



Hoffman Center for the Arts volunteers show off their newly installed sign for Wonder Garden, the center's horticultural demonstration garden and outdoor classroom. PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARY ROBERTS

Connection in the Time of COVID

Artists find creative ways to share their work during a pandemic

By Denise Porter

Long and sloping from the top of the knoll all the way to the Pacific Ocean, Laneda Avenue is the main street for the tiny and thriving hamlet of Manzanita, Tillamook County's northernmost town.

Summertime sees the village swell with tourists playing along the coast. In winter, locals hunker down and enjoy the intimacy of the village known for its thriving colony of both working and retired artists.

All year—but especially when the weather cools and winter storms begin—locals gather at Hoffman Center for the Arts at 594 Laneda Ave. People come together to explore, create and connect, which are the tenets of the Hoffman Center, says Mary Roberts, ceramic artist and president of the center's eight-person board of directors.

"We put on really fabulous art here," Mary says.

Mary says she was drawn to the

Hoffman Center's clay studio when she moved to Manzanita full time in 2016 after owning a home in the area since 1995.

"We want to help artists up their game, engage the community, learn about art and see different arts," she says.

In a typical year, the center provides gallery showings, author events, pottery classes, writing, art and a plethora of enrichment activities.

But what happens to a nonprofit organization during a pandemic, when

things are shut down and people can no longer gather? How can people connect?

As it turns out, much can be accomplished with a team of eager helpers.

Hoffman Center is staffed by a team of 110 volunteers. Mary says it only took the group a few days after Oregon's pandemic shut down before ideas rolled, people gathered steam and launched their first virtual event March 27, 2020.

In fact, Hoffman Center's outreach during 2020 was larger than it ever has been.

"In the year 2020—and into 2021—we produced 180 online sessions," Mary says. "It was a lot to do."

Topics included hands-on art classes, seminars, writing classes and horticulture classes. Artist showcases were also moved online.

Hosting virtual events for a year-and-a-half has not been easy, Mary says.

"We had several volunteers who really learned how to do Zoom very well," she says. "There's a ton of work in producing a Zoom event that people don't realize."

For example, it can be difficult to film a teacher from a view that makes it easy for students to see what the instructor is creating.

There are also surprising benefits to hosting Zoom classes.

"We have been able to bring in teachers and speakers who would not have come here in person," Mary says, referring to cost prohibition or time restraints.

One of the most cherished community events began late in summer 2020 and extended into winter and spring. The online Community Writes program gave participants a writing prompt to focus and hone their skills. Writers entered their submissions to be published on the website.

The feedback from community members during the winter months of the pandemic lockdown was inspiring, Mary says.

"It was so dear to read their testimonies," she says, of how the online classes helped people focus and engage during isolation.

It became clear that more people than just local residents were engaging with the



Local artists join Laura Ross Paul's mixed media class at Hoffman Center for the Arts. The center adapted to holding virtual events during the height of the pandemic.

Hoffman Center classes.

"Because we were doing virtual classes, they signed up from all over the place, but they've all at some point had a connection to this place," Mary says.

Perhaps that connection was a part-time home, or they once vacationed in Manzanita.

"We're not trying to serve the whole world," Mary says, chuckling. "We're here to serve the north coast community with art, but in this particular case, we were able to reach out further."

As spring of 2021 rolled into early summer and some pandemic restrictions were lifted, Hoffman Center volunteers began looking at both creative in-person classes and fundraising ideas.

Unfortunately, the center's main building was too small to host classes while keeping social distancing in mind.

The volunteers' eyes moved across the street to the Hoffman Center's Wonder Garden. Here in the center's outdoor horticulture classroom, people could create and connect while being adequately spaced apart.

Soon, the 2021 summer gatherings began. A fundraiser was underway.

"Having a fundraiser forced us to think about the constraints in place and how to work with them," Mary says. "We can't have crowds in the building, so how do we

keep engaging people in new and creative ways?"

The Wonder Garden became a center of activity.

A volunteer saw an article in The Washington Post about converting Little Free Library structures into tiny art galleries. Inspired by the idea, Hoffman Center volunteers reached out to local artists, asking them to create and donate tiny art scenes inside small shadow boxes. The art collections were placed in the Wonder Garden for public viewing, and the center sold raffle tickets.

Locals, tourists, children and adults were captivated by the tiny art housed inside the tiny boxes.

"We had lots of people just fall in love with them," Mary says.

While it is unclear when Hoffman Center will fully open its doors and engage with the community again for inside-the-building classes, Mary looks back on the past year's challenges and says she is proud of the volunteers who make the center flourish.

"A big part of the Hoffman Center is connecting people of all walks of life, and we did that," she says. "We survived and we have really, really worked hard at connecting people." ■

For more information, go to <https://hoffmanarts.org>.