could tell you that.

CAITLIN: I mean you can tell me but it’s easier to have a list in front of you.

CECELIA: Yeah, and feel free to email me with other questions.

CAITLIN: Okay, that’s great. Oh, yeah, so explain the change, because you were there when it went from the State Arts Council to the DDOA. Explain that because I’ve gotten 50 different answers and I want to get the correct one since you were there.

CECELIA: Well, the correct one was we wanted to develop a more empowered institution that was less governed outside of our primary objective of cultural development. And we also wanted to have the status of being our own division.

CAITLIN: And within the DDOA then the art council still existed, correct? To advise—

CECELIA: That’s correct.

CAITLIN: Okay.

CECELIA: And that’s very important. Because we were a governmental agency, all ancillary groups—citizens groups are advisory, they were advisory from the beginning. Of course they—what—you might talk to people—Judy Hoopes would be a good person to talk to.

CAITLIN: What was her —?

CECELIA: She was the chairman of Delaware State Arts Council from—oh, my God—Judy Hoops and then Stuart Young. He was what I worked with. Judy was—when did I get there, 1984?—Judy was there I think from 1978 and—

CAITLIN: Okay, and I think was Polly Buck the one before her?

CECELIA: Yes, she was the wife of Buck who I think was the governor or something.

CAITLIN: Um-hum, yeah.

CECELIA: And they—
CAITLIN: Everyone’s connected.

CECELIA: Welcome to—and they—I think they basically saw that it happened so—but Judy was one of the first long term chairs and then Stuart came on and he and I worked together for almost eight years. Great guy, he was the chair of this institution.

CAITLIN: Oh, okay.

CECELIA: For a while and he would—he’s definitely talking to—but anyway—and he can tell you a lot about ArtCo and the stabilization effort because he—I start—he and I started it but then Peggy finished it. So relative to changing to the DDOA with the State Arts Council, the state arts council had always been an advisory board, but they sometimes did not understand that about themselves and this was a chance to kinda—to define their role and also to get them thinking a little bit more beyond Wilmington, because most of them were Wilmington folks which is where most of the artists—you know—I mean most of the cultural institution. I will say that—what was I going to say, I had something—when I got there the staff was not allowed to go to the state Arts Council meetings.

CAITLIN: Really?

CECELIA: It was very strange. So here you had these experts—I mean if the staffs weren’t experts they should be.

CAITLIN: So what—okay, so you—if you considered yourself staff what would you say you worked for?

CECELIA: You worked for—well, when I got there you worked for the State Arts Council.

CAITLIN: But you weren’t allowed to go to State Arts Council meetings. So were there two State Art—they were State Art—

CECELIA: No, the State Arts Council, then State Arts Council staff who actually worked for the Historical and Cultural Affairs.

CAITLIN: Okay, that’s confusing.

CECELIA: So basically that didn’t make any sense to me—

CAITLIN: Yeah, no.

CECELIA: Well, you know wait till you go, you don’t go the board meetings here and you’d have to be pretty senior to do it, and that doesn’t make any sense to me either by the way, but—so I said look, this has gotta change. You’re going and if they have a question you’re going to answer the question because you’re the expert, So we changed the whole structure of how this—and that was a stylistic thing with Ms. Hausman—Dr. Hausman. She just decided that and we’re very—it might have been very corporate, but that—anway, that all changed. So there were
things—I’d like to believe if I did anything it was a catalyst for change and cultural development in the state, it’s not a bad thing to say.

CAITLIN: Not at all.

CECELIA: So did I explain the transition well enough?

CAITLIN: Yeah, pretty much so it—

CECELIA: So basically what we did is we got the corporate people on the council because really, if you think about power structures, the state agency is great. But unless—in particular with arts and culture, unless it has representatives from key leaders and stakeholders in the state, they’re not going to be as effective. So that’s a balancing act, but they were supportive—it’s also a very expansive time in—all across the economy they were very supportive of, okay, let’s get out from under the Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs and make ourselves our own institution and make this—and elevate the importance of the arts in government. At the same time try and get some of these people paid. I mean some of the people that were working for me were making $17,000.00 a year so the only way to do that at that time within the state structure, or the quickest way, was to move it out and change the organization chart of the Secretary of State’s office.

CAITLIN: That makes sense. What were the greatest problems that you faced being a director?

CECELIA: Not being able to pay the staff as much as they deserved. I would say that there was a mixed response from the organized business community. Individual businesses were fabulous but, for instance, the head of the Chamber of Commerce, who subsequently was the guy who founded DCAD, when I first met him he said to me, “I didn’t get along with your predecessor.” I said “that’s really funny”—his name is Bill Wire. “And I didn’t get along with your predecessor.” This was Dr. Hausman. I said “well, that’s really strange because the arts and business aren’t mutually exclusive.” He said, “You’re right. “If it weren’t for the businesses the arts wouldn’t be here.” And I said, “if it weren’t for the arts the businesses wouldn’t come.” And I didn’t talk to him for seven years after that. and then he decided it that would be a really good idea to start an arts college because he read it on some in-flight magazine. So you never know where people are going to end up. And I suppose that—so I would say that the challenge was to try to balance building an active, vibrant cultural scene with the politics, the corporate sector, the cultural organizations all moving towards the same goal. And you also have to kind of a reflect on that time there weren’t too many people who were trained to run cultural organizations. They did it as a result of their experience. And the thing I tell my students is one of the reasons you want to go to grad school in arts administration is if you don’t, and you learn only by experience, you run the danger of learning somebody else’s bad habits—

CAITLIN: That’s very true.

CECELIA: Without understanding why you’re doing it. So that’s—that’s part of—there was a mix of capacity in running the institutions, and the institutions have their own challenges in working with boards who did not—who had very definite ideas about how the direction—the
artistic direction the organization should take. And also from a—if you want to think of it this way—an historical perspective the idea of civic pride and investment in Delaware had transitioned from the dominance of a single family who built the roads, ran the newspaper, ran the companies, to a home for world renowned corporate institutions too. So Delaware itself was going through evolutions of its own infrastructure and corporate structure that the arts were growing along with and continued after I left. I mean MBNA coming and running cultural institutions and then leaving, what a crazy thing; I’m glad I wasn’t here, that would’ve been a problem for me. But—excuse me; I forgot to turn that off—so that—I saw those were the challenges—

CAITLIN: The biggest challenges you faced.

CECELIA: I would not say they were problems; it was fun.

CAITLIN: That’s good.

CECELIA: It was fun and I loved it.

CAITLIN: What was your relationship with the NEA?

CECELIA: We had a good relationship with the NEA, a very good relationship. We were seen, I think, as one of the up-and-coming states. I still maintain friendships at the state level. Of course Laura Scanlan is there now. The state programs—we were respected, we built a reputation that was respected. Our staff was, including myself, was asked to serve on NEA panels.

CAITLIN: Oh, good.

CECELIA: Of course the endowment was at that time allocated their funding to state arts agencies on a percentage based on a base and then added to for population. We were very active in the National Assembly of State Art Agencies, I served on the board, Peggy served on the board. And we were active in the state art agency movement around learning from one another how to strengthen cultural infrastructure. We got good ideas. The idea of the ArtCo and the stabilization fund came from several other states who were doing it as well as the National Arts Stabilization Fund.

CAITLIN: Could you explain a little more about what that was?

CECELIA: Sure. Well, it was very clear that the economics weren’t going be as good as they were forever, and so the question was how could we make an effort that would sustain the cultural institutions beyond the support that the state gave in general [inaudible] support. So what were they? They were buildings for a lot of the time, organizations were saying you know, we’re having trouble even in these good—they didn’t even know how good the times were—fixing the burner. Their deferred maintenance was not there. A lot of them were not—didn’t have a cash reserve. The orchestra was in horrible trouble even then and so I came up with this idea and went to Stuart Young and said I want to start a—what would be now referred to as an endeavor.
CAITLIN: Endeavor.

CECELIA: A stabilization fund that allows the cultural community to think about moving into the future and what it would free them up to be able to do or think about. And Stuart liked the idea and so then we convened. We got—Mike Harkins was the Secretary of State—to convene a breakfast meeting of the board chairs and the executives of all the major cultural institutions, the big ones. And I don’t know [inaudible] I think the Rotary Club or something, one of those white men’s clubs, and we convened these people and said here’s the thinking, are you interested? And they said yeah, we’re really interested. So then it was my job and Peggy alongside me to put them—so then—so Harkins looks at me and goes, “well, what are you going to do? What’s the [unintelligible] it? I said, “I don’t know, I’ll get back to you,” and we—we put them in a room together, we locked the executive directors of these organizations in this room and said okay, what’s it going to take to sustain yourselves, to get rid of your deficits, to build a cash reserve, and to create an endowment that will sustain your building, assuming no new programming for the next 20 years? And that’s the formula they came up with. Now what that required was having people show their works. Like how much do I—how much do I really have as a deficit and what is really happening in my institution, and that kind of collaboration had never taken place—

CAITLIN: Never happened before.

CECELIA:—across the cultural intuitions. And we came up with—$21.8 million was the target and then Stuart and I came up with a strategy for how we were going to raise that.

CAITLIN: Yeah, that’s the important part.

CECELIA: And Phil Corrizi who was the Chair of the Joint Finance Committee at the time said well—and he was a marvelous supporter he was.

CAITLIN: C-A-R—

CECELIA: C-O-R-R-I— Corrizi—I-Z-I.

CAITLIN: And he was—

CECELIA: He was the Chair of the Joint Finance Committee in the legislature. He worked at Gore [Industries], was a great guy because legislators, I don’t know if they still are—I live in Delaware, I should know this—they were often employed by someone because it was a part-time job. And he—we went to him. Now Phil played the trumpet in fifth grade and he was a big arts supporter. His constituency—I think he had a green bill—they were big art supporters so he understood that alignment between what he cared about politically and what they cared about politically, but it went well beyond that and we developed a very good relationship with him over time, even though it was sort of prohibitive for state workers to be talking—lobby. I didn’t lie but he—I knew that he was a supporter, we always—we built our reputation, we did our job and he—they respond—he was our advocate so Stuart and I went to Phil and said we want to raise $21.8 million for the arts and culture infrastructure, the buildings. Phil said let’s take it out of the bond money because—because it’s infrastructure we can do that. Bond money is a lot
easier to get through the state legislature and was then—then it is going through general operating—the regular appropriation. So we said all right. He said the most I can get you is a million dollars a year for five years. Fair enough, we’ll raise the other money. Now this was in probably—God, I’m thinking January.

CAITLIN: What year was this because I don’t really need an [inaudible]

CECELIA: I think it was 1990, maybe ’91 because I left in ’93 so it took us a while because, well, actually—

CAITLIN: When did you start? Did you—

CECELIA: We started in ’90 with the conversation and it took us a year to get the organizations—

CAITLIN: Together.

CECELIA: —to come up with this idea—I mean to come up. Lee Kimball, who’s still at Opera Delaware, was very instrumental in all of this so he would have a perspective on it, a different one I’m sure. How we doing on time by the way?

CAITLIN: Forty-five exactly now.

CECELIA: Okay, right, we’ll do some more. So anyway once we got—so it was probably ’91-ish—once we got everybody together and they agreed on what we were going to do—the organizations—they—their job was to vet it with their chairs and their boards, which was no easy task. Then we went to Phil in ’91, we said we wanna do this, he said if you can come to us with some kind of idea of at least a match for the state it will be easier to put it in the bond. We went to David Wakefield from the Longwood Foundation in March and said to him we need a $1 million a year for five years and he said when? And we said in July.

CAITLIN: Now.

CECELIA: He said I don’t believe you, it will never happen, you’ll never get the state to work that fast. But if you can get the state to work that fast I’ll—I’m in, we’re in. And I mean somebody had to write [inaudible] and then he—when we got the appropriation Peggy and I were down in legislative hall in the bowels of the hall at four—three a.m. in the morning and Corrizi came up from even further bowels—they used to meet in this room downstairs. They could smoke then, cigars. He came up to the—I don’t know if you’ve ever been to the legislative hall but there’s this big hallway, a big rotunda, and he came up the stairs and he yelled, “you can go home now, Cecelia Fitzgibbon. We did it I’ll never forget it, Peggy and I never forgot that because he said it’s okay Cecelia Fitzgibbon, you can go home now, we did it!” And so then—so we put—he put it in the bond bill, that one million dollars a year. They floated the bonds because they float bonds over a period of time and we went back to Wakefield—

CECELIA: We told them we got it and he went are you kidding me? He never expected—
CAITLIN: Oh, “now I have to pay.”

CECELIA: He now had to come up with the five million dollars and he did, and so that was ten million dollars, so before I left which was—I left in the beginning of 1993, we had raised ten million of the 21.8 million.

CAITLIN: Okay, do you know what happened?

CECELIA: Yes, well, they put together this—we did—we promised that we would house the money at the community foundation. Not what I wanted to do, but it was the way to ensure not one individual would have control of it. When I left they started this organization called ArtCo. Peggy—that was Peggy’s leadership, they went—she would call me periodically and say, “you’re not going to believe this, we got money from the county. You’re not going to believe this—”

CAITLIN: So that was the organization that was set up to raise money for—

CECELIA: To complete the fundraising for the stabilization.

CAITLIN: Okay, that makes sense.

CECELIA: And Julie Van Blarcom would be very good—illuminating—she’s at the Delaware Children’s Museum.

CAITLIN: Can you say the last name?


CAITLIN: Okay. This actually—backtrack to the dance—what dance organizations did you have come into the state?

CECELIA: We had Garth Fagan; we had Pilobolus we had—God—I’d have to do some research.

CAITLIN: It’s okay, you can—we can talk later.

CECELIA: Damon—David—one of the really—they were all hot. Peggy picked them, she picked them and she would do the negotiating. She’d go out and say we want—we have this program. They don’t—see, now there’s where an archive would come in handy but I can think about some of the others.

CAITLIN: Yeah. So the political allies that you really worked with were Pete du Pont and—

CECELIA: Well, du Pont was out of the seat.

CAITLIN: Oh, okay.
CECELIA: Corrizi was Chair of Joint Finance, Mike Harkins was the Secretary of State, and the governor, hands off a little bit, Castle. Mike Ratchford succeeded Mike Harkins; he was also very—very helpful—Ratchford is at Gore on instead of government like relationship. Those are the three key ones.

CAITLIN: Okay. Just a few more, they should be short. I found in research references to a Wilmington Arts Commission but I haven’t been able to figure out what exactly that is, do you know?

CECELIA: That’s so sad—local arts agency in Wilmington run by Tina Betz. It’s still there, she’s still running it. I mean she—that was—

CAITLIN: I guess there’s just not a lot of information on the internet about it.

CECELIA: Okay, so she ran it then Valerie Tramell took it over. Different mayor. Then—and I worked with them when I ran for senate for a couple years—and then, now Tina is back.

CAITLIN: Okay, and it’s just a local arts agency in Wilmington?

CECELIA: Yes, it’s—in Wilmington, they don’t have a big appropriation.

CAITLIN: Okay, and it’s not connected to the DDOA or anything?

CECELIA: Well, I would imagine that State Arts Council funded but [inaudible]

CAITLIN: I mean—yeah, okay.

CECELIA: But not at that time. Our objective was to try and fund local arts agencies to create three, but Sussex County had one at the time and we could never get one in Kent County. And in a way Delaware—the DDOA functions as a local arts council because Delaware’s—

CAITLIN: In itself, yeah. Did you feel that Wilmington had its own unique art scene as opposed to New York or Philadelphia?

CECELIA: No.

CAITLIN: No, okay.

CECELIA: And I’ll tell you why and this is upon reflection. I might’ve felt that—I felt that it could be, but I don’t think we ever realized that potential. I think that over time—I mean you’re going to get different perspectives from people—I spent a lot of time thinking about this and teaching other people about it so I may be a little bit more reflective than others.

CAITLIN: Definitely.

CECELIA: And—
CAITLIN: Other people we’re talking to were like oh, that was like 30 years ago, I have no idea why you’re constantly thinking about it.

CECELIA: Yeah, so I would say that there was a trend in the 1970s across the country, probably at the behest of the National Endowment for the Arts, to create a model for what civically minded and cultured cities looked like. They all had an art museum, they all had a symphony orchestra, they all had a theater company, they all had—there was like a formula and so in that regard we were not unique. We were attempting to do what seemed to be an appropriate formula for—

CAITLIN: What other states had done.

CECELIA: Yeah, in culturation. Where we were unique is that we had the capacity to rely upon New York and Philadelphia for some artist engagement. However we were also parochial, we didn’t really want—we wanted our own people but I’m not sure that the cultural community and organizations really understood that in order to do that you have to cultivate a community of artists. My husband has had not a—actually has had very little success being an artist here. He’s an artist outside and I would say that his experience is pretty reflective. So there were—because the Wilmington Arts Commission wasn’t very strong, there were missed opportunities at the Riverfront in artists with workspace that could have created Wilmington as more of a destination for artists. And I think those times might be gone now, I’m not sure. And Newark was always a very odd—I mean Newark did not have the level of artist activity that it should have had given that they have a decent art program at Delaware and it was good then too. Steve Tanis I see all the time. Alida Fish. So—and they still live here, they live in Arden. So there was a disconnect there and, I don’t know, I think it had to do with local leadership. So maybe in hindsight what I might have done is cultivate more local leadership, but I kinda feel like I get a pass on that one because we really started from ground zero.

CAITLIN: Yeah, that makes sense.

CECELIA: The appropriation for the State Arts Council when I got here was $300,000 a year, and that was a combination of the NEA money and the state money. When I left here, outside of the stabilization effort, it was $1.3 million. So—and it’s not my—it’s the state legislature, it’s not my doing, but I think that’s endemic of the times as well as endemic of what happens when you have dynamic leadership and thinking about a cultural system. Even though I’m not sure I could’ve said to you that’s what I was thinking about at the time, [inaudible] now I know that’s what I was thinking about.

CAITLIN: And I guess the last question—this is just vague but proudest moment I guess, was that the—

CECELIA: I would say the stabilization.

CAITLIN: The stabilization?

CECELIA: Yeah.
CAITLIN: I mean you got emotional.

CECELIA: Yeah, yeah, that was my proudest moment because it’s a legacy.

CAITLIN: Yeah.

CECELIA: I would say yeah, that was it. That was it, yeah.

CAITLIN: Well, that’s great.

CECELIA: I mean talk about a dream job.

CAITLIN: I know.

CECELIA: You don’t get to be 29 and do that, and you don’t get to have such influence. Now granted it’s a small state but the opportunity to build something—I wish as a resident—I have been a resident of Delaware since 1984 except for one year—I wish the same kind of dynamic leadership was still here and I don’t see it as much. Maybe it’s because I’m focused on Philadelphia more, but even as a resident there would be opportunity for people to draw us in. We live, sleep, and breathe the arts. Yet I don’t feel connected—maybe—and when I first came back I purposely didn’t get connected because I wanted it to be Peggy’s scene. I didn’t want anybody to feel like, oh, we were competing.

CAITLIN: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

CECELIA: So—well, it’s a pleasure to meet you.

CAITLIN: Well, thank you, you gave me tons of great information.

[End of interview]

Duration: 57 minutes