

Fairhope Aging Gracefully

Festival Chair Explains How the Show Reached 70

By Angie Landsverk

Tradition, volunteers, and community support have helped the Fairhope Arts and Crafts Festival become one of the longest running art shows in the country.

“Our town’s always been about writers, artists, and craftspeople,” Festival Chair Vicky Cook said of the Alabama community.

A former manager of the local chamber of commerce found a way to use that for Fairhope’s benefit. In the early 1950s, Barbara Gooden came up with the idea of having a festival of artists who showcased their crafts in storefronts and empty buildings, Cook explained.

“This was the beginning of a truly successful idea to share the local talent of our town, which now extends an invitation to artists from all over the United States to apply for the Fairhope Arts and Crafts Festival,” Cook said.

This year’s event on March 18-20 is the 70th, and the festival committee is celebrating with platinum-colored T-shirts and balloons.

The festival features artists in a variety of categories, including jewelry, mixed media, painting, photography, sculpture, wood, leather, glass, functional crafts, and more.

Cook expects 235 artists to participate this year, a return to the typical number of exhibitors after last year’s event was reduced to 90 artists from just Alabama due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This festival ranked CC24 in *Sunshine Artist’s* 200 Best list last year and always has a full show and wait list. The festival committee recommends artists get their applications in early.

It is a juried festival. Cook said multiple jurors, who have a range of interest and expertise in the arts, review the online images submitted by artists.

“Jurors are asked to rank from a low of one to a high of 10 using guidelines from originality to price, so every visitor will find art they enjoy and can purchase,” she said.

Cook said the same basic process has been in use for years; only the mechanics have changed. “Where artists once mailed in four slides and a handful of local jurors sat around a table scoring each artist, we now use an online process with multiple jurors, viewing images from their homes,” she said. “Even though the basic process has worked for years, the one challenge is making a fair assessment of the artist’s work when quality images are not submitted.”

She said the application and images artists submit are all jurors have for determining which artists will be invited

to fill one of the 235 booths. “So, submit the highest quality images possible, and do not forget the fully stocked outdoor booth (photos),” Cook advises first-time applicants.

She wants those who have not exhibited at the show for a few years to know they made some changes during the past five to seven years.

They became a nonprofit and added or changed categories to broaden the show, Cook said.

The rain-or-shine event attracts about 250,000 people. It is held on the streets of downtown Fairhope, which has more than 100 retailers, specialty shops, businesses, art galleries, bars, and restaurants.

As the pandemic continues, she said they will be mindful of spacing and have more restrooms and cleaning stations. Parking options will be shared via social media. Masks will be available.

The community is passionate about the festival. “An all-volunteer committee, foundation board, local businesses, and sponsors plan year-round to make Fairhope Arts and Crafts an outstanding festival for artists and visitors,” Cook said. ✨



Attendees are ready to visit booths at a past Fairhope Arts and Crafts Festival. Photo courtesy of Stephen Savage

Vicky Cook Shares What Works for Them

1 Our community of artists, volunteers, and guests are often our best advertisement. By making sure artists are treated well and have a smooth show and by providing a fun, family-friendly atmosphere, we hope all involved are inspired to return year after year. Traditional advertising methods, as well as social media, are used.

2 Year-round planning is critical to make a great festival happen. Cultivating great volunteer leaders and using them in their areas of strength makes a show work smoothly.

3 Our festival cannot happen without the support of the local businesses, the city of Fairhope and its devoted employees, sponsors who continue to help each year, and the total group of volunteers who work — from the year-round ones to those who volunteer on the day of the show.

4 Communication is key, whether it is with your artists, volunteers, or guests. With so many moving parts, organization is essential for running a smooth festival. There are bound to be mistakes made or challenges that arise, but if you communicate clearly with all parties involved, it helps solutions rise to the surface.