

Stevenson Academy Closes Its Doors

by Faith Rackoff

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Eight months after the death of its founder Attila Hejja, the Stevenson Academy of Fine Arts, housed at 20 Audrey Avenue in Oyster Bay, has closed its doors after being served with eviction papers on Friday, May 9th.

According to Aggie Geoghegan, famed artist Attila Hejja's sister who had been running the school since her brother passed, "Everything happened rather quickly and all at once." She compared the situation to the "perfect storm" and noted overhead, competition and decreased enrollment as major factors for the Academy's demise.

The Stevenson Academy opened in 2004 as Hejja's tribute to his mentor Harold Stevenson. Geoghegan explained that Hejja, who was an official artist for NASA, was not only the director of the school, he also taught a significant amount of the classes. Geoghegan stated, "When Attila died at the end of August 2007 not only was it a devastating blow to students, teachers and to the school on a personal and professional level but also on a financial level. He taught 45% of the classes in addition to running the school." Although Hejja did all of that work he did not take a salary, in fact he put the money back into the school.

After Hejja's untimely death, teachers needed to be hired to cover the course load, which increased the income expenses by 45%. In an attempt to adjust with the expenses Geoghegan said, "We instituted a number of things operationally to help adjust to the financial loss. The rent is the largest single expense we have so we had discussion with a representative of the landlord who is Charles Wang." The school sought concessions for the short term while it worked to get back on its feet. However she claims, "he was unable to give any significant concessions. They offered a token that would not have helped us at all. That was devastating. Without some concessions, we just could not go on."

Michael Picker, CEO of Renaissance Property Associates, the managing company that Wang owns to oversee his buildings, did not return our calls for this article.

In addition to the increase in overhead the academy had to operate against a rival art instructing school, Long Island Academy of Fine Arts, which was started by former Stevenson Academy instructors in Riverhead. Recently LIAFA started a satellite location at Planting Fields Arboretum and Geoghegan declared that it, "was not only a direct competitor, but also solicited our students."

Enrollment was the third issue the school struggled with. Describing the problem Geoghegan described how, "Enrollment had been great up until the spring semester." She admitted that, "usually we have an influx of enrollment during the third week of classes, this time it didn't happen." She believes the economy and the competing art academy had an effect on enrollment.

"All these things happened together at the same time. Any one of these things we could have likely overcome, but not all three together," Geoghegan confessed. "The school was a great school. We loved being in Oyster Bay. Our students loved it here and I think we brought a significant amount of traffic. It was an art school and a cultural center for the area." Above all she expressed, "I feel very sorry for the community."

Stevenson Academy at ALLI

As for as the school on Audrey Avenue, it is no more. However Hejja's vision will carry on. Geoghegan has worked out an agreement with the Art League of Long Island located in Dix Hills to carry on the Stevenson Academy program within its school.

Geoghegan said, "We were looking for alternatives. Instead of closing the school initially we suspended classes, then we realized we were in an impossible situation. We explored many avenues so we could continue our students, continue the program and continue the school my brother had set up." Then she contacted ALLI. "We were able to make agreement that our teachers will continue to teach the Stevenson Academy program that Attila set up and we continue it there at the Art League for the rest of the semester so that is an excellent option for our students to finish this semester," she stated with a sense of relief. Stevenson classes resumed Monday, May 12th at ALLI.

ALLI will continue the program with the Stevenson instructors. They will offer the fundamental programs as well as intermediate and advanced programs drawing and painting. Geoghegan is still exploring options for the pottery and the sculptor classes.

Having the Stevenson Academy act as a school within ALLI, Geoghegan believes "is just a very wonderful and positive marriage for the two institutions." She went on to explain. "It gives ALLI the opportunity to offer traditional drawing and painting, which is something over the past 30 years, has fallen to the way-side."

ALLI is located at 107 East Deer Park Road in Dix Hills. For more information, call (631) 462-5400 or visit www.artleagueli.org
