

Artisans on fifth - The Beginning

Artisans on fifth, an Artist Co-op in downtown Mount Dora is home to local Artists who share their works with those who appreciate art, who learn from others, and who give back to the community that supports them. In addition to being a Co-op, it is a charity - and a business that needs to earn enough to pay its bills so it can continue its mission. There are those who say that the average Artist Co-op lasts 5 years, and that any lasting longer than that would be the exception. Artisans is 10 years old in February, 2019. So something exceptional must be happening.

This is the story of how Artisans was born, and how it has contributed both to the Arts and to the local community. That story can't be told without giving recognition to the Mount Dora Center for the Arts (MDCA), from which Artisans was conceived and nurtured.

MDCA has been a major focus for the Arts in Central Florida for years, with a major impact on the area. Their activities have had the enthusiastic support of the local community. In 2007, MDCA had some vacant space in its building on Fifth Street. This space having last been used as a gift shop, and before then a beauty parlor, it was replete with orange walls, mirrors and other remnants of those occupancies. MDCA offered this space to its membership as a venue where they could display their works for sale (for a nominal commission back to MDCA) during the holiday season.

They called the event, "*Members' Holiday Showcase*". Even in the depths of the recession, the initiative was successful, so in 2008, they did it again. Sales were recorded in a three part receipt book; where the guest got one copy, the member another, and the third was used to book the activity in MDCA's accounts.

After that second Showcase, things changed. MDCA and a core of intrepid members decided that an Artist Co-op, open year round ought to be established. Other regional co-ops were surveyed, and their experiences were blended with what our entrepreneurs thought then, ought to work best.

This Co-op was going to be a hangout for local artists; who could come, have coffee and cookies, enjoy poetry readings, commune with like-minded folks, and maybe sell some art. They called the initiative the "*Artisan Gift Shop and Hospitality Center*". And they furnished it with among other donations, a pink leather sofa, tables, coffee pots, and more - in that space last occupied by a beauty salon - with mirrored and orange painted walls.

That thought didn't work out so well. One of the issues was that some folks would come in; grab free cookies and coffee and leave. So, then, they got serious. Artisan Gift Shop and Hospitality Center was sent off to

the Good-Idea-But-Bin after a couple of months.

“*Artisans on fifth*” was born in February, 2009 as a unit of MDCA in time for the February Art Show in Mount Dora. MDCA paid the bills, provided the space and utilities, and otherwise supported the artists and the enterprise for a very modest take on sales. In turn, artists got to run the shop, do artist things and sell some art. Purchases were sacked in bags left over from that gift shop that had been there earlier. With that old gift shop’s brand on the bags.

Artisans began with roughly 45 members. The shop had those orange plaster walls and those mirrors. Not very conducive to hanging art. A floor needing work. Donated, variable lighting. That receipt book. A stand alone credit card reader (and, if the records are to be believed, an ‘earring display using curtain clips and spring rod’). And evolving operating guidelines. Guidelines were changed, it seems, when a member did something that was – not quite right? And space for an Artist’s works wherever space might be found. But it worked. Artisans grew to as many as 60 Artists in those years.

Artisans acquired some donated jewelry cases that one might conclude, eliminated the curtain clip earring display.

Then, in 2011, with the assistance of a pro bono lawyer, Artisans became a stand-alone entity in its own right - a 501 (c)(3) not-for-profit charity with its very own tax ID and more - with a responsibility, not only to keep its own books, but to pay its own bills, do tax returns, too and even (now) pay rent to MDCA for its space. “*Artisans of Mount Dora, Inc., dba as Artisans on fifth*” became legal about two years after it was first born - with a mission enshrined in its papers:

- “To promote local emerging artists in both high quality retail and online environments;
- To encourage future artists through an educational scholarship fund;
- To support local charitable causes in the community it serves; and
- To enhance art appreciation among visitors and residents of Central Florida.”

Over time, Artisans has not only benefitted from continued support from MDCA, but also grants from the Mount Dora Community Trust, more pro bono legal assistance, and other help from community leaders, and Artisans’ many members over the years who have donated their time and money, paying forward and giving back to the community, and keeping the facility an ever improving showcase. The members themselves put in a new floor, of course, got rid of the mirrors, painted the walls, installed a new “slat wall” system for hanging art, new lighting, and more. Even to the point where, this year, Artisans replaced those donated jewelry cases with something a little more classy – still used, but classy. But Artisans never lost sight of its core mission of giving.

- We are still a venue and incubator for about, at this time, 30 artists; giving them opportunities they otherwise might not have. Some members are Mount Dora residents. Others from nearby communities. All are Florida residents.
- We've established and give to The Marilyn Dodge Scholarship for the Visual Arts and the Lee Dodge Scholarship for Performing Arts. These scholarships are generally awarded annually by The Women's Committee of Fine Arts in Mount Dora.
- We are a major factor in the local "Bra-Vo" initiative, conducted each year to raise funds that provide low or no cost diagnostic testing for breast cancer for Lake County residents. In the last 7 years, Artisans has raised and donated over \$47,000 to the Waterman Foundation at Waterman Hospital. Every dime of profit that Artisans raises from this is donated.

And so, then, Artisans on fifth is now, according to the records, 10 years old. It's lasted twice as long as the average Co-op. It's a community asset that keeps giving.

Happy birthday, Artisans! May you have many more!

By Ray Mellott, with very special thanks to Joyce Brady and Heather Hopcraft, two original Artisans members, for their contributions to the story, and as importantly, to Artisans over the years.