

Sharing Art and Vision

Lamorinda Arts Alliance lecture features local artist, and the building of a giant ichthyosaur

By Lou Fancher



50-foot, life sized fish-like creature resembles the ichthyosaur Photos provided

Artists, like the art they produce, come in all shapes and sizes. Their resumé's are frequently patchwork: occupations like chemist, mountain climber, marine biologist, firefighter often stitch themselves to writer, sculptor, musician, dancer. Most people think of them as solitary individuals with a certain rough texture to their personalities that indicate either genius vision or outright unsociability.

But then there are artists who fit this profile in every way except for the last. These are visionaries who thrive on interaction. They tend to form collectives, or join their unique perspectives into potent centers of exploration, like the Lamorinda Arts Alliance.

Founded in 1994, LAA President Donna Arganbright said the organization exists to promote area artists and works with galleries throughout Lamorinda. She said the Lafayette Art Gallery's new location in The Forge,

on Mt. Diablo Boulevard, is thrilling. Promoting a show at the Moraga Art Gallery, an opportunity for artists to display their work at the May 10 Moraga Community Faire, and sending a call for art needed for Town Hall Theater's rotating lobby exhibits, Arganbright described the area's creative energy as "unlimited."

Perhaps the most exciting development for LAA—and local residents—is a planned resumption of the organization's bi-monthly meetings, a tradition that had been suspended for two years. Free to the public, LAA members and visiting artists present vivid programs and an insider's perspective on the creative process.

Kicking off the series with a lively presentation by LAA member and Lafayette resident Kris Vagner at Our Savior's Lutheran Church on April 10, it was exciting to imagine what could top "How to Build a Giant Ichthyosaur."

Vagner, an arts and public rela-

tions writer, was one person on The Pier Group's 50-person team who collectively conceived, funded, designed and built a 50-foot long, life-sized, prehistoric, fish-like creature resembling its real life ancestor: the ichthyosaur. A marine reptile that swam the ocean 225 million years ago in what is now Nevada, the 2014 plywood beast replica was constructed in the Generator, an enormous community art space in Sparks, Nev. It came complete with 10-inch resin eyeballs Vagner crafted in her home; a solar powered neon ichthyosaur "baby" sculpture created by Jeff Johnson, a Reno-based neon artist; and moveable parts masterminded by Bernie Beauchamp, a Reno puppeteer specializing in marionettes. Its moving head (9 feet long, with more than 100 teeth), waving fins and torso (lit by "strobe-y lights you activate by pulling a beer tab," Vagner said during the presentation) were designed to be interactive. And to travel: to the annual Burning Man festival in Nevada's Black Rock Desert, where 50,000 people participate every summer in one of the world's largest expressions of creativity.

"This is Burning Man," Vagner said, displaying an aerial image that looked rather like an incomplete sundial, set in sand. A closer look showed a carnival of construction with scaffolds, cranes, power generators and mostly, people. Artists, environmentalists and curious onlookers mingle at Burning Man—their mutual dependency on the elements made all the more apparent by a stunning photograph a member of Vagner's team took during an electrical storm.

"We had an architect, engineer and a house builder on the crew. I was still

nervous about injury and death, but nothing bad happened," Vagner joked.

While re-assembling the ichthyosaur after travel, Vagner said the 15-person crew worked day and night for a full week—this in a place with no electricity or running water. Even during the festival, repairs and upkeep meant "ambassadoring" the sculpture day and night. The project was funded by the Nevada State Arts Council and a Kickstarter campaign that received a serious boost from a

Nevada brewer, who donated kegs of their "Great Basin, 'Icky' IPA" at a fundraising party. Vagner said the in-kind donation estimate for labor (everyone is a volunteer on the Pier Group's projects) was equal to nearly \$18,000 at a point early in the project: "We don't know the total labor donation, but we owe a great debt to everyone who worked on it," she said.

Audience members asked if "Icky" turned out as expected.

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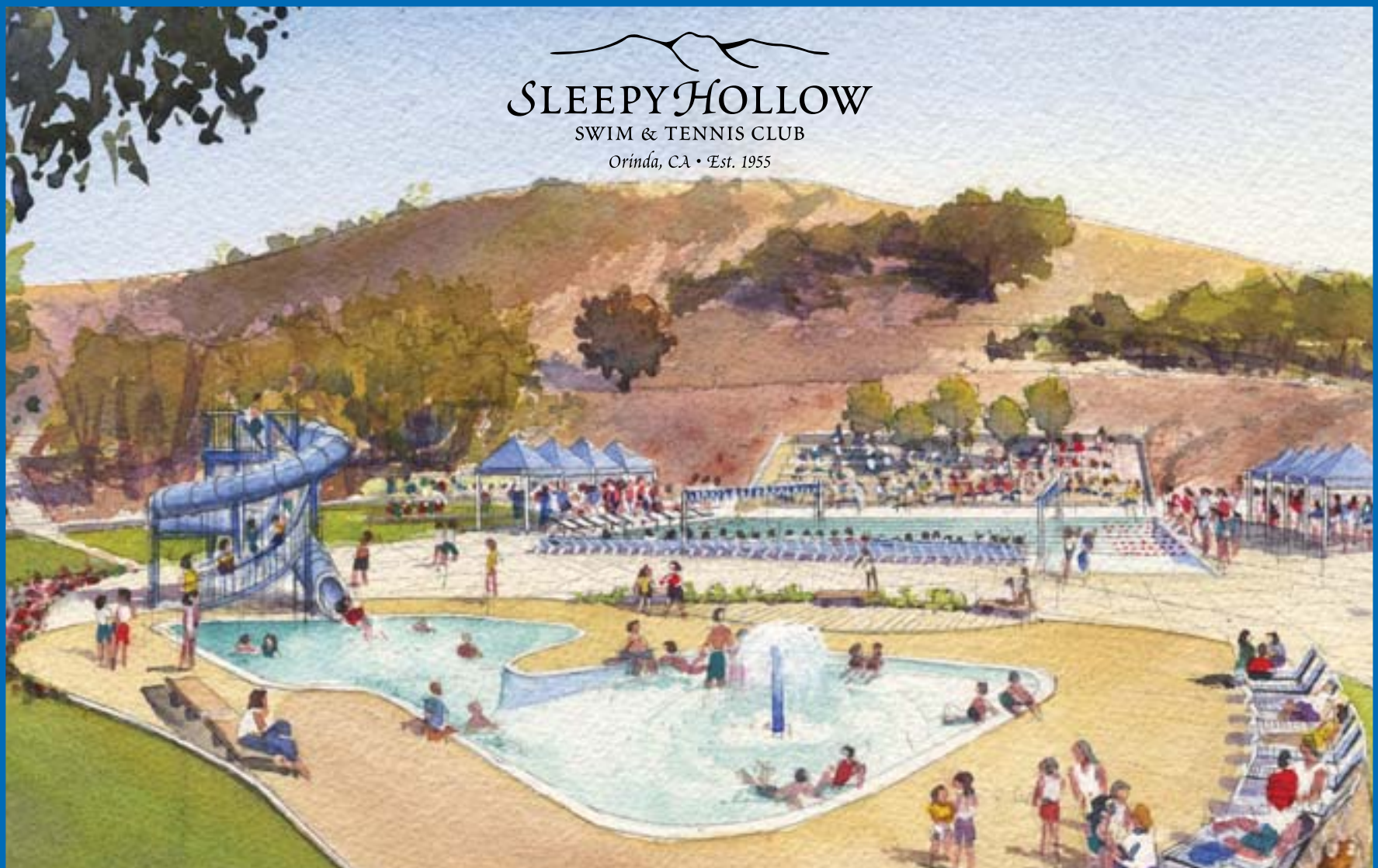
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