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Talking Business

New executive director of PA Guild of Craftsmen focuses on getting people 'to know about us'



CHAD UMBLE | Staff Writer Sep 24, 2018



As a potter who has been a member of the Pennsylvania Guild of Craftsmen for 15 years, Karen Peiffer is quite familiar with the group's work to promote craftsmanship.

And with more than 30 years experience in business at both a large manufacturer and a local printer, Peiffer knows what it takes to keep an organization running smoothly.

So when the Pennsylvania Guild of Craftsmen was looking for a new executive director, Peiffer said it seemed like the ideal new position.

“In a way for me, I saw it as the perfect fit,” said Peiffer, who has been in the position since late May, after two months filling in as interim chief.

Before becoming executive director of the Pennsylvania Guild of Craftsmen, Peiffer was vice president of client services for Intellicor, the former Intelligencer Printing. Before that, she was president of Lancaster Ultra-Graphics and has also worked at Armstrong World Industries.

Peiffer, who lives in Lititz, said she is focused on continuing the work of the nonprofit organization while trying to make more connections with community groups, which could include offering workshops in different areas.

“We’re always looking for an opportunity to get out into the community,” she said.

For nearly 75 years, the Pennsylvania Guild of Craftsmen has been promoting craftsmen and their work.

But despite the group’s long history, Peiffer says she often runs into people who don’t understand what the organization does or how it can be a resource for all kinds of artists and craftsmen.

So, publicizing its mission and the ways it supports artists is a top priority for Peiffer.

“We’re at a place where we need to constantly stay in front of everybody. They need to know about us.” she said.

The guild’s history

Founded in 1944, the guild was begun at the recommendation of Eleanor Roosevelt, who wanted craftsmen to help everyday citizens learn how to become more self-sufficient so that factories could concentrate on manufacturing goods for World War II.

The guild’s state offices originally were in Bedford, then in State College, then in Tyler State Park in Bucks County, a bucolic but isolated setting.

In 2008, the group moved to the corner of Prince and Walnut streets in Lancaster city and then in 2012 it moved to its current location at 335 N. Queen St., where it has a retail store as well as space for its classes and workshops.

The guild offers a full slate of workshops, sponsors fine arts fairs and operates the store which features handmade work from more than 150 artists. It also operates a certification program for master artisans and supports its 11 chapters across the state, including one in Lancaster.

Today, the guild has around 1,300 members, including potters, jewelry makers, fiber artists, furniture makers and glassware creators, as well as other artisans. Members also may be people who simply want to support the group's mission, or get discounts on its classes or at its retail store.

Arts for a new generation

Encouragingly, Peiffer said the long-standing mission of the guild is resonating with a new generation.

“People are becoming more interested in making and doing and using their hands again,” she said.

Open to beginners, the slate of classes includes ones on making wire or metal jewelry, metalsmithing, macrame, basketweaving, glassmaking, pottery making and woodcraft.

“This is a great place for people who like to make gifts, to come in and do it.”

For more serious artists, Peiffer says the guild can offer needed support to people who make a living as artists, including emerging artists.

Yet she notes that while events are popular, that doesn't always translate into members.

“The younger generation, they're not typically joiners, at least long-term joiners. So they're not really membership driven,” she said.

Consequently, many multiweek or even multiday classes are a tougher sell than one-day offerings, Peiffer said.

“How do we create those events, and how do we create that excitement in small hits, and get those folks involved?” she said.

One solution has been the guild's Craft on Tap, a one day “make and take” workshop that offers instruction alongside local, craft beer.

Yet, Peiffer says that even as it evolves to suit some contemporary tastes, the guild continues as a critical — even if sometimes overlooked — asset for local artists and craftsmen.

“We really are an organization that supports practicing craftsmen and the community around craft,” she said.

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