



November 11, 2011

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing today to support the nomination of Charles Ahovissi and African Culture Connection (ACC) for a Governor's Arts Award in the category of Heritage.

As many as five years ago, ACC began offering workshops at Girls Inc., dipping a toe in the water with occasional programs that might last a few weeks. In the past three years, however, the partnership has grown and prospered. African Culture Connection now offers workshops in African arts and culture three times per week in our two centers in North and South Omaha.

"Mr. Charles" has designed a comprehensive, year-round program that teaches girls about African history and culture and gives them hands opportunities to experience the art of Africa – language, visual art, storytelling, dance, music, drumming, textile printing, and jewelry making. This holistic program offers the girls more than a one-time workshop, or even a once-a-week for six weeks taste. Through Mr. Charles and his team of artists and cultural ambassadors, African Culture Connection has had a major presence in the girls' lives for a period of years.

Girls Inc. works primarily with girls from low income families (over 50% with combined household incomes less than \$20,000 and another 23% with incomes less than \$30,000). If African Culture Connection had not reached to Girls Inc., our girls would simply not have the exposure to the rich experiences he offers. A large percentage of the membership at our South Omaha Emma Lozier Center is African refugees. These girls love having a familiar piece of the homes they left behind brought into their lives at Girls Inc. They are proud of their heritage and happy to be sharing it with their friends. While Africa is a large continent, Mr. Charles brings in traditions and culture from a variety of countries and tribes. Many of our girls in both centers (up to 78%) are African American, with roots in the very parts of Africa that Mr. Charles brings into our centers and their lives. Without African Culture Connection, this heritage would, at best, be something they only connected to through books and lectures. Instead, they have the opportunity to touch, feel, hear, and create the art and the spirit of a distant homeland.

Just watching the girls help Mr. Charles carry the drums (and there are so many of them!) into the gym to get set up for a day of drumming, you can tell something special is about to happen. No matter what happened that day in school or at home, the girls are about to get lost in the beats and rhythms of Africa. For the time they are working with ACC, nothing else matters and that, for many of them, is a pretty rare thing.

Please give African Culture Connection your strongest consideration for a Governor's Arts Award. They are truly a gift – not just to Girls Inc. but to the state of Nebraska.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Roberta Wilhelm". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "R".

Roberta Wilhelm
Executive Director
Girls Inc. of Omaha