

The streets of downtown Tuscaloosa are abuzz with people most Friday evenings, but especially the first Friday of the month. No, I'm not referring to the bevy of bars in Temerson Square, or the growing variety of restaurants – I'm referring to the institution Tuscaloosa residents know as "First Friday." This event – a cooperation between local studios, galleries, and shops – allows attendees to view the work of local and regional artists, experience great music and food, and socialize in casual settings throughout downtown.

"First Friday" traces its roots to the first "Art Night" over twenty years ago. This event offers an experience like First Friday, but in downtown Northport on the first Thursday of every month. In 2004, the event expanded to encompass both sides of the Black Warrior River, introducing downtown Tuscaloosa to the mix. Eventually, Tuscaloosa shifted from the first Thursday of the month to the first Friday, and a new event was born. Shops and galleries have come and gone, but the monthly cultural event still goes strong today.

With over 1,700 pieces, the Paul R. Jones Collection of American Art at The University of Alabama is one of the largest collections of African American art in the world. When I spoke with Karen Kennedy, Director of The Paul R. Jones Gallery, she discussed the ways in which The University of Alabama engages the local community through the gallery, as well as the way First Friday plays an important role. Kennedy pointed out that when the galleries, studios, and businesses stay open until 8:00 p.m., they offer individuals



Downtown  
Tuscaloosa is

ABUZZ

on  
First Fridays

by Clifton Baker

*Photo taken by Jim Harrison of exhibited work by artist Daniel Livingston on the 2nd floor of Harrison Galleries in September, 2017.*



Artists Caleb and Ruth O'Connor host First Friday patrons in their spacious, unique studio on University Blvd. where they also present artist workshops on a regular basis. Photo courtesy Ruth O'Connor.

*“For many artists, this may be their first solo show. It allows them to interact and share their talent with the community at large. It is truly a special experience.”*

-Sandra Wolfe, Executive Director of The Arts Council

who work a standard work week the opportunity to see great art. She also discussed that First Friday takes the pressure away from viewing visual art by introducing a relaxed, social atmosphere. “First Friday has built a ‘community of arts’ among galleries and people,” said Kennedy.

Sandra Wolfe, Executive Director of The Arts Council of Tuscaloosa, discussed the ways in which First Friday helps cultivate local and regional artists.

“For many artists, this may be their first solo show. It allows them to interact and share their talent with the community at large. It is truly a special experience.” And First Friday does not just engage professional artists. Last year, The Arts Council of Tuscaloosa partnered

with Tuscaloosa County Schools to present the first system-wide art show during a First Friday at The Arts Council Gallery located at the Dinah Washington Cultural Arts Center.

“It’s a totally different experience seeing your work alongside professional artists. It’s powerful, and that’s what art is about,” said Jason Worley, Visual Arts Teacher at Holt High School.

Jamie Cicatiello at Grace Aberdeen Habitat Alchemy also referred to the impact of First Friday on young artists. “When you show us that you’re serious about your art, events like First Friday allow us to show that we’re serious about your art too,” said Cicatiello.

Another gallery offering

opportunities to both artists and art lovers alike is Harrison Galleries, owned by Jim Harrison, III. He is an active leader in the community, serving on the Board of Directors for the Alabama State Council on the Arts, SouthArts, and the DCH Regional Medical Authority. His gallery features 19th and 20th century paintings, prints, drawings, and sculpture as well as vintage and contemporary photography.

Harrison’s involvement with First Friday dates to Northport’s early “Art Night.” In fact, Harrison has been largely responsible for First Fridays’ growth over the years. When I spoke with Harrison, he discussed the ways in which First Friday frequently surprises visitors and locals alike. “I had no idea,” visitors will frequently



Above, In addition to visual art, Jamie Cicatiello offers vintage clothing, furniture, and jewelry at Grace Aberdeen Habitat Alchemy. Photo courtesy Jamie Cicatiello.

Below right, The University of Alabama Gallery at the Dinah Washington Cultural Arts Center presents UA sponsored exhibits and some joint exhibits with The Arts Council.

tell him. He discussed how there are few Alabama communities that have an arts “center of gravity.” First Friday has actively changed Tuscaloosa’s arts community, as well as increased the downtown area’s foot traffic. He also discussed the extraordinary collaboration he has formed with Caleb O’Connor.

I spoke with O’Connor and his wife, Ruth, in their downtown studio. Here, the two offer a wealth of visual art classes, as well as create their own works. O’Connor was first brought to Tuscaloosa when he was commissioned to paint the murals in the recently constructed Federal Building and Courthouse. Ruth explained that they were so taken with the community and its involvement in the mural project that they decided to move to Tuscaloosa.

For Ruth O’Connor, First Friday offers a “come as you are” mentality, eliminating perceived elitism surrounding visual art. She also discussed the ways in which citizens think about culture.

“When people travel, they think about art,” said O’Connor, as I watched her husband busily work away at his current project. “When something is beautiful, it touches innate parts of us. Events like these build a strong community, and an understanding of that community.”

Among the responses I received from the First Friday participants I interviewed, one element rang true in all of their words: they believe in the power of the arts, and they believe in the power of a community fueled by the arts.

So next First Friday, visit downtown Tuscaloosa and experience the fantastic art the community and region have to offer. Complete the evening by taking advantage of the casual atmosphere, new restaurants, and upbeat social scene. ■

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First Friday takes place on the first Friday of the month in downtown Tuscaloosa. Local galleries, businesses, and restaurants are open in the evening for the community to experience what downtown Tuscaloosa has to offer.

First Friday participants encourage patrons to visit other galleries and businesses within walking distance on the Art Walk. Galleries on the Art Walk include The Arts Council and The University of Alabama Galleries at the Dinah Washington Cultural Arts Center, The Paul R. Jones Gallery, Harrison Galleries, O’Connor Art Studios, and Grace Aberdeen Habitat Alchemy. These downtown galleries have launched a new website that will focus on First Friday offerings.

The website  
[www.firstfridaytuscaloosa.com](http://www.firstfridaytuscaloosa.com)  
 launched for the September 2017 First Friday event.

The site, created by The Nine, is designed to make the First Friday galleries and other art offerings accessible to the public with an Art Walk map displaying the location of all galleries.

