

The Arts Center In Orange

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Arts at odds with virus

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Jeff Poole



The sign outside the Barboursville Community Theater that normally announces current or upcoming shows has been offering a different message in recent weeks.

Instead, Four County Players' marketing coordinator Edward Warwick-White offered words of hope to the community when he posted this message: "Hang in there. It will be OK. We'll get through this together."

Like everyone else, local arts, culture and historical not-for-profit organizations are adjusting to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

But it's not easy.

With closed doors and canceled events, these community cultural institutions are working to engage virtual visitors while reminding them donations are always appreciated.

Things had been looking up at the James Madison Museum of Orange County Heritage. Director Bethany Sullivan said visitation was trending upward in January and February before "taking a nosedive" in March.

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The museum had to cancel a number of large tours and several events, including a significant fundraiser.

"We were building a head of steam," she said. "We were having one or two events a month and we were seeing good participation. This has really quashed it.

"Admissions and gift shop are our primary income and we aren't able to get any cash flow coming in right now," board president Jess Cifizzari reported. "This has obvious short-term impacts (not being able to pay staff) but also it is definitely going to hurt us moving forward throughout the rest of the year."

She said she and the rest of the board have been in communication and trying to work through Small Business Administration grants and other funding sources to keep the museum afloat.

Sullivan, meanwhile, is posting videos of the museum's collection and submitting newspaper columns highlighting interesting items.

"We're getting a lot of visitation on our website and a lot of attention, but that doesn't translate to earned revenue," she noted. "Still, we hope that translates to visitors in the museum once we are able to reopen our doors."

"We were really starting to get a foothold on events and community engagement," Cifizzari added. "Once this is all over, we will hit the ground running again. If people would like to support us during this time, they can sign up for a membership or make a donation through our website."

At Four County Players in Barboursville, the community theater was in the middle of a sold-out run of Agatha Christie's "The Mousetrap," when it had to cancel remaining shows.

Then, the production team and cast of "Cellar in Blue," the April Songs in the Cellar program, announced that show's cancellation.

The group's 47th season came to an abrupt end March 22 when it announced it would cancel the much-anticipated "Mamma Mia!" production scheduled for May.

"'Mamma Mia!' is a musical that we had been looking forward to having on our stage for a long time, and it is shocking that it will not be happening this year," Four County Players' President Debbie Owen said. "While we considered many options for trying to fit it into a new slot in the near term, the best we can say right now is that we hope to get it back on our schedule again in a future season."

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She said the production teams of the canceled shows have been very understanding, though disappointed and heartbroken.

"They all appreciate that 4CP is doing our part to keep them (and everyone else) safe," said. "We are working on some ways to keep our creative folks engaged remotely through virtual community activities (a weekly 'costume challenge' on Facebook and other things to come)."

Owen said the board will make a decision about the first show of its 48th season—"Urinetown: the Musical"—sometime next month. The show originally had been scheduled to run July 31 to Aug. 16.

"We have some flexibility with the timing this summer to see where the situation stands before making a final decision. The rest of the season is still on track as of now. We're addressing things on a case-by-case/show-by-show basis. We don't want to cancel anything prematurely, but have been and will continue to be taking every precaution."

In the meantime, Owen said fans and patrons have been very supportive, even though disappointed that the show couldn't go on. Many even chose to convert their unused ticket costs into theater donations rather than use them for a future show, she said.

The first Saturday in April, dozens of volunteers would have worked with Friends of Wilderness Battlefield (FoWB) for much-needed park maintenance and clean-up at the annual Park Day event.

Instead, FoWB volunteers are busy devoting time to more "back office" activities, according to president Mark Leach.

"Our volunteers are conducting research into areas such as area Civil War hospitals and the patients who were treated there, researching local history, writing articles for our "History in Our Backyard" series and editing and updating the Ellwood/Wilderness Battlefield Junior Ranger workbook," he said.

In the meantime, Ellwood and its grounds are closed to the public.

"Our first priority is the health and safety of our volunteers and members during this time of public health emergency," Leach said. "We are disappointed that we have had to cancel so many events this spring, but it can't be helped, and we will have them again next spring."

While The Arts Center In Orange has had to cancel its spring Young Visions exhibit, director Anna Pillow has good news to report.

The Arts Center's "Art at Home" online initiative has proven successful.

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New videos are posted each Tuesday and Thursday morning and volunteers and staff are working on a new story hour and related art activity to be posted soon.

At the start of the series, The Arts Center created a no-touch art supply table in front of its Main Street location to encourage participation. Pillow said more than 100 supply packets had been picked up.

With a recent donation of cotton fabric, The Arts Center has printed out sewing patterns for face masks and made the material available in front of The Arts Center next to the supply kits, Pillow said. "The campaign is called 'Our Heroes Wear Masks' and if anyone wants to make masks to donate to local hospitals, they can return their finished masks (without elastic or tape attached) in a sealed plastic bag and I will deliver them."

She said plans are still underway for Helen Thompson's summer exhibit, "Social Relativity," featuring the work of college seniors. It's scheduled to show June 4 through Aug. 1. "Since the artists participating in that show are graduating seniors at their universities, we will proceed with the show if at all possible, even if we have to move it online and host the reception through Zoom," Pillow said.

"In short, we are doing everything we can to continue providing a creative outlet and resources for the community as well as opportunities for artists through exhibitions and teaching opportunities," she added.