

# How Grassroots Grows

## PROVINCETOWN COMMUNITY COMPACT TURNS 40

When Hurricane Bob hit New England back in 1992, the 100 mph sustained winds in Provincetown were the highest in the state. At the time, there was a tenant staying in one of the town's historic dune shacks, a scattered group of isolated shelters with a long legacy of housing artists who live and work for the summer out amid the rolling sand. So Jay Critchley, a conceptual and performance artist in P'town since the '70s, gathered a group to go to the rescue and board up the shack, hoping the primitive structure might somehow withstand the violent weather.

It did. That these 19 small, spare buildings—some constructed over 100 years ago—are still intact is a testament to the resilience of Provincetown, which is a beautiful yet fragile place: Geographically vulnerable to extreme weather (worsening with climate change) and, economically speaking, an increasingly harsher place for the artists who define its culture to make a home.

Luckily, P'town has its protectors—and Critchley is still foremost among them. After all, he's the founder and president of the Provincetown Community Compact, which is currently marking its 30th anniversary as an incubator (or as the Compact calls itself, "think-ubator") of cultural development on the Outer Cape. In addition to being a careful steward of Provincetown's legacy as America's oldest continuously operating arts colony, the nonprofit has also emerged as a vital force in preserving its natural environment, fortifying the local economy, and generally advancing the overall health of the town, its residents, and visitors.

"The Compact came about as a reinvention of the Mayflower Compact," Critchley here. "When the Mayflower landed

here on Wampanoag land, they stole the corn and shot at the Native Americans. The idea was to create a different concept of a compact, one that nurtured community and integrated the arts, culture, economy, and environment."



"I see the Compact as being part of my own art practice," adds Critchley, who was raised in a strict Irish-Catholic family in Connecticut, and moved to Provincetown in 1975 with his then-wife. Here he came out as gay as well as a "born-again artist."

"It was an organic process, because Provincetown is a place where you don't have to justify being an artist. If you say you're an artist, people believe you."

His frequently avant-garde works, which contain themes of environmental and social activism, have been performed and exhibited around the world, garnering notice, praise, and—as great art typically does—a bit of controversy, too: For instance, he was once banned from entering the Massachusetts State House for wearing a Statue of Liberty gown he constructed from thousands of tampons he found discarded on Provincetown beaches.

His Provincetown Community Compact was created on the beaches, too. Although the organization was officially formed in 1993, its very first program debuted a few years earlier: Swim for Life & Paddler Flotilla, an annual fundraiser that sees



Provincetown Swim for Life & Paddler Flotilla. PHOTO Mike Syers

[AT TOP] Diana Morton Parade

participants stroke or paddle their way across Provincetown Harbor to support local health organizations. When Critchley and dancer Walter McLean launched it in 1988, there were 18 swimmers who raised \$6,000; in 2022, over 200 participants raised about \$200,000.

In addition to growing Swim for Life—which will take to the harbor this year on Saturday, September 9—the Provincetown Community Compact has expanded its scope and impact in many other ways. For instance, its colorful collection of five-foot-long Prayer Ribbons, which first unfurled at the '93 Swim for Life to celebrate the lives of those impacted by or lost to HIV/AIDS, now include a set dedicated to the victims of the Pulse nightclub massacre in Orlando, where they have been installed at the invitation of City Hall for the last several Pride months.

The Compact's catalyzing work as a "think-ubator," meanwhile, has provided fiscal support, expert guidance, and access to

crucial networks and resources for countless large and small arts projects in P'town over the years. A number of them have become major self-sufficient organizations in their own right: the Provincetown International Film Festival, Tennessee Williams Theater Festival, and Summer of Sass, to name a few.

And today, the Compact is responsible for managing two of those landmark dune shacks, reserving some of its residencies, which are provided to visual artists and writers, for Native Americans and emerging artists of color. There, creators dwell and develop works that keep alive P'town's rich cultural heritage. So too will the Compact itself.

"We're open to exploring every project—there's nothing too crazy or unimaginable," Critchley says. "It's all about believing in your dreams. Provincetown is a place where that can happen. That's why we're here." [X]