

South County Art Association celebrates 90

By KENDRA GRAVELLE

Aug 6, 2017



South County Art Association board members recently celebrated the organization's 90th member exhibition. Pictured left to right are Rick Martell, Paula Imbergamo, Jeanne Wettlaufer, President, Christine Sullivan, Development Chair, Kris Greco, Treasurer, Beth Casagrande, Secretary, Mary Meagher, Vice President and Sarah Daly.

SOUTH KINGSTOWN—With its 90th member's exhibition currently on display, the South County Art Association's executive director reflected earlier this week on the organization's beginning and on how it has grown since its inception 90 years ago.

“It’s very exciting,” said Kathleen Carland, executive director of SCAA. “I think it’s quite an achievement that as a nonprofit organization we have been around that long. We’re just so proud of that.”

At the art association’s birth, it offered members of the Providence Art Club a means for exhibiting their work in South County.

“When it was started, John Dawson and many of the artists used to come down here in summers and paint and they decided to get together and exhibit,” said Carland, who added that Dawson held the first exhibit in 1927 in his home in Wickford.

The first member’s exhibit showed the works of 35 artists—including Hezekiah Dyer, Frank Mathewson, Hilda Anderson, Sydney Burleigh, Herbert Cross, among several others—with subject matter ranging from workers at the Wickford docks to the Gardens of Versailles.

Following that initial exhibit, the artists—who founder John Dawson declared to be an association—began to hold an exhibit each year.

Then there came Bernon Elijah Helme, the superintendent of South Kingstown schools and a founder of the University of Rhode Island. A member of the SCAA, Helme often held exhibits and lectures in his home on Kingstown Road, in the very same building in which the art association is still located.

At his death in 1944, Helme had no heirs so left a portion of his estate—including the Helme House and the Annex building—to SCAA.

Carland, who was hired as the executive director in the spring after falling in love with SCAA based on several art classes she had taken, pointed out that the artistic community within the organization is one that’s incredibly supportive.

“People who are coming in, whatever level they come in, everyone is supporting one another,” said Carland, who added that classes are also geared toward all skill levels.

“It feels gratifying to be able to be in an organization with such deep roots, not only in the community but in history,” Carland continued.

She added that she feels a sense of responsibility to protect the legacy of SCAA—which has seen its membership soar nearly tenfold since its first year—in an “interesting and exciting” way.

“It’s a whole different world than it was in the 1920s and yet the organization has been able to adapt,” Carland added.

Whereas the original artists of the SCAA told their stories mostly through paintings, these days artists have evolved to take advantage of the various technological innovations that have been realized over the last nine decades.

“We are learning to tell our stories through Instagram,” Carland said. “We have all of the things that go along with being a contemporary artistic community. I think that’s one of the things that’s exciting to me—to see how far we can stretch and to be able to grow as an organization to welcome new types of art.”

The SCAA today plays host to numerous art classes and workshops and annual events, including last week’s Dinner Under the Trees, the annual holiday sale which opens on Black Friday and ends Dec. 17, and its Great Art Heist, coming Sept. 9.

Carland added that the association hopes over the next year to become involved with arts organizations throughout the state—in particular, the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts—to provide more professional education for artists.

“So they can understand the business side of their art,” Carland explained. “That’s in our visioning for the next year or so.”

A major difference between the days of the SCAA’s first exhibit and today, she added, lies in the focus of the association’s mission.

The original mission of the SCAA was to promote the arts in Washington County by supporting “in every way the aesthetic interests of the community, particularly by encouraging the production, exhibition, and sale of works of art by local and other artists, by arranging lectures and discussions of art, and by aiding in the preservation and deeper appreciation of the remains of local colonial art.”

Today, Carland said, the emphasis has shifted closer toward educating “both the artists and the community about art.”

“Whether you’re an artist or not,” she added. “We love people who are just supporters and people who love art—we want them to just come and see it. It’s like, everyone isn’t a musician, but everyone can get something from just seeing art or hearing music.”

And an ongoing project is the maintenance of the buildings—in particular, the Helme House, built in 1802, and the Annex, which dates back to 1759 and houses the pottery workshop and drawing and painting studios. Both the studio and the face of Helme were recently repainted. The SCAA is constantly raising money to keep the old buildings in tip-top shape.

“So that they can really house and reflect the vibrant community that’s within,” Carland added.

In discussing her vision for the future of the SCAA, Carland quoted Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The quote goes, “beauty will save the world.”

“And beauty is really in the eye of the beholder,” Carland said. “What is beautiful to you and how you express that within your medium—we want people to be aware that that’s possible.”

The SCAA 90th exhibition is on display through Aug. 12.

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