Sue Higby's 20 years ...

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Sue Higby has reached her 20th year as executive director of Studio Place Arts in Barre — with no end in sight, Jeb Wallace-Brodeur/ Staff photo

Over 400 free original art exhibitions — artwork by more than 1,000 artists seen by many thousands of Vermonters and visitors; classes, workshops and events helping people make art; a dozen artist's studios; nine emerging artist residencies; 16 lifetime retrospectives of Vermont artists; one fleeting sculpture park; one rescued telephone booth; one pandemic; floods in the basement (seven); squirrels in the attic — it has been an eventful two decades at Barre's Studio Place Arts since Sue Higby took the helm there in 2003.

This February marks Higby's 20th anniversary as SPA executive director. A tireless advocate for the arts, Higby has led SPA to become a vital and valued art hub serving the central Vermont community and beyond.

"Without Sue, Studio Place Arts wouldn't be here now," said Janet Van Fleet, artist and SPA co-founder and board member.

"Sue has built SPA from a wobbly, new, enthusiastic but unformed effort into a spectacular regional arts center that is a model of community engagement, intellectual and aesthetic enrichment, and cultural nourishment."

"She is always coming up with ways to do an even more amazing job," said Van Fleet.

Higby joined SPA in its early days — if not exactly its infancy, at least in its toddlerhood. Founded by a group of artists including Van Fleet, SPA opened its doors in November 2000.

Higby, who moved to Vermont from the Washington, D.C., area, had considerable professional background in nonprofit organizational development, including with the National Council for Science and the Environment and The Nature Conservancy. SPA co-founders, including Van Fleet, knew that the new center needed professional help for long term sustainability and were eager to have Higby involved.

Higby also was drawn to SPA, in part from her familiarity with The Torpedo Factory, a groundbreaking arts center with artists' studios, exhibition spaces and educational program in Alexandria, Virginia. SPA seemed to have a similar vision. She soon got involved — first volunteering and serving on its board. She then stepped in as interim director when a previous director left. "Interim" soon yielded to permanent.

Van Fleet recalled that soon after taking on the position, Higby moved the director's office from the second floor to the ground floor, right next to the gallery so she could greet visitors to the exhibitions — direct engagement that she continues. In that first year, Higby also spearheaded SPA's Freedom of Expression Policy protecting artists' rights to self-expression. It was adopted in March 2004.

Every year, SPA offers a very full schedule of exhibitions in its galleries and beyond. Typically, six shows are presented annually in the Main Floor Gallery and two upper floor galleries. Every one is original, and as Van Fleet noted, Higby makes them happen — reaching out to artists, selecting work, coordinating delivery, hanging the art, preparing labels, coordinating artist statements, and getting the word out — all before the doors open. And then gets the art returned, walls patched, pedestals rearranged before launching the next one.

Among SPA's exhibitions, Higby has established the "Rock Solid" show as a spectacular annual celebration of Vermont's stone arts and carvers. "Rock Solid XXIII" is coming up in September. In another of Higby's initiatives, SPA

has honored 16 older Vermont artists with significant retrospective shows. These include Frank Gaylord (2015), Giuliano Cecchinelli Senior (2016), Rebecca Merrilees (2012).

Higby also thinks out of the box. In 2019, she adopted a decommissioned telephone booth from East Calais. The booth, cleaned and set up for hanging art, is now the Quick-Change Gallery, a pop-up space for artists to present unframed artwork in short-term shows.

When the adjacent building was demolished in 2011, Higby collaborated with artists and with the city to transform the vacant lot into a temporary sculpture park. Five large-scale granite and marble pieces were installed there.

As Higby looks back on that project, she noted that “it helped remind people that in addition to Barre’s beautiful gateway pieces, that we can have more pieces of human scale around the city.”

As several new granite pieces have been added around Barre, including “Unzipping the Earth” the world’s largest zipper, SPA has helped get locals and visitors to them with the Art Stroll Map and brochure.

SPA’s diverse educational programs serve adults and youth year-round. During the pandemic shutdown, SPA stepped up online offering to bring more art and artmaking into homes.

To support emerging artists from central Vermont, Higby launched the SPA Studio Residency Program in 2015. In this competitive program, selected artists — nine so far — have the use of a small studio at SPA for one year free of charge and at the conclusion share their work in a SPA exhibition.

There have been plenty of challenges in Higby’s 20 years. In the first decade, the basement flooded seven times as an underground waterway coursed through the foundation — and Higby honed sludge removal skills. Barre’s “Big Dig” — a long-term gain — kept the front door closed for 18 months, so gallery visitors came in the back door. When the pandemic disrupted SPA, Higby led safety procedures at SPA and grew SPA’s online offerings. Just recently, a visiting squirrel was humanely shown the exit.

Higby credits the overall SPA team with the organization's successes and resilience.

"The team of people associated with SPA are a truly outstanding group of individuals. We're talking about founders, staff, volunteers, exhibiting artists, instructors, and studio residents and others," said Higby.

Twenty years in, SPA continues to excite her.

"The excitement that I have can be from something as simple as seeing people's faces light up when they enter the gallery to being in my office and hearing people in the classroom exclaiming things like 'Oh! So that's how you do it!' It's the joy of seeing and hearing people's responses to creativity. I know that what we're doing here has really changed many hundreds of people's lives. It's exciting to think about that."