

# Main Street

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I N S I D E

## If You Host an Open Studios Tour...

By Marie Grimmke

...people will travel through Washington County. When they travel through Washington County, they are probably going to stop for lunch. When they stop for lunch, they will read about some performing arts events in the evening. If they attend the event, they will be tired so they will stay the night in a local inn. In the morning, they will probably drive by a realtor's office, and might want to buy a house.

And if they buy a house, they will need to buy some art to put in it.

With apologies to the children's book *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*, that's the idea behind Washington County's Open Studios Tour, which takes place on July 21 and 22, from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. - bring tourists in to the county, promote the artists, and make money.

Money? Well, yes. According to Marge Mohn, the Washington County "I Love New York" tourism promotion administrator, tourists spend an average of \$200-\$300 per person for every night they stay here. That money is spent on gas, lunch, books, tickets to the performing arts - and maybe - art.

Money is just one reason "I Love New York" was eager to provide matching funding to this first annual project, the brainchild of full-time, professional artists Brenda McMahon and Serena Kovalosky. Sales tax revenues in the county are up, and tours like this one are a magnet to bring in dollars.

But the main reason for the tour is to showcase talent. Often artists in the area must sell their work outside the area, so they remain relatively unknown to their neighbors. This project is a way to cross-pollinate - to make artists with national acclaim locally known.

For example, unless you've read the itty-bitty print on the cover of romance novels for the past 20 years, you might not realize that Greenwich resident Leslie Anne Peck illustrated them. But the oil paintings you'll see on the tour won't be of scantily clad, size 2 women in compromising positions with highly muscled men. Peck now paints farm animals.

"Virtually everything I paint is from a 6-8 mile radius," Peck explains. And that's one of the advantages of this tour - you get to see the roots of the art. Furthermore, Peck says, tourists can talk to the artist about his or her inspiration for the art, the setting, the process in which it was created, and (here's the money thing again) possibly even find a bargain. Galleries typically mark up work 40 percent and framing adds another \$100 or more onto the price of a piece of art. Buying directly from the artist can save a bundle.

Sculptor Gyula (pronounced "Jewla") Varosy uses rough-hewn tree trunks to carve sculptures in his Greenwich studio. You would think that anything carved out of a tree would still look like a tree, but Varosy's human figures resemble a tree about as much as Michelangelo's *David* looks like a rock. And they evoke just a much emotion.

Varosy designed his own light-filled studio from a barn. As an architect, he felt this was an easy undertaking - "A barn to a studio. How hard could it be?" It's been a hectic time for Varosy, but he is optimistic about a good turnout.

Leslie Parke's oil paintings just make a person feel happy. There is an interplay of light and bright color conveyed that is mood-lifting. If you visit her studio you'll find that she lays out hundreds of tubes of paint in chromatic order to capture the peaceful feeling on large canvases.

But getting ready for the tour has been a lot of work for Parke, one of the collaborators on the project. She recently threw out 40 lawn-size garbage bags full of "stuff" from her studio collected during 30 years in Cambridge, and has had to bring back paintings from viewings in the area. Despite the hard work, she says, "It's been empowering for us [the featured artists]." Parke adds that the local artists have had to sharpen their business side - such as investing in MasterCard and Visa machines - but that all the artists involved have been wonderfully cooperative. "I think it's going to be fantastic. It's a vision for the region that's going to pay off for the area."

McMahon and Kovalosky came up with the germ of an idea for this tour a few years ago. McMahon had experience in the broadcasting business and was one of the organizers of the successful Saratoga Pottery Trail. Kovalosky joins the party with 18 years tourism experience in New England and Montreal. Together they shared a vision of a small group of truly professional artists, a juried event, and opening their studios to the public. Southern Washington County became the focus because the area has many artists, few big businesses, and many tourist attractions.

And (this is the last time this article will mention money) the Open Studios Tour on July 21 and 22 is *free*. How many house, garden, farm, or Christmas tours can say that? So with the money you save on an admission ticket - go out and buy some art. ■

