

Biddeford ArtWalk moves indoors

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BIDDEFORD — It was frigid cold and windy on Friday night. Ordinarily, this weather would have scared away all but a few hardy souls from the Biddeford Art Walk, now in its third year. However, organizers decided to bring the ArtWalk indoors, to the North Dam Mill, for the winter months. The corridors of the refurbished mill were bustling with and estimated 250 visitors looking at art, listening to music, checking out the varied vendors and watching a dancing dog.

North Dam Mill owner Doug Sanford said he was happy to host the event, “We love what it does for the community,” he said and added, “It exposes us to more and more people.”

Many said they thought holding the event in the mill building was a good one.

“I think this is really neat, to be all inside, especially in the winter with the cold,” said sculptor Jay Sawyer from Warren who was attending his first ArtWalk in Biddeford.

Sawyer brought several of his metal sculptures with him, including a sphere fashioned from 500 horseshoes. The sphere, which is 4 foot 9 inches in diameter and weighs 350 pounds, dominated the North Dam Mill's lobby.

Wendy Cotsis also thought the idea of holding the ArtWalk inside was a good one, “I love everything in the same building. It looks like there's a great turnout.”

Her husband Jim Cotsis, whose paintings were on display Friday, said, as an artist, having everyone together was valuable. “A lot of artists are networking,” he said, and there was more opportunity to get input about his creations.

In addition to holding the ArtWalk in a single, large venue, another change this year is opening it up to more vendors and crafters.

Karole Bowlds, a jewelry designer from Gray was one of the new vendors at Biddeford's ArtWalk. She said it worked well for her because this time of year was slow.

While she hadn't sold anything, Bowlds said, she had a lot of inquiries and she planned to return next month.

Walter Buczac, owner of Youland's Jewelers on Main Street, one of the oldest stores in Biddeford's downtown, has been involved with the art walks in Biddeford since the beginning.

Buczacz, who is also a photographer, said he got involved with the ArtWalk so he could show his work to a larger audience.

“In past winters, (the ArtWalks) haven't had many participants,” said Buczac. He said holding it inside for the season was a good idea and that Friday's turnout was one of the largest if not the largest he's seen.

Perhaps calling the event the Biddeford ArtWalk is a misnomer, because some Saco businesses have started to participate.

Sooper Dogs on Main Street in Saco has become a regular participant.

"We're really please to see everyone out tonight instead of staying inside and watching TV", said the store's owner Tim Lambert.

Lambert is a lifelong resident who said he located his store on Saco's Main Street because he wanted to bring people to downtown Biddeford and Saco, and he saw the ArtWalk as contributing to that mission.

The University of New England has become more involved in promoting Biddeford's downtown and a number of people from the university turned out on Friday.

"I love the art walk," said UNE faculty member Stephen Zeeman. "It's a novel way to celebrate the arts."

"Biddeford needs the art community," said his wife Susan Hillman, who is also on UNE's faculty. "It adds to the uniqueness of Biddeford."

The ArtWalk was designed to use the arts to attract visitors to the city's downtown businesses, said Tammy Ackerman, a graphic designer and local business owner who has been one of the core group members coordinating the event since its inception.

Some of the members of the core group have moved on, like Anastasia Weigle, who closed her bookstore in Biddeford because of lack of sales and former Heart of Biddeford executive director Rachel Wayend who resigned her job at the end of last year.

Others like Ackerman, Buczacz and Holly Culloton, a partner in the Water Street store LACAVA remain.

While the art walk languished during the past year, "this is a rebuilding year," said Ackerman.

For the past three years, the event has been built on the shoulders of volunteers who donate their time and money.

Ackerman, and her partner Joshua Bodwell hope that will soon change. They have formed a non-profit arts organization, Engine, through which they'll apply for grants to support, among other things, future ArtWalks.

With funding, Ackerman and Bodwell hope that the ArtWalk will be sustainable and continue to grow.

From Brooklyn in New York to Berlin in Germany and even Rockland in Maine, "those cities have been revitalized by culture," said Bodwell. He said he hopes expanding the arts with events like the city's ArtWalk, will do the same for Biddeford.

This will help local businesses as well as artists, he said.

"Commerce follows culture," said Bodwell.

Biddeford's ArtWalk is held on the last Friday of each month. It will be held at the North Dam Mill through April. For more information visit the Web site: www.biddefordartwalk.com

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