

Q&A with Mindy Hawkins

Arboretum to inspire 'plein air' art fundraiser

Artists will paint scenes at Arlington's 120-acre natural treasure

Jacksonville Arboretum and Gardens in Arlington will host a unique happening April 7-9 called "A Brush with Nature: A 'Plein Air' Painting Event." Top Northeast Florida artists will set up their easels at the arboretum to capture the park on canvas, with visitors watching them work. The resulting art will be for sale at a special gala reception, with proceeds benefiting the artists and the park. In this week's Q&A, event co-chair Mindy Hawkins discusses the event's origins, what "plein air" means and why the Arboretum is such a treasure.

Tell us how the event came to be.

As membership chair for the Arboretum, I was thinking about ways in which we could spread awareness of the Arboretum as well as raise funds to help support our mission. I had been involved in planning two much smaller Plein Air events in Jacksonville, and thought what better way to increase awareness of the Arboretum than to have a large, free-to-the-public, art-related event spanning several days and taking place right on site.

What is the purpose? Who or what will benefit?

The two major purposes of this event are to spread awareness of this beautiful property and to raise monies to further the Arboretum's goals. The third purpose is to promote our participating artists. The artists' works that are produced during the Plein Air event will be for sale, and because the artists are donating half of their proceeds to the Arboretum, they will be benefiting, as well as the Arboretum.

What is plein air painting?

"En Plein Air" is a French term meaning "in the open air." Since the mid-19th century and the advent of portable painting supplies like the paint tube and "box" easels, artists have taken to the outdoors. The plein air

movement brought artists out of their studios and into the natural light. It birthed a new type of artist who recorded the everyday scenes of life in the colors and light that nature provided. It offered artists a new way to approach their painting process, as the stiff formality and romanticism of the studio gave way to such movements as the Barbizon School and the Impressionists.

How did you get the artists involved?

When the planning committee was formed, we wanted to make sure that plein air artists were involved from the beginning. Therefore, we enlisted several renowned artists to be on the planning committee. Randy Pitts, Lyn Asselta, Paul Ladnier and Diantha York-Ripley have been invaluable in helping assure that this event caters to its artists' needs and presents the artist and the artwork in a highly professional manner. I believe that because of this professionalism in presenting this event to the artists, that the artists felt comfortable in agreeing to participate.

Why is the Arboretum so special?

It's special because there is nothing else like it in Jacksonville. Let me tell you about this unique, 120-acre Arboretum property off 9A and Monument Road. Within its boundaries lie 13 distinct ecosystems. From fresh water ravine to salt marsh, from oak hammock to upland sand hill, the property offers spectacular bio-diversity. Five trails and seven bridges provide miles of natural wonders to explore. This past fall we presented our first "Introduction to Beekeeping" seminar and were provided 80 jars of honey produced by happy bees living right on the Arboretum property. Recently, we opened our newest trail, the Rosemary Ridge trail. On this one-mile trail are six of the 13 habitats at the Arboretum. You will find xeric hammock, fresh and saltwater marsh, endangered rosemary scrub and oak scrub,

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and scrubby flatwood to depression marsh. In addition to our new trail, we have recently completed a landscape project that included almost 400 new trees and plants being planted around Lake Loop trail. If you go to our website, jacksonvillearboretum.org, you can find all the activities being offered at the Arboretum from owl prowls, yoga, power walks and nature guides classes.

Why are you a fan?

Because every forward-thinking, top-tier city should have an Arboretum or botanical garden as a resource to its citizens. The Arboretum provides a peaceful setting in the middle of an urban area. The Arboretum helps educate Northeast Florida citizens about native and cultivated plants, improves its beauty and atmosphere, engages and promotes conservation and preservation of our natural resources and provides public service. Furthermore, the Arboretum offers a quiet respite from the often hurried pace of city life. Free and open to the public seven days a week, people from all walks of life and with varying physical abilities can enjoy its environs, experiencing a variety of flora and fauna with educational signs along its many trails.

What are other ways we can support the park?

First, by supporting "A Brush With Nature" by coming out and watching our 37 artists painting on site, purchasing artwork fresh off the easel or attending our Gala Reception and Sale. Second, our organization has no paid employees or staff. Unlike city parks, our operating expenses are not funded by the city of Jacksonville. Instead, we rely upon the generosity of the community for assistance, support and labor in developing the Arboretum — anyone can provide support through participation in our volunteer activities and events, by becoming a member of the Arboretum, and through in-kind and monetary donations. Development of the Arboretum has been a true community effort.

—Beth Reese Cravey

Have a suggestion for a Q&A topic?
Email beth.cravey@jacksonville.com.



Artist Richard Scott Morgan paints at the Jacksonville Arboretum and Gardens. He will be one of 37 artists participating in "A Brush with Nature" fundraiser at the Arlington park April 7-9. The event is free.

Provided by Mindy Hawkins



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