

JumpCut

By George T. Marshall

July 2007. Recently I found myself at a popular Providence nightspot called the Hi-Hat at Davol Square. It was jammed packed with area artists and directors. The reason for the large crowd was an annual awards ceremony that acknowledged the best of local talent in music and the arts. I had been asked to serve as a presenter for some of the top arts awards that evening. Tonight my role was that of a local arts leader, which I suppose can impress, but to me it's just that: a role.



As I prepped for my moment under the spotlight, I watched the organizer for the evening quietly making things happen behind the scene. He was very zen. This was a big night for him and nothing seemed to phase him. One by one, he put out small fires, stroked egos and made sure that everything flowed seamlessly.

The organizer: Jim Vickers; founder, editor and publisher of an arts publication based in Rhode Island. The publication: Motif, now heading into its fourth year.

I've known Jim since he started Motif. He was and remains a steadfast supporter of the Rhode Island International Film Festival and is a personal friend. We both share many things in common, not the least being making our dreams realities. Of course, there's no direct path to achieving one's dreams and along the way there are many missteps. Surviving those missteps and growing from them is what ultimately generates success.

If you didn't know already, Rhode Island is a quirky place. Politics is a spectator sport and that permeates every element of the culture. Where else can you find a disgraced former Mayor convicted of racketeering felony charges who comes back after four and a half years of prison to a bidding war for his services? (His asking price according to local media is \$250,000 for his talent as a host on local talk radio.)

There is also something rather telling about native Rhode Islanders: they have this strange belief that anything from outside the state is better than what is created within the state or by locals themselves. It's called the "Rhode Island inferiority complex," and yes, it exists.

Take a look at any of the state's arts events which are merely trunk shows utilizing outside talent: The JVC Newport Jazz Festival; the Dunkin' Donuts Newport Folk

Festival, Providence's First Works; even the Newport International Film Festival was created and curated by New Yorkers. Local artists rarely receive the same level of attention and credit for their talent: that is of course unless they've made their success outside of the state and then come back. (Think Peter and Bobby Farrelly, the two brothers from Cumberland who hit the national zeitgeist with "There's Something About Mary.")

So here I am at the Hi Hat and I'm handing out awards to local artists: musicians who play local clubs; community theatre actors; local directors; songwriters; costume designers; and artists from a whole slew of genres who are rarely recognized: except tonight that is

And that felt good.

Rhode Island actually has many gifted artists. Attend a local theatre such as Trinity Rep in Providence, the Sandra Feinstein - Gamm Theatre in Pawtucket or Second Story in Warren and you'll quickly make that discovery. Go to local night clubs or concerts; attend a Waterfire, take in a presentation at one of the colleges or universities, or view local film work and you'll quickly learn that Rhode Island is rich in talent.

Jim Vickers recognized that and it struck me, how often do readers get to know anything about the people who are behind the scenes in determining what you read, see or hear in the media?

So, at a morning meeting at Starbucks on Thames Street in Newport, Jim and I spoke about the arts, publishing, and what made him tick.

GTM: So just who is Jim Vickers?

Jim Vickers: Professionally speaking, Jim Vickers is editor, publisher and founder of Motif Magazine, the major arts publication in the Greater Rhode Island area. Artistically, I am a writer by nature.

GTM: Can you tell us a bit about your background, education and life's journey?

Jim Vickers: My ascension into the Arts was an unlikely one. Having dropped out of high school because I was unable to acclimate myself to the authoritarian public school approach to education, and because I had to work and support myself, I earned a GED and worked mainly manual labor jobs and night club security. I was a bouncer, basically, during my 20s. Unemployed and at the lowest financial point in my life, one step from living on the streets, I managed a job through the Teamsters Union, Local 251, loading trucks, which greatly improved my circumstances for a handful of years. But during the volatile 1980s economy, the warehouse closed. I took my meager savings and applied to Rhode Island College with the intention of learning skills to better my economic viability by pursuing the law. Knowing virtually nothing about the academic system, I selected RIC because it was closest to my apartment. My GED scores

were high, but the lack of a high school diploma had school administrators leaning toward sending me to community college, which would have been disastrous. One woman explained my application was borderline and that there was an essay on "why I want to go to college," which sometimes made the difference. I asked for a pen, sat down and wrote a 1,000 word essay. I was accepted on the spot. Ironically, it didn't dawn on me that my calling was writing. Those first English lit. and philosophy courses opened my eyes to a world of ideas and art, previously hidden behind a veil. I went from high school drop out to a man of letters. The people at Rhode Island College took a chance on me and turned me on to a brave new world. Without that transition in my life, without Rhode Island College, there would be no Motif Magazine and I'd likely be digging ditches for a living.

GTM: What was the motivation that sparked you to create Motif Magazine-and where did the name itself come from?

Jim Vickers: In Rhode Island, we have a long-standing tradition of local alternative and arts publications. About 5 years ago, a void emerged where alternative and arts source materials were more regionally based than local. At the time, I had been working as the A&E editor for The Westerly Sun. I put together a business plan and jumped without a parachute. Many of my colleagues viewed the world of start-up publications as risky. I saw this as an opportunity to give back to the community. I believed success is inevitable. But, now with viable industry skills and a Master's Degree from Rhode Island College, the downside would be simply to go work for another company if the community did not embrace Motif. Members of our vibrant arts community have faithfully supported Motif.

I learned the word "motif" in a graduate seminar on the Modern American Novel taught by Prof. Paul Anghinetti, my major professor during grad school. A "motif" is a recurrent theme or idea that runs through a literary work, applicable to all areas of the arts, and a metaphor for the publication itself.

GTM: Aside from being a business venture, this work is in many ways a labor of love for you. How many hours do you typically put into the publication on a weekly basis and what does that entail?

Jim Vickers: I see many small publications come and go locally. People have a love for something and try to translate that passion into a paper. The demands and sacrifices are high. You have to be prepared to forego a paycheck for the first year and work 60-70 hours a week. Going into Motif's fourth year, I still work about 60 hours a week, writing, editing, building partnerships and bridges. I even do part of the distribution

GTM: Motif has grown substantially during its short period, becoming a significant player in the regional arts scene. What is your vision for its future?

JV: Motif has exceeded the expectations of my initial 10-year plan. There are three priorities currently being addressed: 1) Distribution expansion; 2) Improvement in the areas of design, writing, and print quality; 3) Growing from twice monthly to weekly.

GTM: Can you share with us some behind the scenes stories about creating Motif, roadblocks you encountered and how they were overcome?

Jim Vickers: Publishing has always been a highly competitive industry. Our staff has adapted and overcome each time we've been pressed. I believe a successful approach to anything is to remain focused on your own tasks. As far as competitors, I like to quote Dana Carvey from "Wayne's World"... "Game on."

GTM: You have built significant relationships with many leading players in the Rhode Island arts scene. You have also passionately promoted artists throughout your entire career. Where does this passion come from and what fuels it?

Jim Vickers: American culture, if I dare a sweeping generalization, tends to press people into an almost worker bee mentality...be a good citizen, pay your taxes, produce economically and consume. These things distract from emphasis on our basic humanity and our growth as better, more whole people. The arts holds a mirror up and helps illuminate the good and good paths if we're willing to learn and be so moved. I listen to all genres of music, revel in the beauty when an artist creates a masterful conflation between sound and lyrics. I recall listening to local alternative rock station 95.5FM WBRU and hearing a metal song by Korn called "Twisted Transistor." Although an excellent group, Korn doesn't top my list of alt-rock bands per se, but that song offers a powerful message to confused and possibly suicide youths. I felt like it really spoke to angst ridden teens and people on the emotional fringe. I said to myself, driving down I-95, "that song will save lives." The arts save lives.

GTM: I was at your recent Motif Awards at the Hi Hat Club in Providence. You orchestrated everything, yet stayed behind the scenes. You let others host and never got on stage. Why didn't you put Jim Vickers into the spotlight?

Jim Vickers: The Motif Awards are not about Jim Vickers or any single individual, or even individual accomplishment for that matter. The Motif Awards are about community. For me, having more than 350 people from our arts community spend an evening in the same room together was what it's all about.

GTM: New England is filled with some amazing artists. Southern New England, and Rhode Island specifically, has wonderfully talented individuals working in an eclectic range of arts. Are their strengths and weaknesses for artists in this region, and can an artist make a successful career here without being forced to move to a New York or Los Angeles?

Jim Vickers: I've seen different approaches from artists. Some feel great reward from the ascetic approach. Others work very hard at being "commercially

successful." And, I have friends who strike a lovely balance. Living in Rhode Island has a tremendous upside for artists. The strength of community and talent to collaborate and network with exists here. The cost of living also remains lower than in a major city. However, traveling and getting your work out to audiences requires travel no matter where you live.

GTM: Who has inspired you in your life?

Jim Vickers: Arnold Schwarzenegger.

GTM: You are very close with your wife and children. As you measure your life, what lesson would you like your children to take from you?

Jim Vickers: Choose a path in life you believe in, one you're passionate about. Go your own way and be your own person. At the end of the day, it's most important to feel good about yourself.

About the Author:

George T. Marshall is the Producing Director of the Rhode Island-based Flickers Arts Collaborative, the creators of the annual Rhode Island International Film Festival for which he also serves as Executive Director. He teaches documentary film and speech communications at Roger Williams University. He is a director, writer, producer of commercials and industrials for numerous business clients in the region. Currently he is writing a chapter on teaching digital documentary filmmaking for a new college text book entitled: "Teaching with Multimedia: Pedagogy in the Blogosphere." He can be reached at <flicksart@aol.com>