The Shared Language of Art

BY KENNIE BEEKER

One of Nimbus Arts’ core beliefs is that art plays a vital role in bringing people together, creating a more connected community that shares and learns together. This value proposition is embedded in their vision and practice daily and has fundamentally shaped this beloved nonprofit’s depth and reach in the Napa Valley.

A Main Street fixture for many of us, the large sign above Nimbus Arts’ home has animated gallery and lecture space, welcoming those studios in the complex as the entrance to St. Helena’s Downtown since 2012. More recently, another Nimbus Arts storefront has opened, 190 Main Street, where a following of eager students, families and community members who ask for more and more art, and also wanted to help Nimbus to grow.

Nimbus Arts blossomed into a public charity nonprofit in 2010 with a threefold mission: providing interdisciplinary classes, camps and workshops, supporting local artists, and offering free community outreach art activities. Activities like classes, camps and workshops are the most familiar part of the art center, but the mission includes more than just art programs for its patrons. Jamie and her artist team brought art classes to many borrowed locations around town, and in the process created a following of eager students, families and community members who asked for more and more art, and also wanted to help Nimbus to grow.

The pilot program and name—Cloud Camp—first Camps started in 2005. Working with teaching artists -- sculptors, painters, and printmakers -- the first campers learned the science of clouds from meteorologists and art skills in all media, and then challenged themselves to construct large-scale cloud sculptures larger than their own bodies! “Cloud Camp” evolved into Nimbus Arts as we know it today, serving as a model for a creative interdisciplinary approach to art program design.

Nimbus Arts was conceived by local resident, Dana Johnson, Dana’s young daughter spent considerable time at the UCSF Hospital and while there, one of the best things for both the children and parents was the fact that the playroom offered art activities. She comments: “Each family with a sick child was an island until we got to the art projects in the playroom. The parents would get the kids started with the project, and then start making one themselves. And there’s something magic about being in the same place with other people but focused on creating something – conversations would just begin so naturally. Once our daughter was doing better, I couldn’t stop thinking about that experience, and I decided to start exploring how we could make an organization to foster both creativity and that wonderful sense of community you get from creating together.”

“Our Family Foundation was headed by Janet Pagano, and together we started brainstorming about what we could work with to get such an organization started, and both of us thought immediately of Jamie Graff, who had founded Tapioca Tiger after leaving her career as a winemaker. More than just a store, Tapioca Tiger also developed and produced innovative activities and programs for its patrons. Jamie was tapped to develop and run the fledgling organization and provided a five-year window to test and refine programs and establish a viable structure. "Jamie is amazing -- she has an endless font of creative ideas and the energy and vision to drive them through to completion. In the first years we had no building or center, but Jamie and her artist team brought art classes and camps to many borrowed locations around town, and in the process created a following of eager students, families and community members who asked for more and more art, and also wanted to help Nimbus to grow.

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Meet a program called HandsOf (HOH), which offers free community art workshops across the region and at the Nimbus studio. For each HOH mosaic project, Nimbus partners with another local nonprofit, and people of all ages and backgrounds come together to create beautiful art elements which are combined to form large-scale public art installations, a visual reminder of the connections between all people and a source of pride and identity for the community. Jamie comments: “We are on our 5th! Hundreds of Hands project. Each one is unique, and they often take unexpected twists and turns, which happens both with art and working with other organizations. One HOH project that just kept growing is our third one, where we worked with a Latina teen anti-abuse after school program called Mariposa to make two huge mosaic panels that are now displayed at the Cape Family Center in Napa. It took us almost three years, and we got to know the girls very well. Their transformation – having gone from no comfort with art to speaking in front of groups and teaching people how to
Nimbus Arts’ expanded, improved, and multi-faceted mosaic Porticos will be featured at the upcoming Nim Bash. Each year NimBASH is the work parties unites to develop and produce the Napa Valley’s multi-faceted and wildly unique “Arty-Party” and auction - NimBASH. Each year NimBASH is guided by a different theme and the team creates art activities, design, auction items, and décor to express its theme. This event showcases the immense creative force and artistic talent within the NimBus team. Now in all of its upcoming free community art events. To get involved, contribute to Nimbus Arts, buy tickets to NimBASH, or get more information, please visit their website, www.nimbusarts.org or call them at 707.963.5279.

St. Helena has been a popular tourist destination since pioneer days, being famous for its natural beauty, wine industry, pleasant climate and medicinal springs. The St. Helena Star newspaper recognized the importance of tourism for the health of local businesses, and advocated for paving the dirt streets, widening the sidewalks, and expanding the rail system to increase access to St. Helena from San Francisco.

A 2019 Star editorial encouraged St. Helena to close all stores at 6pm so merchants and customers could concentrate on playing sports, reading, and socializing, instead of loitering in bars. The decision was reversed after hotel owners realized that visitors left town in the afternoon, whereas before they would have stayed the night and patronized the hotels, restaurants and bars.

ED, Jamie Graff welcomes art patrons and supporters to NimBASH 2019

In early 2018, Nimbus Arts’ board, leadership Circle and generous community supporting our vision.” Now, with expanded studios and growing public interest and involvement, Jamie and her team are juggling a calendar crowded with creative classes and workshops while always looking for even more ways to make art, healing and creative powers available to our community.

Nimbus Arts invites everyone to come visit their expanded and improved home, and join in at one of its upcoming free community art events. To get involved, contribute to Nimbus Arts, buy tickets to NimBASH, or get more information, please visit their website, www.nimbusarts.org or call them at 707.963.5279.

By Kathleen Coelingh, St. Helena Historical Society

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