A conversation with the executive director of AVA Gallery and Art Center

Bente Torjusen

BY SARWAR KASHMERI

Over a lunch of cheddar soup and a kale salad, the longtime leader of the AVA Gallery and Art Center talks about falling in love in Oslo, raising a family in Italy, building a thriving arts operation in the Upper Valley, and having the last laugh on the stern man who told her, “We don’t need an art gallery in Lebanon.”

On the day before Halloween, Bente Torjusen, the tall, vivacious, and tastefully dressed executive director of AVA Gallery and Art Center, glides into Simon Pearce Enterprise lunch appointment. Taking advantage of the impending approach of ghosts and goblins, I ask the leader of one of the Upper Valley’s most prominent art institutions if she believes in spirits.

“No!” she tells me emphatically. “But,” she adds, “in old houses there is a spirit of the past. In the AVA building, which is very old, there is something — a feeling that you get that we have preserved as we renovated it for the present.”

It is a skilled response to my opening gambit, and it moves our conversation back to AVA.

Torjusen has been executive director of AVA since 1986, when the then-diminutive Alliance for the Visual Arts was located in Hanover on the second floor of the Dartmouth Bookstore. She has overseen AVA’s transformation from that cramped gallery to the large art and education institution that it is today.

We settle into our chairs and I suggest she try the sparkling nonalcoholic apple cider and she accepts. The cider appears in tall, elegant glasses and we toast autumn with a sample of hard cider and she accepts. The cider appears

...onto the scene would never be the same.

A V A decided to buy the building. A capital campaign resulted in a highly successful fundraising effort, and someone told us about this 140-year-old factory in Lebanon. We went there and saw the rickety building. But I looked underneath the linoleum and saw hardwood floors, and noted the high ceilings. It had a really good feeling about it,” she said.

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Torjusen was looking for space to expand A V A. Lunch orders are placed — we both decide on the Vermont cheddar soup and kale salad with apples and crushed sunflower seeds.

“An autumn feast,” my guest exclaims.

...we haven’t increased the rent on the 21 individual artists’ studios for several years. And we expect the new building to meet LEED Gold certification standards from day one,” she said.

Torjusen’s attention to the financial underpinnings of A V A’s expansion are as impressive as her vision of connecting art to the community.

“In one year, thanks to gifts to the current capital campaign, we will retire the mortgage on our original building, then all the studio rental income will go toward programming and development,” she said.

AVA’s move to Lebanon tangibly has contributed to the city’s creative economy, helped energize Lebanon’s downtown — and proven early detractors wrong.

Torjusen still remembers the time, shortly after AVA had moved to Lebanon, when “a man came in to the newly rented building, looked at me sternly, and said, ‘We don’t need an art gallery in Lebanon.’ Well, guess what? Last December we received the Business of the Year Award from the Lebanon Chamber of Commerce,” Torjusen said proudly. The honor was in recognition of how AVA helps bring a variety of visitors to the city. “They attend classes and exhibitions, go to restaurants, enliven the whole city,” she said. “I wonder what that man would say if I met him today.”

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“I’d like to do that when A V A is close to reaching its $3.5 million capital campaign. Then someone else can take it over the top and run with it,” she said.

As we get up to leave, I ask her what she will do next. “My late husband was hugely accomplished, but most of his work — documentaries, drawings, paintings, photographs — is in storage. I’d like to organize it and perhaps write a biography.”

And move to sunnier climes, perhaps by a beach?

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...With winter and snow, whatever will I do?”

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