

ASBURY PARK ARTS COUNCIL GETS UNDERWAY

A POTENTIALLY POWERFUL CULTURAL FORCE LED BY WELL-RESPECTED FIGURES **P.28**

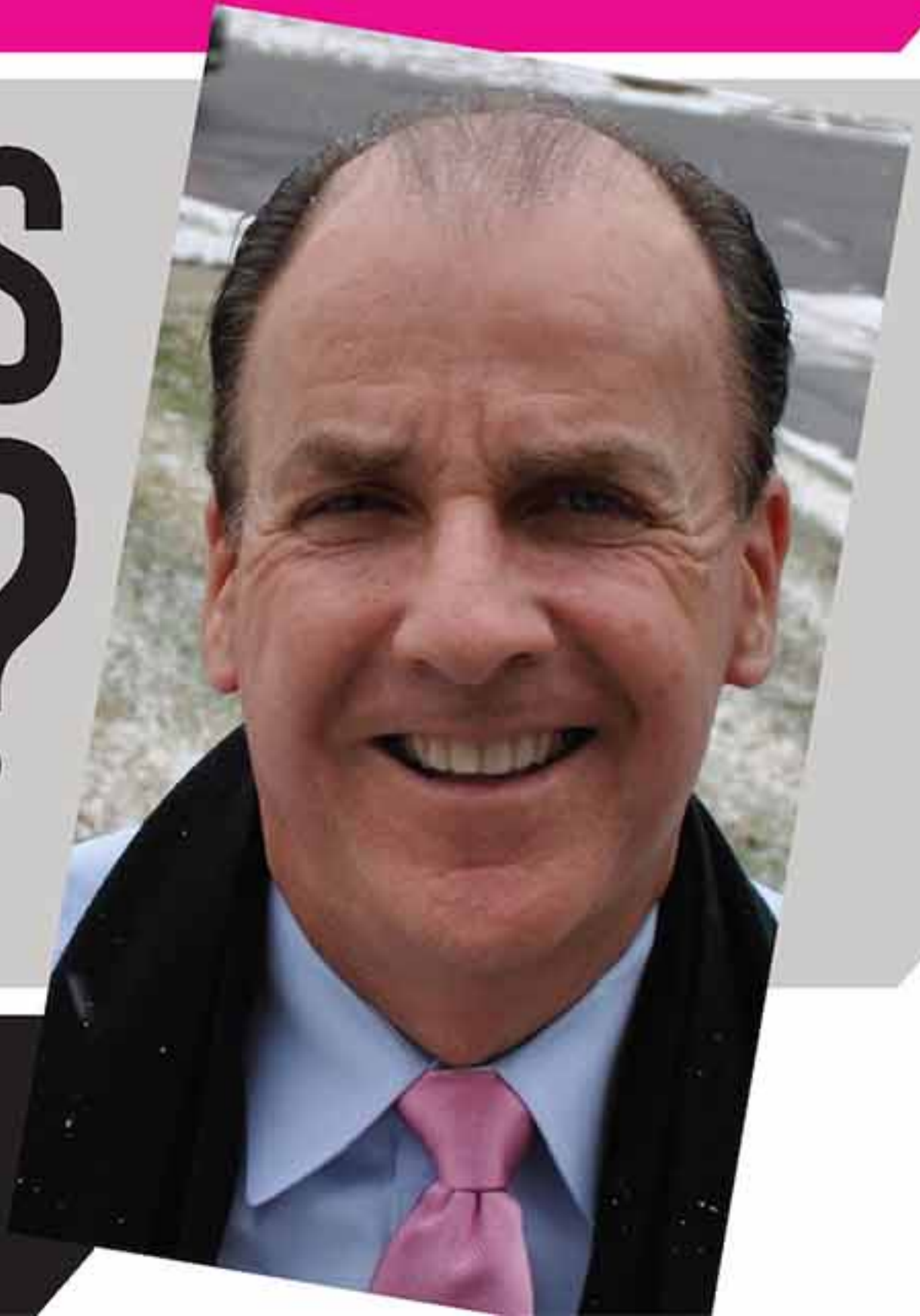


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**Jenn Hampton,
Carrie Turner
and Mike Sodano**



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ASBURY PARK — For over two decades, our primary job has been to look ahead and keep our readers in front of the curve when it comes to the triCity region of eastern Monmouth County. Particularly in Asbury Park.

So you can understand why a big part of our coverage today is how arts and culture leaders in our region are preparing for the world post-Covid.

The story of most arts venues is about navigating the pandemic's economic toll to survive for another day. But there are other arts leaders using this down time to organize to be even stronger when pandemic restrictions lift.

A perfect example is the Asbury Park Arts Council [APAC] a recently formed non-profit organization with a board of trustees that includes some of our city's most impressive arts and civic leaders.

APAC's potential is multi-fold. It can be a powerful force to ensure that arts and culture in Asbury Park continue to thrive amidst the city's economic growth. A big part of that is constantly attracting young emerging creative talent to Asbury Park to work, perform and live in the city (or live in the region while involved in Asbury Park). One goal of APAC is to develop programs for young creatives to interact with established and successful cultural figures in Asbury today to get the benefit of their wisdom and possibly the help of their contacts.

APAC will also advise the city government on maximizing arts and culture in Asbury Park. It's already set to work with the Planning

Board to develop an Arts and Culture Plan for the city. In addition, APAC will sponsor its own arts initiatives and events. It can also attract grants and funding which APAC can then distribute as grants inside the city for arts initiative. And the final goal — the Holy Grail, if you will — is to establish an Asbury Park Arts Center, which APAC would run, to provide a venue for all the arts groups in the city who need a performance space.

The four founding board members have regularly been the subject of our coverage.

One is Jenn Hampton, the owner of Parlor Gallery on Cookman Avenue and creator of the hugely popular Wooden Walls Project on the boardwalk in partnership with boardwalk redeveloper Madison Marquette. Hampton came up with the idea of the arts council with Mike Sodano, who with his wife Nancy Sabino, owned and operated the art house ShowRoom cinemas in Asbury Park and Bradley Beach. (The pandemic tragically forced the closure of those venues.) Sodano is also a founding APAC board member.

Rounding out the board are two other highly-respected figures: Carrie Turner, the former boardwalk General Manager for Madison Marquette, who could probably run just about any organization. (Maybe she should move to New York and run for Mayor. That city should be so lucky.) The other is the equally impressive Paul McEvily, the Executive Director of Interfaith Neighbors. McEvily has overseen the growth of that non-profit into a force in our city involved in affordable housing, workforce development, sustainability initiatives, and incubating and promoting businesses — all with a mission to help those in the community facing societal and economic roadblocks in the

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way of their goals and dreams.

The Executive Director at APAC is Michelle Gladden, a former reporter for the Asbury Park Press and the former editor of the triCity-affiliated asbury-parksun.com. Gladden continues to work with this newspaper as the editor and a writer for our "Unsilenced, Voices for Justice and Equity" column.

"It's one thing to be creative but quite another thing to want to help your community, and someone else," said Jenn Hampton. "This seemed like the perfect timing and with COVID-19, it's a pretty dark reminder of what Asbury Park could be without the arts."

"We thought long and hard about what a new arts council needs in order to shepherd through the arts," said Mike Sodano. "It was to be an advocate; both a magnet and a supporter because the arts are the economic driver of the city."

After solidifying the concept of APAC, Hampton and Sodano brought Interfaith's Paul McEvily and Carrie Turner on as board members.

"We come at this from the perspective that you attract young people through the arts...and then once engaged help point them towards positive outcomes," McEvily said. "Arts are an economic engine of the city, and as with (Interfaith's) collaborations with Jon Leidersdorff's Lakehouse and Kerry Martin's Second Life Bikes, we brought some expertise to get APAC launched and to help shepherd its mission. Our prime consideration was that we establish an independent entity with some core capacity that has the flexibility to operate outside of city governance."

Turner said "I first met Mike Sodano during our time at the [City's] Parking Committee and I met Paul through City Council meetings. For professional reasons we were there, and we were involved. Not only do we have a pas-

sion for the arts, but we also understand how the City works."

APAC was incorporated as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit in mid 2019 with the goal of launching in 2020. They hosted a small event in January 2020 at Kula Urban Farms to introduce themselves to local and regional arts and government leaders. However, the pandemic struck and delayed much of the work the group intended to pursue.

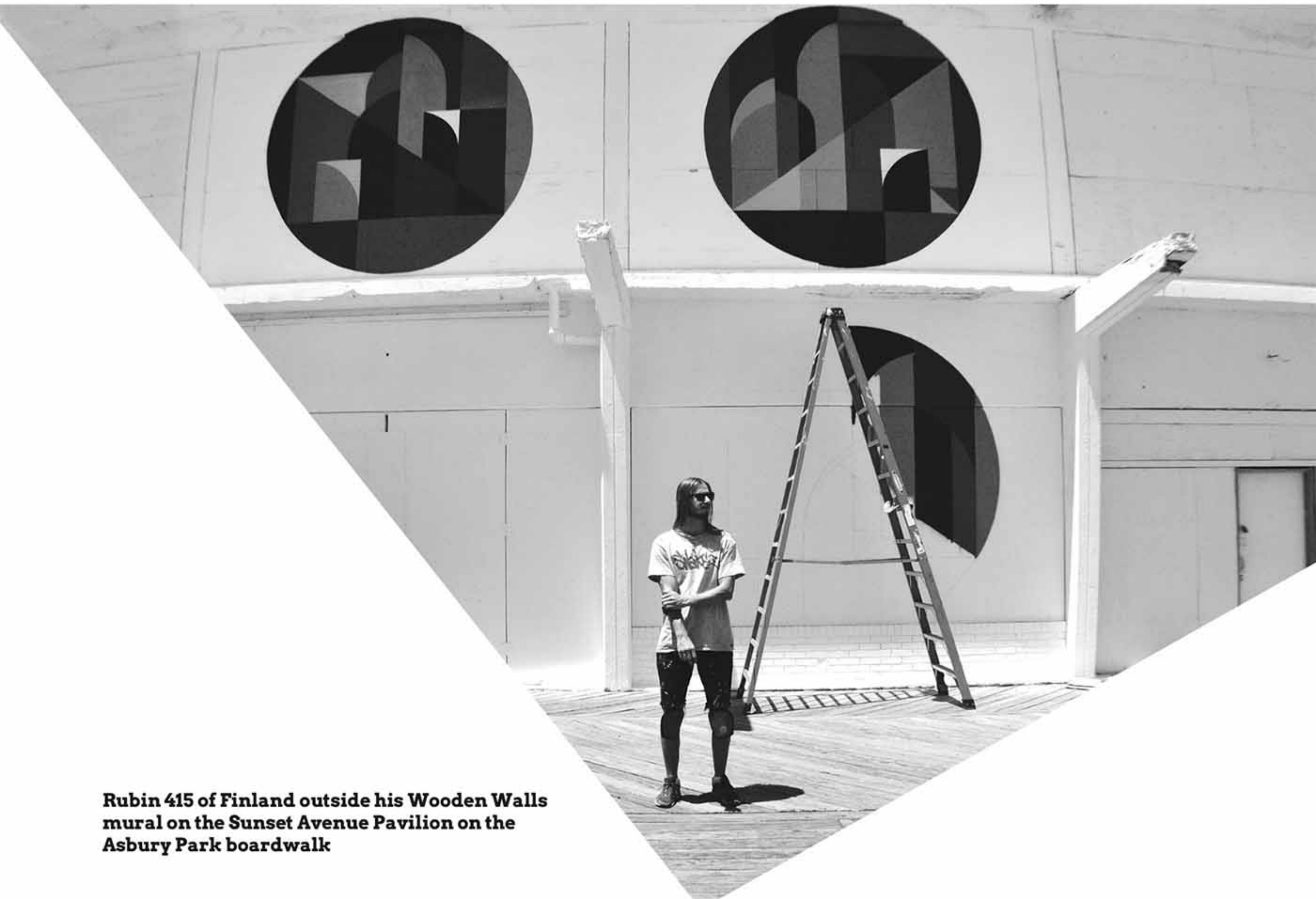
"I'm even more thankful that this organization has started to crawl so we can walk soon because our community is going to need it," Hampton said.

APAC's primary goal and mission is to work in collaboration with the city and art community in advancements of the arts. A first order of business is to work with the Planning Board to create that Arts and Culture Plan, a specific recommendation in the city's recent Master Plan Reexamination report. The Arts and Culture Plan will help further define and solidify the importance of the arts community in the roadmap for the city's ongoing development.

"I believe APAC should serve as one of our hallmarks," Sodano said. "The organization will be a resource for newcomers and visitors who are looking to find out what is going on in town with regard to the arts; that is more important now than ever before."

"The 2021 Asbury Park is far different from the 2007 Asbury Park," Sodano added. "We have really gone backward; while we have more opportunity and more art, because of the pandemic, we are really fractured. APAC will play a cohesive role in helping the arts community."

We know what people are going through and we know how government works," Turner said. "We are steadfast in our commitment because we love the town."



Rubin 415 of Finland outside his Wooden Walls mural on the Sunset Avenue Pavilion on the Asbury Park boardwalk