

Belleville Community Prepares for Annual Art on the Square Event

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Southern Illinois University Edwardsville has always appreciated and embraced the artistic capabilities and expression of its students, faculty and staff members, and alumni.

Throughout the interior and exterior of its campus, dozens of handcrafted works of art are on display, supporting the University's mission to foster creativity and expression to the people on campus and beyond.

Approximately 20 miles south of SIUE, the City of Belleville supports artists not only from the St. Louis metropolitan area, but also from around the world, with its annual Art on the Square event.

On this week's episode of Segue, the premier radio show that discusses the ideas and issues on campus and beyond, SIUE Chancellor Randy Pembroke interviews Patty Gregory, founder of Art on the Square.

This episode of Segue will air at 9 a.m. on Sunday, April 22, on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

Gregory has served as the annual show's executive director since its creation in 2001. Her career began as an elementary school teacher in the Collinsville School District after graduating from Eastern Illinois University. She later taught special education. A long-time staple in the Belleville community, she has been honored with several awards for her teaching and volunteerism, including the Teacher of the Year Award in Caseyville schools in 1991, SIUE's Kimmel Community Service Award in 1993, and Boy Scouts Distinguished Citizens Award in 2008, just to name a few. She also serves on numerous boards and committees.

In its 17th year, Art on the Square will take place from 5-10 p.m. on Friday, May 18, 11 a.m.-9 p.m. on Saturday, May 19, and 11 a.m.-5 p.m. on Sunday, May 20, in downtown Belleville.

"For people who haven't heard of this event, what is it exactly?" Pembroke inquires.

"Art on the Square is a fine art festival and juried art show that always takes place the weekend after Mother's Day," Gregory says.

Each year, between 800 and 1,000 artists apply and submit work using 12 different artistic mediums to be featured in only 100 spots.

During the fair, a panel of judges considers the exhibited work and \$30,000 of prize money is awarded. Prior to the show, upwards of \$100,000 of pre-purchase art cash is sold. This cash is used by patrons to purchase art at the fair. For the past several years, more than \$1,000,000 of art has been purchased.

"This year, we will feature works of artists from Belgium, Israel, England, Argentina, as well as artists from all across the United States," Gregory says.

The Belleville community has rallied around the fair, and a board of 55 volunteers work year-round to ensure the event is successful and runs smoothly.

"When the idea first came to mind, I contacted the former mayor, Mark Kern, who is now our St. Clair County Board Chairman," Gregory says. "To my surprise, he was a true art lover and collector."

With the support of the City, and after 10 months of planning, the first Art on the Square event was met with not only local support, but also a torrential downpour.

“Opening night, it poured down rain, and I thought, ‘no one was going to be here’,” Gregory recalled. “The exciting thing was we were absolutely packed, even in the rain. The artists couldn’t believe they had sold so much art in the pouring rain.

“That weekend, we debuted at number 43 in the nation out of 6,000 art shows across the country.”

“How does one get evaluated for those ratings?” Pembroke asks.

“Those nationwide ratings are calculated by sales. By our second year, we were in the top 25 art fairs, and our third year, we were named the Best Small Town Art Fair in America,” Gregory says. “We compete against shows in New York, Miami, Denver and others all over the country. We have been quite fortunate for all the support we have!”

Each year, the event organizers and the Junior Service Club survey the fair’s patrons and visitors. By gathering simple information about where they are from, their age, and other demographic details, the organizers can ensure that their marketing efforts are being directed toward the appropriate audiences.

“It’s interesting to see how many people come from various locations,” Gregory says. “We normally have around 23-33 percent come from St. Louis. Madison, St. Clair and Monroe Counties make up a large majority of our audience.”

Art on the Square also is host to one of the largest exhibits of art created by high school students from the region. Art instructors encourage their students from over 30 southern Illinois high schools to submit their work that will be featured at Mathis, Marfian & Richter, Ltd., located at 23 Public Square in Belleville. Some high schools in the region will also host nine artists-in-residence prior to the festival.

“The appreciation and love of art should be taught at every age,” Gregory says.

This year’s festival, which has adopted the theme, “A Royal Affair,” will also feature great main stage entertainment, a wine court featuring jazz music, performances from the Gateway Men’s Chorus, The Abbey Road Warriors, a gourmet food court, interior design stage, and plenty of royal-themed children’s activities.

“The theme reflects the Royal Wedding between Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, which will take place on May 19, just in time for our festival,” Gregory says.

For more information about Art on the Square, visit the official event website at artonthesquare.com.

By Madelaine Gerard, SIUE Marketing & Communications