

Lifestyles

Lorna Hennig loved her work, and it showed

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Recently retired executive director of the Racine Arts Council reflects on her 'exciting' job

By Lee B. Roberts
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"If it comes from a creative place, odds are Lorna loves it," said Michael Rude, program director for the Racine Arts Council.

Such passion for all of the arts — from theater, dance and opera to the visual arts and poetry — is one of the things that made Lorna Hennig, recently retired executive director of the Racine Arts Council, great in her job, says Rude.

In her 10 years of service, Hennig spearheaded community events and projects ranging from the Sandcastles festival and the Musica Reservata chamber concert series to the LINK program, which provides musical instruments to kids who can't otherwise afford them, and art classes at the Racine Youthful Offender Correctional Facility. And she did so by spending more time and energy than money, and by sharing her enthusiasm with others.

"Everything Lorna did was fun," said Max Dershem, executive director of Racine's DeKoven Center and a member of the RAC board of directors. "It was never 'I can't do that' with Lorna," he said. "It was 'We need to figure out how to be more active in bringing the arts into people's lives and making the arts more accessible to everyone.' "

For Hennig, heading the RAC and watching it grow was a labor of love.

"I had the best job in Racine," she said in a recent interview from her home. "It may have been one of the lowest paid jobs, but the benefits were huge. All of the people I've met and the programs I've worked with have been really exciting."

Starting from scratch

A visual artist who works in watercolors and handmade paper, Hennig first came to the Racine

Arts Council at the suggestion of a friend who saw the job opening advertised in the newspaper. The bookstore Hennig had been working at had recently closed and her friend urged her to apply for the RAC position which she said "would be perfect for you."

"I needed a part-time job to support my art habit," Hennig said, with a smile.

Both surprised and pleased to be chosen from a long list of applicants, Hennig soon found out that her first challenge in running the RAC would be keeping the organization afloat.

"We had so little money back then, I was told that I might be out of a job in another nine months," she said.

Dershem, who was elected president of the RAC board just two days after Hennig took the job, remembers meeting with the new director at the time and deciding to make the best of what little time and money they had by exploring some new ideas for supporting and enhancing the arts in Racine.

"We figured, as long as we were going for broke anyway, why not try a few things," Hennig said. "And from there we just kept going and growing."

Ten years later, the Arts Council is still going strong, said Dershem. Its membership includes more than 40 area organizations, including performing groups, art galleries and festivals, the Racine Public Library and the Racine Art Museum. And its success has served as a model for arts councils in other cities, both around Wisconsin and beyond.

Hennig's leadership and devotion to the cause have been at the root of such accomplishments, say those who worked with her.

"It was because of her that we took on more educational outreach programming," said Dershem. "Lorna was especially interested in helping people at risk."

Hennig has also had a "huge impact" on the importance of the arts in Downtown Racine, said Dave Blank, chief executive officer/president of the Racine County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

"A lot of the Downtown development in the last 12 years has been arts driven and she was working behind the scenes on a lot of that," he said.

Reaching out

Among the many projects she worked on, one of Hennig's personal favorites was the Prison Art program. She and another area artist, Jerrold Belland, worked with more than 80 inmates at the Racine Correctional Institution, doing drawing and painting projects with them, during her time at the Arts Council.

"I looked forward to going there every Friday to work and talk with those guys," Hennig said. "They worked really hard and it was wonderful to be able to watch them develop as artists and gain self esteem."

Prison Art is something Hennig said she hopes will continue through the Arts Council, under its new director, Jessica Mikol. While she will miss her work with the RAC, Hennig said she doesn't feel sad about leaving her post because she knows she is leaving it in good hands.

"It is time to bring in some young blood, with new ideas," she said. "Jessica is a hard worker and has some really good, innovative ideas."

Along with her accomplishments in Racine's artistic community, Hennig has forged many friendships during her time with the Arts Council.

"I've always thought of Lorna a friend," said Rude. "When I started working with her at the Racine Arts Council, she would never let me call her 'boss'. She wanted me to think of her as my equal, but truth be told, nobody is her equal. She is a great lady with class, intelligence, compassion and a huge heart."

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