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Artists look for ways to help community

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Gloria Waslyn, curator of The Uptown gallery in Kingston with one of a muster of 20 peacocks that local artists will decorate and place through the city's three business districts as part of a fundarasing effort.

Jeremiah Horrigan/Times Herald-Record

By Jeremiah Horrigan

Times Herald-Record

Published: 2:00 AM - 07/17/14

There's not much question the mid-Hudson Valley is home and haven for every sort of arts and cultural event, artform or creator imaginable.

The menagerie runs from giant metal horses to whimsical flowers to fanciful peacocks. More on them later.

And there's no question of the world-class quality offered by the region's artists and creators.

But until now, no one has bothered to quantify the impact of the arts on the region's economy, the way every other large-scale industry regional entity is assessed: by its dollars-and-cents value. How many jobs does it bring to the region? How much money gets circulated through communities?

Would you believe half a billion dollars? And 5,000 jobs?

Those are just a few of the statistical outcomes of a report on the economic impact of arts and culture by the Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach at SUNY New Paltz.

Neither Kerry Henderson nor Gloria Waslyn blink an eye at talk of a half-billion. He is the owner and she is the curator of The Uptown Gallery in Kingston. Both have seen and are part of the burgeoning art scene that the city has long fostered.

When other, more stratified industries have pulled up stakes and left communities like Kingston with empty warehouses, it's invariably artists who see and seize opportunities that aren't always as apparent to corporate entities, Waslyn said. Once empty spaces and eyesores become studios, lofts, galleries.

"It's like sage springing up in the wake of a fire — there's always new growth, nature is indomitable, and its usually the avant garde that sees the opportunity and transforms it."

Another example of how the arts serve their communities sat silently in the front of Waslyn's gallery on Wednesday: a molded polystyrene-and plywood peacock.

It's one of a muster of 20 that local artists will decorate and place through the city's three business districts as part of a fund-raising effort called the Park Peacock Run Wild campaign.

Money from the campaign will be used to renovate Forsythe Park's Kinderland II playground, according to Tara Ryan.

"The Kingston Junior League built Kinderland 25 years ago, and we recognized it was showing its age but that there were no funds available to re-build it," Ryan said.

The nearby Nature Center, like Kinderland a part of Forsythe Park, is where you'll find half a dozen peafowl these days, denizens of the pocket zoo that have become its iconic center.

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Just another example of how the arts work — frequently without being recognized — to improve a community's life, Waslyn said.

Another example? She and Henderson are at work now creating a 10-day event called the Kingston Festival of the Arts in August which they hope will help bring the city's three distinct districts into a more confluent whole.

Henderson, a professional opera singer who launched Phoenicia's successful Festival of the Voice event moved his family to a building just around the corner from his gallery.

"Kingston's a fascinating place, and a very fertile ground for the arts."

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