



Dear Chatham Neighbors,

Ten years ago, Chatham Arts Council (CAC) executive director Cheryl Chamblee called me up, all excited to get a brand new program started in Chatham County. A few weeks later, I was in the principal's office at North Chatham Elementary, making plans for theatre and writing workshops with fifth-graders. The [Chatham Artists-in-](#)

Schools Initiative (AIS) was born that year. Two schools. Three Chatham-based artists. That's how it started.

Cheryl didn't tell me the big vision back in 2015. It was . . . ambitious, especially for what was then a one-person part-time staff! CAC wanted to bring professional artists to Chatham County Schools, AND to be in every school, every year by 2025.

Why would anyone take on a goal like that?

That answer is easy: Because the arts save lives.

I know because 10 years ago at North Chatham, the principal said, "That kid you brought up on stage—this is the first time he's ever been seen in a positive light in front of his peers or his teachers." The first time. For a fifth-grader.

I know because 5 years ago at Virginia Cross, a reading specialist said, "That's the first time I've ever seen that child smile at school." The first time. Another fifth-grader.

I know because just a few weeks ago at Siler City Elementary, a student said, "I found out I'm a really good thinker." Another first-time discovery. Another fifth-grader.

Hundreds of times—not just in Chatham, but all over the country—I've gotten to witness that first time, that life-saving moment through the arts. **And for me, it lands extra here in Chatham, where my own kids and their friends go to school.**

Here we are in 2024, and the Chatham Arts Council, with a larger but still very tiny part-time staff, is close to hitting that ambitious goal. **In 2025, Chatham could be the first county in North Carolina to have a teaching artist visit every school in the Chatham school system!** Y'all, that's huge for our kids.

We gotta help make it happen. It's a good investment. I know because I've seen it with my own eyes: The arts save lives.

With hope,

Mike Wiley

Teaching Artist, Theatre-maker, Dad

"It felt like people could see part of the real me. "

–Chatham fifth-grader after Mike Wiley residency

"It felt good for me to release all my emotions."

–Chatham fifth-grader after Mike Wiley residency

