

Allen West Festival: A Look Back at 20 Years

The 2018 Allen West Festival on June 9-10 marks a milestone – its 20th year as an annual celebration of Buffalo-area artisans and businesses.

Conceived from the start as a complementary event to the Allentown Art Festival, Allen West is produced by the Allentown Association and represents its largest fundraiser for the year. In recent years, there have been over 150 participating artists, vendors, restaurants and local businesses.

In recognition of this anniversary, we put some questions to several founding or early leaders of Allen West, and this is what we heard:

Q: What (or who) was the original inspiration for the Allen West Festival?

Alison Fleischmann: My recollection is that it was the idea of the late Mary Tomaselli, who had a dry cleaning business on Allen at the time.

Gretchan Grobe: The idea came from a committee lead by Mary [Tomaselli] including Jonathan [White] -- to clean up the huge drunk fest on Allen St. west of Elmwood Ave. Alison [Fleischmann] and I were the original Allen West Festival Committee. We took the idea and ran with it. Put out the call for artists; 45 originally, got the permits, dealt with City Hall, not one vendor had a tent that first year... and it poured rain on Sunday of that first year.

Jonathan White: The Western end of Allen Street from Elmwood was not part of the Allentown Art Festival. In the 1970's there was a famous riot in that block where a police officer was assaulted trying to break up a melee and shop windows were broken. It was never that bad again but it never greatly improved. Because the block was not under permit as part of the Art Festival, opportunistic vendors would arrive and just set up on the sidewalk selling cheap sunglasses, patchouli oils and other dollar store junk. Also, the block was not closed to traffic but was still filled with thousands of people walking to and from the Festival and was becoming very dangerous with many near misses of cars and people. The year prior to the start of Allen West, there was a fist fight between two of these rouge vendors that resulted in injury. I therefore proposed that the Allentown Association should permit the entire block, close it to traffic and keep the outlaw vendors from setting up and that we should control who could set up as a vendor, perhaps augmenting the Art Festival. Mary Tomaselli suggested that businesses on the block should set up and that we could invite artists from Allentown to set up booths to sell their work since the neighborhood was home to many artists. This was agreed to be a great idea and was proposed to the Board. Although there was some significant resistance to the idea and a number of Board members felt that the Association should not take on this responsibility, a majority of the Board voted in favor. A committee was formed and we decided to call it Allen West. The hard work was headed by Gretchan and Alison, who brought the Festival to life – soliciting artist applications, working with Executive Director Kathy Toepfer and making multiple trips to City Hall for Permits, marking lines on the street for artist booths and coordinating all of the artists and food vendors. The Festival has grown and become better each year with Gretchan still serving as co-chair along with current Executive Director Andrew Eisenhardt.

Q: Was it intended from the start to complement or to compete with the Allentown Art Festival?

Alison: [Allen West] was started to clean up that area and bring some sort of order to that end of Allen St. In the previous years that area had been taken over by gypsy vendors with real JUNK to sell. We felt it was OUR area and we “occupied” it with everyone’s blessing!

Gretchan: Totally agree with Alison.

Q: Did the Allen West start-up require coordination with the Allentown Art Festival; if so, in what ways?

Alison: No coordination at all – [the Art Festival] loved the idea.

Gretchan: We did ask a little advice from the [Allentown] Art Fest and they very nicely gave it. If they thought of something we hadn't Delores or Mary [Michevitch] would call us...and we would do the same for them. Over the years we haven't always agreed on everything, but we do try to work together. It got so in January I would get in touch with Mary to say the season has begun.

Jonathan: There was some coordination. The Allentown Village Society [who organizes the Allentown Art Festival] did express some concern about Allen West the first year. AVS was and continues to be very protective of the atmosphere around the Art Festival. Sean Hill was president of the Allentown Village Society at the time, and had previously served as an Allentown Association Board member. I called Sean to let him know of the plan for an Allen West Festival and he asked for details, in particular the proposed footprint. Sean made clear that AVS permits went as far as Allen at the East side of Elmwood. I told him that Allen West would be on the portion of Allen West of Elmwood to Wadsworth. He was supportive of an initiative that would bring calm to that portion of Allen Street. The new festival would – in the first years - be open to any artist that wanted to participate subject to rules, which were that the artist had to create all of the work themselves and no vendor could sell commercially manufactured or third party resale items. The Allentown Art Festival is an adjudicated admission process that draws artists from around the country.

The Association had a particularly good relationship with the Allentown Village Society at the time. Prior to the Art Festival that year, a group of Allen Street businesses (mostly newer businesses) took issue with the AVS having a permit granting full control over the street during the Festival. The owner of a coffee shop on Allen at Franklin wanted to set up a temporary café on the sidewalk and was told that she couldn't. She and other businesses appealed to the City and the Common Council refused to issue the necessary permits that AVS would need to operate the Festival. Council President Jim Pitts created a special committee, which he chaired that included two members of the AVS board and three business owners to review the issue and make a recommendation. Association Board member Toby Burns and I were also named to the committee. After several very contentious meetings at which the businesses insisted that they should be able to do whatever they want in front of their own shops and the AVS contended that they needed to control the sidewalks to make certain there were not adverse issues. When the final vote was taken, Toby and I voted to support AVS and they received all of their permits as in

the past. This dramatically improved the [Association's] relationship with AVS and they raised no further opposition to the creation of a second festival the same weekend.

Q: Has the footprint (boundaries) for Allen West changed/expanded over time?

Alison: It now goes further up Wadsworth.

Jonathan: Yes, it originally was Elmwood to Wadsworth. It now goes up Wadsworth as far as St. John's Place.

Andrew: The last 3 or 4 years we have had more applications than we had booths for (we are a little landlocked, all expansion options have been considered but they have issues).

Q: Are the Allen West criteria for participating artists, vendors, and businesses different from the Art Festival?

Alison: In the beginning, we announced it as a "juried" show – Gretchan and I – decided if someone could get in or not. Major criteria? We had to like their stuff...no sunglasses...helped if we knew the exhibitor and other very high standards! If we didn't like the tone of their application we declined them – although we did want the \$\$! In other words, absolutely zero similarity to the Art Festival.

Gretchan: It is a juried show. The committee reviews every application. It has to be made by the artist, preferably local artists, it has to be up to our standards. No wholesale products to be resold. We also work very hard to include local businesses on Allen Street so customers have access to their store fronts. Business can have a booth near the front of their business but they must sell what they sell in their regular business day.

Q: Have the crowds drawn to Allen West grown over the years?

Gretchan: Yes, the crowds have increased over the years. As people discover we are on the other side of Elmwood. We are called the younger, hipper, more affordable festival.

Andrew: I'd say yes....We have doubled the [Association's] profits in the 12 years Gretchan and I have chaired the event.

Q: Have you noticed any changes over the years in the composition of visitors to Allen West?

Gretchan: What a great place to people watch... I wish I could ban people from bringing their dogs to the festival, it's just plain mean... hot pavement (burned paws), lack of water, the crowds. Meanest thing I saw was lady dragging her puppy who was throwing up. I yelled at her, told her to pick her dog up and take it home, or I was going to get the police to arrest her. Most unusual... the man with the alligator in a wagon.

Q: As one of Allen West's founders, what was your role in the first years?

Alison: My role in the early years: permits, etc. from the city; juried the exhibitors with our high standards; painted the curbs defining the spaces...Gretchan may remember more about

those years. Bill Harmon was the Executive Director of the Association at that time and he was very helpful as I remember. I know we made money from the beginning but it was tons of volunteer hours.

Gretchan: Agree with Alison. Also, on festival days making sure things are running smoothly. Booths are set up, streets are closed, people are happy.

Jonathan: My role was to push the concept past a reluctant Board that was initially not in favor of the idea. Then I just got out of the way and let the incredible team of Gretchan and Alison do the work to bring it to life, along with support from Kathy Toepfer.

Q: Has your role changed over time (if so, in what ways)?

Gretchan: At about year eight, I handed the reins over to Monica Pellegrino and Sandra Firmin. They each chaired it for one year, then I took it back. Andrew and I enlarged it down Wadsworth and haven't looked back.

Jonathan: In the early years, most local artists who applied were admitted and there was plenty of room. The committee was careful to ensure even from the beginning that the work was quality but there were less applications in the first few years. That changed relatively quickly. Now that Allen West is established, the committee is more selective and makes decisions to ensure that there are not several vendors who duplicate each other and that the variety of work will be interesting.

I think a significant change is that, for many years, visitors to the Festival did not see a distinction from the Allentown Art Festival and saw Allen West as an extension of that. Today, Allen West has its own identity and people know what it is – an independent art festival that showcases the work of Western New York artists.

Q: What has been the most memorable artistic exhibit or display?

Gretchan: The year the Ford dealers of Western New York had a local artist paint the new Ford Fiesta. They took the car to every festival that summer and raffled it off at the end of the Erie County Fair... someone on Irving Place won it... it's still around!

Q: Has Allen West been successful in promoting the careers of participating artists and vendors?

Gretchan: I've had several artists come up to me and say if it wasn't for this festival they would not be in business today. I realize this festival actually does matter. We do make a difference.

Q: Describe some of the uses of funds raised by the Festival.

Gretchan: We support the Allentown Association. We are the largest fundraiser, money goes to support the association where they need it.

Jonathan: Allen West contributes to the Association's general fund and, therefore funds in some way almost everything the Association does – from planting community gardens to producing a

newsletter to sending out information packets to new home owners and helping to fund staff salaries.

Q: What factor(s) account for the success and longevity of Allen West?

Alison: The whole event – it was a real community builder. I don't agree with giving up the hot dog stand, though. One thought – change the location to Allen and Elmwood and watch the sales.

Gretchan: Okay, I will admit it is work, and takes a lot of time. It is fun.

Factors: stubbornness, determination, people working together. And success of the event... every year it is always a bit different... which makes people come back, year after year. Nowadays, sponsors are what we really need to work for the longevity of the festival.

Andrew: Being adaptable and open to new ideas. Last year and this year we added back the hot dog stand (located at Allen & College). We've also partnered with Infringement Festival to bring music and performers to the Wadsworth entrance of the festival.

Jonathan: The only real factors are simple. It is well organized, well presented and well run and it brings the work of local artists to the people of Western New York. It celebrates Buffalo, it celebrates Allentown as Buffalo's Community of the Arts and it promotes the talents of local artists.