

CONVERSATIONS



FRANK PROVENZANO

Umoja redefines close working relationship

Some weeks, Tanji Grant, the head of the administrative, shipping, accounting and distribution departments at Umoja Fine Arts in Southfield goes unpaid — and doesn't complain.

That's not saying she doesn't speak her mind. Her boss knows exactly how she feels and thinks.

For that matter, Tanji and the person who she defers to regarding issues of marketing and art typically communicate in informal and inexpressible ways.

"We're Leo's," they respond simultaneously when asked about how they manage such a close personal and business relationship.

Then, Tanji takes charge. "We both want to control and we both think alike."

In fact, Grant and her "boss" give a whole new meaning to close working relationship. They finish each other's sentences. Gaze deeply at each other.



Artistic unity: Tanji and Ian Grant.

And regularly talk about business over breakfast, lunch and dinner. When things are going well — which is often these days — it's not unusual to find them celebrating with a snuggle here, there and everywhere. They've also been seen carrying on with an after-hours snuggle. Hmmm. Maybe it has something to do with the meaning behind the word "Umoja."

A family affair

Of course, when the lights go out at Umoja, Grant refers to her "boss" as her spouse. And while she prefers to leave business at the office, it's more difficult for her over-enthusiastic husband, Ian, who exudes a "can do" attitude while updating a close-at-hand marketing plan.

"Sometimes I tell him, 'Leave it alone, Ian. I don't want to hear any more,'" said Tanji, a former real estate agent who sold her then-future husband his first house when they both lived in Philadelphia.

Ian Grant, however, isn't one to remain content.

In just three years, the Grants of Farmington Hills have built their art business into the largest publisher and distributor of African-American art in the Midwest.

Their Southfield gallery filled with lithographs, posters and sculptures is about 10 percent of their total inventory of more than 150 images.

The strikingly colorful images reflect a more positive interpretation of African-American history than what was originally recorded in American History books. In vivid detail, for instance, Detroit artist Ivan Stewart has created a historical series on the Buffalo Soldiers who fought in the Civil War, and "Flipper," the first black West Point graduate.

In the fall, Umoja will reveal a new series on black masters of the blues and legendary players of the Negro Baseball League. Already there's a demand for the work.

The emphasis on positive depictions of African-Americans, however, doesn't get in the way of cultural truths.

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BBA's Expansion:

From local art association to regional cultural center

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER

Located in one of metro Detroit's most affluent suburbs, the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Association is commonly perceived as an exclusive enclave for those with plenty of time and money to take art classes and contemplate aesthetics.

That "misperception" along with status as the "best kept secret in the art community" is about to change dramatically.

With the imminent opening of its \$2.2 million expanded facility along South Cranbrook Road in Birmingham, the BBA is taking an unprecedented step in its 40-year history to redefine itself, just in time for fall term.

As it does, the teaching and exhibiting organization hopes to heighten awareness of the role of art and creative expression in community life.

In these days of public funding cuts to the arts, whereby "progress" is too often narrowly defined in economic terms, that's hardly an easy task. Then again, who'd expect those in arts education to settle for pragmatic challenges.

"Everyone has a creative instinct that needs to be developed," said Janet Torno, BBA executive director. "Funding cuts to the arts have

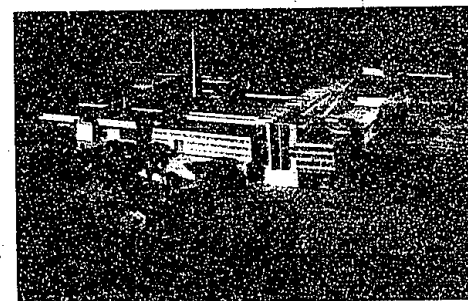
hurt many organizations. Some schools aren't offering art classes. Yet students and even businesses are finding that the 'other side' (of the brain, the artistic side) needs to be developed."

Helping students to develop "creative skills" may be its broad objective, but the BBA has built a solid reputation for offering the fundamentals in basic-to-advanced art classes in drawing, painting, ceramics and papermaking, to name a few. The classes are usually taught by some of the most talented artists and art teachers in the area, including instructors from the Center for Creative Studies, Oakland University and Wayne State University. Teaching at the BBA has allowed many artists-teachers not formally associated with educational institutions to supplement their income while pursuing their own artistic projects.

"In the past, we were a place to experiment, to see what medium you'd like," said Torno. "But now, we have more diversity of classes and programs. Not only can students learn to draw, but they can take a course on art appreciation and learn to combine mediums."

Priced between a community college tuition rate and a community recreation program, a typical BBA class cost about \$200 for a 13-week, three-hour per class course. Rates are lower for children's and less-intensive classes.

"In our classes, we have people from all over the tri-counties," said Susan Citrin, past president of BBA, who played an active role in raising money for the expansion. "Art is a great equalizer," she said. "It's a great communications tool."



Work in progress: (Top photo) Weeks before fall term begins, the finishing touches are underway at the expanded BBA. Janet Torno, BBA executive director, and Stephen Whitney, architectural advisor, in the student commons area. (Above) A scale model of the completed four-phase BBA expansion blends enlarged studio and exhibit space with an onsite lecture hall where forums on art and culture will be held regularly.

Autumn term begins Monday, Sept. 15. Based on preliminary registration figures, Torno expects most classes to be filled over the next few weeks.

History

In the late 1950s, a group of about 20 came together to offer classes, exhibit space and a lecture series. The group, the Bloomfield Art Association, was largely composed of members from the Birmingham Society of Women Painters. The association was formerly at a house next to Jacobson's in downtown Birmingham.

"Back then, we had more ambition than money," said Jeanne Gardner, a founding member.

In 1962, the association moved to the Cranbrook Road facility, a former sewage treatment plant. Soon thereafter, the name was changed to the BBA. Since then, they've been leasing the property from the city for \$1 a year.

"People used to say they're in an old sewage treatment plant," said Citrin. "I look at the new space and I want to weep."

Please see EXPANSION, C2

MUSIC

Farmington Philharmonic rebellious and lovin' it

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER

Nixon and Kennedy will meet again. And soon.

The sequel not even Hollywood producers could have thought was possible will sound much more melodic than stale political rhetoric. Still doubtful?

Okay, actually, meet Karen Nixon-Lane, the irrepressible music director and founder of the Farmington Area Philharmonic.

In yet another showdown with the stuffy traditionalists of the classical music world, Nixon-Lane and the Philharmonic have collared an internationally acclaimed musician to perform with the 70-member orchestra.

Reformed bad-boy violinist Nigel Kennedy will be the featured guest at this Friday's concert in Fuert Auditorium at Novi High School.

Flamboyant by even rock music standards, Kennedy ends a five-year hiatus from the classical stage. He left proclaiming to "never again play the music of dead composers."

Either Beethoven has risen from the dead, or the blain' Brit has had a change of heart. Kennedy is expected to perform Beethoven's "Violin Concerto" in his trademark frenetic, take-no-prisoners style.

What: Farmington Area Philharmonic's 1997-98 season opening concert featuring British violin virtuoso Nigel Kennedy
When: 8 p.m. Friday, August 29
Where: Fuert Auditorium at Novi High School
Tickets: \$15-\$40. Available at Ticketmaster outlets and the Farmington Area Philharmonic, (248) 478-2075.

Returning to the stage earlier this year in Europe, Kennedy's performances featured the music of Bartok, Bach and Hendrix — as in Jimi "Purple Haze/Are You Experienced?" Hendrix.

The choice of Kennedy — who recorded one of the biggest-selling classical albums of all-time — underscores Nixon-Lane's passionate effort to reform the notion of an orchestral concert where "fun and educational" replace "laborious and academic."

If it's up to Nixon-Lane, the upcoming Nixon-Kennedy rematch will be remembered as a symbol of the fledgling orchestra's spirit of rebellion.

Breakin' the rules

Like the rambunctious Kennedy, the Farmington Area Philharmonic doesn't apologize for breaking the rules in the staid and conventional classical music world. The rule they most vehemently target states that community orchestras are a rough assemblage of students, part-time musicians and musician wannabe's.

"The problem is that we're labeled a 'community orchestra' even though 75 percent of our members are union, and all

Please see REBELLIOUS, C2



Rebel with a bow: Reformed bad-boy violinist Nigel Kennedy is the featured guest at the Farmington Area Philharmonic's opening season concert.