Volunteer group builds bridges between museum and the community

release date: January 26, 2020

By Megan Harding

Weekend visitors to the museum are likely to encounter a volunteer ready to welcome them and answer their questions. Since 2007, a corps of volunteers drawn from the Oberlin community, called the Museum Guild, has been helping to enhance the visitor experience at the museum. Stationed in the King Sculpture Court, volunteers may field questions about what to see at the museum or where to have lunch.

The founder of the Guild, Mary Louise VanDyke ’47, says she was inspired to create the group when attending theater at the Shaw Festival in Ontario. “I saw how effective it was to have a member of the community there when you walked in,” she says. VanDyke approached then museum director Stephanie Wiles with a plan to establish a volunteer organization at the Allen. Today, in addition to working at the museum’s information desk, Guild members assist with publicity, merchandise sales, and Tuesday Teas.

Through the Guild, the museum forms meaningful relationships with local residents outside of the Oberlin campus. “Guild members are walking advertisements for the museum,” VanDyke says. “You’d be surprised how often people ask me about the museum when I am out.”

Residents of Kendal at Oberlin are among the museum’s most loyal supporters, and, not surprisingly, they are a robust presence in the Guild. “They all were active in their own communities before coming to Kendal, and they expect to work in the community here,” said VanDyke, a founder of the retirement community. Many Kendal residents were first drawn to Oberlin because of its first-rate art museum and other cultural amenities.

A lot of people join the Guild simply because they enjoy art and want to learn more, as well as keep up on happenings at the Allen. They attend annual sessions to learn about the behind-the-scenes workings of the museum. Desk volunteers also like interacting with visitors who come from all around the world and find it rewarding to talk with the parents of Oberlin students, families deciding on a college, and college or conservatory alumni.

Guild members, when stumped with a question from a visitor, often rely on museum security officers, who know an impressive amount about the museum and its collections. “They are always ready to help and so good when approaching visitors,” VanDyke says.

The museum is looking for new Guild members. All that’s required is a willingness to learn and interact with the public. The commitment may be as little as two hours per month, on weekends, and training is provided.

To express interest or to learn more about the Guild, please contact Jill Greenwood at *jill.greenwood@oberlin.edu,* or call 440-775-8671.