

# The PAF Moves Pawtucket's Evolution Forward

The Pawtucket Arts Festival (PAF) is more than a pop-up event with fried dough and face paint. Through October 4, PAF will bring the community affordable and interactive events that span across time and disciplines. The annual Taste of the Valley and the Blackstone River Party kicked off the festival at the historic grounds of Slater Mill in late August and then, over the six-week period, 20 eclectic events will take place throughout the city. The festival benefits Pawtucket, but also helps artists gain wide exposure in their community, possibly reaching new audiences and fans.

The festival looks deceptively youthful and, no, I don't know what lotion it uses. Billboards and promotional materials boast that the festival is in its 17<sup>th</sup> year when, in reality, its history extends back to the 1970s. "I think it's important that we anchor ourselves in the reality that the city has been trying to support the arts, has had organizations supporting the arts, and has had art festivals for 40 years," says Rich Watrous, co-chair of the festival.

Forty years ago, the city of Pawtucket used grant money and the funds from selling an old steamboat to start an organization that served as the city's arts council, which is now defunct. This started Pawtucket's support of the arts. The festival celebrates the city's current cultural climate, but also pays homage to its artistic lineage. Watrous even spoke of putting up an exhibit showing Pawtucket's evolution as an artistic city some time later this year. The arts scene in the city has slowly and continuously evolved since the 1970s, which would explain the city's latest slogan, "Join the Evolution."

When trying to explain how this festival works, the phrase, "festival inception" comes to mind. The mini-festivals that take place throughout the next month all live under the giant Pawtucket Festival umbrella. These smaller festivals, like the S.A.M festival and Slater Park Fall Festival that take place at Slater Mill and Slater Memorial Park (respectively), are just the newest incarnations of the festivals that existed before, but under a different name.

Pawtucket Arts Festival doesn't just spring up and fall back down. One can treat the festival like a day-trip or let it shape their cultural calendar for longer than a month. The events stretch out, planned so they start slow and then build in momentum as time progresses. Each event on the itinerary could stand on its own, but instead the festival pieces these events together to create a network for the artists.

This year the festival lasts six weeks, cramming in two more weeks of events than in years past. The festival bursts with so much life that even the brochure doesn't list the entirety of the events planned during the six-week extravaganza. "We have things like the 16<sup>th</sup> annual Pawtucket film festival, which has a particular bent toward the music industry. In between each film set, music is performed." In other words, there is a concert nuzzled inside of a film festival ... an event inside of an event. This overlapping and intertwining of art is what makes the PAF special.

Watrous builds networks. "I am a supporter of the arts in Southern New England. I try to build relationships and connections with people in the arts community. And that's a broad term for me — the overarching goal is to reach out across that broad area. The arts festival connects people within the region or around Pawtucket." Apart from the festival, he even has his own personal network of artists under his wing. Watrous has seven children, six of whom are artists. "It'll be interesting to see where that hive of activity takes itself," he says referring to the bustling creativity that exists among children.

In terms of plans for the future, the committee's ambitions include casting their net even wider for the kinds of artists they draw in the future. The Pawtucket Arts Festival is a landmark in Pawtucket's history as an artistic city and giant step forward in its evolution. As the festival continues to grow, opening its arms wider each year and embracing an increasingly diverse array of artists, Pawtucket also becomes a more evolved and inclusive place to be.

*Pawtucket Arts Festival runs thru October 4; [pawtucketartsfestival.org](http://pawtucketartsfestival.org)*