

Museum, cafe break bread to help artists

By JAIME CONE / Reformer Staff

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BRATTLEBORO -- The Brattleboro Museum & Art Center and the Elliot Street Cafe are teaming up to provide artists with micro-grants and would-be philanthropists with the opportunity to make a difference for just \$10.

With a new program called Brattleboro Essential Arts Network (BEAN) Micro-grant Dinners, the museum and restaurant aim to enhance the vitality of art in the community by encouraging dialogue and collaborative decision-making between artists and the general public.

For \$10, anyone can attend a light dinner at BMAC provided by the Elliot Street Cafe. Over dinner, guests will review and discuss funding requests for local art-related projects.

At the end of the night, guests will vote for the one proposal that deserves to receive the proceeds from dinner. Anyone interested in attending the first BEAN Micro-Grant Dinner and casting a vote should simply show up at BMAC on Sept. 19 at 6 p.m.

Based on similar programs happening around the world, BEAN hopes to change the face of arts funding, from a top-down model with limited interaction between givers and recipients to one that features direct, personal contact between donors and their beneficiaries.

"I think that on one hand, there are a lot of people in Brattleboro who don't have a lot of money but are very interested in being philanthropists -- they feel invested in this town as an arts community," said Margaret Shipman, exhibitions and events manager for BMAC.

She said that's part of the reason why she believes the program will be a success. "It's an idealistic program, and this is an idealistic town.

"Another reason why I think it's going to work well in Brattleboro is that it's a great place for networking among artists," Shipman said.

"We (at BMAC) used to have a potluck once a month, and something that I think was missing from that was a structure and a reason to meet," she added. "It was a little awkward to think of conversation, and this solves that problem and brings people together."

She said that for BMAC to partner with Elliot Street Cafe seemed like "a perfect marriage."

The owner of Elliot Street Cafe, Rebecca Jones, is on the museum's board of trustees. The cafe, which will celebrate its first year in business this month, is not just a restaurant, explained Scott Wade, Elliot Street Cafe's general manager.

"It's a restaurant, but there's also ping pong, toys for children and a book swap," Wade said. "The cafe certainly is really well-regarded and fun to eat at, but really we're about creating a community sort of space."

That the cafe is also a Gallery Walk location is an outgrowth of the idea that art can bring people together, Wade said.

Any individual, group, team, business, school or non-profit organization may apply for a grant, which Shipman said will probably be no more than \$300, depending on how many people show up for dinner.

Funds are intended to support projects that contribute to the vitality of art and artists in the community, particularly projects where a grant of just a few hundred dollars would make a real difference.

"Something to make clear is that this isn't just to fund artists and their work," said Shipman. "If somebody wanted the money to distribute paint brushes to the poor, that would be a legitimate proposition. It doesn't have to be 'this is what I paint, and I want to frame it for a show.' It could be anything."

She said those who apply for a grant are welcome to attend the dinner where their application will be considered, and she encourages people to bring their friends along to cast votes.

The three-question application is deliberately simple.

"Dinner guests are going to have to process these requests in a relatively short period of time, and it's not as though we're talking about huge sums of money, so we don't want the application itself to feel like a burden," said BMAC Director Danny Lichtenfeld.

The next application deadline is Sept. 10 at 2:30 p.m. for requests to be considered at the Sept. 19 dinner. The time in between the deadline and the event will allow Shipman to post the applications on the museum's web site, giving voters the opportunity to view them before the dinner.

Application forms are available online at www.brattleboromuseum.org or in hard copy at the Elliot Street Café (open Wednesday to Sunday from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.) and the BMAC front desk (open Thursday to Monday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.).

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