

Art for Empowerment and Unity: 10 years of the Art Market at Vega Metals

Durham locals know the Art Market at Vega Metals as a festive, bustling array of dozens of artists, food trucks and musicians on Hunt Street between Foster Street and Rigsbee Avenue. Celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, the Art Market provides a vital space where Durham residents and visitors can enjoy the best of Durham's local art, street food and music scene.



A Vision of Opportunity and Empowerment

In 2008, Art Market founder Cecilia Henaine de Davis brought her idea for a new arts and crafts market to Vega Metals owners Frances and Cindy Vega and Neal Carlton. They would provide space in the Vega Metals parking lot on Hunt Street and encouraged her to lead the venture. Henaine de Davis wanted to give artists the exposure they needed to gain an audience and improve their work. Other markets in the area had limits on the kinds of art they would accept and the number of artists they could accommodate, as well as rigid participation requirements and high fees that precluded many artists' participation.

Henaine de Davis also wished to create a weekly event in downtown Durham that would be like a festival; a weekly party that would bring people of all types together in an inclusive environment created around the pure love of art. "Art is its own language," explains Henaine de Davis. "You don't have to speak the same language as someone else to enjoy art with them. It brings people together."

Henaine de Davis knew the challenges of language first-hand, having moved to Minnesota from Mexico in 1989 speaking no English at all. "It took me five years to learn enough English to carry on a simple conversation," she reflects. Trained as a dental hygienist in Mexico, but unable to work in the U.S. at the time, she needed to earn income. She began working with jewelry, and started by breaking apart old or discarded jewelry and giving it new life. She set up a table to sell her jewelry in a park in St. Paul and began to hone her craft.

When she moved to Durham in 1999, Henaine de Davis found other women, especially immigrants, in similar situations. In 2004, she was working at the Family Violence Prevention Center in Durham and was asked to bring Latina women to the agency for information sessions on domestic violence prevention and recovery. "I knew they would not come because of so many obstacles," she observes. "First of all, they didn't want their husbands to know where they are. Second, language barrier, third,

kids, and so on.” She went to El Centro Hispano (formerly El Centro Latino) and asked to create a jewelry-making group for Latina women and invited the women to attend. The group was called Mujer a Mujer. “It was a perfect setup,” she says. “I was able to give them information about domestic violence and their legal rights in the U.S., and I gave them the skill of making jewelry. It also became a way for the women to just relax.”

“After the class, you see the results, the beautiful combinations they were making,” Henaine de Davis continues. “Everyone was supporting each other; everyone was giving help to solve problems without judgement. The dynamic that they built within themselves, it was wonderful. The husbands didn’t know what they were doing. It was jewelry making, but it was a support group. And there were two things: either you are in a domestic violence situation or you’re not. If you are, you could find help. If you’re not, you have the information to give others. These women were able to help others.”

It was this passion to empower people with a skill and to bring people together through art that led Henaine de Davis to found the Art Market at Vega Metals. With the support of the Vega Metals partners, the Market expanded from the parking lot into the sidewalk area and ultimately into the street, after Frances Vega helped advocate for a street closure for pedestrians on Saturday mornings.

Supporting the Artist Community

Since its founding in 2008, hundreds of artists have been part of the Art Market at Vega Metals, representing a wide range of art forms, media and intended audience. Some, like Karen Dillard of Dillardville Recycled Art, have been part of the Art Market since the beginning. Dillard says, “When we started it was just two vendors. (Now), it is a blessing for aspiring artists.”



Michele Murer of Designs by Chell, another member since the early years, explains that it’s the positive family vibe of the Market that makes it special. “We have kindled a love of art, family, food, and community,” Murer says. “I love seeing regular customers and the atmosphere the Market has created. There is a comradery among the regular attending artists. Going every Saturday rejuvenates me artistically and spiritually. It has been my haven during my divorce and other life changes. It is so worth the time and effort. The people you meet make it so.”

Vivian Blanco of Unpredictable Jewelry remembers her first day at the Art Market. Blanco recalls, “A lady approached me and gave me a necklace made with flowers and said, ‘you will be great.’” Rebecca Blackwell of Love Infused agrees. “The first day I set up, I received help from several vendors,” explains Blackwell. “One lady let me borrow a tent. Another gave me some kind advice to not give up. It has inspired me to continue with something I love.”

“The supportive community has given me the confidence I need to persevere and I've been inspired by those around me to continue to evolve and try new ideas,” reports Daria Drake of The Durham Originals. Alison McCandless of A Knitted ART concurs. “I began at the Market in the fall of 2010 when my daughter moved away for college. In the eight years since, I've been inspired to think of my work as a small business rather than just a hobby I love. I now have the confidence to exhibit at shows throughout NC. My greatest pleasure, however, comes from the personal interaction with the people drawn to our Market. Many are tourists. I think our art and community shows off the diversity and friendliness of Durham.”

Making it Accessible

The Art Market’s fees are low relative to other venues, and the participation requirements are unusually flexible. This allows artists to attend according to what their budgets and schedules allow. Mary Feger of Feger Furnishings explains, “It encourages me to be a part of a new community that I otherwise would not have joined because of the schedules, costs and restrictions. I have ventured outside the box and created different pieces based on inspiration from the Art Market at Vega Metals.”

Henaine de Davis says this is by design. “Every time people would try some place else, they wouldn’t get a chance. At least here they get exposure and the opportunity to play with other media. Other markets limit the media you can work in. Here, you can make bigger pieces, different pieces. It lets them take the leap.”

Taryn Strickland of Strickly Handmade has also benefitted from the accessibility of the Market for artists just starting out. Strickland points out, “They do so much for new artists and really encourage a collaborative, creative and affordable space for small businesses to start up and flourish. Professionally, the Art Market allowed me to start my business. My business would not be where it is today without them and their support.”

Impact on the Durham Small Business Economy

In its ten years on Hunt Street, the Art Market has helped grow a number of Durham businesses, and has helped move many businesses from part-time or mobile to full-time brick and mortar.

One such business owner, Aisha Sanders of Urbaine Terrain, tells us, “I currently have a studio in the Creative Re-Use District spear-headed by the Scrap Exchange. My studio space is one of two (other occupied by River Takada of Rivtak) inside of Freeman's Creative, the realized dream of Amelia Freeman, a former Art Market Vendor. We are hitting a 6-month anniversary and I am tremendously blessed with this community of such supportive and strong women.”

Johnny Brown of BStill Clothing joined the Art Market in 2017. He explains, “It's kind of crazy to think I see it as a stream of income when I started only last July. The support and advice from the other vendors has helped me out a lot. I'm making enough that I can grow my business quickly so I can hopefully go full time by next year.”



Another successful and quickly growing company, Lo & Behold Naturals, sees the Art Market as a way to grow their customer base. Owner Elisabeth Chadbourne says, “The Art Market has been one of the many wonderful opportunities we have pursued to help grow our business. For us it has been very helpful having a market we can attend whenever we need. We have especially made great connections at the food truck rodeos. The Market is very important to the Durham community; there are not enough opportunities for makers and crafters to get out there and sell. Likewise customers need a place where they can support handmade small businesses.”

What does success mean to founder Henaine de Davis? She says the best part about the Market is “being able to see people challenging themselves in so many ways. To me, success is seeing vendors coming in the freezing winter time, or when it’s raining. Because they want to succeed. They want this.”