



## NEBRASKA HUMANITIES COUNCIL

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# **N E W S   R E L E A S E**

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## Humanities Council announces director's retirement

The Nebraska Humanities Council today announced that its long-time executive director, Jane Renner Hood, will retire at the end of the year. In making the announcement, Chuck Shoemaker, chairman of the board of directors, saluted Hood's accomplishments as significant not only in her commitment to bring the best of the humanities to Nebraskans wherever they lived and whatever their educational background, but in her recognition that "an effective cultural organization must have the financial and people resources in place first to be able to sustain excellence in its work."

Kim Robak, president of the Nebraska Foundation for the Humanities, echoed that assessment.

"Jane is passionate about Nebraskans' access to public humanities programming," she said. "She works tirelessly to build a broad base of funding and to ensure statewide outreach. Jane is a legend in humanities circles. She will truly be missed."

A Nebraska native, Hood returned to the state in 1987 after 10 years in Chicago, where she worked nine years with the Illinois Humanities Council, serving as its assistant director. Her volunteer experience there in philanthropic support for women and children, as well as her work in getting the Illinois Humanities Council's first state appropriation, prepared her well for her new position with the Nebraska Humanities Council.

During Hood's years with the council and the foundation, the annual budget grew from \$481,500 to \$1.6 million and private support from \$64,225 to \$375,000, with an additional \$195,000 in state funding and \$190,000 earned from the Nebraska Cultural Endowment, the first state endowment fund in the nation to be established for both the arts and humanities councils.

Hood is looking forward to the 15<sup>th</sup> annual Governor's Lecture in the Humanities, produced with the E.N. Thompson Forum on World Issues and the University of Nebraska at the Lied Center for Performing Arts in Lincoln on Oct. 14 and featuring Christine Todd Whitman, former New Jersey governor and head of the Environmental Protection Agency under President George W. Bush, speaking on "Going Green while Staying Ahead." It will be Hood's last lecture as executive director, but she plans to attend the 16<sup>th</sup> Governor's Lecture in the Humanities as a Nebraska resident.

According to Shoemaker, the council and foundation have appointed a search committee headed by Don Pederson to begin a national search for a new executive director. Go to [www.nebraskahumanities.org](http://www.nebraskahumanities.org) for information and to apply online. The application deadline is June 30, and the council plans to have a new director in place by early January.

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## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

“I knew that I had two things on my to-do list when I first took the position with the Nebraska Humanities Council, then known as the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities,” Hood recalled. “I needed to raise money for an endowment, and I needed to try to get a state appropriation for the council’s growing program. The NHC had a great program—and that’s what attracted me back to my home state. But the council also had great ambitions to increase the resources to support and expand that program.”

The state funding came sooner. In 1990, the NHC received its first annual state appropriation of \$75,000, provided on a matching basis. “We had to raise \$1 for every \$2 that the Legislature would appropriate, up to \$75,000 each year. That was a terrific boost for our fundraising, and the Nebraska Foundation for the Humanities was re-activated to help the council commit to annual fundraising and make progress on the endowment.”

“The endowment was much slower in coming,” Hood observed. “We weren’t ready to do it in 1987; and a professional feasibility study we did in 1994 clearly demonstrated that. But together the Nebraska Humanities Council and Nebraska Arts Council made it happen when the Nebraska Cultural Endowment was created in 1998 as the first state cultural endowment fund in the nation established for the support of both the arts and the humanities.”

With a growing infusion of private and state support, the council’s program expanded during Hood’s tenure to meet the needs of Nebraska. “Given Nebraska’s unique demographics, we’ve always had a commitment to rural Nebraska,” Hood noted, “and we were able to expand the Humanities Resource Center’s speakers bureau, exhibits, videos, and cultural encounter trunks that had been started in 1983 and the Great Plains Chautauqua that was first brought to Nebraska in 1984.”

The NHC partnered with the National Endowment for the Humanities, Library of America and Nebraska Library Commission to provide the 50-volume set of newly-edited, high-quality hard-bound classics of American literature, underwritten by NEH, to 62 public libraries across the state at one-fourth the price that it would have cost libraries to purchase the set. “It was a fantastic program for libraries with small budgets,” Hood said. “Part of the package was a speaker from our Humanities Resource Center for the libraries to use in a public program announcing the new acquisition. I remember Sen. Rex Haberman personally contributing his library’s share so that his hometown could afford the reduced fee to get the Library of America set of classics.”

Other programs designed for rural Nebraska and adopted during Hood’s nearly 23 years with the council include the on-going partnership with the Smithsonian Institution to bring high-quality national exhibits specifically reformatted to fit the needs of small museums. The council began in 1996 with the popular exhibit on the home front during W.W. II, *Produce for Victory*, which toured five rural towns.

“We have also partnered with NET Radio and NET Television for nearly four decades to bring outstanding humanities programs into people’s living rooms, cars, trucks, tractors, and now their lap-tops,” she said. “Today, technology offers us such an even more amazing opportunity to reach everyone in our far-flung state.”

New programs designed to reach Nebraska’s youth and young families have also been an important part of the council’s work during Hood’s years in Nebraska. “We have tried to focus our programs on the areas of greatest need. It is clear that there are Nebraska children who will not succeed in school unless they have parents or guardians who are engaged in their

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education. Early reading to young children is one of the most important ways to prepare a child for success in school. In 2004 we began a collaboration with the Nebraska Library Commission, local libraries and schools to offer *Prime Time Family Reading Time* in a bilingual format for towns and neighborhoods across the state where students' reading scores fall below the state standard," said Hood. "It has made a significant difference in thousands of children's lives."

Also concerned by national studies that showed a decline in high school students' understanding of history and government, as well as the low voter turnout among the 18-25 age group, the council collaborated with the Nebraska Secretary of State's office to begin *Capitol Forum on America's Future* in 1999 to introduce U.S. foreign policy issues to high-school juniors and seniors from 25 high schools statewide each year and provide them an opportunity to discuss international concerns with their congressional delegation.

The Governor's Lecture in the Humanities was another important new program started under Hood's leadership. "The National Endowment for the Humanities faced a 'near-death experience' in 1995-96 after the 1994 election when the House of Representatives was determined to eliminate NEH, NEA, and PBS," Hood explained, "and the council and the foundation decided they needed a way to demonstrate to all that the Nebraska Humanities Council was here to stay."

They collaborated with Gov. Ben Nelson to begin the Governor's Lecture in the Humanities in 1996 with author, presidential speechwriter and native son Ted Sorensen "as the first and, perhaps, most eloquent speaker in the 14-year history of the lecture series," Hood said. "But it wasn't until we had an overflow audience for Stephen Ambrose in 1998, shortly after the film *Saving Private Ryan* was released, that we realized we had another way to raise funds! We have had excellent collaboration with each governor since Gov. Nelson in presenting a free public humanities lecture by a nationally-known speaker while at the same time raising money for our statewide programming through the benefit dinner and reception that precede the lecture.

"It will be so interesting to see where the council and foundation go in the future. The NHC/NFH is fiscally sound, has a terrific staff and boards of directors, its programming is first-rate, and the people of Nebraska have been so loyal. It is going to be really exciting to be a beneficiary of its future rather than an actor in it."

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***Editors Note: For a personal interview with Jane Renner Hood, reporters may reach her at (402) 474-2131, ext. 107, or jane@nebraskahumanities.org. For further comments, you may call Kim Robak, president of the Nebraska Foundation for the Humanities, at (402) 434-3399, or Chuck Shoemaker, chair of the Nebraska Humanities Council board of directors, at (402) 462-0300.***