

Editorial COMMENTARY

by Tom Starland, Editor and Publisher

Heading In A Different Direction

ArtFields, or should I say the folks who are currently in charge of ArtFields, swiftly asked Hannah Davis to resign after this year's event was over. Davis had been on the job as director of ArtFields for less than three months, but she has been the director of the Jones-Carter Gallery in Lake City, SC, and has worked for ArtFields since its beginning, four years ago. Davis' promotion to director of ArtFields was a sign to me that ArtFields was finally headed in the right direction. She's the only director they have had that had a solid background in the visual arts.

When Davis asked why she was being asked to resign the only answer she got was that ArtFields was headed in a different direction.

Davis and I have talked a lot over those four years about the problems the event is having and how things could be improved, but I guess that's not what the folks in charge now are interested in - they're going in a different direction.

I have often referred to myself as ArtFields' biggest cheerleader. I wanted the event to be successful, but the frustrations about constant missteps have left me tired and in search of what direction I'll be going on the subject of ArtFields.

I do know I'm not going in whatever direction they are headed. The question is - should I continue to look the other way about some problems and just treat ArtFields like most everyone else or should I make it my duty to find the truth about what's going on.

In the past I've gone to battle with the City of Charleston, Spoleto Festival USA, the National Endowment for the Arts, the SC Arts Commission, and the *Post & Courier* about different aspects in the visual

arts and I've been right on all counts. But fighting these battles is a lot of work and a big distraction from the rest of the visual arts community.

Here's one example of one of ArtFields' problems - attendance.

Years ago, Spoleto Festival USA floated a statement that they were attracting 100,000 to Charleston when they were lobbying for major funding from the SC Legislature. The media, being as lazy as most are just started repeating that statement - over and over again each time Spoleto's name came up in any situation. A 100,000 extra people in Charleston would be a very noticeable thing as Charleston is a small town.

One day after one of the Spoleto Festivals just ended I called the Spoleto box office and asked how many tickets they sold that year. They replied, about 60,000. Spoleto doesn't have any free events, a lot of people in Charleston go to Spoleto events, many people go to more than one event, at best Spoleto might attract 40,000 visitors to Charleston, but I'm sure it's much less and it's a lot less than 100,000. They no longer use that figure.

In 2013, ArtFields or should I say the Lake City Partnership Council, paid the Columbia, SC-based Miley & Associates Inc., to estimate that 22,000 visitors visited the festival, spending an average of \$33.

Again, I figure a lot of folks from Lake City attend ArtFields and over a nine day festival many may visit more than once. Since the basic part of ArtFields - looking at art in 40 different venues - is free and ArtFields has just a few paid events it's harder to pin down the real attendance figure, but the folks at the Jones-Carter Gallery keep a count of everyone who comes through the door. As a venue that offers the second most works of art, next to the ROB that hosts a 100 works of art, the count at the Jones-

Carter Gallery has never been over 8,000 and some folks like me visited that venue more than once. I might not have always been counted but I'm sure some get counted several times during the event. That means according to the folks at Miley & Associates Inc., 12,000 - 14,000 people visit ArtFields but don't visit the Jones-Carter Gallery - one of the most popular spots on the tour and a place with public rest rooms.

I'm not buying the 22,000 figure, much less the 20,000 that ArtFields now uses on a regular basis. And, why shouldn't they, they paid good money for that figure. I might also add that less than 8,000 people have registered to vote in the competition in any given year.

I have now visited ArtFields on opening and ending days, midweek, and on sunny and raining days and some days it seems like a ghost town in Lake City. Counting the same group of people over and over again does not tell you how many people are going to an event.

It's like saying, 6,000 people live in Lake City and surely they go to an ArtFields event or venue at least three times during the nine days of the event - presto - 18,000 people attend the event. That's making an estimate. And, some people get paid for making estimates so other folks can repeat them and have no responsibility for that statement.

Ask Columbia, SC, how easy it is to get folks from Charleston, SC, or Greenville, SC, to come to an event in Columbia. Now think about getting those folks in those three cities to come to Lake City.

I've heard lots of folks say to me that after reading what I've written about ArtFields that they would like to go, but in four years they have never made it. It's like fish trying to jump the Hoover Dam to get folks from some places in SC to go anywhere else in this state.

It's like when former Mayor Joe Riley is always calling everything in Charleston world class - I hope in his retirement he gets to travel some so he can see what world class is really like. People in SC have a weird perspective on viewing thing

- especially when they have never seen past the horizon. I'm not a world traveler, but I didn't have to travel very far to see things that were better than what some people call world class. It's a phrase that shouldn't be used too often. Much like life changing and honorable mention when it comes to an art award.

So, for the second year in a row the ending of ArtFields has been a kick in the ass for me - taking the wind out of what I was going to say about the event. Is that fair to those who participated? Probably not, but it makes it hard to talk about an event that leaves a bad taste in your mouth. For now I'm tapped out, but in time I'll write about my experience at ArtFields.

Finally a message to the artists who will be participating and have participated in ArtFields. I understand your position. In my almost 30 years of doing a publication about the arts in SC I know not to expect too many public statements about this issue or any other issue that bothers you. You know people are watching and they will hold what you say against you. And, ArtFields still offers the possibility of making a lot of money. I have and always will be willing to play the part of hearing your complaints in private and voicing them for you in public and keeping your identity only with me. I don't like playing that role but have come to the reality that someone has to do it and since I will voice my concern and those of others without concern for gain or loss - why not continue? I've burned enough bridges in my role as editor and publisher of *Carolina Arts* and we're still here. One more won't make much of a difference.

Artists need to do what they need to do - that's life as an artist. I just wish more of you could stand up for what is right, but I understand it will cost you.

Who knows, ArtFields might still correct its course, but I'm afraid it might be later than sooner and it may already be too late. I'll miss the friendly folks of Lake City who made this event unique, but I won't miss those who decided to hide and withhold information instead of being open and truthful about ArtFields.



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