

## Orford Art Group: Finding a Home for their Art

By KIM J. GIFFORD

Photography by JON GILBERT FOX

Maybe it's because they're artists — creative people used to taking raw materials and transforming them into something worthwhile. So when the Palisades Art & Framing gallery went up in a blaze that took out Fairlee, Vt.'s Colby Block in 2007, it was no surprise that the Orford (N.H.) Art Group was able to turn lemons into lemonades by finding an innovative location to exhibit their work.

Rather than searching for an alternative building in town, the group

— consisting largely of a core company of family and friends — decided on something a bit more personal. Robin Weisburger, one of the group's key figures and early establishers, was in the process of remodeling her house when the idea came to her. Why not take the basement — complete with its indoor/outdoor carpeting and drab interior — and convert it into a space to exhibit her art and do some framing for friends?

"I designed it completely selfishly on my part for it to be my space," she says.

Yet, on Mother's Day, a year later and close to the first anniversary of the fire, Weisburger found herself hosting the Palisades reunion out of her new gallery.

"We invited all the artists who had shown at Palisades and sold more in that one day than we did in a year at Palisades," she says.

Since then, the Weisburger home has served as the location for the group's biannual art shows — one in the spring and one in the fall. The group has also occasionally made use of other creative



Robin Weisburger in her basement gallery

locations throughout the Upper Valley. One attendee remembers viewing one of the group's exhibits at a house that was for sale that a builder had just completed. "It's fun looking at the art in different settings and getting to meet the artists," says Andrea Rhodes of Hanover, N.H.

"It's not the Guggenheim, by any means," jokes another art show attendee, Greg Simpson, but "the Weisburgers converted their basement into a very nice gallery with good lighting and they have done as much as anyone can to represent everything in a professional light."

As the shows have grown — there is now a nucleus of approximately 12 artists — the display is not limited to the basement. During the shows, the Weisburgers open their home to the public with art upstairs and down. They serve hors d'oeuvres and introduce friends and the greater community to a wide range of talent. Works include everything from watercolors and oils to pastel and photography. Some members sell greeting cards of their work, so there is typically something for sale at all price levels.

"They really have a pretty talented group involved in it now and a wider variety of art. It's fun to see what everyone's been up to and creating," says Simpson.

Each show features one of the group's core members who include Gene and Barbara Bellows, Cara Dyke, John Miller, Paul and Althea Goundrey, and Weisburger of Orford; Tom Hall of Fairlee, Vt.; Nancy Maynard of Hartford, Vt.; Carolyn Zuaro of Northfield, Vt.; Robin's daughter, Erin Weisburger Levy of New York, N.Y.; and Robin's sister, Kelly Carney of Idaho Falls, Idaho, who mails her work to be included in the shows. Weisburger estimates that 60 to 80 people attend.

"We love parties, we love to enter-



Artists (left to right) Althea Goundrey, Thomas Jaffaran, Paul Goundrey, Aimee Larson, Robin Weisburger, Cara Dyke, Nancy Maynard and Barbara Bellows



Two works by Barbara Bellows on display

tain, and this gives us the opportunity," Weisburger says. "It's a passion, totally a passion. If you get something sold that's great, but the whole point is so we can show off our stuff."

#### HISTORY OF THE ORFORD ART GROUP

The Orford Art Group originated in the mid-1990s as a small gathering of friends, taking lessons from artist

Barbara Bellows of Fairlee. Bellows, now a well established Upper Valley artist and teacher, at that time had just started giving art lessons to area youth, having taught music for many years. A group of women, including Robin and daughter Erin, had stopped by Bellow's home for lunch and noted all the artwork scattered about. >>>>





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"I said, 'Barbara, look at all this beautiful artwork, you should be giving art lessons and I'd even take a class,'" says Weisburger.

Soon, the women began meeting in a friend's house and the group expanded, making their way through pastels, water-colors and a variety of other mediums. Althea Goundrey and Alan Jesseman eventually joined the group, leading to the establishment of Palisades Art & Framing, owned by Jesseman, in 2005. The group put in many hours renovating their Colby Block space, working well into the night on many occasions.

"We knew what time it was by the train whistle blowing at midnight. We would break up at 2 a.m., sit on overturned buckets in the kitchen, go back to our regular jobs at 8 a.m., and then do the whole thing over," says Weisburger. "It was definitely a labor of love."

This made the fire all the more devastating. Goundrey was on site the day it took place and was able to save a half dozen paintings before the smoke and flames made it impossible to go in for more. Weisburger remembers breaking down and sobbing, something she claims to do rarely, when she watched the remains of the building being torn down. "I watched the wrecker come and take it, just gobble it up, and I stood in the middle of the road and bawled like a baby," she says.

The group did not stay down for long, and several members point to wonderful opportunities that have emerged for them. Weisburger recalls selling her first large painting last year, The Start of Something Good, featuring a sunrise at Myrtle Beach, and having difficulty letting it go. Goundrey has gone on to

### Learn More

For more information on the Orford Art Group and their upcoming shows, contact Robin Weisburger at (603) 353-9332.



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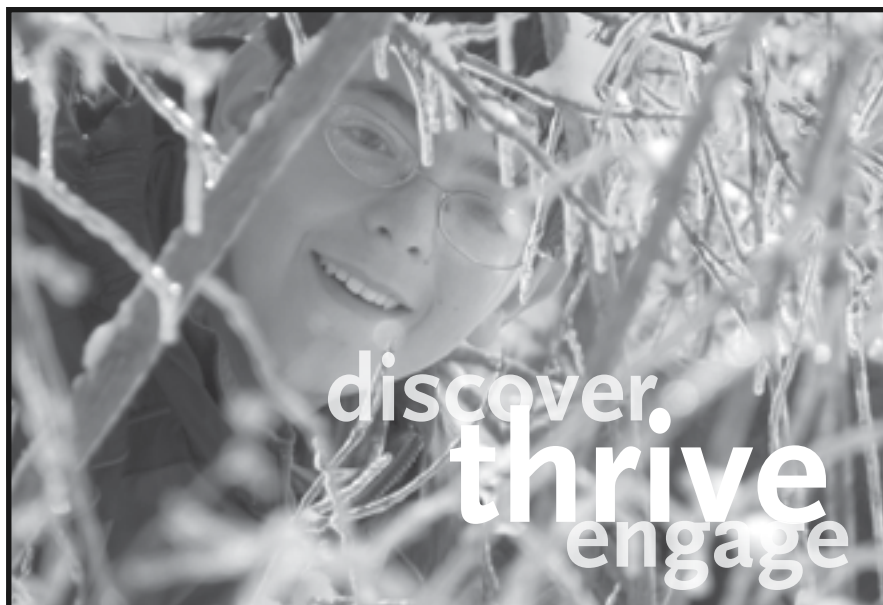
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serve in an AmeriCorp position at the AVA Gallery in Lebanon, N.H., and is applying to a museum studies certificate program. All have seen their artistic talent grow. "Everyone's talent has gotten a little bit better over the years," agrees Simpson.

"Where are the opportunities in small towns to showcase your work?" asks Weisburger, sitting with fellow artists Bellows and Goundrey. "We just made it up for ourselves." UVL



Two patrons look at a piece of framed artwork.



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