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Explore the Arts District From Home with Virtual First Friday

BY NATHALIE FEINGOLD



Eleven years ago, the NTC Foundation started First Friday at Liberty Station as a way to highlight the creative offerings of their Arts District tenants.

"I don't think we've ever missed a First Friday in all 11 years," said Lisa Johnson, President and CEO of the NTC Foundation.

First Friday is a monthly art open house that showcases a variety of artists specializing in all types of mediums, such as fine, culinary and performance arts. The last in-person First Friday occurred on Mar. 6, the pandemic hit and without missing a beat, NTC rolled out their first-ever virtual First Friday on Apr. 3.

The shift to virtual programming was necessary for Arts District tenants to promote their local businesses, especially since the majority of them are considered non-essential businesses and thus were unable to physically open their doors.

As soon as COVID-19 hit San Diego in early March, Lisa and the staff at NTC realized that they had to quickly pivot to figure out what the Arts District can deliver virtually. Lisa says that the virtual showings get stronger and stronger with each passing month.

The August First Friday (Aug. 7) is gearing up to be their most robust virtual showing yet. Featuring live performances by San Diego Dance Theater, live storybook readings and interactive games with Reading Legacies, an Instagram live ballet photoshoot by new tenant Canela Photography, a pottery wheel demo with new tenant Milk Oolong Studio and many other immersive, creative experiences.

"We have for-profits, not-for-profits, small artists, big galleries, all coming togeth-

er to do unique, wonderful things."

The unanticipated shift to virtual First Fridays was not without challenges, especially because the majority of Arts District tenants are small, local businesses.

"All of our tenants are small businesses and every one of them is suffering in some form or fashion. It's been heartbreaking for me to see what has happened to people who have worked so hard to grow these great businesses just for them to hit a brick wall," Lisa said.

However, despite the challenges, Lisa maintains a positive and hopeful outlook during these unprecedented times.

"To see all of the innovation and collaboration come out of such a tough time has been really inspirational and heartwarming for me. Even when faced with really terrible circumstances, the tenants rose above that and it's a little emotional for me actually because I just know how hard it is for them," Lisa said.

However, Lisa discovered that out of the difficult circumstances and government-mandated isolation, Virtual First Friday opened the door for an even stronger sense of community with a reach the likes of which she's never seen before.

"The virtual aspect really opened up a whole new world for us and our tenants, for people realizing what we do," Lisa said.

Lisa has friends in the East Coast and Northern California who are now excited to tune in from their homes every First Friday and take classes from across the country. The Watercolor Society, an Arts District legacy tenant, now can have virtual art shows featuring prominent artists from Europe and all over the United States.

Lisa said that the virtual aspect also broadened their audience to people who may not have felt comfortable taking a class in person.

"I had a friend say to me, 'I've always wanted to take a ballet class but I'm too nervous to actually go into a studio but now, because I can do it from my living room in private, it was fun,'" Lisa continued, "I just think it puts our reach out there and when we can gather again I hope people will think to come and visit us that maybe haven't been there in person before."

First Friday is going to remain fully virtual for the remainder of 2020, an executive call that was determined early on in March.

In the longer term, First Fridays will go back to hosting in-person art open houses at Liberty Station. However, it will forever be changed as it plans on maintaining its online component for the years to come.

"I think the future for First Friday is bright. We're gonna maintain the virtual component, but we'll go back to our in-person component as well... I think we'll see some crossover," Lisa said, "We're gonna look at capturing what's actually happening live and making that virtual too; giving people that opportunity to be a part of what's going on in the Arts District even if they aren't physically there. Now we know all that stuff is very possible."

For those interested in exploring their creative side, find a class or exhibition that appeals to you and tune in on Aug. 7. Visit liberstation.com for more information about the event. ✨