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Art that enriches

A grant to Houston Grand Opera accents the economic power of the arts.

WE all know that our nonprofit arts organizations bring us a wealth of cultural and societal benefits, but it may be news to some that those same institutions are also a powerful engine of economic vitality, particularly in Houston.

Last week, this fact was brought home to us — literally — when our own Houston Grand Opera was awarded a grant of \$250,000 by ArtPlace, a new, unusual collaboration of private foundations and federal agencies. ArtPlace's mission is to drive economic development by "strategically integrating artists and arts organizations into key local efforts in transportation, housing, community development, job creation and more."

In this first round of grants, of which HGO was the only Texas recipient, ArtPlace invested \$11.5 million in 34 local projects nationwide. The HGO grant goes specifically to HGOco, the opera's education and community arm, and its new program, Home + Place, which will work with three Houston communities — Gulfton/Sharpstown, Northside/Second Ward and the Greater Hobby area.

"Brilliant!" said Jonathon Glus, CEO of the nonprofit Houston Arts Alliance. "HGO could not be a more perfect example of such a program. The brilliance of this grant is that it partners these neighborhood spaces that reach all over the region."

Started in 2007, HGOco, in collaboration with the Houston Independent School District and Neighborhood Centers Inc., has involved more than 700,000 Houstonians, of all backgrounds and ages, in cultural, historical and artistic projects.

Sandra Bernhard, director of HGOco, told the Chronicle, "Our

secret is that we don't ever go in and tell people what we're going to do. We listen to their stories. Sharing stories helps empower communities. It promotes language acquisition, it makes children want to learn to read, and it helps parents, too. Those stories, and those ideas, must come from the community."

Sharing those stories has been the foundation of a plethora of HGOco projects, from "portable operas," performed at multiple locations, to workshops, vegetable gardens, quilting, collages... Mothers of young children learn about nutrition, English acquisition, how to shop, to deal with immigration issues, computer skills — all tools to make a better life and a richer community.

Its most acclaimed work, the world's first mariachi opera, has become an international phenomenon. The simple, human story of a Mexican family's migration to the U.S. and its attendant heartaches, melded with the amazing odyssey of the monarch butterfly, *Cruzar la Cara de la Luna* (To Cross the Face of the Moon) opens the new season of the illustrious Theatre du Chatelet in Paris this weekend.

Of course, HGO is not alone. Many of our arts nonprofits reach far beyond their walls, and their impact on our economy is impressive. By 2008 (the latest figures available) the city's cultural organizations and their audiences were generating \$626 million annually and supporting more than 14,000 full-time jobs, and returning \$33 million in local tax revenues.

And in spite of the ongoing recession, said HAA's Glus, our arts sector is still robust and growing, contributing mightily to the local economy.

So Kudos to HGO for its well-deserved award, and to all our other arts nonprofits who enrich both our spirits and our city coffers.



ON TOUR: A scene from the Mariachi opera, "Cruzar la Cara de la Luna," opening this weekend in Paris.

ANOTHER VOICE

The Washington Post

Have gun permit, will travel

Forty-eight states — 49 in November, when Wisconsin joins the pack — allow their residents to carry concealed weapons. Illinois remains the only holdout.

Until now, states have been able to set their own rules for concealed-carry permits. New York, for instance, has fairly stringent standards that ban licenses to those convicted of certain misdemeanors, require individuals to demonstrate a legitimate need and mandate firearms training. Utah's is laxer, essentially issuing licenses to residents and nonresidents alike.

These differences would be obliterated by the National Right-to-Carry Reciprocity Act, which was taken up by a House panel last week. The act would force states that allow concealed-carry to permit out-of-town visitors to tote hidden handguns if they have obtained a license elsewhere — regardless of the issuing state's standards. Advocates say that the law will allow law-abiding citizens to defend themselves wherever they are and to ensure that their right to travel — with gun handy — is not impeded by an obstinate state. This approach is bad policy and unnecessary law.

Many states already have agreements to recognize concealed-carry licenses from other jurisdictions. Virginia, for example, honors licenses from 27 other states that have similarly robust standards; Mary-

land, which strictly regulates concealed-carry, and the District of Columbia, which essentially prohibits it, do not recognize out-of-state licenses. These are legitimate choices that would be overridden by a federal legislature that too easily bends to the will of the gun lobby. Nevada, a strong gun-rights state, rescinded its agreement with Utah because Utah does not require live-fire training. Why should Congress overrule that judgment?

Allowing more guns on the streets and highways would also increase the risks to law enforcement officers, which explains why the International Association of Chiefs of Police and the Major Cities Chiefs Association are among the organizations that oppose the measure.

The Supreme Court in 2008 recognized an individual right to keep and bear arms in the home for self-defense. But the Second Amendment, like every other constitutional provision, has its limits. "Nothing in our opinion should be taken to cast doubt on long-standing prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons and the mentally ill or laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive places such as schools and government buildings," the majority concluded. Regulating who is allowed a concealed weapon should be left to the states.

IF the U.N. VOTES for PALESTINIAN STATEHOOD



LETTERS

Agreed: It can be fixed

Repairable

REGARDING "Yes, it's a Ponzi scheme, but it's also worth saving" (Page B10, Sunday), it was intriguing that columnist Charles Krauthammer would write that in the 1960s, there were 160 workers for every senior receiving Social Security benefits and that today, only three. In 20 years he said there will be but two.

The problem seems to be that old folks are living longer and there are not enough folks in the pipeline to take up the slack. The IOUs in the empty Social Security lock box represent a sum that has been transferred to our country's deficit. Krauthammer says it can be fixed with good adjustments to future recipients with some changes to age deferment and a means test for richer recipients. Sounds like a good plan.

Then, at the end of another essay, "Opponents distort, dissemble, to sell Social Security cuts" (Page B8, Sunday), the writer stated, "The facts are that Social Security has nothing to do with

the federal debt or budget deficit, is self-financing, self-correcting and secure."

How strange that people could look at the same facts and come up with differing opinions. I'll take Krauthammer's definition and have a national discussion as to what we need to do to fix a broken, but repairable, need.

— CECIL TREADWAY, Cypress

Complexities

IT is time to set the record straight for those who are calling Social Security a Ponzi scheme that deceives investors. Participants have never been misled, but they are certainly ill informed. All the information is out there on the Social Security web site. It is an extremely complex system that most of our leaders and voters do not understand.

A major misconception is that Social Security is a retirement program that should pay some expected rate of return to contributors. The reality is that it is an insurance program that never

promised a rate of return! OASDI or FICA appears on employee paychecks as a deduction. Those payments are passed through to beneficiaries of whom over 30 percent are not retirees.

The gross injustice in Social Security is that those of us making under \$106,800 are supporting this insurance program by paying FICA taxes on 100 percent of our earnings. Those making over that amount are paying a much smaller percentage of their income into the "insurance pool" used for the "greater good of society."

CEOs pay an infinitesimal percent of their total compensation into this pass-through insurance program.

Over half of retirees now depend on Social Security for half their retirement income. Why should these people be paying a greater percent of their income during earning years to support a national insurance system?

What we need is informed reform — not a bunch of ill-informed fear mongers continuing to inflame negative emotions.

— LAURY ADAMS, Houston

Corn syrup vs. corn sugar

REGARDING "FDA looks askance at 'corn sugar' branding" (Page A27, Sunday), the Corn Refiners Association wants high fructose corn syrup labeled as corn sugar. To call high fructose corn syrup sugar is like calling wieners steaks.

High fructose corn sugar is wanted by the food industry for two reasons: It is cheap, and it increases shelf-life because bugs and microbes do not like it. They do not care that people are weak and will consume high fructose corn sugar constantly.

It hurts me to see a 300-pound shopper with a cart loaded with cans or bottles of high-fructose-corn-syrup-chemical drinks and cereal or breads. It is difficult to find any packaged or prepared food at the market without it. I read labels.

— CHARLES MCPHATE, Houston

Unhealthy health care

THE conundrum addressed by "True or false? Texas has top medical centers but provides poor health care" (Page B8, Sunday) does not sufficiently emphasize the principal cause. True, American health care is considered the best, yet America's public health statistics are appalling. Health care is a euphemism; medicine practices disease care or, more accurately, illness-caused-by-chronic-disease care. The public belief that medicine cures chronic diseases is almost always false; medicine palliates chronic diseases' illnesses.

American health care's failing national health report card is because of advanced chronic disease prevalence. Over one-half of American adults have one or more identifiable chronic diseases and one-fourth of those harboring chronic diseases have progressed to illnesses. About three-fourths of all American deaths result from chronic disease illnesses. Terminal chronic illnesses are among the worst, most expensive possible life experiences.

The good news is that although chronic diseases are an inevitable part of aging, most of their illnesses need not be. Reducing factors that worsen disease or increasing factors that slow disease delays

illness and death. Most importantly, arresting chronic disease before it causes illness is the health care solution.

America, despite mounting debt, remains the wealthiest nation in world history, allowing the unhealthiest lifestyles on the planet which in turn results in the highest chronic disease rates. America cannot afford the accelerating cost of medical technology to make unhealthy lifestyles less dangerous and ever more acceptable.

— JAMES W. JONES, Montgomery

Negotiate in good faith

THE editorial "Remember Oslo" (Page B6, Friday), offered a clear, comprehensive explanation of why the proposed Palestinian unilateral declaration of independence could do more to harm the peace process than help it.

The U.N. General Assembly declaring Palestine a state without agreement between Israel and the Palestinians on borders or security arrangements certainly won't make things better.

The lack of progress in the path toward peace is frustrating, and it's natural to look for creative ways of solving problems. But those creative solutions need to include all the parties involved to be effective and lasting.

— IRWIN M. BARG, Bellair

LETTERS POLICY

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BIBLE VERSE

Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking vapor: so doth a little folly him that is reputation for wisdom and honour.

— ECCLESIASTES 10:1

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