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The New York Times

## New Group Is Formed to Sponsor Native Arts

By **ROBIN POGREBIN**  
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Even as arts groups around the country are cutting back because of declining endowments and donations, a new foundation to support the work of American Indian, Native Hawaiian and Alaska Native artists is being established with an initial \$10 million from the [Ford Foundation](#).

Called the Native Arts and Cultures Foundation, the organization, formally opened on Tuesday, says it will be the first permanently endowed national foundation of its kind.

"We needed our own endowment for native arts and culture in this country in the coming century," said Elizabeth Theobald Richards, the program officer at Ford who has overseen the project and is a Cherokee. "The indigenous peoples of this country have an incredible wealth of cultural heritage and cultural expression that very few people know about. And it's also incredibly underfunded."

The foundation has been in the works since 2007, when it obtained incorporation papers and established charity status. Only now has the organization hired a president and staff and begun the grant-making process.

The new foundation will provide direct grants to artists and arts organizations, support native arts leadership and team up with other native-led efforts to increase financial support for indigenous arts and cultures.

"Arts and culture and traditional languages and religions have been the glue that held Native Americans together — often in the face of great adversity," said Walter Echo-Hawk, chairman and creator of the foundation, in a telephone interview.

"For many years the government policy was to assimilate native people into mainstream society and essentially stamp out attributes of native culture," he added. "It's a testament to the tenacity of our people that we have any native cultures or religions left in the United States. We are seeing a remarkable cultural renaissance in the tribal communities. But the support of the arts has been almost nil. It's been very difficult for Indian tribes to also support their own arts and cultures."

The organization is to be based in Portland, Ore., and recently selected Tara Lulani

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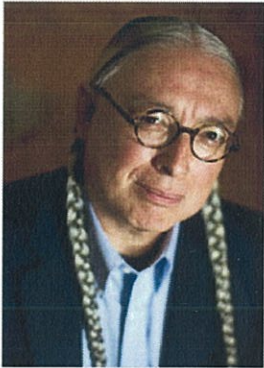
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Arquette, a Native Hawaiian, as its president and chief executive. With 20 years of experience leading organizations and advocating on behalf of native groups, Ms. Arquette has served for the last four years as chief executive and executive director of the Native Hawaiian Hospitality Association, a private, nonprofit organization that works with the tourism industry.

"In a sense, it's part of our quest for self-determination and restoring our sovereignty," Ms. Arquette said in an telephone interview.

She acknowledged the challenge of starting a new foundation in the current economic downturn. "The mission of the foundation can't be accomplished in one year or even five years," Ms. Arquette said. "But there is a sense of urgency. Our elders — our wisdom keepers — are passing away in large numbers."

The foundation, which will start with an annual operating budget of \$500,000 and a staff of four, hopes to provide about \$4 million in grants and program services over the next five years.

In establishing the new organization, the Ford Foundation reached out across the Native American world.

A leadership circle was made up of four advisers from different tribes — Mr. Echo-Hawk (Pawnee), Joy Harjo (Creek Muskogee), Jayne Fawcett (Mohegan) and Elizabeth Woody (Navajo/Warm Springs/Wasco/Yakama). All five members of the foundation's board of directors are Native Americans.

The Ford Foundation made an initial \$5 million contribution to endow the new foundation permanently, with an additional \$5 million promised if new partners brought \$3 million more to the table. The Rumsey Band of Wintun Indians, based near Sacramento, then made a grant of \$1.5 million, while announcing a challenge to other tribal nations to match its gift. Once the challenge is met, Rumsey has promised an additional \$1.5 million, which would bring the tribes' contribution to \$4.5 million.

The Ford Foundation has supported similar efforts to bolster native arts and culture in the past. "The community has the need," Ms. Richards said. "But I really feel the *country* has the need."

W. Richard West Jr., the founding director emeritus of the Smithsonian's American Indian Museum and a Ford trustee, said: "There need to be agencies and institutions that support native contemporary art and artists. For the most part, those agencies and institutions don't exist."

"We never separate art and life," added Mr. West, a member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma. "Art is part of our everyday life."

The foundation hopes to begin making grants at the end of this year or early next year, Mr. Echo-Hawk said.

The foundation's goal is to establish a permanent endowment of about \$20 million over the next five years or so, he said, and to increase that figure over time.

"Culture, even though it is central to our identity, is the last to be nurtured," Mr. Echo-Hawk said. "There is a need to inject resources into the perpetuation of these profound and beautiful art forms."

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