

After 89 years, Chester County Art Association suspends operations

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Children enjoy summer camp in 2019 with the Chester County Art Association in West Chester.

SUBMITTED PHOTO

WEST CHESTER — Art inspires. Art uplifts. Art creates.

Yet in the wake of a global pandemic, key programs and sustainable funds raised during milestone nonprofit events have been suspended, canceled or postponed.

On Sunday, Wendy Kershner, executive director, announced to supporters that the Chester County Art Association (CCAA) has closed its doors until at least the spring.

And without an endowment, or new partnerships to sustain its building at 100 N. Bradford Ave. in downtown West Chester, the CCAA may never reopen.

What is happening to the CCAA is indicative of the impact, and financial burden, the pandemic has placed on fellow regional art centers of the Philadelphia area and Pennsylvania nonprofit organizations.

Chester County artists founded the CCAA 89 years ago in 1931.

Until this past March, the nonprofit was open year-round and reached more than 25,000 people annually, according to Kershner.

During spring, summer, fall and winter, the CCAA typically offers approximately 50 different art classes and workshops for children, teens, and adults of all ages. There are also "open Studio" options for ceramics, darkroom and sculpture studios, and the CCAA runs a robust clay program, too.

Until 2020, the CCAA offered 11 weeks of Summer Art Camps with nine camps in the morning and nine camps in the afternoon.

"That's a total of 198 camps offered, and many campers attend all day," Kershner said. "With 100 campers a week, it's a wonderful, creative, happy time for CCAA."

The CCAA also offers fee-based programs, low-cost and free art programs. There is also a program for English Language Learners that the CCAA conducts for free at local elementary schools.

Businesses in the West Chester community have supported the work of CCAA with charitable donations for decades.

“We also regularly apply for grants to do projects in the community, and we recently completed a banner triptych for the West Chester Senior Center that was funded by the West Chester Sunrise Rotary Club,” Kershner said.

“After 89 years of service to the community, we are struggling to survive. When our facilities closed on March 15, we never expected that seven months in, we’d be out of funds and suspending programming,” Kershner said. “Having undertaken a major renovation in 2014-2016, our reserves were unexpectedly depleted. After many business and procedural improvements plus new programming, we were well on our way and thrilled to be back ‘in the black’ at the start of the year. We were properly staffed to further expand educational programming, and we had established numerous collaborations to reach new audiences. We had also completed an exciting plan to develop our outdoor spaces — including an outdoor amphitheater, sculpture gardens and community walking trails — to be announced as part of the celebration for our 90th anniversary in 2021.”

Then the pandemic hit. “And we had no reserves to fall back on,” Kershner said. “Thankfully COVID-19 grants helped us to keep our doors open, and we found many new ways to engage with the community and bring in revenue. Sadly, registrations were low for online and plein air classes, and individual donations have been relatively few and far between. We’re now looking at new paths for sustainability so we can survive and thrive for another 90 years. These include partnerships and mergers as well as exploring our real estate options as our property is our only asset.”

Kershner has led the CCAA for more than four year, during which she said she worked to leverage her fine arts background and corporate business experience to help grow and expand this art center’s mission.

The mission of the CCAA is dedicated to educating, inspiring and connecting the people of Chester County to and through the arts.

“What all nonprofits strive to do is imperative to each of us,” Kershner said. “It has been said of nonprofits that ‘our job is to make the world a better place.’ To pick up where government and society leave off. To protect the marginalized. To offer an educational path that has often been cut

or diminished in public schools. To provide opportunities to explore, create and think outside of the box. And as the pandemic highlights, we truly need creative thinkers to help solve current and future challenges that all of mankind will continue to face.”

And although the doors of CCAA are now temporarily closed to the public until at least the spring, hope remains.

“In the same way that there is a national awareness of and appreciation for all teachers as the result of so many students doing some sort of at-home learning, I hope there will be an increased awareness of and appreciation for all nonprofits and what they bring to our communities,” Kershner said.

“Whatever the future holds, we are now embarking on a new path to find a way to continue to champion the arts and support the community. Although bittersweet, change is inevitable and often shines the light on new possibilities.”

Kershner added, “The arts enrich all of our lives.”

To support CCAA, visit: <https://www.chestercountyarts.org>.

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