



(From left) Suzanne Kachmar of City Lights Gallery, Kathy Maher of the Barnum Museum, Marianne Frisch of the Bridgeport Arts & Cultural Council (front), Eileen Walsh of 305 Knowlton Street Gallery (rear), and Robbin Zella of the Housatonic Museum of Art, photographed in Bridgeport, Conn. March 29th, 2012. Photo: Ned Gerard / Connecticut Post

Bridgeport's arts doyennes committed to city's cultural future

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Many in large part place credit for Bridgeport's visual arts renaissance at the attractive feet of five dynamic, tireless individuals who believe they are on an important mission.

All are women -- and none live in Bridgeport. Their names are familiar to artists and hard-core arts lovers, who consider them Bridgeport's arts doyennes. Beyond that circle, their names are perhaps less known. Yet these women are helping to shape the "new" Bridgeport, creating events to draw visitors downtown. They are the force behind the development of special events, such as the annual Bridgeport Art Trail.

Their names: Eileen Walsh, [Kathleen Maher](#), Robbin Zella, [Suzanne Kachmar](#) and [Marianne Brunson Frisch](#).

We asked each to respond to a few questions about their motivations, their love of the arts and whence comes their passion for this former industrial city.

They responded eagerly in emails, each providing pages and pages of comments. One thing is obvious: None is in it for the money, as each has a modest income. Also apparent: Each loves Bridgeport, each loves what she does, and

each is a community activist volunteering hours of her time to countless arts projects. And each has elevated the chore of multi-tasking to an art form. Here are their comments.

Eileen H. Walsh, 43, Stratford, owner/ director of Gallery 305K on Knowlton Street, a commercial gallery; co-founder of the [Bridgeport Arts Trail](#); www.facebook.com/pages/Gallery-305K/145195792202986

"I have always loved Bridgeport and feel very connected to it (and its) unique charm ... I find people who visit my gallery from out of town are amazed by what they find (here). Most importantly, I like the people of Bridgeport. I find them to be welcoming, smart, adventurous and full of talents and surprises. It's a pleasure for me working here, watching the city grow and change. I love that part of my job is having events and inviting them into the gallery. That is truly what keeps me going.

"Having an active arts community is one of the signs of a healthy city. The arts often act like a carrot to draw people in. Gallery 305K is housed in the historic Armstrong Factory on the East Side. As a private gallery, I do most everything. I am also a metal sculpture (artist) -- but I am not good enough to get into my own gallery!"

Biggest challenge: "Art is a luxury item and can be difficult to sell in a community where people struggle to make ends meet. We need to keep reaching for a broader audience that will be able to appreciate the art we show, and be capable of purchasing the art and supporting the artists who make it."

Kathleen Maher, 49, Trumbull, executive director/curator, [Barnum Museum](#), a nonprofit owned by the city and operated by a foundation; lecturer and guest on the [History Channel, Arts & Entertainment](#) and NPR, serves on numerous boards and sits on the [Connecticut Historic Preservation Council](#) as a gubernatorial appointee; www.barnum-museum.org.

"Bridgeport is a vital, fascinating, historic city with a modern heart and soul. Very much like New York, Bridgeport celebrates its glorious past and has enormous pride in the contributions it has made to a greater American and global landscape.

"Having [P.T. Barnum](#)'s legacy to preserve and interpret is no small responsibility. His life, enterprises, adventures are truly the `stuff' that legends are made of, and it is an extraordinary honor to be charged with the task. (Beyond circus showman), his contributions to the character of American entertainment, advertising and even social reforms are part of the fabric of who we are today. Barnum embodied `living life to the fullest' and in his own words: `The noblest art is that of making others happy!' "

Biggest challenge: "As the museum recovers from the 2010 tornado, the efforts of preserving the landmark have taken the lead on priorities, and the recovery, including everything from the preservation of the magnificent building to the remarkable 25,000 artifacts inside the museum, has taken center stage." (A partial reopening is planned for later this month.)

Robbin Zella, 52, West Haven, director of the [Housatonic Museum of Art](#) at [Housatonic Community College](#), where she oversees a \$15 million donated collection; spearheaded the movement to establish the Greater Bridgeport Arts & [Cultural Council](#); www.hcc.commnet.edu/artmuseum.

"I think that the phrase `grow where you're planted' is apt. As the only full-time employee at the HMA, I perform most of the duties ... (from) curator (to) grants writer. The HMA was founded on the belief that daily interaction with art can have a profound effect on one's life. Art can spark dialogue, allow a space for contemplation, a space to think and feel. Art also creates community through participation and/or collaboration. Corny as it may sound, I really believe that art, architecture, music, literature ... dance, choreography, film, poetry are the physical manifestations of the human spirit and will."

Biggest challenge: Finding funders. "Because the times are so tough, people need a respite from their daily dose of woe: economic downturn, rising costs, job loss, school loans."

Suzanne Kachmar, 53, Milford, executive director and program director of [City Lights Gallery](#), a nonprofit arts gallery and community center, co-founder of Art Trail; www.citylightsgallery.org

"Honestly, in part, I have selfish reasons" for wanting Bridgeport to succeed. "I would love to embrace my inner lazy self while feeding my need for the stimulation and affirmation that the arts give to me -- and share that joy and catharsis with others."

"I want all the arts ... in my backyard. Also I crave the type of (vibrant) place that an arts community creates ... I have had the luck of visiting, working, studying and living in communities where the arts greatly contributed to the character of a place -- (places such as) Venice, Rome, St. Petersburg, Paris, New York ... and Stratford (former home of the [Shakespeare Festival Theatre](#))."

Working with kids in an impoverished neighborhood made her realize "that it was important to pay forward my good fortune of having art easily accessible to me from childhood."

Biggest challenge: "It's tough to sell art in this economy, especially at the rate that the artists need and deserve to be compensated. We are free and open to the public; this is part of our mission. But to do so, we need to sell art, seek funding, donations and sponsors."

Marianne Brunson Frisch, 56, Weston, executive director, Bridgeport Arts & Cultural Council; www.bridgeportarts.org.

"Bridgeport has character. The city is genuine and self-assured. So many people are passionate about Bridgeport and all of its facets and have approached me with enthusiasm, rallying around the arts and culture as springboards for Bridgeport's growth. The city has a spirit of camaraderie and shared ownership, which is inviting and engaging."

"My passion for Bridgeport and the BACC are intertwined. The BACC supports and strengthens Bridgeport's cultural sector by building and facilitating partnerships with artists and organizations, coordinating and hosting seminars and forums, linking like-minded individuals and groups, organizing art- and community-based exhibitions and artist-led talks, and highlighting the vibrant arts community through social media avenues. We are a hub for networking for those offering and seeking information."

"What has impressed me since joining the BACC is the spirit of collaboration among the arts and cultural community as well as the mayor's office and other organizations and businesses. Moving forward with this positive energy and combined effort will bring success."

Biggest challenge: "Finding enough resources to support the local arts and cultural programs."

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Read more: <http://www.ctpost.com/entertainment/article/Bridgeport-s-arts-doyennes-committed-to-city-s-3469216.php#ixzz1rrrMPW57>