

History of the Arts and Cultural Alliance of Jackson County (ACAJC)

ACAJC was founded in 2003 to fill a need recognized by an informal group that named themselves the Cultural Organizations of Jackson County (COJAX). This group felt that a formal, 501(c) 3 non-profit organization would help the community recognize and celebrate the power of arts and culture, and acknowledge its impact on individual growth, development and learning, and on the overall quality of life and economic sustainability of the community. Prior to the formation of the Arts Alliance, there was not a collective body working together to coordinate arts and cultural related activities in greater Jackson.

Community Cultural Plan. In 2004, the Arts Alliance began an effort to assess what this community wanted and needed in terms of arts and cultural offerings. This started with the Arts and Cultural Interest Survey and other pre-planning and assessment activities. A grant from the Jackson County Community Foundation provided the wherewithal the ACAJC needed to hire ArtServe Michigan to facilitate the development of the Jackson County Community Cultural Plan. That accomplishment was the commencement of our planning. Since that time, the ACAJC has continued to implement the goals through its annual strategic plan and revisit the plan every three years with community members. Since its inception the Arts Alliance has advocated for art in Jackson through one-time and recurring projects, both large and small. It should be noted that we strive to make all our events fully accessible.

Public Art. The Arts and Cultural Alliance of Jackson County has a history of providing and maintaining public art in Jackson even before it was a formal organization. A public art committee was originally formed to develop the City of Jackson's public art program around 2002 to develop a public art design review process and a temporary art installation program. Revenues from the City's wireless telecommunication tower rentals (*i.e.*, the "ugly tax") were identified as the program's dedicated funding source. For over nine years the Public Art Committee oversaw the selection and installation of public art for the city of Jackson. They also made several purchases of permanent art and supervised the restoration of existing sculptures. In 2010 due to economic constraints, the city suspended funding.

Jackson 2020. In 2012 the Jackson County Chamber of Commerce undertook a county-wide initiative to create a unified vision of where the community wanted Jackson to be in about ten years. A number of strands representing areas of interest in Jackson have been meeting for several months to create this vision. Because of its familiarity with the arts and cultural community and its ability to communicate via E-blasts, the Arts Alliance took on the creation and leadership of the Arts, Recreation, and Culture (ACR) Strand and chaired regular meetings that reported to the larger workgroup, until 2014.

Smaller Projects. In the early years, the Arts Alliance's efforts included Youth Symposium for high school seniors interested in the arts. In collaboration with the Jackson Civic Art Association and Ella Sharp Museum of Art and History, the Arts Alliance supported Art a Loan, which selected artwork from students in all grades of the K-12 schools in Jackson, arranged for about 60 works to be professionally framed, exhibited in the museum gallery, and rented out to local businesses and professionals for one year's time.

Staff Leadership. In 2009 the Arts Alliance hired a full-time Executive Director, a position funded by a grant from the Jackson County Community Foundation. Under her leadership, the Arts Alliance initiated its first Art Home Tour to highlight the work of local visual artists. The Executive Director continued the Arts Alliance's offering of workshops and events and created much-needed infrastructure for the organization, creating the website, along with a social media presence, and starting *Art News*, a bi-weekly email newsletter for the arts and cultural community now with over 100 editions and more than 1,000 recipients. Our E-blasts feature county-wide arts and cultural events and opportunities for artists such as theatrical auditions, art contests and festivals, and information for freelance writers.

Jammin' in Jackson. 2009 saw the first of The Arts Summit, a year-long series of monthly meetings of movers and shakers in Jackson. Along with valuable networking, the Arts Summit gave rise to *Jammin' in Jackson*, a free six-event music series on Thursday evenings in downtown's Bucky Harris Park, in partnership with the DDA and sponsored by a local credit union.

Gift Gallery. The Arts Alliance added another initiative, the Gift Gallery, a holiday consignment market in late November/early December featuring the work of local artists, authors, and musicians. 2013 was the third and final year. This program made a modest profit and showcased the work of local artists and artisans to the community. There are now other Holiday Consignment Markets in Jackson, and since our goal is to provide events as needed, the board considered this no longer a need for the community and has dropped the program.

Expanded Initiatives. In 2012 the Arts Alliance partnered with the Jackson DDA, Midtown Merchants, and a local business to produce an artists' walking tour where art was placed in businesses and galleries in the downtown area. Community members voted for their favorites, whether artists, musicians or authors and cash prizes were awarded. This was reprised in 2013 but in 2014 it was expanded significantly to be an event called How Bazaar.

MCACA Regranting. 2012 and 2013 the Arts Alliance took on the role of regranting agency for MCACA mini-grants for Region 16 which covers Branch, Calhoun, Hillsdale, Jackson, and Lenawee Counties. This region included counties which do not have arts councils and have been designated as underserved.

Workshops for Creatives. In September 2013, the Arts Alliance partnered with the Spring Arbor University's Business School Hosmer Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation to offer a series of eight workshops for artists and creatives. Led by Jackson artist and entrepreneur, Jane Robinson, the workshops provided individual and hands-on information about creating a business from legal aspects to social media to creating and presenting a business plan critiqued by local business owners. What started as the workshop program has continued independently without the help of ACAJC.

It is not the intent of ACAJC to own projects, but to support them and then let them soar individually. The Arts Alliance continues to also advise, plan and assist in marketing campaigns and provide fiduciary support for its members.