

Brandywine

Festival of the Arts

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Artists celebrate return of the Brandywine Festival of the Arts

With festivals and events like Old New Castle Day and others ending, how is it that the 50-year-old Brandywine Festival of the Arts is set to return the weekend of Sept. 11 and 12?

“Quality art and community support,” responds Barry Schlecker, executive producer of the revived arts festival that will bring approximately 250 artists and crafters to the banks of the Brandywine River in Wilmington. “And a bit of nostalgia,” he adds.

“Since we announced the return of the Brandywine Festival of the Arts, I have received hundreds of phone calls and e-mails from residents who are thrilled the event will be back, and from artists up and down the east coast interested in participating,” Schlecker says.

The Festival actually dates back to 1960 and has attracted anywhere from 10,000 to 25,000 people a year to the banks of the Brandywine River in downtown Wilmington.

Landscape architect Bill Nicholl has attended the Brandywine Festival of the Arts all but two years (he was in Hawaii and Portugal) since its 1960 inception. As an engineer for the New Castle County Parks Department at the time, he was part of the initial planning and has watched the event grow and evolve ever since.

“This event is an institution, especially to the artists and crafters. But for a lot of people, it’s a place to see and be seen, to catch up with old friends, reminisce and to see interesting things. There’s always something new and different at this Festival,” Nicholl says.

Nicholl recalls the early days when artists would exhibit their paintings on snow fencing and organizers would place pots of honey up in trees to distract bees. “We even had a bull roast one year, but that got too complicated.”

John Schoonover was an early organizer of the Festival in the 1960s. “We started with 30 artists exhibiting for one day, then added crafters and a second day in the 1970s,” recalls Schoonover, photographer and curator of Schoonover Studios in Wilmington.

Back in the 1960s and now 50 years later, Schoonover sees the Brandywine Festival of the Arts as an important urban event that adds to Wilmington’s cityscape. “For years this was

a quality stop on the arts festival circuit. By exhibiting artists from this region as well as others from far away, the Festival broadens our perspective of both arts and crafts and that's a healthy experience for everyone."

That's just the flavor of the event that's developing now. Schlecker continues to be in communication with local and national artists who will exhibit at this year's Festival. The jurying process of the artists and crafters is now underway.

"We're judging the artistry now so that we can once again achieve the positive reputation that made this Festival beloved by Wilmingtonians and respected by the arts community nationally," Schlecker says.

"I think there will always be an audience just because this event is part of the city's tradition. We want to raise the experience so that whether you're traveling from a few blocks or hundreds of miles, the Brandywine Festival of the Arts will leave a very positive mark on everyone who participates," Schlecker adds.

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