

A Whole Bucket of Fun: The Pawtucket Arts Festival brings two weekends of arts programming to the state

Twenty-three years ago, the Pawtucket Arts Festival was just a small arts fair that allowed vendors to set up shop and sell their art. This year, festival director Anthony Ambrosino and his team have pulled out all the stops.

The festival, which is presented by the Pawtucket Teachers Alliance, The Pawtucket Times and the City of Pawtucket, will take place over the weekends of September 10 and September 19.

Ambrosino, who became the festival's director in 2019 when Eastern Equine Encephalitis was prevalent, says he believes the festival has minimal COVID-19 risk because it is all outdoors.

"I was more scared last year than this year," he says. "Everything is outdoors, so really the only worry is weather. People are desperate for things to do that are safe and get them out of their house, and we hope to provide that."

The free arts festival offers an eclectic itinerary of food, dance, music, painting, yoga and more.

"We try to stretch that art definition as much as we can," Ambrosino explains.

Ten restaurants will compete for the title of best empanada, with festival goers as judges, and the festival has teamed up with Pawtucket Central Falls restaurant weeks to get people out to support local restaurants.

Tree Yoga Studio will offer yoga; art studios and galleries will be open and interactive craft events also will be offered. There will be sculptures on site and live music performances throughout the event. For the little ones, there will be face painting, bouncy houses and more during the family fun day.

The festival's headlining attraction is Plein Air Pawtucket (see sidebar). En plein air painting refers to the practice of painting outside. For this event, 12 renowned artists will set up their canvases around the Blackstone River so that viewers can watch them paint live. "It speaks to what we're trying to do with the festival, which is create art outdoors," says Ambrosino. The artists will sit before Pawtucket's landmarks and breathtaking skylines, and capture them on canvas in what promises to be an awe-inspiring experience for all those watching.

The Rhode Island Philharmonic returns, bringing with them a sense of long-standing tradition.

"I hope to stand on the shoulders of those who came before me and bring the festival in the direction it needs now," he says. Asking the Philharmonic to perform was important both because bringing tradition to the festival is a priority and, "it's a celebration of a partnership that benefits our youth." The Philharmonic has partnered with The Pawtucket Teachers Alliance for some time now, hosting many programs with Pawtucket schools.

With the world seeming a bit grey these days, it's important to provide people with a colorful escape, though Ambrosino believes art is inescapable in our day-to-day lives.

"The arts are imperative," he says. "Everything from song to storytelling to any kind of artistic expression goes back to the cavemen. The definition is so broad. From the design of your coffee cup to the Netflix show you are watching, art really is everywhere."

The Pawtucket Arts Festival takes place Sept 10 - 19. For more information, go to pawtucketartsfestival.org.