

Photo exhibit exposes Petersburg to controversy

BY F.M. WIGGINS (STAFF WRITER)


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PETERSBURG - Old Towne will be exposed to a new collection of photos tomorrow night that has generated some controversy over just how much might be shown by the photos.

The project, called Old Towne Exposed, is designed to draw people to downtown - exposing them to the area and all it's offerings. The 40 photos by Mel Talley show 46 people - 23 males and 23 females - from Petersburg all in various stages of implied nudity.

The exhibit consists of black and white photos of Petersburg residents - including business owners and artists, retirees, and even a few pets - in settings that create the illusion of being unclothed.

 Image Gallery for Photo exhibit exposes Petersburg to controversy



But that hasn't stopped the exhibit from creating controversy. Last week, a petition was given to City Council by Brenda Stockton with more than 300 signatures on it asking city officials to put a stop to the exhibit that begins with Petersburg's monthly Friday For the Arts! event.

"The undersigned citizens of Petersburg, Virginia object to the promotional photo show of people in the nude (implied or apparent) to attract tourist [sic] to the city. We do not want our city celebrated because of nudity, depravity, and the devastation associated with such a display," states the petition.

Last night, participants and select guests were invited to a preview event where the images were officially unveiled.

"I think it was exciting to participate in it," said Paula Mims, owner of The Globe. "It was great to see a new idea come to life. Everything was done very tastefully."

As the cloths were removed from the final prints, the room filled with excitement as participants looked at their own photos and the other 39 that were part of the project. Also included in the final project, a portion of the petition against it.

Talley says that he can't understand why the controversy exists.

"I think it's much ado about nothing. I think it's a misunderstanding," Talley said. He added that before yesterday no one aside from himself had seen all the images and only each individual participant had seen their own photo on the back of his camera.

Stockton says that even though she hasn't seen the actual images that are part of the display, she's already seen enough when an area periodical published photos of some of the shoots.

"I'm just very disappointed in this project," Stockton said. "Petersburg has so many other things to attract people, it's such a shame that people have resorted to nudity."

She added that while the project may not show people completely in the buff, even implied nudity is too much.

"We object to using nudity at all," Stockton said. She says that she and others, including members of her church and those that signed the petition, don't want the image of the city to be tainted by the project. "We don't want the attention that nudity attracts to the area."

Kimberly Ann Calos, who served as stylist on the photo shoots and will be hosting the exhibit in her store, said that everyone is entitled to their opinion about the project. "I invite those that signed the petition to come and look at the tastefulness of it," Calos said. "I think this is going to be one of the best photo exhibits that Petersburg or the area has seen."

Although the petition asks the city to halt the exhibit, there is little city officials can do about it even if they wanted to.

"The council is empathetic with those individuals that presented the petition, but this exhibit is not a city function and is not being promoted by the city," said city spokeswoman Joanne Williams.

She added that as the city understands what it is to be exhibited, the photos are not of an illegal nature. "The city's official position is we're not taking a position on it," Williams said.

While Williams said that the event is not sponsored by the city, she did say that the opening scheduled for Friday is set to take advantage of a city-sponsored event - Friday For the Arts!

"That doesn't mean the city is involved though," Williams said. "Many businesses use the event to host special events."

Williams added that it is the city's hope that whenever individuals come to Friday For the Arts! that they won't just visit one venue.

Talley says that's his hope with this project.

"I think that anyone who comes just because of the controversy will see that it's much ado about nothing," Talley said. "But I hope it also serves to be a catalyst to bring people downtown."

Stockton said that even she may be drawn to go and see the project at some point. "I might, I haven't decided yet," she said, adding that normally she observes the sabbath on Fridays.

Talley added that he's done shows before that have brought people to Old Towne who had never been before. "I want them to look at what else is here," Talley said.

The exhibit - a partnership between Talley and Calos - began several weeks ago as a way to promote Old Towne and to raise money for the nonprofit Petersburg Animal Welfare Society (P.A.W.S.). P.A.W.S. is currently trying to raise money for a new animal shelter in the city.

All the proceeds from the exhibit - posters will be sold at the opening Friday and there will be a silent auction for each of the prints - will go to the animal group. The auction will take place from May 12 to June 12.

Talley said he's not sure what sparked the petition drive and the objections. "No one talked to me or Kim [Calos] about this project, Nobody contacted us to ask what this project is about," Talley said. "We didn't even find out that there was a petition until after it had been presented to council."

Stockton said that she hasn't made any efforts to talk to either Talley or Calos and that she doesn't care that the project is being used as a fundraiser for P.A.W.S. "There are other ways to raise money," she said.

But the exhibit is generating interest. WCVE, the Virginia PBS station, is scheduled to air a segment about the photo exhibit tonight at 8 on its "Virginia Currents" show.

Talley said that the word "exposed" was carefully chosen.

"We want to expose Old Towne as a whole, the interesting people, the businesses and the diversity in Old Towne," Talley said. He added that the word takes on a second meaning with the images where his subjects - 46 people evenly divided between male and female - expose something of themselves "beyond the skin though, their business or their hobby."

But Stockton remains skeptical. "We're not trying to cause trouble, we're just concerned about the moral fiber of the city," Stockton said.

The exhibit is located at Kimberly Ann's, 246 N. Sycamore St. in Petersburg.

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4 posted comments

I'm visiting Petersburg tomorrow evening to see the exhibition - I am visiting from London, UK. If the primary objective is to attract attention for the downtown area, then it's obviously succeeded.

I have a friend and his wife who participated in the shoot - bluntly, if you want to see flesh, go to any beach or pool this summer where there will be a great deal more on display.

The moral indignation seems to be grandstanding by some community leaders, who have mounted a protest for no reason and does the self-styled, moral, decent townfolk no credit whatsoever. In fact, this protesting makes Petersburg look silly, small-minded and provincial when in fact, the old town is charming with deep historical significance and deserves to be brought to life.

Karl Hindle, 05/13/10 11:07

art is communication. thank you petersburg for turning up the volume.how pleasantly spiced are our lives.thank you petersburg for letting me live with you, naked brick and cobble stone.unclothed river and wide open sky. just look at all your pretty green trees on rolling hills!and the people! the people are so sweet! i love you all.here i hold in peace.

badclowns, 05/13/10 10:37

Is this the best churches can do to help the city? Boycott art? Have these closeminded fools ever looked around Petersburg? The people attending and involved in this exhibit aren NOT the people that are driving the city into the hole it has been in for decades! On top of it all it's for a good cause and giving money back to the community. I'm willing to bet this gives more money to Petersburg than all 14 of the ridiculous churches combined have done this century. Mind your own business Stockton!

Citizen, 05/13/10 10:28

IF you observe the front page of the PI today, this was the only enlightening, even though controversial story. Unfortunately Petersburg is a city waiting to evolve and doing so slowly. At the same time, this is 2010 and we are trying to revitalize downtown.

There is going to be controversy, but unless you attract people to the town to see the architecture, the restaurants and entertainment - the new lofts developing along with the new bus station, all is lost.

The churches are entitled to their opinion, but they have been here for a long time and doing good - but there is more needed to get people to realize Petersburg is a "diamond in the rough" - great location, river running through it, Art Galleries, history etc. but, unfortunately we do not draw enough persons yet to enjoy it.

Summation, this was done in good taste, it was not portraying the city in a bad light everyone should be working toward the same goal---revitalize downtown and draw people, young and old here.

pargast, 05/13/10 9:50