

Blooming passion

How one art studio's mission to include individuals with mental disabilities became the aesthetic of a city

Sean Eifert

Walking along the sidewalks of Uptown Athens, Ohio, it becomes impossible not to notice cartoonish, doodles plastered in every nook and cranny. Keith Haring-esque flower designs can be seen on building decals, banners, electrical boxes and more. Businesses like Ohio Credit



Passion Works has art on the majority of electrical boxes in the area, like the one featured.

Photo by Sean Eifert

Union and Raphael's Hair Salon have adopted the unique artistry as their "look," displaying proudly in their storefronts. The unique artistry is, of course, the unique style of Athens' own Passion Works Studios. These businesses aren't the only example of the studio's art being displayed around the city. As time has progressed, it seems that the art that originates in this small non-profit is becoming more prevalent around the city. It's as if the city itself has taken the city's artistic endeavors as its own.

Part of the reason for that is, as Patty Mitchell, the founder of Passion Works says, the studio hasn't changed its mission. "(Our mission) is exactly what it is today as it was at its inception. That was to involve people with different abilities, specifically folks with developmental differences and physical challenges to be able to

create and collaborate in a group setting,” she says. “We’ve been beating the same drum for years, and it’s just getting a larger audience.” Mitchell sits in her living room, with papers spread across the floor and table behind her. Some have drawings, some do not. The walls are a sage green, with white dots painted on, leaving little spaces of the green peaking through. There are yellow dots in the mix of white dots, clumped together around the door frame. It’s likely the dots are an unfinished project, similar to her work in the Athens community.

Passion Works has been in operation since the 90’s, but hasn’t reached a wider audience until recent history, due to the recent success the studio has seen as a private entity in 2018. The most notable among the recent successes is the passion flower, the “Official flower of Athens, Ohio.” (need more info from Mayor and Amanda.)

Nancy Epling, an artist at

Passion Works, reiterated just how recognizable Athens has become because of the passion flower. “When we’ve traveled to my hometown of Yellow Springs, people will see the flower and be like, ‘Athens.’ We like to say it’s the essence of Athens. (The city) wants something that is identifiable and Passion Works has that,” Epling said.



The Passion Flower has become the studio’s most prevalent source of “income,” to fund art projects and artists.

Photo by Sean Eifert

The relationship between the Athens Community and Passion Works comes from a shared sense of acceptance within the two. “There’s a culture of ‘You can be whoever you are (in Athens), just don’t be an areshole.’ and there’s an expectation of kindness,” Mitchell said. Athens is a place where people find new purpose, it’s the same with Passion Works. Nancy Epling said, “(Athens) has been the underdog, it has been the poorest place. It is where a lot of eccentric people go, but people want to be around that. Patty will often say, ‘We’re not waiting to be invited to the party, we are the party.’ We’re throwing the party and anybody can join us. We want to celebrate every individual for what they have to offer.”

Athens is a haven for creatives and eccentrics alike, in a lot of ways the community reflects the mission of Passion Works Studios. Eccentric individuals have a place in Athens, in the same way that members of society that are typically rejected. “Historically, people with developmental disorders have been tucked away and hidden from society. We’re trying to do the exact opposite of that at Passion Works. It’s loud, it’s colorful, it’s joyous, it’s in your face with how bright it is. You don’t want to look away, you’re intrigued by it,” Nancy Epling said. Passion Works art raises questions as to what viability means in society, and the Athens community reflects that in its mission to let everyone be who they want to be. Mitchell said, “A lot of people will see our art and they won’t even know people who they perceive as special needs or ‘different’ did it. I want people to be curious about art and when they dig a little deeper, it changes perception about humans and potential and talent and who gets to be part of a community.”

In recent history, the arts have corresponded to economic growth, both nationally and in rural areas. Funding has been an issue for Passion Works. The nonprofit art studio receives funding from the city, but Epling says that the city could be doing more. “It always comes down to funding, ‘How do we pay for things?’ There’s actual statistics about economic growth. Wherever there is more art and more investment in art, the economy grows with that because people want to be around that.” According to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), The art industry made up 4.4 percent of the United State’s GDP in 2021. That’s roughly \$1 trillion, and the highest historical watermark for the industry. The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis reported that in 18 states in which 30 percent or more of the population lives in rural areas, the arts added \$72.8 billion to those state’s economies in 2017. In 2020, state governments invested \$494 million in nonprofit arts organizations, according to the same report. The statistics would agree with Epling’s assertion that the arts favor rural economies.

Patty Mitchell says that funding will come as they continue to “dance to their own drumbeat.” “The more we do and the more people can rely on us, the more financial support we’re going to receive. We’re becoming a go-to entity,” Mitchell said. “I don’t think we’re gonna wave from our mission and our approach. We’re just going to organically grow and be able to say yes to more things and provide more support to things that already exist.”

(Need interview w/ mayor, and research into the city’s funding of the studio’s endeavors)

(Interview w/ Amanda Sharrai to understand the passion flower better)

(create graphics for comparative data about funding comparatively and a timeline of the history of the studio)