

Garrett County Arts Council: Celebrating the Arts in Garrett County for Forty Years

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While the natural beauty and recreational activities of Garrett County, Maryland, are a major attraction to the area, visitors and residents alike also delight in a rich and varied arts scene. Much of this culture has been encouraged and promoted by the Garrett County Arts Council, currently celebrating its 40th anniversary.

Just after the Bicentennial in 1976, Garrett County visionaries such as Dorothy Leighton, Clint Englander, Helen Earles, Frances Acton, and George McDowell launched the Garrett County Arts Council. In 1993, the State of Maryland decided each county should have an arts organization to funnel support from the state level to local programs. The existing Arts Council stepped into this role for Garrett County.

In 1994, the group hired its first paid staff. Early volunteers and staffers operated out of the box office at Garrett College until 2000, when the organization opened its Gallery Shop in Oakland, with an administrative office in a tiny back corner.

For fifteen years, The Gallery Shop was a fixture in Oakland, over this time featuring work by 366 carefully selected artists from Garrett and contiguous counties. Displays were changed three times a year. This kept the work “fresh” for customers and allowed artists “to keep working and perfecting their skill.”

Broken pipes in August 2015 forced the council to vacate their long-time space, so creative solutions had to be found. As Garrett County Arts Council director Karen Reckner notes, “We owe it to our artists to provide gallery spaces to have their work available for sale, and to our customers who turn to us for quality local art.”

The council opened pop-up galleries in another Oakland location and in Grantsville for the holiday season. A new pop-up shop has been set up in the former Silver Tree Marina next to Archie’s Barbecue in McHenry, where it will remain until December 2016.

These temporary sites have given the GCAC Board the opportunity to plan for a permanent location for The Gallery Shop and offices. The Arts Council has just approved the decision to adapt the first floor of the Sincell Publishing building on Second Street in downtown Oakland for this purpose. Though last summer’s loss of gallery



Top photo: The Gallery Shop features arts and gifts from carefully selected local artists.

Above: Then Board President, Carole Perez (left), presents a “Friend of the Arts” award to Mountain Lake Park resident, Helen Earles in 2004.



The Gallery Shop had been a fixture in Oakland since 2000 but broken pipes forced them to vacate in 2015.



The pop-up gallery will be at the Silver Tree Marine building in McHenry through December 2016.

space was a “tragedy,” Reckner points out that it was also “an opportunity to move ahead in exciting ways.”

Despite its years of influence in the county, few people are fully aware of the work of the Arts Council. Reckner explains that the Garrett County Arts Council serves as a “conduit” between the Maryland State Arts Council and local arts. Organizations such as Our Town Theater, Spruce Forest Artisan Village, Garrett Lake Arts Festival (GLAF), the Board of Education, and many others are, in part, supported by grant money from the Garrett County Arts Council. The Arts Council writes grants requesting funds from the State Arts Council. Some additional funding comes from Garrett County government, fundraising efforts, and membership fees. The Arts Council uses about half of all funds for general operating expenses while the other half goes to local arts agencies.

In addition to funding groups, the Council works on behalf of individual artists in several ways, including The Gallery Shop, the Heritage Arts Fest, the literary journal *Ginseng*, student shows and awards, and artist studio tours for the public. Every effort is made to keep these projects self-sustaining so that they do not require spending from the budget.

According to Reckner, Maryland ranks fourth in the country in per capita spending on the arts, and the State

has mandated that arts funding must start each year at least at the level of the previous year’s budget. We are indeed fortunate that Maryland recognizes the importance of the arts. We’re also fortunate that the Garrett County Arts Council so ably obtains and allocates funding for local artists and arts organizations.

The arts enhance the quality of life in Garrett County. The Garrett County Arts Council has helped make it possible for audiences to enjoy concerts, theater performances, artisan demonstrations, Heritage Craft Fest shows, Gallery Shop exhibits, and many of the other cultural events that fill the local calendar. As it marks its fourth decade, the Arts Council looks forward to expanding programming of all kinds in the future.

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