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VIEWPOINT BY DIANE MCWHORTER

See You When It's Safe

SATURDAY MARKET'S 50TH YEAR, IN A PANDEMIC

May 9 marked the 50th anniversary of the Eugene Saturday Market, the oldest continuously operating weekly craft market in the U.S. The coronavirus postponed the Market season, so Saturday Market is not there in the Park Blocks, but the real Saturday Market is intact: It's you, the community.

Each rain-or-shine event — between 1,500 and 2,000 Saturdays so far — is a surprise. Those several hundred artisans may be similar, but a special concoction of weather, idiosyncrasies, charms and spicy creations is mixed into a new dish. That satisfaction is still cooking in the kitchens and shops of your favorite crafters and chefs. Some have turned to sewing and are giving away PPE. Some food artisans are doing take-out for a transition period. We miss each other.

We've weathered storms before. Harsh weather or finances delayed a few starts. In 1971, the Market did not open until June 19, on Courthouse Plaza, and almost ended in August when Lane County commissioners balked. Dramatic protest resulted in a continued season on the Butterfly Lot. Some challenges repeated and others were hard to believe: dogs and give-away kitties, inappropriate buskers and an arson. Most brought joy and cooperation; one person brought a cheetah, another live bunnies for meat. Selling festival food was new, and Market's archived newsletters and meeting records show how hard it was to craft operating rules through the decades.

Saturday Market's website now includes a member portal populating with photos and a Facebook marketplace with more than 1,200 participants. A virtual version of the guidebook and interviews on Instagram are posted. Nothing stopped for the membership except artists meeting their appreciators in a common space downtown.

In 1969, when the first craftspeople gathered, choosing potter Lotte Streisinger as spokesperson, a craft renaissance was young. Bringing handcrafts to a central marketplace seemed ancient and subsiding, but the opposite flow persisted. Activists were looking for truth and value in authentic lifestyles and artifacts. Phony and plastic were out.

Streisinger and her friends were not hippies but serious artists wanting to make a living. Urban galleries, few and exclusive, made selling locally seem basic. Market began with 29 artisans in the rain. By Christmas of 1970 a narrow alley by the Overpark overflowed with 200 sellers and an abundance of enthusiasm.

Always, it was about individuals in a group process. Consensus-based decision-making required highly invested participants; it evolved into a representative volunteer board and a staff of about 20 in full- and part-time roles. When you see the event, you won't notice the set-up crew, starting at 4 am, finishing after dark, or all the office and support staff. A dozen volunteer committees and task forces work on budget, sustainability, standards and more. It's a goal to have the event look like magic, but it's work.

A key part is you, the vibrant color in the tableau. In fairy wings or cat ears, wolf tails or tats, jeans or tiny skirts, people want to be seen as they are, or as they wish to be: to belong. Where else can you find an adult onesie or one-of-a-kind wire wrapped opal, just for you? You can look into the eyes of the person who dreamed it.

Best of all, you come to announce and orient your life. Engaged or graduating, you stroll for reward, rings or a journal. Tender conversations shared; when you come for the first time without your partner or child who flew from the nest, it brings tears.

After 9/11, Mayor Jim Torrey thought about canceling Saturday Market and the Eugene Celebration. Beth Little was the general manager and the chair of the celebration board and helped guide him to turn the Friday night party into a vigil for community grief and the normal gathering into part of the healing.

That wisdom of the heart is how community works, through our center with its dependable vulnerability. It's hard to think about investment and retail in a fraught moment, a radically altered land. We are in such a moment on this 50th anniversary. Our event won't happen downtown. We can't gather.

We are gathering differently, collecting values and passions, gentling into a new shape. All of us, for the first time or the thousandth, want to celebrate together. Facebook posts and *Eugene Weekly* viewpoints are a far step from reality when no opening day is set.

The big party was canceled, but the bigger party is planned. Creatives from Saturday Market, Oregon Country Fair and other legacy organizations have carried forward the work of our visionary founders. When the streets open again, whenever that is, we will emerge and, if we can't hug, we will embrace what we've built.

What was loved will resume, piece by piece, still wonderful. The threads of the tapestry have not unraveled. That shimmering glamour over our town just can't be torn. Adorned in our Market treasures and with bells on, we will step on back to 8th and Oak and we will have our gathering. We won't settle for anything less.

See you when it is safe.

Diane McWhorter started selling at Saturday Market in 1976, and is presently working on organizing the archives. You can see a retrospective of Saturday Market at [YouTube.com/watch?v=gpmkg2dCI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpmkg2dCI).

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