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—Contributor.....Annie Landenberger
—Contributor email.....verbatimvt@gmail.com
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[REDACTED]

Notes from editor (not for publication):

The mashup of feature to interview to feature just doesn't work. I'm going to try to pull the merchants' comments into a sidebar to the interview, though it does seem a little redundant, and we're facing a tiny paper this week. Stay tuned.

[REDACTED]

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

#####BEGIN HED#####

1 Festival of Miniatures was a big deal for downtown
2 Brattleboro

#####END HED#####

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3 Inaugural holiday event was an artistic hit — and a boost
4 for Main Street merchants

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5 TEXT BODY:

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6 BY THE TIME 87 sites had signed on to take part in
7 Brattleboro's December miniatures displays, Erin Scaggs, creative
8 director of the Downtown Brattleboro Alliance (DBA), declared
9 that the event wasn't going to be just a stroll.

10 It'd be a festival. It'd be big.

11 Indeed, throughout December, it was hard to miss the
12 chatter about it. Some maybe just drove through or took it in in
13 course of daily routine. But for others, it was a destination for
14 visitors from throughout New England and beyond — even
15 Chicago.

16 Brattleboro's Festival of Miniatures was the first-ever
17 anywhere, says Melany Kahn, the prime visionary behind the
18 project. And it will probably not be the last.

19 While Brattleboro's festival leaders are wrapping up with
20 meetings, a survey, and a look at what's next, the business
21 community is taking stock. First impressions from several
22 business owners in town indicate the event was a success.

23 *The Commons* spoke recently with Kahn and Kate
24 Trzaskos, DBA's executive director, about the festival.

25 * * *

26 **Annie Landenberger:** What was the impact of the
27 Brattleboro Miniature Festival? Cultural? Economic?

28 **Kate Trzaskos:** We are working on our survey to get
29 actual, quantitative data, but I will say for qualitative data that
30 several businesses have expressed that this was their best
31 December on record. That they just felt like their store was full all
32 the time. They remarked on how bustling downtown was, that the
33 streets were full of people. Folks they hadn't seen in years came
34 back downtown.

35 **A.L.:** Tell me about the survey of store owners planned.

36 **Melany Kahn:** I actually just wrote the first version of it—
37 it's all percentages and input for next year. I don't think there're
38 going to be any huge surprises there. I think it's just going to
39 support what we already know.

40 I've personally talked to dozens of shopkeepers; [Kate's]
41 talked to dozens. I can tell you anecdotally stories like [one
42 merchant's]: first day she had the window open — the first day of
43 the walk — she earned two-thirds of her month's rent that day, in

44 just one afternoon. And she was a really good sport about staying
45 open.

46 **K.T.:** So they committed to being open Friday and
47 Saturday nights until 7, and I think that the free parking on the
48 weekends was another thing that really helped, especially with
49 locals. We removed so many barriers.

50 And Melany said "we want ambassadors" — so we had
51 people on the street, welcoming people, directing people. It
52 really was like a "rediscover Brattleboro" kind of moment for a
53 lot of people. I think that the two big successes were first getting
54 all of these folks on board.

55 **A.L.:** That took doing?

56 **K.T.:** In our first meeting, the skepticism was high. And it
57 was amazing just to see how it built, how people got on board,
58 and how the businesses encouraged each other.

59 So the second success was that the community building
60 of this project was phenomenal. I think across businesses, but
61 also within businesses, their staff teams, the library team,
62 everybody was saying it was so great to have this project to work
63 on together.

64 **A.L.:** It's impressive that this was the first.

65 **M.K.:** Yeah, there are miniature shows, which are very
66 commercial in their presentation. But this was geared towards a
67 general audience. Nobody had to like miniatures in order to
68 enjoy it. Because there was something for everybody, whether
69 you liked trains, taxidermy, bears, or tea parties, or puppets, or a
70 cookie contest, or a museum of tiny things. I mean, there were so
71 many Easter eggs of surprises.

72 **A.L.:** Lovely phrasing.

73 **M.K.:** And if you didn't like one window — if it wasn't
74 your thing to look at stuffed ducks — you'd move to the next and
75 [find] a miniature street scene with 3D cutouts. Everything was so
76 incredibly creative and different. I think that because it was so
77 accessible to every age range, it was free, it was open 24 hours a

78 day, seven days a week for 40 days. I mean, it just hit all the right
79 buttons — kind of by accident.

80 **A.L.:** How by accident?

81 **K.T.:** Well, with the first run, you don't know, right? We
82 were doing all this planning, and I think we all had a moment
83 where we were like, *Is anyone going to come to our party?*

84 **A.L.:** Oh boy, those feelings...

85 **K.T.:** This was the first. Nobody really had expectations,
86 [and in the end] I think that people were so surprised by the
87 breadth of the program and also by the creativity and the
88 technicality of all those pieces.

89 **A.L.:** Tell me about the judges.

90 **K.T.:** We had been talking about celebrity judges, saying,
91 "Oh, we need such-and-such big name." But then bringing in
92 folks from the minis world, it elevated [the event] to this place
93 where we all learned so much about the art and science of
94 miniatures. They took it so seriously. That was great.

95 **M.K.:** So I think the questions for next year are: What
96 worked? What didn't work? What could we do better?

97 I'm a person who doesn't want to do the same thing
98 twice, so, for example, we'll engage the schools, but we're not
99 going to do the same spirit house thing again. It's going to be
100 something different. And all the feedback around that has been
101 just amazing — off the charts. [One teacher] said there were all
102 sorts of things that came out of it that were a surprise to her
103 curricularly, that she hadn't really anticipated.

104 **A.L.:** I can imagine the benefits.

105 **M.K.:** And that of using the hands, the heart, and getting
106 back to being in touch with the things that we make. Yeah, I think
107 about the window at Shoe Tree, you know, the group of people
108 that got together to do that. That was all donated. That was all
109 their hours, all their time, all their resources. And they just did
110 that for the benefit of that store and with so much heart and so
111 much humor.

112 **A.L.:** Was there ever a big pushback?

113 **M.K.:** I thought we'd have more but we had exactly
114 none, except in the very beginning.

115 And I really want to address this: There was a question
116 about whether or not this was somehow glossing over our
117 unhoused problem, or being unsympathetic toward it.

118 I've spent a lot of time thinking about this. And I then
119 had a bunch of different experiences that helped me to
120 understand why it is not that.

121 And most of those experiences had to do with unhoused
122 people appreciating it. [One homeless person walked into] the
123 Museum of Small Things. "I just love coming in here so much.
124 This reminds me of my childhood," she said. She's been spending
125 a lot of time taking in the minis.

126 To suggest somehow that a person who's unhoused can't
127 appreciate this to me shows sort of a lack of sensitivity. They had
128 a childhood and they have nostalgia and they have all the
129 feelings that we all have. So offering them something that's free,
130 that's nice to look at, that makes their community a nicer place to
131 be in is actually a loving move.

132 It's a way to include everyone and to say, "We know that
133 you have struggles and challenges, and we also know that you
134 have the capacity to appreciate these things."

135 **K.T.:** I think that what the DBA strives to embody is that
136 Brattleboro is everyone's downtown. And we want to create a
137 place where belonging and welcoming, health and safety are
138 held by everybody. There's lots of tension in different
139 conversations around that. But I think ultimately everybody wants
140 that in this community.

141 **M.K.:** We know there's a big appetite to do it again. But
142 you do something right, and you don't want to screw it up. A lot
143 of people came out of the woodwork at the end, like, *please let
144 me know if you do this next year, I'd love to do (fill in the blank).*"
145 But everybody on the team agreed in keeping our mission laser
146 focused on miniatures.

147 The event got coverage on ample social media, in
148 Vermont papers, on Vermont television, in *The Boston Globe* and
149 in at least two magazines, nationwide through the Associated
150 Press wire service — and even as far as New Zealand.

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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151 **ANNIE LANDENBERGER** is an arts writer and columnist
152 for The Commons . She also is one half of the musical duo Bard
153 Owl, with partner T. Breeze Verdant.

#####END BIO/COATTAIL#####

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