

Here is the story, from my remembrances and bits and pages of yellowing papers, of the birth of the Valley Art Center.

My family's first house, in Chagrin Falls, was an old Western Reserve style at 35 South Main. We moved in late October, 1961 from Indiana, and the valley was full of color, most especially beautiful maple trees. My oldest son found a buddy, Corky, who lived on the same street up the hill and soon his mother, Eleanor Over, and I became friends. I enrolled my three-year-old son in Alice Fitz's preschool in her home just behind the Over's house. East of the Over's lived Dolly, the "puppet lady" whom I would later know as Lilly Criswell, knower of all thing pertaining to the Chagrin Falls Artists. Betty Solether, from across the street, dropped in to tell me how hard it was to become part of the town. Her mother-in-law owned the movie theater in this Western Reserve community and she said the old timers "felt more New England than New England".

The village was going through a difficult adjustment. It was evolving from a small town into a bedroom community of Cleveland, and this would eventually change the makeup, desires and intent of its residents. The old timers felt threatened by the new. However, it seemed that there was plenty of open land between Chagrin Falls and Cleveland. Many townspeople believed the river would keep the outside crowds away.

In March, I attended a Chagrin Falls Artists meeting in the Old Town Hall, introduced myself to some members, then went home and cried. There were a few who seemed very close and a few who seemed to be strangers like me. Were they unfriendly or was I homesick? I missed Columbus, Indiana artists and friends whom I had just left. In the spring, I would walk with my little boys to the donut shop, and with a sack of

sweet circles, we would walk down broken stairs to the base of the large falls, sit on a rock and ponder. I knew I wanted to continue making art, and the side parlor was perfect studio space. No way could I have known that in two years it would become a gallery.

After Christmas I began some new paintings. One was of the Chagrin River seen as it swept away from the bridge and the large falls, and one was of a deserted Indiana one room schoolhouse. The annual exhibit of the Chagrin Falls Artists would open at the Old Town Hall in the fall. I was told it was enthusiastically enjoyed by residents, visitors to our picturesque town, and artists who submitted new pieces each year for prizes. Preparing for this show took lots of energy and work. Heavy flats, stored in the Old Town Hall basement, were pulled upstairs and placed in traffic patterns enabling the art to be properly viewed. The male members, with Bob Takatch leading, had constructed standing frames holding heavy composite board, 6 feet by 8 feet, on which to hang our paintings. Our local primitive artist, Max Barnard, would deliver his work with painted frames as part of the picture. It was more practical and cheaper, he explained, to paint a frame on his painting panel. There was always an argument as to how to handle rejected work. One year we held a “Salon de Refuse” in the balcony, but that was poor compensation and made several artists unhappy. The Old Town Hall Show was a great social time for all of us...working to hang the show, sit the show, and take down.

I won a blue ribbon, in my first year, for the Indiana schoolhouse. Someone came up at the opening of the show and said, “The only reason you won is that Joan is pregnant!” It took someone else to explain that Joan Kerber had been taking the blue ribbon for several years. Later, when I saw her wonderful abstracts, I knew why.

But I was happy and now getting to know the members of the organization, enjoying meetings in various homes and participating in potluck dinners. I remember an early controversy when the majority vote chose to open the required borders for exhibit applicants. We would now include much larger area for membership than our town and a small area outside. The minority felt threatened with a larger pool of new members, but we added some talented artists, some from Cleveland, Orange, Moreland Hills and Gates Mills.

In February of 1963 my family moved to 31 South Street. I knew I would miss the studio space in the old second parlor, but the rental house was to become offices. Before my move, Nancy Martt asked me to join her in teaching children's art classes. We rented space over Chess's Cracker Barrel next to the Popcorn Shop. The windows looked over the falls. It was a good space and had a closet with a large wash tub used by a former hairdresser. We soon found out the pipes were clogged with hair and required a plumber...for more than one visit! A small room with toilet was in the hall next to the stairs...a necessity for children's classes. (This space is now used for law offices and is over the Fireside Bookstore.) One morning for an oil class, Nancy suggested using a new invention for turps...the Styrofoam cup. She placed them on the tables and I followed with the turpentine. Then I looked back to see the cups melting, the tables dripping and the smell melding with the chili odors from downstairs. Nancy named our "school" the Studio-Workshop. After several weeks we added adult classes, and among the first seven students, was Jane Spock, the wife of Dr. Spock of baby book fame.

We also offered the Studio-Workshop for Chagrin Artists meetings. As president, Nancy managed to pass a resolution to rent the large side room at 35 Main...where I had

lived and painted a few months before...for a gallery. We would staff it with volunteers from our group. The vote was very close; many members were afraid of *any* financial commitment. Soon, finding that members wanted to hang on the walls but not sit and sell, Lil Fueger and Del Gimmel took over the gallery and gave many shows. They called it Gallery 35 and painted the floor for each opening to go with the exhibit. How many coats of paint those old board experienced, I do not know, but I remember having a show with a new artist in town, George Roby...

Before moving to Chagrin Falls, I helped to found the Columbus Arts Guild in Columbus Indiana. In 1959, a neighbor, Julie, asked me to assist her with an AAUW art project. A few weeks before our meeting, I read an article in *Post Magazine* about a new art center formed in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and the Reynolds family, of the tobacco fortune, as its big angel. I suggested to Julie we might start an art group for the whole community. It would be for men, women and children and be an independent entity. One summer evening about sixty people gathered in our old farm yard to discuss the formation of the Columbus Arts Guild. It would have four divisions...art, theater, music, and literature. In the first year, with help from the Cummins Foundation (Cummins Diesel) and several other business and private gifts, we produced a jazz festival, a large outdoor art show, a costume party with orchestra, a few foreign films, art classes, and a chorus. Then my family and I moved to Chagrin Falls.

An active little theater, an opera study group, a great books study group, and the Chagrin Valley Artists were already established, but many of the artists were dreaming of a permanent place to show and meet and paint together. In June of 1963, after a meeting agreeing to a larger vision, we applied and were granted incorporation of the Chagrin

Valley Community Center. Jesse Hall, Dorothy Howard, Curtis Howard, Charles Day and I signed the document. We used the Columbus Guild paperwork as a foundation, hoping we could consolidate existing groups into a large art center.

Then activity stalled. My marriage was in serious trouble and eventually led to a divorce in the turbulent year of 1968. I was to become the sole support for two sons and know the vagaries of single motherhood. It was a time for great change in my life.

My friends, the Over's, were moving to Charlotte, NC and Phil said goodbye to his best buddy. Alan and Eleanor Over sold their home to Bob Takatch, who converted the barn where my children had played, into a wonderful studio space. Then Nancy Martt said she would no longer be able to continue with our classes. She suggested that I take them to my home and gave me the chairs, tables and supplies...and a means to support my sons. What a gift! The first semester in my basement included two children's classes on Saturdays and five adult classes during the week. It was crowded, confusing and successful, but with students' Christmas cards drying all over the house and up and down stairs, I knew I had to find rental space.

David Solether told me about the rehearsal space over the marquee of his mother's movie theater. It was perfect with lots of windows, a small kitchenette with sink, and a toilet on the first floor. It even had an old bathtub for soaking paper and washing brushes. And space! Friends helped me clean it, paint all the folding chairs fire red, and make easels. Then I asked several artists if they would like to have a class in the space with rent on a pro-rated basis. Bob Takatch, Sam Scott, Alfred Howell, and Nancy Martt accepted the invitation. I was given the name of an art teacher who might be interested in taking over my children's classes. She came up to the new space, liked the

idea and said she hoped to someday move to Chagrin Falls. What a find! Julie Weber! She was a really wonderful art teacher who eventually replaced George Roby at the high school. On the day of my first class over the theater, a new reporter from the *Herald* came to do a story and to take pictures. She introduced herself. Barbara Christian! It was her first assignment and she had forgotten film. And I had forgotten to buy turpentine.

The Studio-Workshop became a busy place, growing with classes for children, teens and adults, scheduled for all the weekdays, Saturday, and some evenings. My boys helped with cleanup. One day I received a call from the new president of the Chagrin Valley Artists. He told me I should put the name of the Chagrin Valley Artists over the door in place of Studio-Workshop and he was granting me his permission. For what purpose, I asked. "To give the studio classes credibility", was his reply. "No thanks!" said I. I felt like the Little Red Hen who did the planting and baked the bread...now he wanted to take the credit for all the work, not to mention expenses? I had my own credibility! I also found out there had been no discussion in meetings over such a name change.

In January 1971, our third year at the theater, I received notice that the lease would not be extended. By now the work was filling all my time, so it seemed the dream needed to expand. Art centers, since the late '50s, had been springing up all over the country promoting many art activities. The National Council for the Arts became a federal agency in 1965. After many years working with the Studio Workshop, I knew that I wanted to teach and to paint, not be an administrator, but I also saw the Studio-Workshop was leverage. I began talking to artists, students and others in the community about the dream. It began with many small conversations, small meetings, planning and

letters with mass mailing and culminated in a large meeting at the library. Many Chagrin Valley Artists came as well as others from the community. The majority were interested in creating an art center for Chagrin Falls with music as well as art and including photography and pottery...and a gallery...and a sales room. We had great ideas, but for an art center to become a reality, we needed a solid concept and a way to fund it. The income flow from the Studio-Workshop gave reality to our plan.

I especially remember a vocal meeting when we tried to persuade the Little Theater and the CF Historical Society to join us in a federation. One elderly gentleman said loudly, "Where did all these carpetbaggers come from?" A meeting at Shelly Kravitz' house was heated over whether to start a major gift campaign with a professional fundraiser (who asked for a hefty per cent of funds collected) with a goal of a new property designed for our need. Louise Hall and Caroline Schwerzler wrote a cover letter for a mass mailing that included plan and brochure designed by Bob Takatch. As summer weeks passed, I became concerned as to where we would hold classes with our large number of return students. If we went with the big plan presented at the Library meeting, which included a glorious architectural drawing of a new building, a HUGE fundraiser would be required. It would be several years before we could have our classes. We needed rental space NOW. We found it on Bell Street, a former small factory with a garage, bathroom, basement, two front rooms and a big room in back and downstairs. Lou Marino became our consulting architect, approved the space and we signed the lease. (This was only the south half of the building now occupied.) The Valley Art Center, now incorporated, opened its doors September 1971 with the Studio Workshop furnishings and other donated chairs, tables and equipment.

What made the dream come true was a good plan, a stream of income from the Studio-workshop classes, and with anticipated income from classes in pottery and photography. And many tenacious and dedicated believers! In seven months planning time, we opened The Valley Art Center, filling our classes and unaware of our many impending problems. We soon found the dust from the pottery area in the lower level sifted into the photo lab; and the potters found developer fumes unpleasant. During rainstorms, water poured down the front basement wall flooding the lower level floor. Solution: cut a ditch into the floor that ran to the back door. Gravity works! *Most* of the floor was dry.

In the Center's first months, Julie Weber called me "mother of the art center" when she wanted me to "back off". I knew the same kinds of frustrations a mother experiences when letting go, but Julie knew the group had to learn to work together to make an art center possible. Everyone had opinions and suggestions, but NO ONE wanted to clean the bathroom. Finally Bob Takatch organized Saturday work parties.

The place was really jumping! We had our art gallery, though a bit shabby, and evening openings with punch and wine. A music division was added under the leadership of Jim Moser with help from Eudice Rose. Some of the best parties were the annual cabarets...candles and wine on the tables and wonderful entertainment. (The singers in the beginning of *The Gathering*, the TV movie, are the Valley Art Center Chorus.)

The movie
was filmed
CF & Hudson

Two years went by with growth and expanded classes and a kind of "topsy-turvy" routine. We had enthusiastic volunteers and eager students. Two men burst in one morning while I was teaching a class, and boldly announced they were going to buy our

building and make office space out of it. They had already built a new office building next to us, so I knew they weren't joking. We were still such a young group and doing so well. It would be hard to find new space and go through a move. So I started the circle of phone calls again...and meetings... and, like a miracle, we collected enough for a down payment. Our students were generous and community gifts were many. WE bought the building! Now we had an asset and a mortgage, though it often seemed like a liability. We never found a big angel, but there certainly were lots of wonderful cherubs to keep us flying.

One evening during this time of solicitation, the members of the Chagrin Valley Artists met at the center to discuss their future. Rick McPeak, its president, asked for the group to officially vote to become affiliated with The Valley Art Center. A heated discussion finally resulted in a vote to cease as an organization. There were members who missed the Old Town Hall Annual Exhibit, and felt the VAC space wasn't as good. Some members talked about the loss of intimacy that once existed when we met in each others homes and our occasional pot luck suppers. Some mentioned the costume balls that used to be and were no more. I felt like crying, but then I realized that no matter what a few did, the core of the founding members of VAC were Chagrin Artist Members. We had found our friendships in Chagrin Valley Artists activities, but some members wanted only to create and exhibit. Added responsibilities...and work... and classes were at issue. And money! I still have a paper from the Library meeting, with a plaintive little note at the bottom "What about the artists?"

The annual art exhibit at the Old Town Hall ceased. Many new artists came into the VAC membership, while some of the Chagrin Valley Artists chose not to join the new

organization. Meanwhile Julie Weber built a group of enthusiastic members into a new venture. We were participating in Blossom Time activities, but Julie wanted to expand the effort...she was the “mother” of Art by the Falls.

Due to family illnesses, my son’s serious accident and then my second husband’s death, I truly had to let go. Bob Takatch helped me to acquire a teaching position at Cuyahoga Community College and I continued to teach a few courses at VAC. A few years later, the VAC would be the site of my wedding reception when I married Alan Over. My first Chagrin Falls friend, Eleanor, died after the family moved to North Carolina and Alan and I decided to “put the world together again.” We danced to the music of the dance band that rehearsed at the VAC and had a rollicking good time and farewell. Some were gone from Chagrin Falls, but many of the people, the artists, the students, the volunteers and patrons who made the Valley Art Center become a reality were there for my wedding. I said and hugged my goodbyes and Al and I flew off to Tahiti. I returned to Charlotte, NC in a happy marriage and beginning a new life of printmaking, one-person shows and gallery representation. But I carried fond memories of my Chagrin Fall years.

It takes the WHOLE community to form an art center. It takes the tenacity and dreams and a good eye on the budget to keep it alive. It is as much a creative act as a painting on a canvas, requiring the collaboration of many people with many skills and the nurturing of the community. I recall so many events with my students and the work they produced and the friendships we made. We shared many good laughs and fun in painting. We talked about feelings, events, composition, media, techniques, art history and how cathartic art can be. Some of the students held art degrees and some were beginners, but the support and encouragement flowed from all.

I, also, hold in my memory those wonderful artists and residents of the village that gave time and energy and money to make this organization a reality.

As I write this I remember:

Alfred Howell was the "Dean" of the Chagrin Valley Artists. I taped an interview with Alf about his life when I was in graduate school at Kent. His daughter gave it to Western Reserve Historical Society.

Joan Kerber was Alfred's daughter, a graduate of Cranbrook Art Institute, and a painter of wonderful abstracts and cartoons, printed in the Plain Dealer. She worked many years for American Greetings. Husband Hal helped with annual show.

Nancy Martt, my partner on many occasions and a good friend. Her enamel portraits are splendid, so are her landscapes and florals. Her husband, Ernie helped us, too.

Caroline and Urb Schwerzler...Caroline made beautiful jewelry and Urb was an architect. She gave me some advice on the fat times and the lean times of being an artist.

Lillian Criswell and her husband "Red" kept the memory book (where did it go?) and helped in many ways. She was known as "Dolly, the puppet lady," and served in office for the CF Artists many years.

Sam Scott had a distinct line quality in his paintings and drawings and was an ad illustrator for Halle Bros department store. He painted murals for Cleveland Playhouse...I hope they are still there.

Dottie Gregg worked in many media...ceramics and all forms of weaving. She also taught my son to ride a horse. Dr. Gregg was a founder of Hamlet Hills. We had some great potlucks at their home.

Betty Terry made delightful paper sculpture angels and made them for a large specialty store.

Dorothy, a very fine photographer, and her husband, Curt Howard were part of the artists' group helping at the beginning of VAC before moving to Vermont. She made portraits of my sons at 9 and 11.

Anne and Steve Warner...Anne was president and held other offices with CFAA, Steve was a land designer and worked on several highway projects, i.e. shaping of land and plantings on freeways.

Bob Takatch created joyful watercolors, always wanted to be a book illustrator, organized the Old Town Hall exhibit, taught commercial art at Orange High School...did whatever needed to be done. I took my teen classes to his studio as a field trip and watched him use the air brush with envy.

Louise and Jess Hall were active in every aspect of CFAA; Louise wrote cover letter for VAC

Lil Fueger and Del Gimmel operated Gallery 35. Lil painted a comic critter for a visual at the Library meeting...and worked for American Greetings, primarily in humor.

Sue and George Roby...Sue painted exquisite small watercolors of the village that I coveted and George's pottery was wonderful. His help was greatly appreciated as we tried to build a pottery lab.

Ev Derthick, an Editor of *The Plain Dealer* and Chuck Day, ad agency officer helped me with advice and suggestions that were extremely valuable. They were not artists, but knew business and promotion techniques.

As the movement for an art center grew, many new people gathered to help it happen.

I remember Phyllis Leonetti and a beautiful small drawing of a bird's nest, Dale Harsh and his strong watercolors, Eileen Ingalls and her one woman exhibit at the new center, Kaethe Koelkebeck, a fine abstract painter, pointing across Raintree restaurant and saying with her German accent, "There's that wunderbar Russian photographer!" as she pointed out Nick Boris...and he *was* wonderful. Both Kaethe and Boris taught at VAC. Judy and Jerry Pinckard and Don and Kathy Smith gave enthusiastically to our beginnings. Leah Haddock, Jackie Pappalardo and many other young women spent hours helping. We attracted new artists: Agnes Brodie a fine painter and commercial artist (whose brother owned one of the US premier galleries), Bobbie Wheeler who had a show at VAC with life-sized soft sculpture figures ("W. C. Fields" scare the wits out of me one dark morning as I unlocked the VAC front door). I remember Rosemary Frescos' beautiful enameled boxes and Rick McPeak's photo of a mushroom. Clarence Perkins, Alan Peters, Virginia Willard all contributed to our schedule and Florian Lawton not only taught, exhibited, but also went on tour as we tried to reach out to other communities. Jo Learch, Ed Kagy, Cathie Christian, Joe Russell, Jane Flag, Dorothy Clafin, Dick Shanklin (who dropped a press into his basement and claimed he could never move it out again), Maxine Masterfield (who taught her inventive techniques and went on to many national venues) ...all were there at the beginning and provided energy to make things happen. There are many others as well, but I have asked Ann Tate to write the next chapter of this history. Nancy Martt knows about the Chagrin Valley Artists and its early years.

I hope for many more fun-filled and productive years for The Valley Art Center.

I am so proud of your achievements.