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Troy spiffs up for its very first Night Out

By JOSEPH DALTON, Special to the Times Union
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There's a trend that keeps climbing up the Hudson Valley: coordinated art openings on a single night. It's a simple idea that concentrates the public's attention and turns out crowds.

Back in 2004, the arts communities of four cities launched Art Along the Hudson, with openings in a different locale every Saturday. Each month the cycle begins with events in Kingston on the first Saturday, followed by Beacon, Poughkeepsie and Newburgh on successive Saturdays.

Last fall, Albany caught on to the idea and launched First Fridays, primarily in the Center Square neighborhood. In just six months it has become a genuine phenomenon: 20 venues participated on Feb. 2, drawing more than 800 people.

And now the Collar City is getting into the act with Troy Night Out, a citywide happening running from 5 to 9 p.m. Friday and continuing on the last Friday of every month. Expectations are high for the event to spotlight the city's arts scene, as well as its range of shopping, dining and entertainment options.

"There's a critical mass that's finally accumulated here," says Karen Schlesinger, who conceived the idea for the event, pointing to myriad new galleries and retail establishments, primarily in downtown Troy. "There's also a nice sense of community and that's what's going to make this event a success," she says.

Schlesinger, 30, is herself the proprietor of one of Troy's latest art venues, Digital Artist's Space, a service bureau and art gallery at 27 Second St. that opened last April. She moved to Troy a little more than a year ago with her husband, Chris Jordan, a faculty member at the Sage Colleges. Both are photographers. "I loved the feel of Troy, the walkability, the architecture and the artsy feel," she says.

As she got to know both the arts and business communities, Schlesinger noticed a familiar refrain: "Wouldn't it be great if ...?"

"After hearing that for a couple of months, I was like, 'Why doesn't somebody do something?'" recalls Schlesinger. Early last fall, she decided to take action by calling a series of open meetings that got the momentum going.

Sharing the bulk of organizing duties with Schlesinger is another Troy newcomer, Elizabeth Young, 29, owner of Living Room, a six-month-old shop at 274 River St. A third-generation antiques dealer and descendant of Philip Schuyler, Young was raised in the Capital Region and resettled here in the past year with her fiancé, Steven Scarlata, a French horn player. They previously lived in New York City and Tokyo, but found Troy to be "a Victorian jewel."

Other event sponsors include the Arts Center of the Capital Region, which has provided meeting space and financial coordination, and ID29, a Troy-based communications firm that has come through with graphic design and marketing support.

So far, Troy Night Out will feature 15 galleries, 20 retail shops, and about a dozen restaurants and cafes, including such new establishments as the Kismet Gallery, Spillin' the Beans restaurant and coffee bar, and Many Hands Gift Gallery.

"Look around at the new people and business of the last six months," says Schlesinger. "It's finally enough to counter the resistance and apathy that's kept anything from happening."

Seasoned Troy-watchers know what she's talking about, as past renaissance efforts have come and gone.

"We joke that we've been here for nine of the last 12 revitalizations," says Kathy Bloom, of J.K. Bloom Jewelers, formerly known as Hummingbird Designs, located at 29 Third St. "But this is a good one, with new people and energy," says John Bloom. The couple will not only be keeping their shop open late on Friday, but also using the occasion to celebrate their 25th anniversary of doing business in Troy.

"Recently, there have been little happenings all over, and everybody (in the arts) knows everybody else, so the timing is really good," says Colleen Skiff, founder and director of the 10-year-old Fulton Street Gallery. When Skiff was new to Troy, she organized some quarterly "Art Happenings," but found it hard to maintain momentum. She sees strong potential in the monthly aspect of Troy Night Out and the organizational team that has come together. "Everyone knows their strengths," she says.

Joe Mancino, general manager of the two-year-old Flavour Cafe and Lounge at 228 Fourth St., welcomes Troy Night Out as a sign that "everyone is banding together for one purpose, which is to promote Troy and downtown business. I think it's an awesome idea and I hope the public comes out and supports it."

Look for a full listing of venues and events at <http://troynightout.org>.

Worthy expenses: The now well-established First Fridays in Albany and the nascent Troy Night Out are grass-roots events, initiated and organized

by independent artists and sole-proprietor businesses, that are affecting the operations of larger cultural institutions.

For instance, for the Albany Institute of History & Art to join in the First Fridays celebrations, as it did for the first time in February, approximately \$1,000 in new funds were required to cover the costs of security, building and ground staff.

"We have 15 galleries, not one," points out director Christine Miles, who views the outreach potential as being worth the additional work and expense. "It was a very snowy night and the galleries were packed," says Miles.

Likewise, the Arts Center of the Capital Region will be shouldering the new costs of staying open late for Troy Night Out. "It's an exciting opportunity, but it's a challenge," says Deidre E. Healy, Arts Center president. "In terms of staffing and hospitality, it's easily a few hundred dollars for each event. ... We're making a serious commitment of time and resources to this."

Art shuttle: Michael Weidrich of First Fridays wants everyone to know that the shuttle service route for March 2 will be between Center Square and downtown. (Apparently there was some confusion in February of whether the shuttle would take a swing out to the Opalka Galleries on New Scotland.)

The first anchor stop is at the Upstate Artists Guild, 247 Lark St. Catch it in downtown at Albany Center Galleries' new location, 39 Columbia St. The round-trip takes about half-hour and continues throughout the evening, 5 to 9:30 p.m.

Keep up with First Fridays at: <http://www.1stfridayalbany.org/>

In Douglass' words: Now on view at the State Museum are six letters written by Frederick Douglass, the former slave and anti-slavery activist. Douglass wrote the letters between 1855-1857 to Hannah Fuller, the organizer of the Skaneateles Ladies Anti-Slavery Society. They show the close working relationships that Douglass forged with white women leaders of the anti-slavery movement. The pieces of correspondence are a recent addition to the collection of the State Library and will be on display in the New York Metropolis Hall, adjacent of the Harlem in the 1920s gallery, through March 9.

Coming up next weekend at the museum is the 16th annual New York in Bloom, featuring 100 floral displays throughout the galleries. It's one of the few exhibits for which the museum charges an entry fee, but proceeds support after-school programs for children and teens. Admission to "New York in Bloom" on Friday is \$4, while it's \$6 on Saturday and next Sunday, but that also includes entry to the annual Gem, Mineral & Fossil Show and Sale.

Next weekend is also the last opportunity to catch "Represent: Selections from the Studio Museum in Harlem," which is on view through next Sunday.

Joseph Dalton is a local freelance writer who contributes regularly to the Times Union.

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