Scarab Club sparkles on its 110th anniversary

By JoAnn Amicangelo
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- Art gallery and club has grown membership 74 percent since last year
- New executive director has launched new programs and increased revenue
- "Hidden gem" aims to be less hidden

In 1973, when high school student Carl Wilson explored The Scarab Club, an art house located in a three-story, Lancelot Sukert-designed building on John R in Detroit, he left because it felt staid.

When the printmaker returned in 2012, however, he discovered a different vibe.

"I found The Scarab Club to be anything but stodgy," he said. "Now, it's like home."

Wilson is one of a growing number of members and exhibiting artists at The Scarab Club, which marks its 110th anniversary this month.

There is much to celebrate. In the past 12 months, the club gained an energetic new executive director, increased programming, exceeded 2016-2017 income expectations and diversified its audience.

Founded in 1907 by a group of artists and art lovers as a gathering place for discussion, critique, inspiration and exploration of visual, musical and literary arts, The Scarab Club’s board of directors tasked new Executive Director Ashley Hennen with bolstering the community’s awareness of the club.

**Changing perception**

Though located just behind the Detroit Institute of Arts and between the College for Creative Studies and Michigan Science Center, few people seem to know The Scarab Club is a gallery and meeting space that is open to the public.
Adrienne Nutter, owner of Grosse Pointe-based Fandangle Event Design, said that's a perception the venue is actively trying to change.

"You don't need to have a membership. You don’t need to know anything about art to come in and appreciate the shows that are exhibited," said Nutter, who joined the club last year and now serves on the board. "And the second people go down there and go to a lecture or to a party or event, they're just enchanted and they want to come back for more."

She is passionate about the unique and intimate experience The Scarab Club offers over other art venues, experiences such as the ability to watch Detroit artists at work in the club's studios and to purchase paintings on display.

"You clearly can't do that at the DIA. And so, it's a really great little gem that I think more people should take advantage in the city," Nutter said.

New branding launched in spring 2016 has played an important role in bringing in new members like Wilson and Nutter. Membership increased 74 percent, from 305 in 2016 to 531 today, and 195 percent since 2010 when The Scarab Club had 180 members.

However, new engagement-focused programming is what's gaining the attention of a younger, more diverse audience.

Last year, Hennen, in partnership with Detroit Research and Salon De'troit, launched the Regular’s Table, which pairs Detroit artists, thinkers and dabblers for intimate, informal conversation; Live at the Scarab Club, an exploration of Detroit's rich musical heritage; and Future Artists, an after-school program facilitating engagement between the girls and young women living at Alternatives for Girls with female artists.

Hennen said the new programming creates a framework for more people to participate in conversation around the arts, to understand what is happening in Detroit's art community and to feel more connected to it. They also complement the club's existing amenities and event calendar, which include:

- Three galleries
- Artist studios
- 24 exhibitions a year
- Juried and curated shows of local and international artists
- Pop-up exhibits
- Chamber, jazz and blues music concerts
- Woodward Line Poetry Series
- Four sketch sessions a week
- Dance classes
- Four big parties — Mardi Gras Masquerade, Garden Party, Boar's Head Dinner and Gold Medal Awards Ceremony and Noel Night

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The club's 110th Anniversary Celebration on Sept. 29 brings the party count to five this year. Plans for the evening include chamber music, jazz from the Live at the Scarab Club Showcase, live portrait sketching, a pop-up exhibit of Robert Hopkin's works, an open bar and strolling dinner.

**Intergenerational**

Though programming changes and new membership can prove challenging for existing members, Hennen has met with little resistance.

"People have been really receptive and open and hungry for change here," she said. "We've gotten a lot of positive feedback about the new programming we've brought on board and the new changes we've made."

Nutter pointed to the popularity of the Founders Junior Council and its events at the DIA as evidence of the love millennials have for the arts.

"The interest is there. And we want to make sure we are bringing the next generation of art lovers to the club so that we continue to sustain and grow our membership but also continue to sustain and grow interest in the arts in southeast Michigan," she said.

Careful not to alienate older members while working to attract younger visitors, Hennen and her team are intentional about creating opportunities to bring the two constituencies together.

Past events like the members' wine tasting and a dual exhibit opening — featuring the work of Feather Chiaverini, a CCS student, alongside the work of 2017 Plein Air Challenge participants, who tend to be long-standing members — help bridge that gap.

"The double opening brought together an interesting cross-pollination of people who are all interested in the arts but are from very different demographics and perspectives," Hennen said.

**Growing support**

It was a positive year for The Scarab Club financially as well.

Income for fiscal year 2016-2017, ending June 2017, was $421,362, exceeding Scarab official's forecast of $298,064 by more than 40 percent. In contrast, the club ended the 2011-2012 fiscal year with an income deficit of $23,426.

Hennen said membership dues, special events, grants, an anonymous donation of $50,000 and club rentals, which continue to be its largest source of revenue, are what put the Scarab Club over the top.

"We will be using the $50,000 donation to retool our kitchen, which goes back to helping the revenue from rentals," she added.

Though The Scarab Club has a strong history of foundational support from the National Endowment for the Arts, Michigan Council of Arts and Cultural Affairs, Erb Family Foundation, Knight Foundation and...
Kresge Foundation, the board hopes to build its roster of private donors.

"It's not a tough sell when you consider its historical legacy and that contributions support Detroit's cultural heritage, contemporary art and the current creative community," said Hennen.

The Erb Family Foundation agrees.

"As a family foundation, part of our mission is to support the arts as helping to provide a great quality of life, a vibrant community. But aside from the fact that The Scarab Club is one of the 42 arts organizations we support, it is just a phenomenal, charming organization that was for a while, unfortunately, kind of a hidden gem," said Jodee Fishman Raines, vice president of programs. The foundation granted the Scarab Club $30,000.

**Strategic planning**

In October, Hennen celebrates her first year in her new role at The Scarab Club. As with other leaders of small nonprofits, she acknowledges the challenge of dividing her time between day-to-day operational concerns and strategic planning.

Yet she is proud of what she and her two-person staff — a full time office and events manager and a part-time gallery director — and the volunteers have been able to accomplish.

Given sufficient resources, Hennen envisions eventually creating a commissioned model to help support the need for professional development among Detroit's artists. She would also tackle the long list of building maintenance projects and make landscaping improvements at the club’s front entrance.

"I'd like to create a more inviting space, so maybe lighting out front with landscape improvements — something that makes it apparent that anyone who walks by is welcome to come in," she said.

She plans to discuss the project with Detroit office staff at Los Angeles-based Lorcan O'Herlihy Architects, which has expressed an interest in pro-bono support for kitchen renovation drawings.

In the meantime, she and the board continue to develop a strategic plan that keeps the current momentum going. The underlying goal, however, will be to build awareness.

"It's the hope that five, 10 years from now people aren't walking by our front door saying, 'What is that place?'" Hennen said.

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