

Convergence spreading its unity through art throughout RI

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This year convergence will mean moving towards unity by spreading out - as opposed to coming together.

The Convergence International Arts Festival, started as a one-day event in Providence's Roger Williams Park 13 years ago, is now a three-week celebration of the arts extended throughout the state.

Convergence runs from Friday, Sept. 7 to Sunday, Sept. 23.

With areas outside Providence taking a more prominent role in the program, it promises to generate a lot of interest -- and money.

Convergence Executive Director Bob Rizzo had a slow and steady approach when he started the festival, which has now become a multi-media event.

"Initially, I had a 10-year game plan and it grew from that one day with very few glitches because I was going at a nice slow pace," he said.

Rizzo wanted to take something not many people understood, such as sculpture, and bring it to the people of the state, rather than making them go into museums to seek it out. He is pleased with the results of Convergence. Over 30 large-scale public sculptures will be installed in downtown Providence parks for the event.

"When I started people didn't know how to pronounce the word but now it's become part of the language," he said. "I think to me the thing that stands out most is that we have made contemporary sculpture part of the landscape, and we've done so with very little controversy."

Judy Hambleton, director of education for the Newport Art Museum, said her city's participation in Convergence this year represents an inclusive attitude.

"It's a small state and whenever we can have opportunities to join the arts together as one entity I think we can go forward and do it," she said, "and be a good example for other locations."

The grounds of the Newport Art Museum will feature eight sculptures. This year the museum combined its annual Family Fun Day, which is supported by the Bank of Newport, with Convergence, and will be hosting workshops for the public where artists will display the methods within their mediums.

The mission of the festival is to demystify the art experience by bringing museum, theater and musical experiences to the public arena. Hambleton said it's working.

"The arts always need exposure and the arts always need funding and anything we can do as far as enhancing people's quality of life by exposing them to the arts is great," she said.

Director of Galleries at West Kingston's Courthouse Center for the Arts Susie Duke said the festival was so well received in its first year that sculptures which were only required to be displayed for three months were there for 10 months.



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"The thing I was really interested in was that people really drove around the whole state looking for sculptures," said Duke. "There's also not a lot of contemporary sculpture around here, it's mostly war monuments and men on horses but there are a lot of contemporary sculpture enthusiasts in the state."

Pawtucket has also increased its involvement in Convergence this year. According to Donna Rochon, program coordinator for Convergence, the city has almost tripled its budget for the festival since it began there three years ago.

"One of the things Bob Rizzo wanted from Convergence was to extend and reach out," she said. "And we have kind of split things into threes, as far as one dimensional, two dimensional and three dimensional performance, and local, national and international."

One of the international features Pawtucket Convergencers are most excited about is the dragonboat racing. Measuring 38-feet from tail to end these boats have room for a drummer on one end of the boat, a gong player and driver on the other end, and 15 rowers in the middle. There will be nine quarter mile races on the Saturday of Convergence, one every hour on the hour. The winners will each receive a round-trip ticket to Taiwan from American Airlines.

"A very key thing is we've attracted the attention of American Airlines," said Herbert Weiss, program manager for development projects in Pawtucket.

"We're really reaching out to the business community to promote this," he said. "It's key for us in economic development because it fits with our efforts to promote our arts and entertainment district, which with 370 acres is the largest, geographically-speaking, in the state."

Rochon agreed Pawtucket is using its involvement in Convergence as an opportunity for more exposure.

"We want to raise the bar on art and the consciousness of it to the city of Pawtucket," she said.

Rizzo said that although different communities have different festivities, it's all the same celebration. "Now that it's been adopted statewide, cities like Warwick and Pawtucket are starting to do their own interpretations and that's helping to build this economic base of all these cities and towns. Rarely do you get to see it in the way you see it in Convergence," he said.



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