

First Fridays poised for growth

by Phyllis Mangefrida

Where can you go to catch a poetry reading, shop for artwork by local artists and craftspeople, attend several archetypal art gallery receptions, watch an artist create an original oil painting, and hear a live musical performance all for free and all within the space of three hours? Oh, did I mention the free refreshments?

A citywide open gallery night known as First Fridays is one of the best-kept secrets in Rochester, despite its growing popularity. On the first Friday of each month, from 6 to 9 p.m., about 30 venues, many in the Downtown Cultural District and in the Neighborhood of the Arts, host public receptions.

One venue that has become a destination for many gallery hoppers and houses numerous art studios all under one roof is the Hungerford Building on East Main Street. George Fekete, of Brighton, has been enjoying Hungerford's First Fridays' networking and party atmosphere for three years. He learned of the monthly event from Sabra Wood of Crocus Clay Works, whom he refers to as "the mayor of Hungerford." "I usually go to Crocus Clay, and I usually bring them a bottle of wine, and I drink two of theirs," jokes Fekete. He offers to introduce me to "the mayor."

We walk down the hall to the open doors of a ceramics studio, where a cheerful Sabra Wood wearing a striped shirt sits holding narrow slips of paper to be used as entry forms for a prize drawing. She greets people in a strong, friendly voice with "Hi, guys. Would you like a chance to win something tiny this month?"

A woman carrying a cherubic child with red cheeks and blond curls enters, and Wood repeats the question. The woman says with a laugh, "I already have something tiny!"

Wood has been in the building for eight years and is a charter member of the First Fridays coalition. Members commit \$100 to help with the costs of promotion and agree to be open 9 out of 12 First Fridays. The first time Wood participated in First Fridays, only 35 people came through her studio. Now she gets several hundred. "I pay my fixed costs with First Fridays," she says. Being on the list of open galleries for First Fridays isn't enough on its own to build that kind of traffic, however. "We send out over 2,000 invites a month, we Facebook, we Tweet, we do whatever is necessary to let people know we're here," adds Wood.

She also helps rally other studios in the building to participate in First Fridays. Having more open studios in the building attracts more people, which in turn makes the Hungerford Building an attractive place for artists to locate. Everybody benefits. This microcosm illustrates the purpose and the beauty of individual artists organizing for the greater good.

Four years ago, First Fridays was in its infancy in Rochester. Today, it's on the verge of maturity, ready to break its local bonds and see the world. Or at least to have art lovers

from outside the region travel here to see our world.

Meet Bleu Cease, the driving force behind the ongoing series of gallery nights here. When Cease took over as executive director and curator of Rochester Contemporary Art Center on East Avenue downtown in 2007, he wasn't content with just "turning the ship around" at RoCo, as the gallery is known. "What's that saying?" he asks and quickly finishes the thought: "'A rising tide lifts all boats.'" He helped buoy the gallery scene in Rochester by reproducing open gallery nights such as were being done in other cities across the country. Within months, he organized a bus trip to Syracuse to expose Rochester art lovers to that city's two-year-old gallery hop and to learn from its experience.

In addition to Syracuse, Cease examined a number of open gallery nights being organized by civic, educational, and community groups in larger cities, such as Kansas City, Mo., and smaller cities, such as Missoula, Mont. "I looked at a bunch of different models," he tells me over the phone.

Cease has been careful to make sure that First Fridays does not come off as being self-serving to Rochester Contemporary. And he doesn't include businesses that have a strictly commercial interest in joining with no intention of showcasing art. "There are a lot of cities where the cultural programming of First Fridays is diluted into a commercial event. I want to keep it gallery driven and art driven," he says. This is one way Rochester's version of First Fridays rises above the rest.

Cease devised a simple solution to another problem that plagues other cities' gallery nights. He doesn't want people to get frustrated trying to follow a map that's been printed weeks in advance, so he doesn't preprint any maps. With 30 venues a month to deal with, "It takes an act of God to get the list a week ahead for the website," he says. "A gallery might decide on Thursday to not be open on Friday or the other way around." He makes certain the list and map of participating venues on the website are up to date.

On Hungerford's fourth floor, where the wooden floors are dark with age, three men sit at the far end of a long, narrow room. Painting easels line one wall. As I admire paintings hung near the entrance, one of the men invites me to come in. He holds a large palette with tiny dabs of closely related shades of pink, blue, and other colors precisely arranged in a grid. Clamped to his easel is a wet oil painting of a little girl in pink and white old-fashioned clothing holding a white parasol. He introduces himself as Chris Kolupski. Next to the painting are three snapshots: one of the little girl's face and one of each hand. The painted girl looks more lifelike than the girl in the photos. Kolupski has imbued the scene, and especially her skin, with warm sunlight and soft shadows.

"The reason I am here is because of First Fridays," says Kolupski, 43, of Rochester. "All I have to do is open the door, and I get some free marketing." He goes on to talk about cross networking that happens organically in this situation and can't be predicted. In the course of my visit, as he explains this phenomenon, I see it in action.

A woman strolls in by herself and notices the painting he's working on. "Oh neat, look at how nice this is," she says. But then, seeing the photographs next to his easel, she sounds disappointed when she remarks, "Oh, so you use pictures."

"I am for this one. I don't always." She wants to know how often he uses live models.

"When anyone can sit for me, I paint them," Kolupski says. "The painting on top is from life. In my classes we usually work from life." He teaches color theory, painting from still life props and live models, and *plein air* painting (painting outdoors from life).

The woman is a model, always looking for potential work. Kolupski asks for her card. After she digs around in her purse and comes up empty handed, he offers her a piece of paper.

Kolupski has signed up two new students in the four months he's been here. He can squeeze up to 10 students into his studio, but he hopes to rent the room next door and expand to accommodate 12.

He tells me about a shy girl, about 16, who has come to the previous two First Fridays. "I happen to know she's a fabulous painter—I've seen her work. She comes in with her parents, and I think she may be considering taking classes. If I could get her as a student it would be fantastic because, as every school knows, the gifted students make the teacher look good," he says. "We talk technical stuff, and I think I may be helping her tweak her strengths." Kolupski knows what to credit for bringing this talented youngster to his studio: "It's all because of First Fridays. She would never be in my studio in any other circumstances."

Parking can be a problem at many city venues, where, especially on a Friday night, art seekers must compete with residents, restaurant patrons, and bar hoppers for parking places. To help launch First Fridays in 2007, a free bus service ran among the venues. Grants that funded the buses ran out after six months, but Cease has no intention of reinstating the service. "It was incredibly complicated to organize," he says. Despite the parking challenge, lack of free public transportation hasn't hurt First Fridays. He says Rochesterians value their independence and prefer to drive themselves, anyway. "This is an automobile town," says Cease. Some venues have dropped out because they were too far from the main hub of activity and weren't getting enough patronage, but Cease doesn't have to recruit new galleries or store owners—they come to him.

Beth Brown, 49, of Pittsford, opened the Shoe Factory Art Co-op last November. She returned to the Rochester area about five years ago after having been away for 18 years. For four of those years she ran a co-op gallery in the Berkshire Mountains in Massachusetts. Back in Rochester, she sought out information about local galleries, leading her to Rochester Contemporary, which she says, "is the main mother pig of the Rochester art scene, and everything feeds off of that."

Brown's gallery is in the Anderson Arts Building on North Goodman Street, where there is a high concentration of First Fridays venues. "First Fridays is kind of nice because the building's open, and there are other things going on," she says. "Sales are always hit or miss. You win some, you lose some. It's trying to figure how to sell, how to price artwork, how to market artwork in the economy that we're in. Trying to promote art and trying to sell art to Rochester residents—this is our goal. I really want to sell art. Sometimes we sell art, sometimes we don't. You never know when you're going to sell artwork; it's like going fishing."

Cease agrees. From a visitor's perspective, he says, "It's a hunt. You have 30 venues to choose from, and if you go to 10, chances are you'll see something you like."

But there's more to First Fridays than selling artwork. Stephen Palermo, 33, of Rochester, whose artist fiancée has participated in First Fridays, thinks the true measure of success for First Fridays is how engaged people are. "If they're talking to the artist, if they want to ask questions, if they're not afraid," he says. "It's one thing for people to just go in and look around and not say anything. You want people to come, and they're coming for a reason."

Fekete, who says, "Nobody ever accused me of being an artist. Or a musician," would like to see even more people attend First Fridays. "A lot of people who aren't into the arts and who don't have an innate appreciation of the arts and music—if they came to these things, I think their minds could be changed," he says.

Now that First Fridays is a proven, sustainable, and growing success, Cease is ready to take it to the next level. He wants to partner with the city government. "They need to get involved," he says. "They should be celebrating it." He wants a billboard on I-490 and more media exposure: "Shame on the *Democrat & Chronicle* for not covering it," he says, "We want people to come from Buffalo, even Toronto, in the next four years. That's where we're headed with this."