

STARVING ARTIST FAIRE HEALTHY AT 20

KEEPING THE FAIRE GOING HAS BEEN A COMMUNAL EFFORT

When the Starving Artist Faire began 20 years ago, Astoria was hardly a hip, bubbling incubator of the arts. “There wasn’t a Sunday Market when we started this faire,” says event founder Judith Niland. “There weren’t arts and crafts places or galleries or any place that covered craft arts.

“You would go out on the town and the sidewalks would roll up at 8 at night,” Niland remembers. “There wasn’t that much going on, and trying to make it as a (professional) artist in this town, yeah, it just wouldn’t work.”

To address the void, Niland organized the first Starving Artist Faire at the Astoria Eagles Hall. It was 1996. She says about 30 artists came to exhibit, and the vast majority of them were women.

“We just did it because it reminded us of who we were,” Niland says. “We thought the chances were we would have a good time, put a little joy in the world, trade, and maybe even make some money.”

Niland herself dabbled in myriad mediums, including dolls, clothing and collage. “Whatever struck my

fancy that year is what I would do,” she says. Other vendors offered a similar mélange of ceramics, paintings, jewelry and so on. Just about anything was welcome so long as it was handmade. The event offered some artists their first opportunity to sell or exhibit.

“I have one good friend who was a furniture painter,” Niland remembers. “She sold out every piece of furniture she painted in the first day and people wanted more. She had no idea that would happen, that people wanted her stuff.

“It was a nice, safe atmosphere for artists to put their little soul on the line,” Niland adds. “That’s why we did it, too.”

The inaugural faire was successful enough to replicate, and the second year Niland brought it under the nonprofit umbrella of the Astor Street Opry Company,



Submitted photo

Joy Diamond presents printed and rereprinted art.

where she worked as a stage and production manager. The hope was that the faire would not only serve local artists, but act as a fundraiser for the Opry Company. “Last year it brought in about \$2,000,” Niland says, “which is a lot for us.”

Today Niland is the Opry Company’s managing director. (We spoke backstage before a rehearsal of ‘Scrooged in Astoria,’ which opens Friday — the same weekend as the Starving Artist Faire.) That the faire has lasted two decades is no surprise to Niland, who likens its staying power to that of the Opry Company itself.

“There is something about the ASOC,” she says. “We hook in to a loyalty and a tradition.

“I really believe areas attract likemindedness and energy,” Niland continues. “This area has always been about people who are little steadfast, they like their tradition and the like, and they come back every year. But it’s always the people around us that tell us: ‘Let’s keep going.’ It’s like an old marriage — they just keep going no matter what.”

And indeed, keeping the faire going has been a communal effort. In 2000, Niland handed the reins to Cindy Peake. Peake, who began at the faire selling soap, has shepherded it ever since. That has included a tumultuous dance through several locations, including a stop in Warrenton at Lum’s Auto Center.

“If we didn’t have all the support of the venues and the community that comes and looks forward to it every year it wouldn’t go as far as it has,” Peake says. “We’re really fortunate.”

This year will be the faire’s second at the Astoria Armory. Despite the shifting venues,



Photo by Andrew Tonry

Judith Niland backstage in the dressing room at Astor Street Opry Company.



Submitted photo

Laura C. makes jewelry and mixed art.



Submitted photo

Ted Messing makes metal art.

finding vendors to fill them has never been an issue. Peake expects between 50 and 60 exhibiting artists. There also will be live music, concessions, Santa Claus and a raffle. The cost of entry is either \$2 or two cans of food. (Purchased tickets benefit ASOC; can donations go to the Clatsop County Food Bank, and many attendees give both.)

“After 20 years it’s very much a tradition,” Peake says. “It’s like a big family gathering.

“It’s just real comforting and real

friendly,” she adds. “People like to come and linger and talk. Some of them come to look for certain vendors. They mill about and listen to the music and eat some food and bring the kids to see Santa. It’s a lot of fun. It’s like a three-day party.”

But while the party may be fleeting, the arts and crafts live on.

“I have a pillow that I got at the faire 20 years ago,” Niland says. “I still have because it was made so well.”

the arts

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Story by ANDREW TONRY

If you go

Dec. 4, 5 & 6

Astoria Armory, 16th and Exchange streets

7 p.m.-10 p.m. Friday

10 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday

11 a.m.-4 p.m. Sunday