WSU’s Arts Gala showcases student talents, versatility, community commitment

Let’s take the initial “W” of Wright State University and divide it into two “Vs.” The “Vs” will stand for versatile, doubly so in the case of the annual Wright State Arts Gala.

The entire arts center is in the midst of a major renovation, in some areas, a reconstruction. Entrances have been closed and areas walled-off. This did not stop the V is for Versatile Gala planners.

Led by Jennie Buckwalter, the Internal Committee of faculty and staff work closely with the Arts Gala Host Committee. This year’s enthusiastic co-chairs were the affable Kelly and Joe Lehman. The committee is a definition of “eternal.” My wife and I have been part of this group since its inception. And, we join others in enthusiastically remaining “in the loop” for planning this grand event.

There are so many aspects that make the Arts Gala a premiere happening in the Dayton area. This year, over 760 patrons attended to enjoy the arts, the camaraderie and glorious food stations spread throughout the arts complex. But the defining attraction is that the funds raised by the attendees is devoted to scholarships for the mega-talented students that attend WSU’s multi-faceted arts programs.

After last year, the Galas had raised over $1.75 million for these beautiful young strivers. It is forecasted that this year’s record attendance will push that total above the $3 million mark!

All involved thrill when we see the scholarship recipients everywhere at WSU. Often these scholarships make the difference in their lives and futures. At the Gala, the students, in their full-dress finery, bear tags that say, proudly, “May I Help You.” Just seeing them helps all of us!

The veteran attendees often come with the vow that they will enjoy all of the arts performances and demonstrations. I defy anyone to come forth and claim that they have accomplished this. If anyone ever came close, it would be Paul and Susie Weaver. Paul, always a paragon of organization skills, has a plan and shares it freely. Last year we tried to follow them and gave up in the 2nd hour. This year, we didn’t even try.

We always begin with the lavish hors d’oeuvres that dominate the

main hall. It takes a lot of plate balancing, hugging and kissing, to accomplish sampling the delights. This year, one of my favorite restaurants, Amber Rose, created the appetizing appetizers. The College Chorale sang from the balcony and were the prelude to the official welcome by President David Hopkins and Dean Kristin Sobolik.

After that, the rush began. Many start with the Wind Symphony in Schuster Hall. The orchestra is one of those extra special events, a phalanx of every sort of tootling instrument. They do make beautiful music but the anticipated feature is the “guest conductor” leading The Stars and Stripes Forever.

Customarily, the guest is one of the chairs of the event. This year, Kelly and Joe selected their son, Evan Welser, a WSU graduating senior, to take the honors. Evan hopped up on the podium replacing Maestro David Booth and took charge immediately. He was really conducting and loved every second of it!

I can only speak for my path through the banquet of delights. We began with a violette performance of Mamma Mia. Four couples were in constant motion as they belted out the lively numbers of this popular musical. As a special surprise, Kevin Moore, Artistic Director of The Human Race Theatre Company, was introduced by Stuart McDowell. Kevin presented the coveted Stephen Schwartz prize to Mimi Klipstein. Mimi, a star in many of the WSU productions, is graduating and heading for New York and her slice of theater history. Mimi has also been a “Catch a Rising Star” scholar for several years, a program partially sponsored by Alice and me.

From there, we looked in on the chamber music studio and made our way to the Festival Playhouse for an energetic sampler of Peter Pan, the present mega-musical. The joyful cast gave three full-house performances. You can still see the entire production until April 16. Few tickets are left but begging the WSU box office helps.

We then went to the Herbst Theatre for Sondheim on Sondheim. Again, a dazzling cast delivered a sparkling performance interspersed with film clips of Sondheim discussing his work. Sean Michael Flowers, WSU star of a decade ago, has returned from New York and collegiate teaching. His amazing piano accompanied the singers perfectly.

Sondheim is a brilliant lyricist. He got his start with the lyrics for Bernstein’s iconic musical, West Side Story. When he writes his own mu-

cals, the lyrics are startling, clever, timely and electric. His music turns them into patter songs.

We were also able to see Kim Warwick’s Opera Theater production of The Pirates of Penzance. Always fun, Gilbert & Sullivan’s romp was well done. It featured retired WSU professor and acting devotee, Chuck Larkowski, as the Major General. He and his bevy of beauties made everything come up sunshine!

I must remind all that there was lavish food, all different from different purveyors, at every performance venue. Suddenly, it was the end of the evening. When we repaired to the main hall for the well-remembered dessert buffet, we realized that we were a bit late and it was picked clean by the revelers. Well, that wasn’t all that we missed. Perhaps next year we will do it all — but we would have to wear roller skates!