

30 Years of Art in the Park

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It's easy to say that Art in the Park has come a long way, growing and evolving over 30 years. It's easy to say, because it's true.

But it's also true that South Portland's Art in the Park, scheduled for Saturday, Aug. 8, has always been a big deal. Held annually at Mill Creek Park, the event now draws 185 artists and photographers and thousands of visitors, who fill the park to capacity.

Bill Alexander, who founded the event and chaired the Art in the Park Committee for 20 years, remembers the park always feeling especially active and alive with Art in the Park, from the very first year.

"The first show featured 85 artists, and grew quickly until we realized that to limit its size was to ensure enjoyable viewing for spectators," Alexander said. "It seemed to capture an audience right away."

Art in the Park began as a way to bring together artists and art buyers, and also to highlight student artists in the community. The primary mission of the event remains to support and promote the visual arts by providing a venue for artists to show and sell their art.

Many of the artists are local. Some live regionally, and travel the summer art show circuit as part of their livelihood.

The show has a strong educational component, noted Mary Kahl, chair of the Art in the Park Committee since 2000.

Art in the Park selects student art work for its T-shirt, poster and program, and exhibits student art at the show. To build a relationship with the schools, the show provides funding to art teachers for classroom supplies, and awards a \$1,000 scholarship to a South Portland High School student who plans to pursue art at college.

Art in the Park is not a juried show. As a result, the show brings together beginning and experienced artists. The range of work, in terms of style, media and overall quality, is vast. The show provides great opportunities for buyers, Kahl said.

"It is a great opportunity to buy art at a reasonable price, including original art work and framed prints ready to hang," Kahl said. "It is especially fun to meet the artist whose work you are buying. It makes the art more personal when it's hanging in your home or office. I no longer buy mass-produced art. It is much more fun to buy from an artist personally. There's now a face and a story behind every piece of art I buy."

The roots of Art in the Park go back 30 years. Alexander suggested the idea of a summer art festival to then-Mayor Ted Christie's Quality of Life Committee. "The interviewer thought it was a good idea and reported enthusiastically back to the council. I was asked to present a plan to bring it about, and the City Council agreed to let me work out the details and recruit a committee."

The content of the festival has changed a little over the years – in the early days, for instance, the festival declined to exhibit crafts and photography. Food has been a big part of the festival from the start, to encourage people to stay a while. Music was added many years later as a background attraction. Kids in the park is also a popular addition making the event a true family experience.

Two things about the festival have always worked in its favor: Student artwork and the setting.

By exhibiting student art, the festival guarantees a built-in audience of parents, relatives and friends and builds strong community roots. The park itself provides an exquisite setting for the festival. It is large enough to accommodate large groups of people without feeling crowded, and it has proven a popular and welcoming destination for traveling artists, because of its shade-producing canopied trees and friendly atmosphere.

Over the years, Art in the Park has invested in Mill Creek Park with a series of projects, including the gazebo and bridge and improvements to the fountain.

"We thought it was the best and only spot we wanted to use, and the festival has stayed there," said Alexander.

"What I like most about Art in the Park is its friendliness and community atmosphere," Kahl said. "I keep coming back to how many people tell us Art in the Park is their favorite show and how much they love it. We have people of all ages in the park enjoying art, the park, the music, the food and the activities. It's just plain fun."