

UNC System President Peter Hans
Remarks to the UNC Board of Governors
April 18, 2024

It's wonderful to be back at School of the Arts, which — exactly as you'd expect — puts on the best show of any campus in the UNC System. I still remember what a joy it was to be here for Chancellor Cole's installation just a few years ago, which included world-class ballet performances, a couple of musical numbers, and the best percussion ensemble anywhere in the state.

I knew right then and there that we needed to recruit more orchestra conductors to become chancellors. They understand how to shape creative energy into something beautiful, into a work greater than the sum of its parts. And Chancellor Cole has certainly shown that talent here at School of the Arts.

Every time I visit this place, I think about what an extraordinary act of creativity it was to found a public arts conservatory in 1960s North Carolina. It was an audacious thing to believe you could build a southern Julliard in the tobacco and textile town of Winston-Salem, and it's no surprise at all that vision came from a novelist.

John Ehle was a great believer in the unsung capacity of his fellow North Carolinians, someone who spent a lifetime noticing the overlooked talents, passions, and humanity of his fellow citizens.

He was also someone who believed very deeply in the capacity of art to bridge the great divides in our lives, to help us see with compassion across barriers of race, class, time, and politics. He wrote with beauty and understanding about settlers and civil rights activists; about Native Americans and railroad barons; about mountain clans and families torn apart by civil war. He even found it in his heart to write a biography of a University President, about the legendary Dr. Frank Porter Graham.

He was, in the old-school sense of the term, a social critic — an artist who showed his love of this state by willing it to be better. School of the Arts was born from an act of criticism. Ehle had a long history of frustration with the way art and music and drama were taught in our state, and he wasn't quiet about it. He wrote demanding letters to deans and department heads at UNC-Chapel Hill, where he worked for a time. He wrote a public report criticizing the limited opportunities in arts education for young North Carolinians.

"I've always been critical," Ehle told an interviewer in 2005. "That seems to me to be basic to creativity."

But Ehle didn't stop with criticism. He knew that offering a sharp observation about a problem was just the first step toward action. Given the opportunity to do something constructive about the challenges he named, Ehle didn't hesitate. In his work as an advisor to Governor Terry Sanford, and his time with the Ford Foundation, Ehle helped spark one of the most productive chapters in North Carolina education. He showed how creative energy can be the spark for real progress, and how the truest sign of commitment is sticking around for the hard work of rebuilding and reform. Having the courage and patience to rectify a wrong is one of the most important things we can do for the institutions we love.

That commitment is alive and well in our public universities, and it is especially vivid here at School of the Arts. The founding charter of this school calls on North Carolina to continue promoting "matters of the human spirit," and it's wonderful to see this generation of students embracing that charge. There were doubters when this school was first created, people who didn't believe North Carolina possessed the native talent to fill a world-class performing arts conservatory. Those skeptics were wrong, and we're a better state for it.