

the artistic historian

“Iron rusts from disuse, stagnant water loses its purity, and in cold weather becomes frozen; even so does inaction sap the vigors of the mind.” - Leonardo da Vinci

There will be no inaction sapping the vigors of the minds in Riverdale. Patti Watson is seeing to that. Patricia Watson, PhD., is the founder of the Riverdale Art Center. The RAC, she calls it. The place was opened in November and that was supposed to be Strike One against it. Who opens an art center in the heights - depths? - of a recession?

“We picked the worst time to try,” she says. But, adds, “It was meant to be.”

She might be right.

First, consider Patti Watson: super smart, funny, engaging and so optimistic that when you talk with her you want to run out and buy a lottery ticket, you feel so hopeful.

She is, as she describes herself, “an historian by training, an artist by nature.” As a child and teen, she loved art and dreamed of a life of creation. When she reached college age, well, her dad didn’t exactly want his daughter to go to art school. “Starving artist” is a romantic notion until it’s your daughter doing all the starving.

Instead, she received a B.A. in English from the University of California, Berkeley, and then earned her M.A. and Ph.D at Johns Hopkins University, concentrating in the history of medicine and medical anthropology. That led to years of remarkably fulfilling work in the fields of HIV/AIDS eradication, which even led to work in Africa, where she worked and traveled extensively. She is now a principal at the Business Historical Group consulting firm. But about 10 years ago, she

was re-bitten by the art bug. Her new passion: ceramics.

About three years ago, she was one of the founding members of an arts cooperative called Icehouse Pottery. But once she attended sculpture classes at William Paterson University in Wayne, she felt a new energy driving her work through the synergy generated by working with a variety of different types of artists. She described that as a “community of artists” working in all kinds of media: metalwork, painting, photography, drawing, computerized 3-D sculpting. So many disciplines and, when the artists all got together, the energy was palpable.

Inevitably, creating an art center made sense. She recruited four board members to help drive the growth of the new arts endeavor. On a map, they drew a circle around Riverdale and realized if they could build it, this community of artists in Passaic, Bergen and Morris counties would come.

That’s what they set out to do.

Job One was to form a non-profit organization. They did.

To give the future arts center a strong university affiliation, she recruited two additional board members from the art department faculty at William Paterson University to join the RAC’s board of directors. They developed a mission statement: “The Riverdale Art Center is dedicated to enriching the lives of individuals, families and the community through art.”

continued on page 18



Olmec by Alex Vincenzi
Image courtesy Jean-Pierre Subrenat

Image courtesy Bernard Suchit



Chefs Jean-Louis Gerin and Yves Crouzet with Patti Watson and some of her ceramic raku sculptures at The RAC's opening night.

continued from page 16

Simple enough, but Patti wanted more: "To cultivate," she says, "a supportive environment for art to flourish and the human spirit to soar." Consider this word: GEOS.

Each letter stands for something RAC wanted to address.

The G is for gallery space for established and emerging local artists to display their work. Prior, there had been no such place.

The E is for educational classes and services.

The O is for outreach programs, like art therapy for people with special needs.

The S is for studio space, made affordable, for local artists.

The G and the S are self-explanatory and we'll get back to them in a bit. But the E and the O are the good stuff, the stuff that makes a community a community.

Remember, her training is in the history of medicine. She has seen healing in all its traditional and many non-traditional forms. Art and healing are important to her.

"Hands-on art therapy builds a strong sense of well-being," she says. It's essential for a healthy people, a healthy community.

Art is the key to self-expression. Release that creative energy and amazing things can happen to the soul, the spirit, the light, whatever it is you want to call that thing inside you that needs to connect with the world.

The RAC will offer art classes for seniors as well as people with special needs. Its gallery and studio space might be the inspiration for that one confused teen needing that one spark to understand the passion burning inside.

But there is a problem. "We're in a dire financial emergency," Patti says of art communities in this country. Do not underestimate, then, the importance of one little arts center in one little town in New Jersey.

So, about that space . . .

There is a quaint old place called Slater's Mill in Riverdale and Patti thought it would be perfect for gallery space. But it was unavailable so the search continued. A random conversation with an employee at Bograd's Fine Furniture in Riverdale led to a meeting with storeowners Joe and Marcia Bograd. She told them about her idea and they loved it. Three weeks later, the Bograds invited her over and,



Image courtesy Jean-Pierre Subrenat

The RAC's Board of Trustees, left to right: Patti Watson, Alan Lazarus, Joan Hain, Elaine Lorenz, Eileen Poplis and Jerry Valenta. Sign designed by Prof. Tom Uhlein of William Paterson University and donated by Frohling Sign Company of Nanuet, NY.

while sitting in a gorgeous Queen Anne chair, she was offered a house behind the furniture store. Not just a house, but the 1881 Victorian at 2 Newark-Pompton Turnpike. "I was floored," she says. "I was humbled."

Later, she found an old brick factory at 5 Mathews Ave. which was great for studio space. Co-owner Joe Azzolino was happy to help.

She will not tell you that she and some of the other RAC board members cannibalized their 401(k)s to loan the RAC money to prepare the gallery and studio. But they did. She would rather tell you about the buzz in the community. She would rather tell you there is "a lot of art in this community" and now it has a place to go. There was the cocktail party fundraiser at the 1881 Victorian on the night of an ice storm when 50 people came out anyway. There was the opening of the gallery - the exhibit Founders and Friends - in November when 250 people jammed in to see the work of local artists. It runs through Jan. 23, 2010.

She will tell you about Carl Richards, the nice man who lives and paints in Cape Cod now but who actually grew up in his ancestral home - the 1881 Victorian in Riverdale. He was working at the family business, Richards Funeral Home across the street, when about 10 years ago he had a stroke.

And an awakening.

He left the funeral business to pursue his passion. Which he advises everyone to do now.

Coincidentally, five minutes before the RAC opening in November, Carl Richards called Patti and told her about their connection. The next exhibit, opening Feb. 4 (through March 28) will include two things: the launch of RAC's art therapy program and a prominent feature of Carl Richards work.

Against all odds maybe it's as the passionate, hard-working, intelligent Ms. Watson says - the RAC was meant to be.

Or maybe it's more about what the Renaissance man who painted the "Mona Lisa" and "The Last Supper" and drew "Vitruvian Man" said. To paraphrase: "Don't mess with the vigors of the mind." ■

- By Terry Egan

SOURCE:

RIVERDALE ART CENTER

2 Newark-Pompton Turnpike, Riverdale, NJ

Gallery hours: 12-6 Thursday, 10-5 Friday and Saturday

(973) 513-9250 www.riverdaleartcenter.org