JULIUS A. KARASH ON BUSINESS AND THE ARTS:

GUILDit: Nurturing the Kansas City Arts Scene

Nichole Raab of the Voler - Thieves of Flight Performance Ensemble spoke at the August meeting of GUILDit at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art. GUILDit offers networking, tools and resources to Kansas City artists and entrepreneurs.

From murals to museums and pop-ups to performance stages, the Kansas City arts scene has grown like a weight lifter on steroids in recent years. There’s more to see and more to do in more places.

But for many artists and arts-oriented organizations, one thing that has not pumped up is financing, whether through grants or ticket sales. In some cases, funding has shriveled a bit.

There is helpful information out there if you know where to look. One such place is GUILDit, a Kansas City program sponsored by Fractured Atlas, a New York-based nonprofit that empowers artists and arts organizations.

Founded in 2015, GUILDit was patterned after 1 Million Cups, the entrepreneurial education and networking program started by the Kauffman Foundation. Artists and representatives of art businesses and organizations tell their stories and seek advice and, hopefully, a bit of encouragement.

“It’s a way for artists, many of whom are entrepreneurs and very isolated, to come before a group of people who want to help them,” said Susana Bruhn, GUILDit founder and executive director. “We help them in idea generation on obtaining funds, running their business more efficiently, different markets they haven’t thought of reaching before.”

The August GUILDit meeting at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art featured presentations by City in Motion Dance Theater and the Voler - Thieves of Flight Performance Ensemble.

Both face challenges that revolve around the need to grow.

“Our philosophy is that everyone is a dancer,” Andrea Skowronek, City in Motion co-artistic director, told the dozen or so attendees. “We have a wide range of dance classes for adults and children. We do a lot on a small budget.”

City in Motion recently moved to new quarters in the Plexpod Westport Commons, located in the former Westport Junior High School on East 39th Street. Tracie Jensen, City in Motion School of Dance director, said they want to expand eastward across Troost to serve “new students, new populations and new communities.”

City in Motion’s income exceeded expenses by $12,071 last year, but ticket sales covered only 20 percent of expenses for most performances.
"Our grants, although they've been stable over the years, are decreasing," Skowronek said. She said funding from the Missouri Arts Council has dropped from $12,000 to $10,000 over the past couple of years. Support from Kansas City's Neighborhood Tourist Development Fund totaled $3,000 this year, down from $5,000 last year and $6,500 the year before that.

Voler took flight as a Kansas City-based ensemble of aerialists and dancers in 2007. The group performs aerial acrobatics. "I'll perform from cranes, from palm trees, wherever I can hang from," said Nichole Raab, one of Voler's original members. "That creates a lot of buzz and word of mouth."

Voler also offers classes that teach conditioning and stretching techniques. It is housed in a former church building perched in the historic Russian Hill neighborhood of Kansas City, Kansas. The group plans to expand into the Crossroads Arts District. Raab said they want to book more shows and events but the competition has grown fiercer.

The presentations were followed by questions and suggestions from those in the audience, which numbered about a dozen persons.

Paul Tyler, former grants director of the ArtsKC Regional Arts Council, said, "it's become a more competitive environment for arts and culture. The life of the arts community here is really dynamic, and it has grown substantially in the last several years. But we haven't had corresponding growth in traditional sources of funding that have supported the previous level of artistic vitality. It's a great time to rethink much of what you've been doing."

Bense Garza, an artist and designer, suggested that Voler reach out to Visit KC, Kansas City's tourism and convention bureau. He noted that event planners ask Visit KC for entertainment recommendations. He also recommended that Voler establish contact with the Missouri Division of Tourism.

Susana Bruhn, GUILDit founder and executive director, suggested that City in Motion seek ideas from the Kansas City Startup Foundation.

Garza recommended that City in Motion talk to the Missouri Lottery about potential funding.

"I was happy to get some fresh ideas," Skowronek said. "It was great networking with the people here."

Rachel McMeachin, Voler's founder, said she too found the GUILDit session helpful. "We've been learning as we go with this. This isn't stuff we already have in our heads. To have suggestions coming from people who've been doing this a lot longer than we have, or have a different perspective than we do, is so appreciated."