

Great Falls CONNECTION

Artist Community Rising

Great Falls Studios is pleasantly surprised by its rapid growth.

By Aranya Tomseth

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In 2003, despite the fact that she had lived there all of her life, Laura Nichols was actually contemplating a move from Great Falls.

"The character of Great Falls has changed over the years, and it had gone in a direction that wasn't particularly how I wanted it to be," said Nichols, a local potter. "It was a farming community and then it became an affluent bedroom community."

Fortunately, Nichols decided that she should give her hometown a chance.

"I thought, if I'm here, there must be other people here with whom I'm compatible," she said.

Subsequently, she decided to found Great Falls Studios, a consortium of local artists, and by doing so, Nichols discovered that there are quite a lot of people like her living in her community. By the end of 2003, she was able to recruit just under 20 members, and by December of 2005 that number had jumped to 35. Today, there are 49 artist members in the group.

In addition to drastically increasing its membership in the last few months, the group has also incorporated itself as a Virginia limited liability company, established a volunteer Board of Directors, and started the application process to become a non-profit, charitable organization that will have the ability to accept tax-deductible donations.

"It's exciting that there are this many artists in Great Falls," said Jonathan Fisher, a painter and member of the Board of Directors. "Suddenly the notion of turning Great Falls into a center for arts media seems very well within the realm of possibility."

LAST MONTH Great Falls Studios began renting the loft above The Silk Purse in the Great Falls Village Center. The space, dubbed "The Artists' Atelier," has enough room to accommodate up to seven artists. Great Falls Studios sublets the space to its interested members.

"There is a problem all across Fairfax County for artists who can't find space," said Fisher. "So if you want to work outside of your home it's very difficult to find a spot, especially in Great Falls. This is a way for members to get a fairly cost effective space to work."

However, this is only the first stepping stone on the road to a bigger goal.

"Our dream is to have a headquarters building that would house a permanent exhibition area, classrooms for art teaching, and a bigger space to make room for more studios for artists," said Fisher.

The group is just beginning to look into how to best achieve this goal. Nichols says that while a permanent space is one long-term plan, right now she is focused on making the community aware of its thriving art community.

"Since we're all in Great Falls and we have this talent here already, and some people teach, some people show and some people have studios that people can come visit, there is an awful lot here right now," said Nichols.



Contributed

Jill Banks works on a still life painting in her new studio space at the Artists' Atelier in the Great Falls Village Center.

Upcoming Great Falls Studios Shows

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Great Falls Studios has two upcoming shows, both of which will feature a diverse mix of works from its members. Walt Lawrence, a local photographer and member of the Great Falls Studios Board of Directors will display five images in the upcoming Great Falls Studios exhibit at the RE/MAX Gateway real estate office on Colvin Run Road. Two of his images are of a 6-month-old, 55 pound baby tiger that was temporarily housed in Great Falls before heading to a wildlife sanctuary in Southern California.

"I took a bunch of pictures of him and the handler, and I am donating the proceeds from any sale to the sanctuary," said Lawrence.

Lawrence, whose first solo show is currently running at the Great Falls Library, says he is looking forward to the many upcoming Great Falls Studios projects.

"We're moving forward on a lot of fronts and there is a lot of energy in this group," said Lawrence.

Great Falls Studios will open a second exhibit on Monday, May 1 at the Great Falls Library.

"What is exciting about them is that not only can people enjoy the art, but they can so easily contact the artists for more information," said Nichols.

Nichols says she is thrilled with the growth of her consortium, and credits its success to the commitment of its members.

"That is what's giving it its energy and vitality," she said. "I can't wait to see what happens next."



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