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Expanding Access to Art

Art Hop has jumped its downtown boundaries

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Art Hop visitors view works displayed in a gallery set up in a storefront in the Washington Square neighborhood.

Art Hop, held the first Friday of each month since 1997 in downtown Kalamazoo, has long mixed local artists with local businesses. Except for a few “expanded” Art Hops each year that included art displays at other locations, most Art Hop venues had been downtown.

But now two new neighborhoods participate in Art Hop — the Washington Square area of the Edison neighborhood and the Oakwood Plaza area of the Oakwood/Winchell neighborhood. These neighborhoods wanted to boost their businesses and visibility, and the Arts Council of Greater Kalamazoo, which organizes Art Hop, was excited to offer more venues to its artists.

“There have always been places outside downtown (taking part in Art Hop), but this is the first time it’s been concentrated in an area,” says Beth McCann, deputy director of the Arts Council. “The expansion has always been artist-driven. They came to us and said they wanted to be a part of it.”

Bree Hahn, co-owner of Initial Attraction, a gift store in the Oakwood Plaza, says her store became an Art Hop venue last November because she knew there would be plenty of visitors.

“There’s a buzz in the air on the first Friday of the month,” she says. “We liked the idea that it was a plaza-wide event.”

In March, 49 locations were part of Art Hop, including nine in the Oakwood Plaza area and six in the Edison neighborhood. That’s up from the approximately 30 venues that used to participate most months of the year. Almost 80 shops participate in December Art Hops, just in time for Christmas.

Heather Purcell, manager of Wild Birds Unlimited in the Oakwood Plaza, says her store featured nature photography from Josh and Dave Haas at the November and December Art Hops. Purcell says she bought one of the photos for full-time display in the store and it has generated excitement among customers about future Art Hops.

“There was a lot of (foot) traffic,” Purcell says. “A lot of people didn’t know we were here. The recognition is what we needed.”

Several stores in the Washington Square area, south of downtown along Portage Street, started participating in Art Hop in 2013. Their participation was part of a greater movement to revitalize Washington Square, which was a busy shopping area in the 1940s and 1950s. The area experienced a downturn in recent decades, and the Kalamazoo County Land Bank has been spearheading efforts to bring new business and residents to the struggling area.

Art Hop has helped that effort, says Land Bank Executive Director Kelly Clarke, who noted that “we’re able to benefit from the name recognition.”

Artists enjoy that same recognition from Art Hop, McCann says, because “it’s a great opportunity to have a first show and it gives veteran artists an opportunity to show off their new work if they’re trying a new style.”

Even if an artist doesn’t sell a piece during Art Hop, visitors often collect artists’ business cards and track them down later to purchase their art.

“It’s great to see what sells and what people are interested in,” says Amy Zane, who features high-school-age artists and others at her shop, Amy Zane: Store & Studio, at 132 S. Kalamazoo Mall. Zane has displayed her own work at past Art Hops and knows the benefits as an artist and gallery owner.

“It’s a ton of recognition for artists, and it’s made a huge difference in (potential customers) knowing where we are,” she says.

Scarlet Vazquez, director of participating arts at the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Kalamazoo, helped almost a dozen middle school students display their paintings and drawings and give a dance performance at last October’s Washington Square Art Hop. Another show is planned for this month’s Art Hop, when both Vazquez and Clarke say the Washington Square neighborhood venues will offer several activities highlighting the neighborhood’s improvements.

In 2014, about 75,000 individuals attended Art Hops, according to McCann. She expects attendance of about 80,000 this year.

“Stores are watching neighboring businesses jumping on board,” she says. “They see that it’s good for their business and the community.”

McCann says the Arts Council is also eyeing the Stuart area, north of the Kalamazoo College campus, as

a future Art Hop location.

Hahn says she has been hearing good reviews concerning the participation of Oakwood Plaza stores in Art Hop. "We're hearing that it's nice to have an alternative, or that they're stopping here on the way downtown," she says. "We wanted to do it because it's a fun event. The community comes out for it."

Tags:

- Art Hop
- Washington Square
- Edison neighborhood
- Oakwood/Winchell neighborhood. Arts Council of Greater Kalamazoo
- Beth McCann
- Bree Hahn
- Initial Attraction
- Oakwood Plaza
- Heather Purcell
- Wild Birds Unlimited
- Josh Haas
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- Kalamazoo County Land Bank
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Expanding Art Hop
