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Triple threat: 3 Vt. cities make national list for arts vibrancy

By Patricia Minichiello



Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff Photo
Studio Place Arts is a major contributor to Barre City's arts vibrancy.

Vermont made a new list of “Hotbeds of America’s Arts and Culture” not one, not two, but three times.

Barre, Bennington and Burlington made the list of 20 medium and small communities across the country with vibrant arts scenes.

“For us it’s exciting to see that vibrancy doesn’t have to be in large places, but there’s vibrancy all over the country,” said Marla Teyolia, associate director of the National Center for Arts Research, a group affiliated with Southern Methodist University.

Teyolia said that it took researchers seven months to complete the list. “This is our first annual report and our intention is to release it every year,” she said.

The report uses three criteria: total number of arts communities in the area, total nonprofit arts dollars in those communities and level of government support — state and federal arts dollars.

Barre ranked Number 10 on the list, while Bennington and Burlington ranked 15 and 19 respectively.

Sue Higby, executive of Studio Place Arts in Barre, said the ranking was exciting, especially given Vermont's triple threat.

"At the same time, the onus is upon us who have received recognition to expand our contributions. We have a huge responsibility to maintain programs," Higby said.

"While it's a huge honor, I would not want to see this honor short-lived."

She said she hopes that this kind of national recognition serves as a catalyst for the state of Vermont to put more money into the arts scene.

"This is a good wake-up call," Higby said. "This cluster of activities happening in central Vermont should be marketed through the state Department of Tourism."

Cities near Barre — such as Waterbury, Woodbury and Montpelier — were also mentioned in the report as contributing to the central Vermont arts scene. Organizations such as Studio Place Arts in Barre, the Green Mountain Film Festival in Montpelier and St. Johnsbury, and the Vermont Philharmonic reflect why the scene is considered vibrant.

In Bennington, organizations contributing to the vibrancy of the arts scene include the Bennington Arts Guild, Bennington Center for the Arts and Oldcastle Theatre Company.

Eric Peterson, a lifelong Bennington resident and Oldcastle's founding producing artistic director, said Bennington has been trying very hard to create a vibrant arts scene, and it's terrific to finally get recognized.

"Pretty impressive. We beat Burlington actually," he said with a laugh.

Oldcastle Theatre Company is a professional theater that produces original plays highlighting regional and national issues. Last season they did a play called "Bennington Goes to War," which Peterson co-wrote with Anthony Marro, longtime editor of Newsday on Long Island and now an Old Bennington resident. The play was based largely on interviews by the Bennington Historical Society.

"We're keeping our part of Main Street very vibrant and very busy," he said, adding that the Bennington name is synonymous with the arts, thanks to institutions such as Bennington College and the Bennington Museum.

The arts scene as a whole, Peterson said, suffers because many artists in Vermont cannot survive on art alone.

"You have to have other jobs," he said. "You have to teach, drive a truck, or do something else. That hurts the arts. Time is precious for arts."

Burlington-South Burlington was the third Vermont city to make the list. Among the major arts

groups contributing to the distinction is Burlington City Arts.

Eric Ford, communication director of Burlington City Arts, said the recognition is a testament to a long history of vibrant arts programs in the area — everything from Discover Jazz Festival, “a world-renowned event,” to the South End Art Hop! in Burlington at the end of the summer.

“When you travel around Burlington, art is everywhere. Every bar, coffee shop, public space that you see, there’s Vermont art on the walls,” Ford said. “It’s just this invasive thing. It’s everywhere.”

“It really shows you how many people are living and working as artists in the Burlington area,” Ford said.

Vermont Arts Council says there are more artists per capita in Vermont than any other state.

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