



COMMENTARY

20 years of community enrichment

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We at Studio Place Arts opened our doors to the public on Nov. 11, 2000, 20 years ago today.

Surely, when the founding artists were staring at a scorched shell of an historic structure on North Main Street in Barre in the late-1990s, the Nichols Block, they could not have imagined the incalculable positive effect made by SPA on vast numbers of community members and visitors who have been served by our programs. We thank SPA supporters, volunteers and others for their many contributions.

We treasure our copies of the original “SPA Prospectus” that was prepared to elicit support from community members back in 1999. This understated document outlined plans for a gallery, a selection of educational programs, and work spaces for local artists. Additionally, it outlined the case for SPA: There was no existing visual arts center in Washington County at a time when there appeared to be growing interest in exhibiting, learning about art, and collaborating on visual arts

projects. A hub of activity such as SPA was predicted to attract participants and audiences from as far away as 25 miles.

Simply stated, SPA delivered. We did not settle on just one exhibition space; we have an engaging schedule of four simultaneous, contemporary art exhibits that regularly rotate. These are free of charge, and we often develop workshops and artist talks to involve people of all ages in the content of the exhibitions.

Over the years, SPA has collaborated on its exhibitions with outside institutions and groups, such as: The Center for Cartoon Studies, University of Nagoya in Japan, the Vermont Studio Center, the Vermont Weavers Guild and the Cranbrook Academy of Art. Additionally, SPA has mounted 11 lifetime retrospective exhibits to honor these featured artists’ many contributions.

SPA influences art outside of the art center. We at SPA regularly share our work, model projects and our Freedom of Expression Policy (approved in

2004, this exhibition policy is the only one of its type in the state of Vermont). SPA exhibits artwork in public spaces, such as municipal buildings, and in private businesses. As a community volunteer, I secured funds to create the Stone Sculpture Legacy Program and the Art Stroll to bring more public sculptures to our streets and more attention to our talented local sculptors.

SPA has offered a wide range of classes and workshops to people of all ages and abilities. Additionally, we have provided artist talks, to reveal how artists plan for a body of work, their methods and specific techniques, ways to exhibit and sell work, archival issues, and to provide other resources. SPA regularly offers activities for young families, including free art workshops on Saturdays, story time and “eye spy” activities in the gallery, and scholarship assistance. We work hard to expand the number of children, teens and others in order to contribute to the understanding of SPA as a resource for innovation and creativity.

SPA was formed out of the interest among the founding artists to create studio spaces that would afford new ways to collaborate, share ideas and interact with the public. Those connections made by working artists turn out to be an inspiring source of energy for our art center; we often describe this as a way to demystify the art-making process and motivate people to consider ways to make art themselves.

In 2014, SPA secured a grant to test an 11-month Studio Residency Program in one of our studios that would provide a free workspace for an emerging artist in our community and includes the promise of an exhibit at the conclusion of the residency. This popular program has been extended, and it is now entering its sixth year. The geographical scope of our reach is sometimes surprising. Participation has exceeded our original expectations described in the historic “SPA Prospectus” and many people drive from Chittenden County and communities across the state, as well as from other areas across the country, to attend programs and exhibits at

SPA, often traveling distances of well over 50 miles.

Over the years, there have been “ups” and there have been “downs.” As previously noted, SPA has had many “ups.” The “downs” have included: Slogging through extremely tight economic circumstances, including the Great Recession; surviving multiple floods; haggling with Barre City over property taxes; and a bias among philanthropic resources that results in disproportionately fewer funding opportunities for the visual arts compared to other cultural organizations. SPA began as a gleam in the eyes of an intrepid band of founding artists and it has flourished over the years with the investments made by dedicated volunteers, staff and artists. Unlike many nonprofit organizations, SPA never had a group of “deep-pocketed” donors, never asked for a local bond, and never received annual support from federal, state or municipal governmental sources.

The current strains felt by other nonprofit organizations are felt by SPA as we push through a pandemic and related economic challenges. Nevertheless, we

know our regional visual arts center provides hope, inspiration and comfort, and we will continue to do everything possible to serve our community.

When the pandemic began and SPA had to close its doors, we pivoted quickly to deliver digital exhibitions for artists, an organizing site for making face masks, and creative games and educational programs for children.

We are proud that SPA was one of the first art centers in Vermont to reopen, guided by careful protocols to protect participants. SPA members and donors have provided the essential unrestricted dollars that support the many creative opportunities for service, collaboration and productivity throughout the years. We sincerely thank you for supporting SPA.

SPA provides a threefold benefit to our region: economic development, cultural enrichment and community service. We simply could not have accomplished as much, nor meet the growing demands on our institution, without you!

-Sue Higby is SPA Executive Director since 2003.