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BENEFACTOR OF THE ARTS

By James J. Gillis/The
Newport Daily News

NEWPORT, R.I. —
Alison Vareika
remembers when she
became hooked on the
arts.

She was a little girl
growing up in
Oklahoma when her
parents divorced and
her father moved to
New York to set up a
law practice. "My sister
and I used to go to New
York for two weeks
every summer," she
said. "My father had no
idea what to do with
us, so he would get
tickets for matinees to
every big show on
Broadway. It was
absolutely amazing."

That led to a lifelong
interest in the arts in
general, and singing in
particular. "I think the arts make a community a better place," she said.

The Arts and Cultural Alliance of Newport County recently awarded Vareika its annual Dominique Award for contributions to local arts. The award is named for Dominique Alfandre, executive director of the Island Moving Co., and Alfandre was among those who nominated Vareika.

"She cares very much about Newport and what happens here," Alfandre said.

Vareika said she sees Newport as a place ripe for a bustling year-round arts scene, even if the idea is more a concept than a reality. After finishing boarding school in Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., Vareika took a job on a ship sailing the West Indies.

"We ended up in Newport for the America's Cup races in 1974," she said. "I ended up moving to Newport in 1976 and have been here ever since."

Vareika started volunteering at the Newport Art Museum in the 1980s. She helped organize fundraising parties such as "Space Odyssey," during a very creative period.

"It was really a lot of fun back then," she said. "There were a lot of creative women and we didn't have a lot of rules placed on us. We had a lot of fun putting these events together."

In addition to being co-owner with her husband, Bill, of the William Vareika Fine Arts gallery on Bellevue Avenue, Vareika might be best known for a project that has yet to come to fruition — the Opera House renovation. She is heading the long-running effort to change the vacant movie theater into a downtown performing arts center.

The project started a decade ago and led to the removal of the building's stucco facade to expose its original brick. The theater dates back to 1867, and its hidden front section reveals a stage and old show posters.

The economy has stalled the project, which at one point had a price tag of close to \$20 million. Scott Mohon, hired as executive director in early 2010, resigned late last year and has returned to his native Texas.

"Scott would have been the perfect person if we had a performing arts center ready to go," Vareika said. "His strength was in programming and bringing in performers. But we're not at that point."



Alison Vareika stands in the William Vareika Fine Arts gallery, which she co-owns with her husband. (Photo by Jacqueline Marque)

Now Vareika and her group are shooting for a more modest fundraising figure that would allow for an initial interior renovation to let people see the potential for a grand-scale center.

"I don't think people are easily able to visualize what we have in mind," she said. "What they picture with the Opera House is a chopped-up cineplex. But it's such a beautiful building and we want people to at least see the possibility of what we have in mind. Newport is the kind of place that should have a performing arts center, and a lot of people are surprised we don't have one now."

While she is in favor of attracting large-scale sailing events, she points out that those are seasonal and temporary. A performing arts center would bring people to town year-round and provide a boost to local restaurants, she said.

"If people come to see a show, they are going to go out to eat, too," she said. "You talk about Restaurant Week. It could be Restaurant Week 52 weeks a year. You talk about government investment, this is just the kind of thing government should be investing in. It helps communities and provides jobs."

The Vareikas have been married since 1985. They began dating when an astrologer-artist friend thought they would develop a deep connection.

A mother of two sons and a daughter, Vareika earned a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Rhode Island in 1983. In addition to arts activities, she is a former president of the Aquidneck Land Trust.

She remains passionate about choral singing, attending the Berkshire Choral Festival each year. "I practically live for that week," she said. "It's a chance to be with people who love to sing in the choral style. My mother was a pianist and we were dragged to the symphony as kids, and I love being among people who gather to sing this kind of music."

Alfandre, who won the Dominique Award in 2010, said Vareika has a strong and tireless devotion to the arts. Alfandre is the one who asked Vareika to climb aboard the Opera House cause about six years ago.

"She is someone committed to the arts beyond her job," Alfandre said. "There are a lot of people who are doing great things as part of their jobs, but Alison goes beyond, as you might remember from the events she helped out on with the art museum.

"I will also say that she is very determined, persistent and stubborn, which you can see from her involvement in the Opera House. When she takes on something, she doesn't give up."

This article originally appeared in The Newport Daily News on April 8, 2011.
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