

Art With Heart

The Mooresville Art Depot is a charming arts center in historic downtown.

by PIPER ANDERSON

It's a Friday morning, and kids are painting in an old warehouse supported by rustic floors and wooden beams that dangle with twinkle lights. It's summer camp at the Mooresville Art Depot: the radio blasts and children spread art across the walls so that color is splashed everywhere. In the next room, boxes are wheeled in with photographs and wheeled out with paintings as new exhibits are hung. A train rumbles by outside, and inside there's a flurry of activity as the morning quickly turns into the afternoon.

The Art Depot is a visual arts center run by Mooresville Arts, a nonprofit guided by the simple but important mission of providing art to the community. Sitting on Main Street, the Depot is small and unassuming. But if you look a little closer, you can see the place is special. It goes back to what's important: a simple love for art, and a desire to brighten a town with that love. It showcases new talent, providing burgeoning artists with an avenue for recognition. It gives back to the community with programs like art outreach at senior homes and programs for children. For those who want to express themselves and learn a little, there



are watercolor classes, acrylics classes, and live modeling classes. Essentially, the Depot welcomes people to come in and enjoy art.

"I like having a community arts center where art is displayed, it's taught, it has the involvement of the community, where we're expanding programs and looking for new ways to be involved with the community," says Jeannine Tieri, the treasurer for Mooresville Arts. "I'm really enjoying watching it develop into something that is

for everyone. You shouldn't have to go into Charlotte to see art, and you don't have to."

Mooresville Arts started 61 years ago as a group of artists who liked to paint together. Now it's grown into a well-established arts center that displays new exhibits each month. What used to be a train depot has now become a meeting place for writing groups, and a rehearsal place for drama groups.

"We have people who come in who will drive 30, 40 miles just to paint on Wednesday afternoon for two hours," says Ellen Patterson, the public relations director for Mooresville Arts.

The quality of work at the Depot has gotten recognition not just locally, but from across the Piedmont—people living throughout the region come and participate in competitions.

"We have really made a name for ourselves over the past couple of years. Our judges are astounded at the quality of our work," Patterson says.

As they should be. The Depot has attracted internationally known workshop instructors like Sterling Edwards and Zoltan Szabo. It has hosted the American Water Color Society's travel exhibit—one of six stops the exhibit goes to in the U.S.—and so has had the best of the best watercolorists within its walls. In November and December of this year the Depot will host the watercolor society once again—"They ask us now," Patterson says.

Over 10,000 people a year come to the different exhibits. The very popular "Women Painting Women" exhibit, now in its fifth year, will premier in August. As can be expected, the turnout is huge in March for the youth exhibit, which is open to kindergarteners through 12th-graders.

The Depot isn't without its issues, though. The building itself needs to be renovated to make it more efficient and more handicap accessible. Although the gallery is air-conditioned and heated, the attached warehouse is not.

"The building is a challenge to us because we'd like to have more programs





Sandie Bell, "Sparkle The Storyteller"

for children, adults, and vets, but we can only use half the building half the time," Teri says. "So, we need funding to make improvements so we can use the rest of that building. And there are a lot of cosmetic things we're working on so that it will be a more aesthetic experience."

Mooresville Arts has worked with an architect specializing in historic buildings to make plans for an updated arts center complete with better facilities. However, they don't have enough money for the renovations, so the major hurdle right now is fundraising. The Depot gets most of its money from membership fees. Entirely volunteer run, it exists by the sheer might of the people who love it and dedicate their precious time to keeping the doors open.

This is an important mission, too—a survey by the Town of Mooresville's Cultural, Parks, and Recreation department found that art classes were in the top five of the most highly prioritized programs ranked by the community.

"The arts bring people into the communities," Patterson says. "They bring a quality to the community that you don't get if the arts aren't there."

And it certainly feels like a community here on this Friday morning. There's a gift shop tucked away in the corner of the gallery stocked with jewelry handmade by locals and whimsical sculptures carved by neighbors. Kids laugh and create beautiful art together. Next door, artists gather to create a new talent-filled exhibit. Mooresville Arts started as a gathering place for friends to paint, and it has stayed true to its origins. Through gallery visits and membership meetings, people have come together who might never have met otherwise. The art makes the Depot special, but the people do, too. www.mooresvillearts.org

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