Portrait of region's artists shows how varied they are

By Bill Densmore

Don't expect an influx of a new class of people into the region if a proposed contemporary-art museum is built in North Adams, a researcher says. That's because artists' interests and income sources are as varied as those of the public at large.

That's one conclusion to be drawn from an effort by a Columbia University researcher to complete the first-ever portrait of the income, motivations and human-service needs of artists.

"Artists are part of the community, too," says Professor Joan Jeffri. "They are integrated into the community in ways that aren't realized. They use services, for example."

Jeffri surveyed 9,870 artists nationwide and received responses from 4,134 under a grant from 10 foundations and the state-funded Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities. Her findings were made public last week in New York.

The survey respondents were from eight major cities nationwide and from two rural areas: Cape Cod and western Massachusetts.

In an ADVOCATE telephone interview, Jeffri cited the following key findings:

-- A total of 56 percent of the artists in western Massachusetts reported individual gross incomes greater than $20,000 a year -- a figure higher than the median family income in the region. But 31 percent reported incomes in the $10,000-to-$20,000 range.

-- Few respondents nationwide actually derive their primary income from their art activities. In fact, more than half the respondents earn $3,000 a year or less from their art. In western Massachusetts, less than a third of the respondents earned more than $12,000 a year from their art.

-- Nationwide, 77 percent need to work at other jobs to support themselves and their art, and those jobs range from taxi driving to factory employment.

-- Artists have a higher level of both traditional and non-traditional education than the general population. Forty-two percent are college graduates. In one surprising finding, Jeffri said 82 percent of respondents had health-insurance coverage, indicating a high degree of concern for personal health.

-- A total of 59 percent of artists in western Massachusetts said "environment" was their principal reason for locating where they are. Jeffri said the term environment was not otherwise defined. She said that figure contrasts with about 20 percent who rated environment as important in cities like Boston.

"Clearly the economic realities of artists' lives revealed by this study show that passion, commitment and inner drive are what compel artists to be artists," says Jeffri.

Of the respondents, about a third were in painting or sculpture, and the rest ran the gamut through photography, film, video, television, theater, dance, writing or music. The median age was 37 and 57 percent were female. In western Massachusetts, 27 percent of the respondents were in painting or drawing, 24 percent were in writing or literature, 9 percent in crafts and 9 percent in photography.

"Many artists are concerned about their role in society," she says. "One artist said: 'I am filled with anxiety for the future and rage at our society's undervaluing of the arts.' Another described artists as perpetual, permanent outsiders."