

County's Cultural Councils Bridge Artful Distances

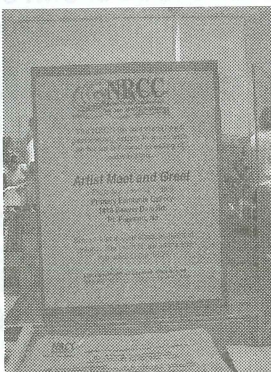


NJ Secretary of State Nina Mitchell Wells at the NRCC's Forum for Arts, Culture & Heritage event in Lakewood.

"Art and culture have been around forever," Northern Regional Cultural Council chairwoman Patti Wade said, "but there's so many new things coming out now, with technology and so on, that sometimes you lose sight of the richness, of how it can actually better your life to appreciate what other people with such talent have done, or to appreciate what's happened in the past.

"Really, everything is so futuristic now that people don't really reflect on the past enough, and I just think that's really important."

The dedicated volunteer members of the county's Northern and Southern Regional Cultural Councils work to "promote the visibility of the arts and heritage in the greater community of Ocean County," according to Lindsay Dandeo of the Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission.



Northern Regional Cultural Council's upcoming Artists Meet & Greet event; a part of the group's display at the recent Point Pleasant Boro Earth Day celebration.

The councils were an outgrowth of the Ocean County Cultural Plan created in 2002, Dandeo explained. One of the plan's goals was to establish cultural councils within the county, comprised of business leaders, arts professionals and regular citizens representing their respective municipalities.

Originally the plan designated four councils: in addition to the northern and southern, a western and a central. All four were active for a time until, eventually, the northern and southern emerged as the two strongest. Currently the northern council has 13 and the southern 11 members, each including one chairwoman.

Dandeo said the reason for the numerous separate councils was Ocean County's large size.

"It's the second largest county in area in New Jersey," she said. "So you're dealing with a vast amount of land area and 33 municipalities. ... That's a huge amount of ground to cover."

On the Northern Regional Cultural Council are: Chairwoman Patti Wade, Karen Zitzow and Sal Marino, all of Point Pleasant; Marguerite Wynne of Bay Head; Inger Dooley, Jeannie Kellington and Paige Miller of Point Pleasant Beach; Robert Anstett of the Brick Township Cultural Arts Center; Ralph Masco, Rose Reilly Leonard, and Janet Spahr of Brick; Theresa Beaugard of the Strand Theater in Lakewood; and Roberta Krantz of the Ocean County College Fine Arts Center.

Continued on page 29

On the Southern Regional Cultural Council are: chairwoman Sandy Goldsborough and Steve Steiner, both from Surflight Theater; Tim Hart of the Tuckerton Seaport and Stafford Historical Society; Connie Becraft of St. Francis Community Center in Brant Beach; Patricia Chamberlin of the Long Beach Island Foundation of the Arts and Sciences in Loveladies; Joyce McFadden of Southern Ocean County Hospital; Jeanne DiPaola of Ocean County Connection and Stafford Township Council; Lois Mullen of the Pine Shores Art Association; Linda Feaster of Ocean County Library; Thomas Stephens of the Stafford Township Education Foundation; and Rick Reynolds of the Southern Ocean County Chamber of Commerce.

"The groups are both really great, really effective, just in slightly different ways," Dandeo said. It is purely by chance that the northern council consists mainly of regular arts and heritage-loving residents from various sectors while the southern council consists largely of arts & history organization representatives and professionals. Each council seems to have naturally evolved in a way that reflects the needs specific to the arts and cultural heritage climate of its respective region, Dandeo said. "But they ultimately exist for the same reason."

Although the councils use the Ocean County Cultural Plan as a guide, "whatever they feel they have passion about or want to do, they can do, within reason," she said.

Because the councils' budgets come from the county, they are like a branch of the commission. But each council embraces its unique identity and takes total ownership of its work, she added, which "really helps the commission to fulfill its mission statement, which is to promote public interest in the arts and heritage," Dandeo said.

As the chief arts and heritage advocacy group in the county, the commission benefits greatly from the work of each of the councils, a vital connection to the greater community.

"We find out, a lot of times, that people want ... a collective voice," Dandeo said. "So this is our means of connecting with them, bringing them together."

Maximizing Northern Exposure

Wade has led the NRCC for about four years, in which time the council has made great strides in its mission "to cultivate community awareness through education and involvement in cultural arts and heritage, while developing partnerships between the business community, artists, organizations and advocates of the arts and heritage in Ocean County."

"It's been very interesting to watch how the whole thing formed," she said. "It's such a grass-roots kind of thing, and to see it move and expand is very interesting and rewarding."

In May 2004, the council held a symposium at the Brick Township Cultural Arts Center that brought together government officials, artists, historians and other major advocates for the arts and culture, basically to learn more about each other's communities.

"A lot of people could live in Bricktown and have no idea what's going on in Point Pleasant, right next door," Wade said. "They are just very focused on their own towns, and there is so much going on, so we gave them an opportunity to talk about their communities – what they're doing with arts and culture in their communities – and to network." Lines of communication were opened, she explained, in order for the council to learn what could be done to help artists and arts supporters to help themselves and each other.

Wade said she feels the symposium bore out a greater awareness of the arts, culture and rich history to be discovered in the northern Ocean County area and established connections that might not have been, otherwise.

Continued on page 30

"That's kind of where we were going with this, and it really did work," she said.

Later, in November 2006, the NRCC organized the Forum for Arts, Culture Heritage at Lakewood's Strand Theater, to promote cultural participation in the northern region.

Secretary of State Nina Mitchell Wells attended and gave the opening remarks, to the effect of "how important it is to keep arts alive," Wade recalled. Steve Steiner, producing artistic director of the Surflight Theatre in Beach Haven, was the keynote speaker. He spoke on the history and evolution of Surflight and the necessity of "getting the word out, and getting people involved, and getting community connections made."

Afterward, focus groups divided up and brainstormed ways to work toward achieving the desired goals. The suggestions that came from the focus groups included mass marketing via email, which requires only an Internet connection; inviting the public to submit event notices to publications such as *Out & About Ocean County*, a free information resource; presenting networking opportunities for artists, historians and advocates; and getting artists into the schools "to share the knowledge they have with the next generation."

Wade now compiles a monthly e-newsletter, after combing the newspapers and web sites for events happening locally, which she sends out as an email blast. In the works is an NRCC web site, where people will be able to post their organizations' events and exchange ideas and information via an online bulletin board.

Of what makes the council successful, Wade said, "I tend to think part of it is that the majority of (council members) have lived here a long time; some have lived here all their lives. ... We're very entrenched in this area and love the area."

She further attributed the council's success to the diversity of the council members' backgrounds. From law, education and history to visual and performing art, prose, poetry and men's and women's issues, "we cover all the bases to get all the different points of view," she said. "I think that works for us." With such an interesting mix of people, everybody brings something different to the group's projects.

"It's a team effort with a lot of cooperation, I do know that," Wade said.

Additionally, the council has gotten by with a little help from its friends at the Cultural and Heritage Commission.

"Cynthia (Smith, commission administrator) and Lindsay (Dandeo) have really pulled us through some of the rough times," she said.

In times of uncertainty or doubt, "they were just always there to support us, with telephone calls, and emails, and (by) showing up at the meetings to discuss issues and set us off on the right path again. I can't tell you enough how important those two people were."

With the right support system, the NRCC has catalyzed positive change and improved communications among arts and heritage leaders and participants. Still, the council continues to strive to be a greater presence in the community at large.

"We always want to expand, but we want to expand based on what the needs are beyond the initial thing, which is getting people to know that there's plenty to do up in Northern Ocean County. ... People just think we all close down in the winter, and they just don't get it."

Coming up on June 12, the council will host a Meet-and-Greet event for artists in a "very informal setting," where ideas will be shared and light refreshments will be served.

Above and Beyond Southern Hospitality

From 2006 to 2007, the Southern Regional Cultural Council conducted an in-depth economic impact study, which sought to prove the arts are vital to local economy, not only by attracting tourists and new residents to the area but also by inciting them to spend their money on other, additional things like meals and souvenirs while they are in town, according to chairwoman Sandy Goldsborough.

"We wanted the business community to realize the economic impact of (the arts and cultural) sector, because businesses understand dollars and cents. So we needed to show that there was an impact. Because we were pretty sure there was one."

The study put the total economic value of arts and cultural organizations in Southern Ocean County's 12 municipalities at an annual estimated \$20.8 million, broken down into direct expenditures (ticket sales, admission fees, concessions) accounting for nearly \$9 million; indirect value (meals, transportation, shopping at nearby retailers) totaling almost \$4 million; rental fees and grants (vendor booths, donations to the venue), \$2.1 million; induced revenue (construction investment, taxes, license fees), \$2.25 million; and labor value (all jobs created by the arts/heritage community), \$3.6 million.

Among the council's goals, Goldsborough explained, is to publicize the role of arts and cultural heritage and to increase the business community's awareness and involvement therein for the sake of community-building and economic development.

The council's aim with the economic impact study, therefore, was to drive home the message of just how much business stands to gain from involvement with such organizations – namely, networking, client-building and public relations – through sponsorship, support, volunteerism and donations of time and expertise.

So the SRCC devised the study, as facilitated by one Dr. Harold Nolan, director of the New Jersey Institute for Tourism and Recreation Management. Working with him, the council created a survey that collected demographic information as well as insights into people's spending habits, Goldsborough explained.

"It was important that we ask the right questions in the right ways," she said, in order to shed light on what money was being spent and where. Questions about hometown, age range, home ownership or renter status, distance traveled and media choices were included in the survey.

The intent was to show arts organizations contribute to economic development and impact more than just the organizations themselves.


"It's much easier to talk a business owner into supporting (the arts and culture) if they understand that there is an economic value to them and to the region," she said.

It might further interest merchants to know, Goldsborough noted, studies have shown "philanthropy is good for business."

Consumers, if given a choice between two equal service providers, are more likely to do business with companies associated with good causes. For an example, just look at Paul Newman's company, Newman's Own, she said. His food products may be tasty, but the fact that a portion of the proceeds go to charity is the icing on the cake.

"(The economic impact study) was basically a way to let business owners in the community know, 'Hey, we're not just here with our hands out all the time.' And we kind of can't survive without doing that, but you've got something to gain too."

When arts organizations and businesses in the community partner up, it's a win-win, she concluded. Some businesspeople seem to understand implicitly, she added, and others never will.

The work of the two regional cultural councils, however, ensures steps are taken in the right direction to keep arts and culture alive and well for future generations. 

- Victoria Ford