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# ARCHIVES



- ▲ Jayne During (top photo) helps a customer at her Kuaba Fine Art Gallery.
- ◀ Visitors to the Ruschman Art Gallery admire a painting.

## IDADA

**How First Friday became part  
of the Downtown landscape**



▲ Mark Ruschman, founding president of the Indianapolis Downtown Artists and Dealers Association, chats with two artists

during the February First Friday event at Ruschman Art Gallery.

**W**ANNA GO TO A MOVIE FRIDAY night? Gotta check one thing first: Is it the first Friday of the month? Yes? Then forget it. First Friday. Gotta go to the art galleries.

And so the conversation goes the past few years, since the 2003 creation of the Indianapolis Downtown Artists and Dealers Association, a development which quickly led to the decision to keep Downtown galleries open not just for major quarterly events such as the spring and fall gallery walks – but on the first Friday of each month.

Our social calendars have not been the same since.

“It has been a great thing to see the First Friday event become popular to a more mainstream audience,” said Jason Zickler, an artist who is currently serving as president of IDADA. “We have been able to get people to attend local galleries and art events who would not have normally been aware of the local scene.”

Zickler and his two presidential predecessors – Mark Ruschman and Kevin Martin – all know that IDADA has improved the local arts landscape well beyond the monthly Friday night openings. Still, they don’t underestimate the impact.

“IDADA is not just First Fridays,” Martin said, “but First Friday does get a lot of people in front of artwork.”

Ruschman – the organization’s founder – smiles when he thinks about the original idea for First Friday. “Never has so much been gained from so little,” he said, pointing out that the monthly events gave the fledgling organization instant notoriety. “It has been a great success story,” said Ruschman, owner of the venerable Ruschman Art Gallery, tucked away in the St. Joseph neighborhood far from other galleries. “IDADA gained recognition and momentum very quickly.”



▲ David and Shannon Forsell (left) visit with Monica Bopp and Kevin Osburn during a First Friday at the G.C. Lucas Gallery on Mass Ave.

Ruschman said that, once the idea for IDADA gained shape, making it a reality wasn’t that difficult. “People were enthusiastic about it from the very beginning,” he said, noting that artists and dealers alike recognized the value of an organization which would “have a seat at the table.”

At the same time, he said, then-Mayor Bart Peterson was showing strong support for the arts. “It seemed everybody was on the same page, that we need to promote *all* the arts.” The mayor’s interest had helped launch the cultural development initiative, Ruschman said, making it wise for the arts community to present a united front.

IDADA’s start got a major boost from the newly created Indianapolis Cultural Development Commission, which awarded the Downtown organization \$30,000 to help promote itself.

Nearly seven years later, IDADA is firmly entrenched in the



Downtown arts scene, boasting a membership of over 150 artists and nearly 40 galleries. Another 20-some people and organizations related to the arts world are also members.

Along the way, Ruschman said, one of IDADA's biggest achievements has been creating partnerships that are critical to the future of the arts in Indianapolis. Of special importance, he said, is the liaison between IDADA and the Arts Council of Indianapolis. Ruschman said the two groups have worked together on a number of initiatives, some originated by the Arts Council, others by IDADA. Zickler singled out the Arts Council's "beindypendent. org" campaign to facilitate public awareness, especially with first-time buyers.

Ruschman said that IDADA has also helped artists deal with the nation's current economic woes, "making the situation more palatable, easier to navigate," partly by knowing there's a support system in place.

Another IDADA accomplishment is its comprehensive website which helps with networking. The website was one of Zickler's first contributions after he joined IDADA to get more involved in the local art scene and learn more about the galleries, his fellow artists and potential opportunities IDADA might offer.

"After meeting all the people involved and



**Scenes from past First Fridays:** (Top), at Dean Johnson Gallery on Mass Ave; (above) at Big Car Gallery in Fountain Square during the most recent First Friday, and (left) at The Art Bank on Mass Ave.

seeing how much of a difference we can make," Zickler said, "I quickly became involved in a larger way, first by helping with a website overhaul and then moving on to some larger-picture organizational things."

The website contribution fit nicely into Zickler's interests. A visual artist who works with acrylics on canvas, he is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in the field of informatics, which studies the impact technology has on people as a society and as individuals.

He agrees with Ruschman's assessment that IDADA can help artists deal with the economic downturn. "We are actively trying to wrap up some final details on some pretty big opportunities for artists to sell art," Zickler said, noting that announcements

would be made soon. "Galleries and artists are both really feeling the pinch right now, and if we can help some galleries and artists sell a few additional pieces they would not have had an opportunity otherwise, then I think we are doing our job."

That rationale appeals to Martin, who, unlike his fellow IDADA members, is not an arts professional. In 2004, he opened The UPS Store Downtown, and as a Downtown resident found himself walking into art galleries as he roamed his new neighborhood. Calling himself a "numbers guy," he enjoyed being exposed to a more abstract, aesthetic world.

His early contributions included printing IDADA brochures for free, door-knocking and passing out flyers. As a businessman, he liked what he saw. "There's a lot of bang for the buck," he said of IDADA. "It's a very sharp organization." Martin sees the value in helping artists – especially emerging artists – connect with a larger audience. He has also enjoyed watching as other enterprises, particularly on Mass Ave and in Fountain Square, have been able to connect with IDADA for major events.

Operating a company which deals in shipping, Martin has

also enjoyed having a hand in spreading the word about local art. “It’s nice having the opportunity to connect local artists to even more people outside our boundaries,” he said, “just getting Indianapolis art in the hands of people in other parts of the country.”

But Martin said his own priority for IDADA would be to bring in more age groups, as well as more emerging artists who might not be getting high-dollar return on their work. “And we need to bring in more people like me – numbers people.”

Ruschman, meanwhile, is worried about the city’s reversal of attitude about the arts, amid the economic downturn. He looks back at the climate that existed in 2003, in the Peterson Administration, when IDADA was formed. Now, he said, proposed cuts in arts funding is “very short-sighted.” He pointed out that the arts community gets only a tiny percent of the city’s budget, while delivering a strong return on that investment. “The city needs to be invested, on an ongoing basis, in the arts,” Ruschman said. “I don’t think they fully realize what a step backward it would be – and a message to those of us out here who volunteer.” He believes IDADA can help the mayor and the City-County Council better understand how that investment pays dividends.

Ruschman said the biggest evidence of IDADA’s success is “the fact that we’re here.” He noted that the organization had its most successful annual meeting in November, an event highlighted by speaker Paul Klein, a noted arts advocate from Chicago who talked about the prospects for the Midwest arts scene. “People came away feeling encouraged, feeling good about the organization,” Ruschman said.

Whatever the role IDADA may play in the future of Downtown artists and art dealers, Martin is ready to give Ruschman the credit. “To say he’s the founder is an understatement,” Martin said. “He’s way beyond just a guy who owns a gallery.”

**– Bill Brooks**