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Artists Academy's message: No need to starve

By [Lee Howard](#) Day Staff Writer

Series teaches about business side of being creative

New London - Mark Patnode likes placing his paintings where they are least expected, which explains why some of his work is on view at Kamp Dog eatery, known for its huge portions and cheap prices.

It doesn't explain why Patnode keeps popping up at weekly meetings of the business-oriented New London Rotary Club, where an artist might seem out of place. But Patnode, a graphic designer at Sonalysts Inc. in Waterford who shares a studio on Washington Street with four other artists, sees no contradiction between art and business.

"Without creativity we have stagnant communities," Patnode said. "The arts buoy aspirations."

Patnode, like others attending the current three-session Artists Academy educational series sponsored by Hygienic Art, says artists too often ignore the business side of their craft while business folks need to be reminded of the importance of the city's pool of creativity.

What's more, said Artists Academy member Marie Kobar of East Lyme, being involved in community events helps get the word out about an artist's work.

"Networking really helps you grow your business," she said.

The Artists Academy @ Hygienic is intended for people like Patnode and Kobar who eschew the idea of the lonely painter toiling in obscurity and abject poverty to turn out Vincent van Gogh-like masterpieces that no one buys. The program, funded by a one-time \$35,000 Champions in Action grant from Citizens Bank that was the only such award handed out in New England, involves 25 working artists from southeastern Connecticut with a waiting list of about 30.

New York City artist Jackie Battenfield, author of "The Artist's Guide: How to Make a Living Doing What You Love," said during an appearance last month at the Monte Cristo Bookshop - before giving a formal presentation to Artists Academy members - that being an artist is a self-directed life full of trial and error.

"It is not a vow of poverty," she said.

The problem, according to Battenfield, is that many artists try to make a living in their craft without developing a plan. She suggested, for instance, thinking about a hybrid career in which selling art is only one of the income streams. Artists have many interests and abilities and should work to tap into more than one area, she said, rather than counting on studio art to pay the whole freight.

Battenfield said painters hundreds of years ago were practiced in the art of business because they usually trained under another successful artist who taught them how to promote and sell their work. But under the current educational system, she said, artists get very little training in such key areas as budgeting, pricing, meeting deadlines and promotion.

"I teach artists that other side of their life," she said. "I'm all about any practical solutions."

The importance of enhancing artists' strengths as entrepreneurs was identified as a need for the region when the Southeastern Connecticut Enterprise Region developed an economic plan for the area three years ago. People engaged in creative pursuits were identified as one of six clusters of economic strengths in southeastern Connecticut, said Deborah Donovan, SeCTer's director of economic development.

"The idea was, 'Let's design a series of courses that teach artists how to think like an entrepreneur,'" Donovan said.

Donovan said a strong creative culture helps businesses generate more revenue because the arts attract people from out of town and add to the local quality of life.

If you go

What: Artists Academy @ Hygienic Art

Email: hygacademy@gmail.com

Website: hygienic.org

Phone: 860-443-8001

Cost: \$25 for three sessions

Networking is important

Kobar, who has been pursuing her art full time for nearly a decade, said speakers brought in by the Artists Academy have been inspiring, encouraging her to look at new venues for her art as well as to improve the look of her website and business cards.

"It's almost as if I'm starting all over again," she said.

For Patnode, attending the Artists Academy is a refresher in some of the practices that he has been using to get the word out about his art for 30 years.

"Artists are not taught these things," he said. "We have to go out and figure it out ourselves."

Fighting against some painters' isolationist tendencies, Battenfield also suggested that artists need to be more open to critiques. Actors crave feedback in the form of director's notes that help improve their performance, she said, and artists in turn should seek help from others in the industry to create more powerful images - and to touch up artist's statements that often sound too abstract or pretentious.

Battenfield's business approach does not focus on what customers are buying. Instead, she urged artists to make what they love.

"This is too tough a life to make work you don't like," she said. "The audience comes first, not second. ... There is an audience for all different types of work. ... You can't predict when the art community will turn its attention to you."

At the same time, Battenfield said it's important for artists to do research and know the players in the art scene around them. They also need their own website and a presence in the social-networking sphere, she said.

"I'm getting more comfortable with networking," said Kobar, an acrylic painter whose work is featured at the Fresh Air Gallery in Old Lyme.

Patnode, a New London resident whose frequent exhibitions include an upcoming show at the Alexey von Schlippe Gallery in Groton, said he posts his new paintings on Facebook and says feedback from friends and patrons often helps him decide his next artistic direction. He also believes in exhibiting at libraries and donating pieces to art auctions, which provide "wonderful exposure" for his work.

"I just like putting my art out," Patnode said. "If it's sitting in my studio, who's seeing it?"

Patnode said success builds on success, and the more people are aware that other collectors are acquiring an artist's work the more likely one can build up repeat business.

Joe Celli, Hygienic Art's director of development, said that Fairfield, New Haven and Hartford all have arts alliances that bring in outside experts to help artists enhance their business understanding, but the New London area lacked such an organization when he applied for the Artists Academy grant. Since then, the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition has formed, but it is still in the early stages.

Artists Academy programs, coordinated by Jess Brey, have presented information on a wide range of topics, including branding and marketing; copyright law and accounting essentials; and website design and social media. Celli said artists' interest in the program has been so strong that he hopes to continue offering courses beyond the next cycle of events, which runs from April to June.

"We're hoping the success of the program will allow us to find further business sponsorship," he said.

l.howard@theday.com
