

ART-A-WHIRL AND THE CREATIVE CLASS: *The Twin Cities arts and culture legacy*

By **Susan Schaefer**
UNDER THE HOOD



Art-A-Whirl spans neighborhoods and disciplines

Whatever corner of the Twin Cities you live in, chances are you or someone close to you has participated as an artist or a guest in what Anna Becker, executive director of the Northeast Minneapolis Arts Association (NEMAA) calls our "rite of spring" – Art-A-Whirl.

The three-day happening has been heralded as the biggest open studio tour in the United States with tens of thousands of visitors attending past events.

Shuttered for the past two years due to the pandemic, this year's event took place on May 20-22, 2022, and the artists were primed and ready to throw out the welcome mats. Even with COVID-19 variations continuing to mutate and spike, many of NEMAA's more than 1,000 members, housed in over 60 locations in a defined geographic area, were cautiously optimistic about this year's turn out.

Past NEMAA president, Carmen Gutierrez-Bolger, who shares her studio in the Casket Arts Building with two fellow artists, said the artists she spoke to were enthusiastic about returning to an in-person event. "To be honest," she stated, "almost everyone has had COVID. This year many are cautious about not serving food, but many, including my studio, are not masking."

Art-A-Whirl's origins

In 1995, a group of determined art-



Former NEMAA president, Carmen Gutierrez-Bolger, readies her Casket Art studio for Art-A-Whirl 2022. (Photo by Susan Schaefer)

ists set up studios in Northeast Minneapolis' neglected factory buildings. These art pioneers then decided it would be good for the public to see (excuse the Hamilton pun) "the room where it happens," so they organized the first open studio tour. A few years later, the growing group formed NEMAA as a non-profit entity. Through diligent collaboration and savvy marketing, Art-A-Whirl, now marking its 27th year, grew in popularity, becoming a nationally recognized art phenomenon.

By 2002, under the leadership of then-president Gutierrez-Bolger, members of NEMAA joined together with the city of

Minneapolis, the McKnight Foundation, and local businesses to establish the formal geographical area now known as the Northeast Minneapolis Arts District. In fact, those efforts have been a model for many other Twin Cities' neighborhood branding efforts, including those served by our community papers. Colorful flags on light posts now demark many communities.

Astonishing economic impact of arts

In the early 1990s, even before NEMAA formed, as chair of the Greater Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce's



Susan Schaefer's Engineered to a Higher Standard collage.

respected Leadership Minneapolis Program™, I established the creative class sub-committee of the chamber's public affairs group. We invited author Richard Florida as a guest speaker to discuss his groundbreaking book, "The Rise of the Creative Class." Along with colleagues from the newly dubbed creative industries including architecture, public relations, advertising, design and landscaping, our sub-committee hosted guest speakers and special events, providing new perspectives and data about how significantly creativity impacted local economy. We understood how important it was to engage business leaders around the arts.

Our efforts can be linked to the adoption almost two dozen years later by the city of Minneapolis of the Creative Vitality Index (CVI), an economic measure developed by a Western States Arts Federation (WESTAF), used to weigh in on the ever-increasing contribution of arts and culture to our population. Minneapolis even developed



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