

Front Page News

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'Art is communication' (Community Builder)



JULIE ANDERSON / Daily Courier

Hyla Lipson, the executive director of the Grants Pass Museum of Art wants to bring art to the community and the community into the art museum, one of only two in Southern Oregon. Having concerts, classes and community events has helped that goal.

By Kurt Hildebrand and Steve Boyarsky for the Daily Courier

Today's conversation is with Hyla Lipson, executive director of the Grants Pass Museum of Art.

Q: The Grants Pass Museum of Art is an important part of the community. Why is an art museum important?

Hyla Lipson: Art is communication. So, an artist, whether an author, poet, dancer, musician, or a visual artist, is trying to tell you what they either see or feel. Once you understand that, when you look at art, you get a feeling for history, you get a feeling for ideas. And a museum is a place that gathers, protects, exhibits, and educates. It's a center where people can come, feel safe, and learn something. We are one of only two art museums in Southern Oregon: the Schneider Museum at Southern Oregon University and Grants Pass Museum of Art.

There are plenty of people who have lived here for decades and don't know about us.

My goal is to get everybody here. How do you do that? Well, I started having concerts and those brought people up who normally wouldn't come to an art museum. We have art films; we have a whole bunch of workshops for adults almost every Saturday. We have fundraisers and events. Our fundraiser used to be a big gala that we'd have at the fairgrounds or someplace big.

After the pandemic, we went online and had a virtual fundraiser. We hang art in the museum that's also for sale online. Another big event is Art in the Garden. We have eight gardens throughout the city that we choose. Then artists bring their art to the gardens, and we sell it. That's a fun event.

During the summer, we offer art classes for kids. They are \$15 each, so they're very reasonable. All the classes sold out last year. We anticipate that happening again this year. Also, we created fifth grade field trips. There are over 900 fifth graders in Josephine County. We won't ever see all of them, but the first year (pre-COVID) we saw over 600 students. This year we had 485 students. We're back and we're rolling. We also see students who bring their families and friends, telling them what they had seen on their field trips.

Q: What does making art and viewing art do for people?

Lipson: There have been studies on this. If you go to a museum; your blood pressure goes down, you feel safe. It's a pleasant place to be. People are calm here. There was an

article titled, "Take two Picassos and call me in the morning". (Laughter.) The article emphasized the health benefits of art. Because of that article, we now have art films. The films come from England and highlight exhibitions around the world — they are called Exhibitions on Screen. Our next one is July 23 and it's about the Vermeer exhibit in Amsterdam, which is sold out. We charge \$5 per person and offer chocolate and popcorn!

Knowing that art is communication, we ask fifth graders, "What did a watermelon look like in 1800?" Students discovered an artist who painted still-life in 1800. They saw a painting of fruit and said, "It must be a watermelon, it was weird looking. It looked more like a pumpkin, but the inside was yellow. It wasn't red like ours is". The artist probably never realized that somebody in the future would want to know what a watermelon looked like. Artists show us what people wear and what their houses look like. What were they thinking? What was their environment like? What did they think about the universe or nature or animals? The artist's perception is unique, as is everyone's. Sharing perceptions is one of the great benefits of viewing art. It can create a conversation and a bond based on mutual understanding.

Q: How can an art museum be a cultural hub?

Lipson: We had a lovely couple who visited the museum. She was wearing a gorgeous lei from Hawaii, so I figured they had just gotten back from a trip there. No, they had been dating online. This was their very first day to meet face to face. He had brought her the lei from Hawaii. They were finding places to go that were neutral and friendly and could get to know each other better.

Just a couple weeks ago, we had a couple who had baby twins. It was their twins' first outing. They had never really taken the babies out before. This is a great place for babies because art is visually stimulating. They wore a little pack with the baby facing out. They walked around and looked at art.

The goal of being a museum is to be a cultural hub. Once you get here, you get it, you understand. Our mission is to enrich lives of people from all walks of life by offering art experiences that stimulate the senses, intrigue the intellect, and bring joy to the spirit.

Q: Are there more artists in Josephine County than other places? It feels like there are.

Lipson: I think that people move here because art flourishes and artists can be together. Artists enjoy engaging with and enhancing their communities. Festivals like Art Along the Rogue and the Evergreen Bears help to make Grants Pass a hub for artists to hang out. Even when they don't really work together, they like to be together and they're really supportive of each other.

The museum membership show is always a favorite exhibit here. Artist members can show two pieces of their art. Last year we had 186 pieces of art on display.

Q: What are some other ways you get people into the museum?

Lipson: First, general admission is free. We have an elevator up to the museum so there are no barriers. We also offer the space for organizations to meet. We have a big screen and a projector. We have 10 tables and 50 chairs. One of the Rotary clubs had a Super Bowl party here. Doug Walker figured out how to stream the game. They had prizes and food and beer, and it was great.

A museum doesn't have to be a snooty thing for only rich people. It's for everybody. It is a good place to visit. We also have a library that has art books that people have donated. If you're a member of the museum, which is only \$40 a year for an individual, you can check the books out and take them home. Anyone can enjoy the library. We have a table and chairs in the library, sometimes small groups meet and just chat in there.

Q: What is the single most important thing about the museum?

Lipson: People. The museum has two paid employees. Everyone else is a volunteer.

First, we have our board of directors. They take care of the overall vision of the museum. Then we have the exhibition department — an integral part of what makes the museum so appealing.

Greeters are so important for our outreach to visitors. We have about 25 people who spend four hours helping to make our visitor experience wonderful. On top of that we have over 100 volunteers for various events. THEN we have our generous members, donors, and sponsors.

We would be remiss not to mention the foundations who help keep our doors open. Each of the people who interact with the museum are important because they care. We care a lot about them as well.

Q: What are your dreams for the art museum?

Lipson: My dream is to have more members and more visitors. In March, we had 1,200 visits. Of the 1,200, 600 of them were here for events. That includes field trips, classes, a film, and a concert. That means 600 came just to be in the museum.

I'm constantly trying to figure out how to get people in this building and not under false pretenses. (Laughter.) Last week we had AIM, which is Authors' Innovative Marketing. We had 27 authors sharing their writing. They had tables around the galleries and people could come in and talk to the authors and buy their books. The next day Saturday they had panels, each author would answer questions, or they'd read a little snippet of their book and it was really well attended. The authors loved it. They've already set a date for next year.

And the symphony likes to have a meet and greet at the museum. When Martin, the conductor, unveils his program for the next season, they do a big unveiling in Medford. But then they also do a small version of it here because a lot of people in Grants Pass go to the symphony. This year it is scheduled for Sept. 10.

**Q: Is there something that jumps to mind that is clearer to you now?
Something that used to be confusing, that's now come more into focus?**

Lipson: As I get older, I've learned that everything changes. My mother used to say, "This too shall end." Which it always does. Whether it's really good, it's going to end. If it's bad, it's going to end.

When I was younger, I saw a documentary about a woman, I think she was from Peru. She had wrinkles in her face and only a few teeth. Her comment was, "Life's a giggle, but you have to be old enough to know it." (Laughter.) When somebody says to me, "You're so calm," I think — I kind of am, because nothing's going to break. Tomorrow's coming, and I'm grateful when it does.

I really value each day. I tell the fifth graders this because we talk about perception and their perception is based on their knowledge of what they've experienced in their short life. I tell them that when I had my last birthday, I had spent 28,470 days on this Earth and their eyes get really big.

Days can seem insignificant, so you must make them significant by paying attention to every minute. "To be present" is a good way to live life.

Grants Pass Museum of Art

The Grants Pass Museum of Art is the city's primary resource for exhibitions and collections of fine art since 1979. The museum is located in the heart of the historic old town at 229 S.W. G Street.

The galleries offer opportunities for learning, introspection, and connection with cultures from around the world.

Museum hours are Tuesday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is free. The museum's website is gpmuseum.com and the phone number is 541-479-3290, or email office@gpmuseum.com.