

Art League celebrates 70 years

Club boasts growing membership

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DANVILLE — The Danville Art League turns 70-years-young in 2008. A celebration on Saturday will pay tribute to that milestone with an event geared toward both the past and the future.

The Art League continues to grow, according to treasurer Roberta Williams.

"Thanks to a big membership drive, we're at 108 members now," Williams said. "This summer's art classes attracted quite a few new people to join."

This follows a decline in membership over the years, some of which Williams attributed to natural attrition. But the Art League held together, something she attributed to its former president, Catherine Johnson.

"If it wasn't for her, this (group) would have disappeared," Williams said. "She's been the mainstay."

The combination of leadership and renewed interest in the visual arts has put new life into the venerable group. Members spent the past few weeks sprucing up their headquarters, a former grocery store.

A grant from Keep Vermilion County Beautiful allowed the group to landscape most of the front of the building and start on the side and back.

The inside underwent both a thorough cleaning and reorganization. In the process, a treasure was uncovered.

Sam Schulman joined the Danville Art League in 1950. The retired businessman always appreciated art but never painted until then.

"I started my art lessons with the Art League," Schulman said. "I drew and painted in oils."

A canvas of Schulman's, one of a series of five nudes that he painted in the style of Degas, was discovered during the clean-up in preparation for Saturday's event. A surprise reunion of the artist with his work took place on Thursday.



Danville Art League members, June Uthe, left, and Sam Schulman look at a painting Schulman did several years ago that was found in the art league building during a clean-up in preparation for Saturday's event.

Matt Huber / Commercial-News

IF YOU GO

The Danville Art League invites the public to its 70th anniversary celebration from 2-4 p.m. Saturday at 502 Sherman St.

Activities for children will be held and refreshments will be served. For more information, call 442-9264.

"My wife framed the others and hung them in our house," Schulman said. "I had forgotten all about this one."

Schulman said he also painted many portraits over the years. He also enjoyed painting in the style of other artists, including Norman Rockwell, a method of instruction that many self-taught artist use.

"I would stand in front of my painting and work until I got it right," he said.

Now 93 years old, Schulman said his style has changed.

"I sit now instead of standing," he said, "and I only draw."

One of Schulman's portraits was of June Uthe, another long-time Art League member. Uthe said she started drawing as a child, especially people's faces and animals.

"When I was in high school, I received a scholarship to study

at the Art Institute," Uthe, a former Chicago resident, said.

Although she had never lived in Vermilion County, some of her ancestors had. When she and her husband moved to Danville, Uthe felt she'd come full circle when she visited their graves near Mann's Chapel in Rossville. Like Schulman, she has been a long-time Art League member.

"We learned from each other," Schulman said about those early days.

Art in the Park, which the Art League originated as a visual arts event, has since grown into Arts in the Park and includes crafts and performing arts. Uthe recalled one of the early shows the group held in Lincoln Park.

"We hung our paintings on snow fences," she said. "That's how far we've come."

Both Uthe and Schulman plan to attend Saturday's anniversary celebration.

Scrapbooks about past Art League events and members as well as award-winning work by members will be on display.

The future looks bright for the organization, according to Williams.

"This community is looking for art experiences for children and adults," she said. "Our prognosis is positive — we're growing."