MARION: A HIDDEN GEM WHERE VOLUNTEERISM THRIVES

Before ArtWeek officially expanded statewide in 2017, only one local creative business in Marion participated in ArtWeek. That same business owner invited a newly transplanted resident to an ArtWeek brainstorming meeting the next year – and a spark was lit that continues today. Jennifer Wolfe Webb was intrigued by the possibilities that ArtWeek offered in re-energizing the transitioning Marion Art Center. The success of the first ArtWeek at the MAC helped in building an active and engaged board, hiring a dynamic new executive director, and casting the Marion Art Center (MAC) as the lead in reawakening this creative community.

“A CONVERSATION WITH JENNIFER WOLFE WEBB, BOARD PRESIDENT, MARION ART CENTER MARIONARTCENTER.ORG

WHAT SUCCESSFUL MARKETING AND OUTREACH STRATEGIES AND TOOLS DID THE CENTER USE OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS?

A new board member volunteered to lead our marketing and public relations efforts. This retired professional developed a manageable plan with a press list, signage needs, and promotional materials (i.e. flyers to schools). This allowed us to recruit a local media sponsor to produce a calendar insert and publish weekly artist profiles. A generous graphic designer new to our community volunteered to assist with all our marketing materials. Simple tools like adding ArtWeek to MAC email signatures also increased visibility. More recently, last year our local community media station produced a captivating video segment of an ArtWeek kick-off event where the community gathered to launch our inaugural Volunteer recognition Awards.

HOW DID THE MARION ART CENTER RECRUIT, INVOLVE, MOTIVATE, AND RECOGNIZE THE DIVERSE RANGE OF VOLUNTEERS WHO MADE ARTWEEK A REALITY?

Volunteers have been essential to our success as an organization and to its ArtWeek participation. We developed an ArtWeek Committee including program event champions. Today, we have a robust volunteer group who are already planning for 2020. We realized the group didn’t need to be large but that dedication and passion were important, so there is a team of about eight people who lead the charge. This committee is helpful in dividing the work, while also creating meaningful ownership by allowing people to right size their tasks. We’ve also learned the value of tapping into people’s passions – the possibilities are endless when people are motivated! But we are also mindful to say thank you and to publically recognize event/program leaders, board volunteers, and community partners … without them, we would not be where we are today.
WHAT BENEFITS DID ARTWEEK HAVE TO THE ART CENTER AND TO THE COMMUNITY? WHAT CHALLENGES DID YOU FACE?

ArtWeek has helped plant many seeds that have bloomed throughout the year. For instance, an ArtWeek partnership with the Council on Aging translated into permanently dedicated art space in their building. And last year we worked with a local historical society to offer area walking tours that included the MAC. We have found that ArtWeek provides us with a non-intimidating outreach platform - it is a fun, engaging, and inspirational way to introduce new volunteers to our organization. What is our biggest challenge? We have too many good ideas! The first year we offered seventeen (17) events – phew! But our first-year Jazz Jam evening was so magical that it has now become an annual event that everyone looks forward to, and several programs we now offer more regularly. Last year we even illuminated the building as part of ArtWeek’s Light Up the Night – so many possibilities.

WHAT INSIGHTS ON YOUR SUCCESS WOULD YOU LIKE TO SHARE WITH OTHERS FROM SMALL ORGANIZATIONS, ESPECIALLY ON LEVERAGING THE POWER OF VOLUNTEERS?

Overall, ArtWeek is very doable for small volunteer-driven groups – it has a short and focused timeline, it is volunteer friendly, and it is a creative celebration that brings joy and a sense of community. Brainstorming sessions openly invite different ideas and voices that should be heard as representative of the diversity of a community art center. Also use ArtWeek free resources like the inspiration/example sheets to light sparks and new ideas and the e-toolkit. We found Year Two was much easier since people knew what to expect and by then we had hired a new executive director, recruited new and committed board members, and had a more visible role in the community.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

• Use ArtWeek to engage new volunteers
• A simple marketing plan can drive results
• Recognize and celebrate the value of volunteers
• Recruit a local media sponsor(s)
• Tap into local talent and passions

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