

Ocean County Artists' Guild Update

By: Victoria Ford



Leadership of Ocean County Artists' Guild.

Photo credit: Victoria Ford

The Ocean County Artists Guild, an Island Heights institution for 62 years, occupies a 140-year-old Victorian house on Chestnut Avenue along the Toms River.

It began in 1957 as the Ocean Arts and Crafts Club, a small group of artists doing what artists do: getting together to make art and share ideas about how to promote their work in the community. In a few short years, the group had grown from seven members to 30, staging exhibits in local hotels, banks and backyards on clotheslines. The name was changed to the Artists' Guild

in 1960. They met in the First Aid Squad building until they outgrew that space, then moved around a bit until they settled for 15 years at a United Methodist church until, miraculously, in 1974, one Edith Grace deeded the house and grounds as a gift to the Guild.

On a recent spring afternoon, four ladies from the Guild's leadership team gathered to discuss the organization's traditions and goals, and to reflect on their own stories of finding a "home" at the Guild to nurture their creative passions.

The current president is AnnMarie Dario, an art therapist by profession, and a potter and painter; board member Tamara Woronczuk is a retired art teacher, mixed media artist and workshop coordinator; painter Carol Ann Oporto is a past president; and painter Mary Jo Austin is a retired art teacher and the longest-running board member.

Today the Guild's mission is much the same as ever – to serve the artists and community, to enhance the quality of life for residents, to be an outlet and training ground for artistic talent and an attraction to draw tourism.

The facility is open to the public Tuesday through Sunday afternoons, 1 to 4 p.m. Admission is free.

"This place is hopping," Woronczuk said, with different activities taking place all the time. Classes in every medium for adults and children run in four-, six- and eight-week series; workshops, demonstrations, open studio time with live models and cultural programs are available to active artists of every level. Workshops bring nationally known names, Woronczuk said: master of watercolor Charles

Reid from Connecticut, Joe Gyurcsak of Mercerville (resident artist and brand manager for Blick and Utrecht Art Supplies), Kristy Kuch from the Midwest (“the queen of colored pencil”), Tim Lynch from Illinois. They’ll attract attendees from as far away as Kansas, Arizona and California.

The Guild has tried to stay true to the fundamental art principle of “drawing from life,” according to Dario, as the organization has its roots in fine art in the classical sense.

Still, anything that stirs intrigue and brings people through the doors is worth a shot. Demonstrations, flower arranging, poetry, knitting/ crocheting, song circles, printmaking, pottery, Victorian tea, member dinners, even a paranormal research event around Halloween, always a popular time for people to notice and wonder about the Guild. Regular participants in weekly “Do Your Own Thing” sessions attend religiously.

“It’s hard to tell from the outside what happens inside,” Oporto remarked. Outdoor art projects effectively pique the interest of passersby.

Membership is not limited to artists; anyone who wants to support the activities and aims of the Guild may join. Art instruction for all ages, informative and entertaining programs and many kinds of social events are offered. And membership is a family affair, Dario explained. Artful activity is a vehicle for quality time together. “Make and Take” workshops in June, for example, are popular with parents and kids.

Generations come together at the Guild to showcase their talents. In the latest juried photography show, Dario noted, one family took home four ribbons: Meghan Booth, who shot with a GoPro, and her grandfather Rob Rielly, who used more conventional techniques.

The walls and halls of the Guild are always lined with artwork – members and guest artists, solo and group shows and special exhibits.

In order to stay current, technology upgrades, website improvements and a new social media push have gone a long way toward “dragging people into the 21st century,” as Oporto put it. The Facebook group page has almost 500 members and new ones are added weekly, apart from about 300 actual members, about 75 of which are active.

Some of the persistent challenges, though, include fostering volunteerism and attracting younger members. Volunteerism can start at just one hour a month, Dario said. It’s whatever time people have to give. And internship opportunities are available for college kids.

Of course taking care of the building is a job in itself, Oporto said. The upkeep involved in a 140-year-old house presents special problems most other arts organizations just don’t have, she added.

But from the very beginning, members have been concerned about maintaining the historic structure. Early on, they auctioned some of the items in the house but preserved the parlor. Soon, a gift shop and gallery shows flourished.

“The lovely old house has been kept ‘Victorian’ as much as is practical and retains most of its early charm,” according to the written history. “Some beautiful and typical antique furniture pieces that came with the house add to the atmosphere created by the original architect.”

Ever growing and evolving as needed, in 1998 the organization began a campaign to build an ADA-compliant addition that would honor the historic architecture. Plant sales, garden tours, bus trips, raffles, a grand art auction, and donations from members, friends and foundations helped to finance the project, which was completed in 2005.

With the expansion, the building lost its historic designation, but that was a choice the board had to weigh against the value of forging ahead. In the end, progress won out. Now the house needs an exterior facelift, and the auxiliary carriage house needs electrical work in preparation to receive a kiln donation.

Ceramics is an exciting new offering that will fill a need – “We get a lot of calls asking ‘Do you do pottery?’” Dario said. Woronczuk had visited and been inspired by Princeton Arts Council’s ceramics program, but she was quick to explain, observing how other organizations do things is more about informing a context in which to stay unique. “We don’t want to compete, we want to get along,” Woronczuk said.

And get along they do. New this year is the Island Heights Cultural and Arts Alliance, comprising the Artists Guild, the Peto House and the Cottage Museum. The Alliance is “dedicated to providing and cultivating arts and culture while preserving our architectural heritage and shared sense of place.”

The John F. Peto Studio Museum preserves and promotes the legacy of the internationally renowned trompe l’oeil artist and celebrates the history of his life, family and work. The permanent collection displays artworks, furniture and artifacts original to the house, historic photographs and more. Mission is to maintain Peto’s home and studio as a working museum, by fostering educational opportunities in the arts and partnering with the larger community.

The Jano Taber Cottage Museum or “The Cottage,” a Queen Anne carpenter gothic two-story summer cottage in the heart of town is open to the public as an accurate example of a “Living Museum,” typical of the late 1880s.

Some joint efforts of the Alliance are the Garden Tour in June and Sail Fest in September, to appeal to families.

To each member the Guild holds special meaning and precious memories.

Austin’s dad built her family’s house in Lavallette in 1945. She became a summer member of the Guild in 1983 and retired from teaching art in 1992. Upon retirement, she said, she tried working fulltime as an artist, and that lasted about two weeks. All that studio time felt lonely. At the Guild, she found a second family.

Woronczuk was drawn to the Guild after retirement because “I knew that I would find a home.” She visited the organization and fast fell in love with the people who kept it running; she saw it as a place where the arts are truly valued. “I think it’s important to have a center for the arts in the area, and I think this can be it,” she said.

Oporto agreed. “There’s just something about it that just grabs you.” She moved to the area 10 years ago from Virginia Beach and found in the Guild an instant community.

Dario started taking classes at the Guild in the ’90s and has brought her children there since they were small. She noted “a certain sentimentality about it.”

With a vigilant eye on relevance and sustainability, and with the continued love and support its devoted members pour into it day and day out, “This place will survive, I have no doubt about that.”