

Business owner revives Brandywine art festival

By PETER BOTHUM
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Last fall, artists all over the Delaware Valley lost money and exposure when the plug was pulled on the Brandywine Arts Festival, which had been held every year for nearly half a century.

Attendees, in turn, were denied the chance to take part in an annual rite of autumn on the banks of the Brandywine.

"It was a sin that it didn't happen last year. A sin," said Olga Ganoudis, a jewelry designer who got her start at the festival more than 15 years ago. "The Brandywine Arts Festival was more than making sales, it's connecting with the city of Wilmington."

This September, the annual arts festival will return to its home in Wilmington's Brandywine Park with a new name, the Brandywine Festival of the Arts, and a new organizer, Barry Schlecker, president and owner of The Network Group and head of the Newark Film Festival.

Schlecker, a Wilmington native and art collector, watched what happened last year and decided he was going to bring back the festival.

"Some people didn't even buy art, because it was like Point-to-Point, it was the Flower Market, it was something you did in September," Schlecker said. "It was the kickoff of the fall season."

Schlecker said the Brandywine Festival of the Arts will feature 250 artists, music, a children's tent and food vendors. As in past years, admission will be \$5 for both days of the event, with children under 12 getting in free.

Schlecker has kept his plans mostly under wraps since last fall, picking the brains of artists who have participated in the event for decades.

One of those artists was painter Larry Anderson, who said he was crushed when the festival was canceled. While sitting over "several cups of coffee," Anderson told Schlecker that, among other things, he wanted to see more serious judging.

"It was juried until the last few years. It got pretty loose," Anderson said. "I wanted to see some quality come back. I wanted to lose some of the carnival atmosphere, and bring it back to being an arts and crafts show."

Mitch Lyons, a potter who also does prints in clay, sold his work at the festival from 1975 through 1995 but stopped because the festival had become too crowded. Because of the changes Schlecker has in store, he said, he'll make his return this fall.

"He [Schlecker] is a big supporter of the arts," said Lyons, who splits his time between Dunedin, Fla., and New London, Pa. "He doesn't seem to be the typical art collector, but his heart is in the right place."

Schlecker said local art students will have a role in the festival. The Boys & Girls Club's Pegasus Artworks group will likely run the children's arts tent, and students from the Delaware College of Art



Barry Schlecker said he'll work full time on the arts festival and the film festival.

and Design and local high schools will also be involved.

He plans to partner with the Friends of Wilmington Parks and have them receive some of the profits. They, in turn, would provide volunteers and other resources.

Mike Porro, the organization's executive director, said the partnership hasn't been finalized but that he's looking forward to working with Schlecker to bring the festival back where it belongs.

"It's a tradition to be there," Porro said. "There was an outpouring of people who had been there over the years who wanted it back."

Money questions

Festival organizers were denied a permit in September 2009 to hold the event at the Wilmington park site because of a financial dispute. Executive Director Janie Blanch attempted to move the festival to two different locations before settling on the 14-acre Walker Farm in Hockessin. But she was forced to cancel because of a lack of commitments from artists. As a result, about 150 artists and craft makers lost money they paid for their spaces.

Blanch could not be reached for comment.

After the cancellation, Wilmington officials received inquiries from people who wanted to take over the festival, said Tina Betz, the city's director of cultural affairs. The Friends of Wilmington Parks and Blanch were among those who called, Betz said.

Carol Strickland had attended the festival for 20 years. She said she's glad to be able to resume her end-

of-summer tradition.

"I'm so excited. I'm in," Strickland said. "It was always a given that the week after Labor Day, it's the Brandywine Arts Festival. I guess we all took it for granted."

Pike Creek resident Marilyn Reed, who has attended every year since 1991, is glad the festival was revived quickly.

"I think there was probably a window of opportunity to bring it back, and if that window was missed, it would have died forever."

Schlecker said he plans to sell the Network Group and make the Brandywine Festival of the Arts and the Newark Film Festival his full-time jobs.

"If you want to do this right, you have to dedicate yourself," he said. "This requires a full-time effort."

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