

REFLECTING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

Arts organizations reflect on 2020

BY ZOË BUCHLI

Local arts businesses have had to adapt in a number of ways during the coronavirus pandemic. Whether hosting virtual events or drastically reducing customer capacity, arts businesses faced unique challenges and successes in 2020.

Don Nisbett Art Gallery

For Don Nisbett, co-owner of Don Nisbett Art Gallery in Ilwaco, Washington, one of the largest obstacles introduced by the pandemic was a reduced supply of materials.

“Besides the obvious impact of having to shut down or reduce capacity, one of the biggest impacts to the gallery has been having trouble procuring the base materials I use to manufacture some of the products I sell,” Nisbett said. “Some of our best selling items are still unavailable and it is very frustrating and also affects some of our wholesale accounts.”

Nisbett said his customer base was a huge source of support in 2020.

“When we were shut down I started call-

ing existing customers to offer gift certificate specials. Most people that I called purchased one. A few customers even called us, just trying to help by placing orders and purchasing gift certificates for future visits to the gallery,” he said. “Every purchase, big or small, helped us make (it) through.”

Nisbett’s gallery features virus-inspired art, including t-shirts embellished with “social distancing” with spaced-out, COVID-safe crabs, an idea he said came from his wife, Jenna. The gallery also is selling shirts with “essential worker,” which Nisbett said came about from a commission from one of his local customers.

“One of my customers saw some of the ‘essential worker’ art on Facebook and commissioned me to paint her daughter, a nurse. The painting is a likeness of her daughter, a Rosie Riveter-style nurse, with a mask,” Nisbett said.

The piece was posted online. The Ocean Beach Hospital and Medical Clinics bought shirts for their crew. “It’s a great piece and continues to be a best-seller,” he said.

Nisbett said he is grateful for the support



Caitlin Seyfried

Coast Community Radio in Astoria.

from his family and community, and ability to keep creating throughout the year.

“I’ve been saying that 2020 was the best and the worst. I think one of the biggest factors in our ability to make it through these tough times (was) the ability to adapt and stay relevant,” he said.

Liberty Theatre

Astoria’s prolific Liberty Theatre closed its doors on March 12, 2020.

Jennifer Crockett, executive director, said the main challenge posed by 2020 was funding.

“We, like a lot of the bars and restaurants and tourist things in town, were coming off of a slower than normal winter, and so we were hit (by the pandemic) at the worst possible time,” she said. “We did temporarily furlough staff, including my own position.”

Crockett said the theater had successes with finding financial support through a variety of grants, private donations and financial aid programs, which allowed them to make some building improvements to the theater.

Staff and volunteers used the downtime to tackle lingering maintenance projects around the building, including building a new concession stand and box office.

Crockett said another silver lining of the pandemic was the success of virtual events. Her personal favorite was the theater’s virtual gala in November.

“It’s kind of a funny story because we didn’t expect as many people to watch it as

they did and it absolutely crashed our website,” she said. “It was a great problem to have and we were excited that so many people wanted to watch it.”

Virtual events were a new addition to the theater. Virtual programs will continue after the theater has fully reopened, Crockett said.

“There are a lot of people in our area that either don’t have access to cars or can’t afford ticket pricing or transportation,” she said. “We are always trying to include as many people as we can ... I think virtual programming is a great way to do that.”

The Liberty was able to help other performing arts organizations in the area.

“We knew if the Liberty was struggling, everyone else must really be struggling,” she said.

By leveraging the Liberty’s relationships with elected officials, donors and the theater’s larger network, the theater became an agency for 17 performing arts organizations across Clatsop County, known as the North Coast Performing Arts Alliance.

“We adopted a new mission during the pandemic and have been working to keep all of the performing arts organizations alive. It’s been really rewarding work,” she said.

The theater plans to start bringing back small shows with limited audiences indoors and is planning a summer filled with programming in outdoor venues, including a block party in July.

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