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Gallery starving for more artists

Artspace Gallery, down to a dozen members, seeks more artists

HELEN YANULUS
Pocono Life Writer
February 05, 2006

Richard Spezzano has designed a graphically appealing and informative brochure about the Artspace Gallery in Stroudsburg as a tool to find new members and gain local business sponsors.

Unfortunately, the gallery membership has no money to print the tool that just might help them stabilize their finances and keep the gallery doors open.

But Spezzano, the new director of the cooperative gallery housed in PoconoArts Council's Community Cultural Center near Courthouse Square, remains optimistic.

"We consider ourselves an important part of the community. The visual arts are supposed to be a vibrant part of the community," said Spezzano, a resident of Stroudsburg who has been a member of the gallery for the past year. "I hope people will recognize this as something that will be saved."

This effort, on the heels Designer Crafts closing at the end of December, is a palette of new ideas that give artists more membership categories and opportunities, and offer sponsors more visibility.

"It's a renewal, and I think that's exciting for downtown," said Laura Goss, executive director of PoconoArts Council. "The other thing is to get other artists involved as well. Overall, it gives the arts more visibility. In turn, the community will be more open to the arts."

The gallery, particularly during opening receptions and on weekends when the artists staff the space, brings together the artist and the public.

"Not only do they see fine art, but they can talk to the artists who made the art. This sets Artspace apart from the for-profit gallery. They have quality fine art and access to the artists," Goss said.



Richard Spezzano, new director of Artspace Gallery in Stroudsburg



Don Manza, assistant director of Artspace Gallery in Stroudsburg

DOWNTOWN, FOR MANY YEARS, had a vibrant presence via the monthly First Saturday art walk, which has since dwindled with the closing of a few galleries and the departure of the manager of the event from Jacob Stroud Corporation.

"That is disappearing. The town has let it go. Businesses are not getting together to support it because they're losing business. It's a sad situation, and I'd like to change that," said Spezzano, who after spending his first year with the group introducing motions for improvements was elected as the director. "This will help support businesses. If we stay open and they stay open, we will thrive."

He is also worried that the tourists have stopped coming downtown and residents have forsaken downtown for malls.

Don Manza, assistant director and resident of Tannersville, said, "We feel there is still potential here."

Spezzano is wholly dedicated to this cause. "We want the community involved with us. We don't want to do this and not have the people come out," he said. "I'm determined. Some galleries closed. I ask, 'Why are we letting this happen?' We need to get the community and businesses involved."

"Other galleries take 40 to 50 percent commissions," Spezzano said. Artspace now takes 25 to 30 percent commission, depending on the membership category.

"I'm an artist, and I get to have a say on what gets put in the gallery, what type of shows are to be scheduled," said Spezzano, a photographer and digital artist. "I couldn't open a gallery on my own. It would be insane."

This lower commission allows the artists to keep the prices down. Prices range from \$100 to \$1,200, with most of the work tagged at \$200.

"I can keep the art at a reasonable price, so the community can buy art," said Spezzano, who noted that art provides inspiration and stirs the imagination for artists and non-artists alike.

"You can go to the department store and buy art. But the probably 5,000 people across the country or your neighbor will buy the same thing. This is all original artwork," Spezzano said.

A new addition will be a gift shop with notecards, puzzles and small-format matted art for sale.

The membership also wants to make exhibit openings more of an event by asking local musicians to donate their time to play. "I feel strongly about bringing it together and stop competing," Spezzano said.

He also believes that galleries need to be open for the area youths. "The schools are huge here. They need a fine-art gallery. They shouldn't have to go to New York to go to a gallery," Spezzano said.

Manza noted that the variety of artistic styles are engaging. "It gives people unaccustomed to going to a gallery an idea of what can be done with art," he said.

Artspace will also offer classes for all levels. Upcoming classes include drawing and hand-coloring photography.



Artspace Gallery on Seventh Street, associated with PoconoArts Council, is run by dues-paying member artists. The number of members has decreased, prompting the Artspace board to institute new enrollment criteria.



Members of Artspace have the right to display their work in the Stroudsburg gallery. Frequency of displays depends on the category of membership.

OVER THE YEARS, the membership has ebbed and flowed, reaching a high of 24 members several years ago, and now having a roster of a dozen artists. Much of the attrition can be attributed to members retiring and/or moving from the area. Other members couldn't spare the time to commit to sitting in the gallery on weekends and attending each opening or have enough art to put new work into the gallery.

The dues associated with membership were also an issue.

When a business sponsor of the month wasn't able to be found, the membership had to come up with the \$150.

With the new changes, local artists will find a host of new categories that may appeal to their artistic output and financial situation. Full members, for example, will be able to hang at least two pieces per month instead of just one, and the associate member will be able to hang one piece instead of none. Artspace will also offer seasonal membership, and a one-month guest artist and emerging artist category.

Artspace members are also seeking community support.

Spezzano wants the community to understand one thing about donations: Donors might fail to recognize that a donation to the arts council does not go directly to Artspace. However, the gallery benefits by having a good rent deal and having council staff keep the gallery open during the week. The association of the council and gallery also allows Artspace to have non-profit status.

"I hope that people would donate to both," Spezzano said.

One new idea is that businesses that donate \$50 or more will be featured on the window wall, which is visible from the street, for one year.

Spezzano firmly believes these changes are for the better and get to the heart of the matter.

He said, "I'd like to continue to create art and not hang it in a closet. We want people to enjoy it."