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Gallery owner demonstrates the art of giving

By James J. Gillis/Daily News staff

NEWPORT - As a Boston College student, William Vareika planned on a life in public service - as a lawyer or politician, fighting the good fight for the underdog.

But an art history class launched Vareika in a fresh direction. And he has provided more financially for favorite causes than he ever imagined.

"I think it's all part of the ideals I grew up with," he said. "That goes along with my training from the Jesuits."

For 20 years, Vareika and his wife, Alison, have run William Vareika Fine Arts on Bellevue Avenue. It's hard work and a handsome living, he said, but the gallery also serves as a fundraising vehicle for the local causes in which the Vareikas believe - Save The Bay and the Potter League for Animals in Middletown are just two examples.

"I'd say that in 20 years, it's more than a \$1 million," he said. "Believe me, coming from my background, I never thought I'd be in a position to do this."

Vareika grew up in South Boston and in Brockton, Mass. He traces his route to Newport, and to the life he now leads, to a man who died in 1910 - stained glass artist John LaFarge.

Here's how it happened. As a BC student, Vareika took a job at the Boston Public Library. "I was a practitioner of TM (transcendental meditation) at the time," he recalled. "I went to Trinity Church across the street from the library to meditate. That's where I saw LaFarge's work for the first time. I was very taken with it."

That and a burgeoning interest in art brought him to Newport, where LaFarge's stained glass work is featured at the Newport Congregational Church, Channing Memorial Church and The Breakers. Vareika arrived in 1974, when the area was grappling with the economic downturn from the Navy's decision to pull its fleet out of Newport. Vareika showed up with a degree in political science and a desire to penetrate the art world. To get by, he picked up odd jobs, such as working as a janitor at the Newport Art Association, now the Newport Art Museum. And he threw himself into a successful fight to save the Newport Congregational Church.

Supplementing the art history course he took in college, Vareika taught himself about art, immersing himself in the American and world masters. "While that was going on, I learned that I had a talent for buying and selling art," he said.

Vareika and his wife set up artwork in their carriage house, before opening the gallery in 1987. Twenty years later, clients contact him from around the world. Most of the business comes from out of town, but Vareika sees his charitable works as a way to help the local community.

"While most of my clients are from elsewhere, I love to see the Newporters, the local people, coming in and looking at what we have," he said. "We function as both a gallery and a museum seven days a week."

Christie Smith, executive director of the Potter League, said she finds the Vareikas' community involvement admirable. They have served on local boards, such as the art museum and the Aquidneck Land Trust. "They've gone a long way in establishing relationships with a lot of the nonprofits in the area over the years," Smith said. "It's their way of being involved in the community."

A fundraiser this evening to benefit the Potter shelter includes a guest list divided between familiar and new faces, Smith said. "There are people Bill knows who are coming, people we don't know," she said. "They're new to us and that's a great thing for us to reach a new group of people."

On a recent afternoon, Vareika sat among a collection of animal paintings, some dating back the 1800s. The gallery just closed a show devoted to Narragansett Bay that netted \$200,000 in donations to Save The Bay.

"I had a client who offered me a \$100,000 matching grant," he said. "If we equaled that amount, he would provide the \$100,000. I'm happy to say we did."

Opening today's show, "All Creatures Great and Small," the week after the Narragansett Bay show closed allowed for little breathing room. The walls needed painting, the artwork had to be hung and Vareika still was trying to obtain pieces by Andy Warhol and William Wegman to complete the show.

But it's not as if long hours are a big deal to Vareika, who has a 30-year-old stepson, a 21-year-old son and a 15-year-old daughter. He's worked every day, seven days a week, since Easter Sunday.

"People think I should be able to take a day off, being the boss," he said. "But there are things to be done and bills to pay."

Vareika grew up as one of four children in blue-collar neighborhoods. His father worked in planning for the Gillette Co. in Boston and his mother was a housewife. "The art world, that was something I knew nothing about," he said. "My parents didn't collect art. They did take us to museums. But nothing in my childhood really prepared me for what I'm doing now."

"But I love art. I'd be involved even if I didn't do this for a living."