



[Barnaby Evans, WaterFire's creator - a social entrepreneur igniting art and urban community](#)



If I could, I would nominate Barnaby Evans, the creator of [WaterFire](#), for a [MacArthur Fellowship](#) (aka, the “genius” awards). But unfortunately, these fellowships don’t have an open nomination process.

If you haven’t experienced *WaterFire*, I urge you to come to Providence one of the nights that the fires burn. Thousands of people, from all walks of life, stroll the walkways that align Providence’s downtown rivers to contemplate

and participate in this extraordinary work of public art and urban community. A [fabulous article](#) in the Washington Post a few years ago so well describes the magic of this event and the herculean effort to put it together, that I needn’t go into the details here.



WaterFire’s creator, [Barnaby Evans](#) is one of the most generous and thoughtful individuals that I have met. Did I also say brilliant? That too.

For over 12 years, Barnaby has been” sculpting” this extraordinary phenomenon. For those of you who have run special events, you know how much work each event entails. Well, imagine the effort to run an event for tens of thousands of people, then do that on average 13 nights from May to June each year! Most normal humans would collapse after just one or two of these events, but Barnaby and his dedicated staff and addicted volunteers keep going and going and going.

Each lighting adds features. The music selections are carefully designed for each event by Barnaby. This labor day weekend will celebrate working people and also include tenors and sopranos and Opera Providence live. Upcoming fires will include programming to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the founding of Israel and the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade.

These aren't commemorations in name only. The rituals of WaterFire will be expanded to integrate new natural, built and human symbols that create opportunities for deep reflection on the theme presented.

Barnaby's visions are grand, well-researched, and brought to life by sheer determination and hour after hour of hard work by all involved, including the artist.

For Barnaby, each canvas of WaterFire is an opportunity to intentionally reaffirm community. He does this through WaterFire's design but also by showcasing its amazing people and institutions. The rich heritage of our multicultural community is reaffirmed through the music selections, through special programming and through the people who come to participate in this event. For example, a few weeks ago, WaterFire once again presented the scholarship awardees of [Latino Dollars for Scholars of Rhode Island](#) to the crowd at the ballroom stage. Last January, LADO surprised Barnaby with a special award at its annual scholarship banquet.

Barnaby Evans embodies for me all the best of nonprofit leadership — scholarship, intellect, generosity of spirit, passion, genius, courage and commitment.

As a private, nonprofit organization, WaterFire Providence's task ahead is to raise the funds that will enable it to build the internal infrastructure to deliver in perpetuity and to meet the resounding desire of our community that *WaterFire* continue "forever." With new capacity, we can look forward to the next phase of artistic genius and community partnership that freeing Barnaby from the managerial tasks that consume so much of his time will allow. (Truly, I don't know when he sleeps...like so many incredible "social entrepreneurs").

I look forward to the next wave of artistic and community building genius.

Gayle

P.S. In full disclosure, I've been very fortunate to consult with WaterFire Providence — first to facilitate a thoughtful strategic reflection on their future, and now to provide consultation as needed for the roll-out of that plan. If not for that relationship, I probably wouldn't have had the opportunity to work alongside this amazing human being (unless I had volunteered for WaterFire).

This entry was posted on Wednesday, August 27th, 2008 at 9:47 am and is filed under [Profiles of passion and courage](#), [Nonprofit Highlights](#), [Strategic Thinking](#).

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