

Pelham Art Festival History

What you see in the Pelham Art Festival of the present had very humble beginnings. In 1985, a group known as the Friends of the Fonthill Library who wanted to raise funds in support of the local library came up with the idea of holding a backyard art show and sale. The idea was well received by all involved, including Pelham Art Club member Lois Schonewille. Mr. and Mrs. Schonewille offered their comfortable backyard as the venue for the first show. Thus in June 1985 and again in 1986, on sunny Sunday afternoons from 1 to 5 p.m., visitors enjoyed fabulous art shows around their swimming pool. The artwork was hung on easels and on the fence surrounding the pool. Most of the artists were from the Niagara area with a few coming from farther afield. Represented were members of the Pelham Art Club, the Welland Art Club and the Port Colborne Art Club. This humble beginning was the seed that a year later resulted in something far more ambitious.

The Friends of the Fonthill Library seized upon the opportunity to raise funds for the new library that they hoped would be built. The success of the backyard art shows spurred them on. The Pelham Art Club also had previous experience in holding local art shows. In 1986 Dorothy Higgins, who was a member of the Friends of the Fonthill Library and of the Pelham Art Club, now known as Pelham Art Association, suggested that a more ambitious venture be embarked upon. She suggested that the Friends of the Fonthill Library in association with the Pelham Art Club hold an art show in the Pelham Arena to help raise funds for the proposed new library. For that show, which had the title of Artmart Niagara, Barbara Simpson was named convener of the show. Marilyn Casson agreed to recruit artists for the show, ably assisted by Sylvia Blackmore and Dorothy Higgins. Margaret Rosinski took on the job of properties and Barbara Culliford looked after the food and beverages facet of the organization. In addition to the local artists, commercial art galleries were invited to set up their wares in the arena as well. The arena was well supplied with beige and brown art easels, supplied by the local art clubs and private individuals. Gordon Stephenson contacted Rice Road Nursery who provided plants for the transformation of the arena into a partial green belt on Mother's Day weekend. Tables and chairs filled the west end of the arena turning it into a food court dining area.

Thanks to Vernon and Barbara Simpson we had an exceptionally effective drawing card in that Vern arranged to have one of his company's helicopters provide rides over the area including a flight over Niagara Falls. People from far and wide followed the helicopter to its landing pad near the arena. Needless to say that once on the site, they were invited to view the show going on inside. The money raised by the helicopter rides augmented the funds raised through Artmart Niagara.

In 1987 the Pelham Town Council voted to build a new library building in order to expand the Town's office facilities. The aim was to take over the space occupied by the existing library, which was housed in the same building as the Council offices.

The combined Friends of the Fonthill Library and Pelham Art Club organizing committee were pleased with the potential that they saw in being able to raise funds for the support of the local libraries. None of the people involved in the show would have dared to think that its life would span two and a half decades and counting! The initial year's success was but a portent of things to follow. The seed of an idea planted around a backyard swimming pool had begun to grow with vigour. The Pelham Art Festival Committee was born of that seed and was formally established in conjunction with that first large show in June of 1987. The experience gained in that first year in the arena had tremendous learning results. The successes far outweighed the little "glitches" that cropped up from time to time.

The second year brought several changes in organization. The name of the event was changed to the Pelham Art Festival, a name that has gained much respect in the art world, putting Pelham on the map of art festivals in Canada. Thanks to Hugh Molson (Chief Librarian) a Province of Ontario grant was secured to help in the building of proper art display boards for the show. Vern and Barbara Simpson were instrumental in getting a group of craftsmen to build the boards at a price that allowed us to build all we needed. These boards have survived to benefit the show ever since, due to the kind, loving care in maintaining them that has occurred over the years. Mothers Day Weekend became a focus of activity by many volunteers and became synonymous with the Pelham Art Festival!

Changes in responsibilities were implemented as well. Barbara Simpson stepped down from chairing the event to devote more time to properties. Margaret Rosinski and Friends of Maple Acre took on the responsibility for the food and beverages. The group came up with a name for the food service facility that has been used ever since. In keeping with the nature of the show they have become known as the Salvador Deli with apologies to Mr. Dali's memory. Barbara Culliford, who was on the Library Board and a member of the Friends of Fonthill Library, took on the role of chairing the committee for the Pelham Art Festival as show convener. Little did she know then that her responsibilities would be long term; she served from 1988 to 2008 in that capacity. In 2008 Heidi TeBrake took on the role of Chair and Convener of the show from Barbara (Culliford) Lanneval.

The Pelham Art Festival organization has matured over the years and is spurred on by the input of new committee members on an ongoing basis. Building on the foundation that was established by the original group has been the strength and life's blood of the Festival. Growth has been witnessed in every year of operation. The year 2011 marked the 25th anniversary of PAF, as those involved have come to refer to the Pelham Art Festival Committee. All who contributed can be proud to say they have served their community well. The Pelham Art Festival has benefited tremendously from the active participation of many exceptionally talented volunteers over the years. In 2018, they succeeded in helping the Pelham Art Festival Committee contribute over \$425,000.00 to enhance the services provided by both the Fonthill and Maple Acre branches of the Pelham Library system. In addition, annual scholarships, currently valued at \$1000.00, are given to deserving Pelham students of E.L. Crossley Secondary School, Notre Dame College School, and the Niagara College Art and Design Program who are proceeding to study art at the college or university of their choice. The Pelham Art Festival Committee has also supported a variety of programs and events that promote the arts in the community at large.

Beautiful works of art, live musical entertainment, good food, friendly ambience and support of the community keeps people coming back to savour the show year after year. Ambitious advertising and regular committee brainstorming keeps the show vibrant. We have celebrated thirty-two years of history and look to the future!