

The Little Arts Center That Could

Gualala Arts Center Celebrates 50 Years of Community Support



COURTESY OF GUALALA ARTS CENTER

By Alan Ahtow

In providing the perfect title for this article, Barbara Pratt, Publicity Coordinator for the Gualala Arts Center, has succinctly summed up the result of the past 50 years in the life of the Gualala Arts Center.

Barbara Pratt and David "Sus" Susalla, Executive Director, were gracious enough to give a "Reader's Digest" version of the history, development and current operation. This hidden gem of an Arts Center sits comfortably cocooned in a magnificent Redwood Grove on the banks of the Gualala River in the town of Gualala. Like the impressive trees that surround it, the Gualala Arts Center continues to grow with innovation due to an active working Board of Directors, an army of creative community volunteers, a dedicated staff and the people in the community who support and participate in Gualala Arts events and subsequently the Arts Center.

The story of the pursuit of a physical structure within the town of Gualala for an Arts Center began in the early 60s. As the last of the lumber mills closed, the town of Gualala seemed to be quickly headed to becoming a ghost town. Fortunately a new crop of settlers began to arrive; these creative, imaginative and artistic folks opened art galleries and sold crafts to the few tourists who passed through on their journey along the scenic drive of Highway 1.

These merry bands of new residents

held dances, put on plays and entertainment of all descriptions, these events were the beginnings of the annual Art in The Redwoods festival. Eventually in 1961 a group of these citizens began exploring the idea of starting a non-profit. By 1964 the Gualala Arts Collaborative was formed and the Art in the Redwoods Festival was officially named in August 1965. Growing steadily in members and encompassing art programs of all persuasions, the search for a permanent space to house and accommodate the diverse artistic undertakings became a priority.

From those early days Gualala Arts used the Gualala Community Center and small venues in town to put on shows, exhibits and performances. Now 50 years later, the permanent physical structure is a state-of-the-art center which includes an inside theatre, outside amphitheater, several galleries, a full catering kitchen and expansive grounds with nature walks and sculpture gardens.

A brand new elevator is being installed this summer and illustrates brilliantly why the Gualala Arts Center is so successful and productive. With a goal of \$140,000 for the purchase and installation of an elevator the kickoff party was held in May of 2010; by May 2011, over \$100,000 was raised and close to \$40,000 of in-kind donations of time, equipment and expertise secured its implementation right on (if not under) budget. The Arts Center is

extremely proud to be debt free.

How has the community of Gualala achieved such a venue? Not overnight. Like the Giant Redwoods that stand sentry around the Arts Center, it has taken years of hard work, thousands of volunteer hours, endless events, fundraisers and most of all, a firm belief in the project which is shared by the community.

It all began in 1982, when the Gualala Redwoods, Inc., a lumber company, indicated that they would deed an old mill site if \$250,000 could be raised and held in trust for Gualala Arts to develop, design and construct a visitor and art center. Gualala Arts began raising funds through various events over the next several years. In 1987, just shy of the goal of \$250,000 by \$40,000, they decided to proceed by having architectural plans drawn and began the building permit process. In 1996, an additional \$100,000 was gifted and construction began in April 1996. The official ribbon cutting ceremony took place in August of 1998.

Now, with an annual budget of over \$600,000, a working board of up to 20 individuals, 30 different volunteer-run committees all empowered with different roles and responsibilities, 5 full time staff, hundreds of volunteers and close to a thousand members, the Center is thriving. The Arts Center's proximity to Sea Ranch and Sonoma County makes it truly a nexus for the area's social and artistic life.



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The mission and goals of the center are “promoting public interest and participation in the arts.”

The Center hosts popular annual events like the Art in the Redwoods Festival, Top Hat Dinner, Gualala Arts Auto Show and Dance in the Redwoods, to name a few. In fact, last year the Center had close to 1300 events, workshops, lectures, shows both on and off site, as well as playing host to weddings, private parties, meetings, maintenance days, volunteer drives, etc. Additionally, The Dolphin Art Gallery, located in the Sundstrom Mall, provides a retail space for member artists who share in the profits with high commission rates and provide support to the Arts Center.

Along with, grants, endowments, planned giving and memberships, the Arts Center is always looking for creative ways of securing long term funding. The Center is always seeking “Art Angels” who will sponsor an event, project, show or production that is close to their hearts. Finding and encouraging these Art Angels ensures that the Center can keep event admission costs down so more community members can enjoy and appreciate the wide range of programming the Center offers.

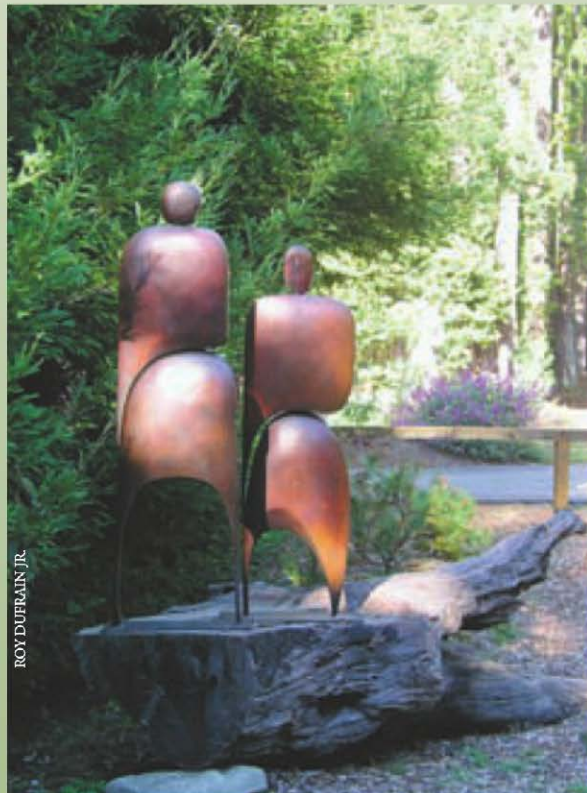
David “Sus” Susalla fosters and nurtures a very participatory approach: all members and participants in the Arts Center have the option to propose anything from show and installation ideas, to structural improvements and beautification projects. “Sus” firmly believes in giving ownership to the individuals and groups who present new concepts. With his staff and volunteer help, they assist in executing the vision. No idea is rejected

out of hand, no subject is taboo and no work too controversial to consider. The philosophy that art should challenge, art should inspire, art should educate and art touches lives is evident by the diverse activities and events that the Center produces and supports.

The grounds of the Center include various walking trails and ample parking. This Mendocino County gem is a must-stop visit for locals and visitors alike.

For the many art centers that find themselves struggling for relevance and survival in their communities, studying the Gualala Arts Center’s model could well be a very useful endeavor. The Gualala Arts Center succeeds because it is constantly nurtured by a community whose commitment and dedication to the belief that the arts are as important to a healthy and dynamic community as the land, the trees, the ocean, the air that surrounds them and their beloved Gualala Arts Center. Fifty years old this year! Congratulations Gualala and here’s to fifty more.

For more background information and for current and upcoming events, exhibitions, productions and opportunities, please visit gualalaarts.com



ROY DUPRAIN, JR.