

HOW MUSIC CAN SAVE THE WORLD

by CHRIS BEAUDRY

Executive Director, Willimantic Renaissance, Inc.

From the moment he picked up a saxophone in the fourth grade, Mansfield native **Chris Beaudry** knew music would shape his life. Under the wing of his cousin and first teacher, Katheryn "Aunt Kay" Niemasik, he found both skill and spark — the start of a lifelong creative journey.

By high school, that passion carried him to the **Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts**, where he studied with jazz giants **Jimmy Greene** and **Paul Brown**. A scholarship to **The Berklee College of Music** took him to Boston where he lived for eight years performing, composing, and growing as a working musician. Teaching later brought him back to GHAA, before he headed to New York **University** for a master's in jazz studies where he met, studied with, and eventually went to work with **4X-Grammy-winner, Lenny White, of Miles Davis fame**.

In New York, Chris began shaping the music world from behind the scenes — helping White release more than ten albums and booking top artists such as **Christian McBride, Regina Carter**, and the **Smalls Live All-Stars**. Those years of touring and industry work deepened his sense that music's true power lies in connection.

When the pandemic returned him to Connecticut, Chris took on management of The **Side Door Jazz Club** and the **Old Lyme Inn**, eventually becoming general manager of the entire property. Yet, he felt the pull to build something of his own — something rooted in community. That dream became The River Room, a performing-arts venue in **downtown Willimantic** co-founded with **Daniela de Sousa** and built under the general contracting expertise of Mark Dressier. With guidance and generosity from blues legend **David "Lefty" Foster** and Shaboo Inn co-owner **Bruce John**, the space opened in April 2025.

Since then, The River Room has hosted world-class performers — from **Gray Sargent** of Tony Bennett's band to **Grammy-winner Zaccai Curtis**, plus bestselling authors like **Wally Lamb** — while giving local artists a stage to shine. It has quickly become a creative heartbeat for the region and recently was named "Best New Business" in the 2025 Chronicle Readers' Choice Awards Poll.

In 2025, the board of Willimantic Renaissance, Inc., the organization that produces the Willimantic 3rd Thursday Street Festivals and other projects, voted to make The River Room an official project of the nonprofit, and Chris became WRI's **first Executive Director**. For him, it's a homecoming — a chance to use the arts to revitalize the very community his family helped build. His grandfather once owned a store on Railroad Street; his father welded the movie screens at the Mansfield Drive-In; and his mother, **Teresa "Cookie" Mamunes**, still teaches English Language Learners at E.O. Smith High School. Her compassion and commitment remain his guiding light.

Beyond music, Chris is a tireless local advocate — showing up at festivals, coffee shops, and farmers markets, always urging neighbors to **"support local."** This year he returned as main stage emcee of the **Celebrate Mansfield Festival**, bringing together storytelling, song, and civic pride — the same spirit that defines his leadership at WRI.

For Chris Beaudry, everything circles back to roots: musical, familial, and communal. Whether he's on stage with his saxophone, booking the next River Room act, or attending and enjoying events around town, he's helping ensure that **Willimantic and Mansfield thrive with the arts at their heart**.