Ocean County Artists Guild: Lifetime Achievement in the Arts

By Pat Johnson



Watercolor class at the Guild. Photo credit: Pat Johnson

The Ocean County Artists Guild in Island Heights has received the Ocean County Lifetime Achievement in the Arts Award for providing a home for artists for over 68 years. William Pike, new President of the Guild refers to the group's headquarters at 22 Chestnut Avenue as the "Victorian Lady." It is a marvelous, gingerbread adorned house built in 1879 that is a blessing to over 300 members of the Guild. Every week, the aging beauty is open for workshops, both adult and children's; gallery viewing, music and soon to be included--poetry nights. Pike has been president for just a short time; he jokes that he took a watercolor class a year ago in August and nine months later he woke up as president! But he has thrown himself into the preservation and expansion of the Guild wholeheartedly. Pike is himself an accomplished artist but always worked in a business capacity and so his appointment is a timely one.

"To preserve this place we have to run it like a business," he said during a recent interview. "I hope to help to shore up our financials. Unlike a lot of arts organizations we have this building and it is expensive to maintain, but it is worth it," said Pike.

To this end, the Guild is applying for a Historic Preservation Grant from the New Jersey Historic Trust. "This building is a work of art," he said as he pointed out the fireplace tiled in the arts and crafts style, the pocket doors, the high, light-filled windows and plaster ceilings.

He also appreciates and venerates the past. "One of the things I love about this place is the history of how it came about. In 1957, women in white gloves took charge," said Pike. "The seven women who came together to start the Guild saw a need. Island Heights was an art colony but there wasn't an arts institution."

Edna Thompson Feerick spearheaded an Ocean Arts and



The Robert Given House (c. 1879-80)
Photo credit: Pat Johnson

Crafts Club with six friends that met in various locations in Toms River. In addition to offering art classes the women held exhibitions—sometimes hanging work on a clothesline. They supported a monthly Art Appreciation program as well as Sunday afternoon music and ballet programs. When membership grew to 30, they changed the name to the Ocean County Artists' Guild. In 1974, one of the founding members, Edith Grace, donated the Victorian house in honor of her late husband and the Guild had a permanent home.

"They were true trailblazers," said Pike. "And women of this type of character have kept this place alive for 68 years. It has seen decades of change—but this institution is still standing, still making art."

Today the Guild offers art classes for adults Mondays through Thursdays that vary from drawing to watercolor to linocut and more. Children's programs are offered two days a week and there is an art book club every second Friday. Pike says the children's programs will be expanded moving forward. "We offer a kids' art summer camp for a couple hours a day 4 days a week but we are hoping to expand the hours depending on our volunteers."

The Guild had six galleries with exhibits that are changed every month and also includes a 'pop-up' gallery for special exhibits. Recently the Guild offered Island Heights grammar school to have an art show and reception complete with juice boxes and cookies. "Schools have scaled back art programs significantly," he notes. "Usually there's one art teacher that comes once a week for grades 1 through 6."

"Part of my directive is to attract teens and college age students, we are going to start more programs to fill that gap." This past March all the Toms River High Schools displayed their art in the Guild galleries. "These kind of things attracts new members—mom and dad and grandparents come," said Pike.

Besides art classes and art exhibits, the Guild has periodic music events on Fridays and plans to have poetry nights as well through an intern from Georgian Court University. They also offer programs for underserved youth in collaboration with Bright Harbor Healthcare and Hearts of Mercy. The Guild has installed ADA compliant hardware and incorporates adaptive teaching methods for children with special needs. Pike is happy to report that younger people are on the board of trustees. The Guild is also looking for ways to partner with the Toms River Arts Center, the Peto Museum and the Cottage Museum, both in Island Heights. "Having a consortium of art institutions increases our cultural and historical tourism and benefits all," said Pike. "We're trying to jam as many events into the calendar as we can, we always want to have something new."



Guild President Pike and photo of the founding women of the Guild. Photo credit: Pat Johnson

A committee is presently researching Guild history for a website "Island Heights Virtual Art Museum," that will include all of the artists that lived in Island Heights or were associated with the OCAG. "We have discovered that at least two of the founders had direct family links to the original Island Heights art colony that began fifty years before (the Guild), almost as soon as the resort was founded in 1878," wrote board member Marilyn Kralik. Research has also turned up a famous summer resident of the house—Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, prominent in the Civil Rights Movement and who spoke at the 1963 March on Washington where Martin Luther King gave his 'I have a Dream,' speech.

While acknowledging all of the artists, "We're not focused on the past alone. Our beautiful home contains the history, but is focused on bringing art to all and to becoming an even more active community center," said Kralik.