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SAMA-LIGONIER VALLEY CELEBRATES 20 YEARS

Ligonier – The Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art at Ligonier Valley will mark a major milestone in 2017 as the Museum recognizes its 20th anniversary. The year-long celebration begins in January and will include a variety of special events, family programming, art classes, and more.

In the early 1990s, a group of Ligonier Valley residents led by Tina Thoburn approached SAMA's Board of Trustees to request assistance in establishing an arts center in Ligonier. The group worked closely with then-Director Michael Strueber and the SAMA staff to found the Museum which, 20 years later, has become an integral part of Ligonier's emerging arts scene.

That visionary steering committee included Tina Thoburn, chair; Cindy Busch, program committee chair; Paulette Nikel, arts resources committee chair; Steve Gooder, site committee chair; Connie Pilz, design committee chair; and B.G. Alexander, Alan Blosser, John Duggan, Betty Gamble, Roberta Kuhns, Connie Lynch, Betty Marky, Nancy McClintick, Sandy Mellon, Betty Mickinak, Ingrid Rea, Kim Shaffer, Madelon Sheedy, Bill Smail, Michael Strueber, Ann Sullivan and Tom Thoburn.

"The steering committee originated as an arts committee at the local library," said Pilz, who is still an active member of the Ligonier Valley Museum. "The group would meet and stage art exhibits, but we needed to find a new space."

Mrs. Thoburn took the reins and the search began for an arts center location. But after a meeting with Strueber and SAMA officials, the idea of a museum of fine art began to take root.

"Years of planning and preparation went into this," said Pilz. "The effort was spearheaded by Tina Thoburn, who amassed a large group of excited and dedicated individuals. Tina organized a conference before the Museum was founded and she asked us, 'What do you want Ligonier to look like in 25 years?' We wanted a tourist haven, a place that would be vibrant and active in the summer and that would have a strong focus on the arts. It's such a wonderful feeling to look back, 20 years later, and realize just what we accomplished."

Capital resources to the project included a lead gift from the R.K. Mellon Foundation, plus additional gifts from Mr. and Mrs. Guy Paden Gamble; Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Thoburn, Jr., who donated the property and three log houses which were used to create the Museum's attractive log cabin façade; Mrs. William Rea, whose gift covered exterior landscaping; and Mrs.

Thomas Lewis, Jr., for the back porch. Mr. and Mrs. Paul Ecker also donated a log home which was used in the Museum's construction.

"The Gambles, Elsie Hillman, Wilma McKenna, Sandy Mellon, Ingrid Rea and the Thoburns generously provided the financial leadership and support to develop the Museum without the need for a capital campaign – a rare institutional occurrence," said Strueber. "As well, Betty Gamble donated her father's paperweight collection that is now housed in a beautiful cherry wood structure at the entrance to the main gallery."

SAMA-Ligonier Valley opened on September 10, 1997, with a preview reception and ribbon cutting for donors, trustees and others. The Museum formally opened to the public with a family day open house on Saturday, September 13. The program included self-guided tours and art treasure hunts for children, hands-on craft activities, plus demonstrations by artists-in-residence Jan Barone, Tom Beckman and Paulette Nickel.

The first visitors to the Museum were treated to an exhibition of fine prints, drawings, sculpture, paintings and photographs from the permanent collection representing artists including George Bellows, Mary Cassatt, George Hetzel, Mary Jane Peale, John Singer Sargent, and other prominent names. Visitors also flocked to the Walter Carlyle Shaw Paperweight Collection of antique and contemporary paperweights, donated to the Museum in 1992 by Betty Gamble and placed on permanent display when the Museum opened. The nearly 200 paperweights were housed in a custom cherry wood "wall" with random window openings, permitting visitors to view the paperweights from a variety of perspectives. Madelon Sheedy, who had served as Coordinator of SAMA-Johnstown, was the first Curator of the Ligonier Valley Museum.

"It is difficult to believe we are now celebrating Ligonier's 20th anniversary," said longtime SAMA Trustee Ann Benzel. "The Ligonier Valley Museum has proven to be one of the flawless jewels in SAMA's crown, sparkling with historic character, serene gardens, brilliant exhibitions, stellar arts programming and professional education presentations. Ligonier has proven to be a shining example of what our trustees, staff and supporters have been able to achieve."

To celebrate the anniversary, the Museum will host SAMA's annual Night of Distinction awards program in April, a special plein air painting contest offering cash prizes in three age groups, a return visit by guest speaker and UFO researcher Stan Gordon in March, the annual Garden Party, and a variety of art classes. Special art exhibitions are in the works that will celebrate exhibits from the Museum's 20-year history as well as artwork by Museum founders. The festivities will culminate on September 9 with a family day open house program. The event will include a cook-out, hands-on art activities for kids, artist demonstrations, live music, games, and an art auction.

The Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art at Ligonier Valley is located at One Boucher Lane and Route 711 South in Ligonier. Hours of operation are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Friday and 1 to 5 p.m. weekends. The Museum is a handicapped-accessible facility and is open to the public free of charge. For more information, please call (724) 238-6015 or visit www.sama-art.org.