New Jersey's Arts Programs Have a Friend in Judi Leone



Judi Leone

The New Jersey State Council on the Arts, a government agency within the Department of State, is the definitive voice on funding for artists, arts organizations and art projects in the Garden State. For more than 40 years, the Council has advanced its mission to improve New Jerseyans' quality of life through programs and projects that allow the arts to flourish, serving more than 18 million audience members each year.

That said, Ocean County residents who care about the arts should know how fortunate they are to be well represented on the Council by experienced and hard-working arts advocate Judith Leone of Toms River.

As the Council's second vice chair, Leone is one of 16 governor-appointed council members, only four of whom are from southern New Jersey. She has served one complete three-year term and, as of December, was awaiting reappointment by Gov. Jon Corzine. She was confident that "things will be happening in January."

The appointment process involves a candidate's acquiring recommendations from the appropriate senators – in Leone's case, Sens. Christopher Connors, Andrew Ciesla and Robert Singer, from each of Ocean County's three legislative districts, 9, 10 and 30 – followed by an OK from the full senate and, finally, the governor's stamp of approval.

Last year, under Leone's leadership as chairwoman, the Council's grants committee distributed some $20 million in grant monies to about 300 different recipients throughout the state.

According to the Council itself, the whole of the agency's monetary and human resources is devoted to "fostering quality education, stimulating economic development, bolstering tourism and building NJ pride ... in partnership and collaborations with literally dozens of other (cultural and arts) organizations statewide."

For Leone, the resultant feeling of accomplishment is considerable.

"To 'give back' is such a cliché," she said, "but, truly, this is my home, and I would like to do something that makes it a better place. And I'm able to, so it is my pleasure to do it."

A lifelong Toms River resident, Leone has indeed dedicated most of her life to making a positive difference in the lives of others through humanitarian pursuits – for 17 years as an elementary school teacher and librarian in the Toms River School District and, especially since retirement, as a leader in numerous nonprofit organizations, including the Garden State Philharmonic; the Algonquin Theater; Ocean's Harbor House for homeless children; animal welfare agencies; fundraising entities the United Way and Open Arms; and the State Council on the Arts.

Her husband, Stephan Leone, is also a supporter of the arts, education

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as a trustee of Ocean County College and an active participant in Toms River's Downtown Business Improvement District. For their combined efforts, OCC named the Leones Humanitarian Couple of the Year last year.

Judi Leone first became involved with the Philharmonic in 1993 and has served as president of the board of directors seven out of the past 14 years.

The board's role, she explained, is "to raise money, first and foremost ... (and) to guide the organization in the way we think it should go," both in terms of furthering its mission and fostering its growth.

The key to healthy growth, it seems, is the cultivation of healthy relationships, both within the organization and with the community. The 15 or so board members work closely with conductor and artistic director Anthony LaGruth, three youth orchestras, one chorus, a small office staff of about 5 people and new executive director Sean Baker, who comes to the Jersey Shore from New York City, where he was the manager of the Chelsea Symphony.

Ideally, everyone should work together, Leone said.

Her experience on the Council is somewhat different from her work with other organizations, Leone explained, as the Council functions more like a foundation than like a nonprofit's operating board.

Of what drives her to contribute her time and skills to so many worthy causes, she said she does it as a way "to have fun, meet people and make decisions that make a positive impact." Additionally, she said, the state government "can do just so much" to ensure sufficient funds are allocated for arts programs; that's why it needs "strong advocates who make themselves heard."

"I feel fortunate to be able to do it," she said.

Leone's affiliations evince her firm belief in the cultural significance of art and music and her limitless compassion.

"The older I get," she said, "the more important I see the arts are, not only for children, but ... for any well-rounded person," In the proper measure and form, art can calm and inspire, provoke thought, lead to better understanding, evoke laughter and tears, even "soothe the savage beast," she listed.

"It's all such positive things," she said. "It's really quite grand."

Exposure, of course, is key to instilling an appreciation for the arts at a young age.

Kids are taught early the value of competition, usually by introduction to sports mentality," she said, but "let them sit and listen to something." Given the opportunity, they just might enjoy it. She gave as an example the responses she has seen from groups of elementary school children who visit the Algonquin Theater on field trips: "They are rapt."

The onus, then, is on schools to take advantage of opportunities to let students experience the cultural resources in their communities.

As a Toms River native, Leone has witnessed many changes over time, in terms of growth and development – namely the late 1950s' construction of the Garden State Parkway, which ushered in a new demographic from the north – and the role of the arts in schools and the community.

A positive change she has observed more recently is how art and music, often in combination, are being used as therapeutic tools or pathways to healing, in hospitals, nursing homes and programs for people with special needs. Of the "great meshing of these organizations," she said, "it's just wonderful."

Leone was an art major before deciding on elementary education as her major course of study at what was then Newark State (now Kean University). So it makes sense why, as a teacher, Leone made sure art was a regular part of her curriculum.

"We did an art project every week," she said. "... I loved it as much as they did. We had fun." CS

- Victoria Ford