

Lawyers team up with accountants & artists

Question: What do you get when you bring together smart lawyers, dedicated accountants and creative artists? Answer: You get St. Louis Volunteer Lawyers and Accountants for the Arts (VLAA).

VLAA brings rewarding volunteer opportunities, a chance to directly and positively impact the arts scene in St. Louis and opportunities to work with a lot of fun and creative people.

VLAA is a not-for-profit organization that was started in 1982 to provide free legal and accounting services to local artists and arts organizations. The organization works with law schools, the legal and accounting communities and the arts community to provide a network of volunteers from various disciplines to support the business side of the artists' work.

I have served on the board of VLAA and continue to volunteer. My first contact with the organization was in the early '90s when the Executive Director of VLAA, Sue Greenberg, and I met through a BAMSL function. The mission of the organization intrigued me. I thought, "Well, I have no artistic talent, and I really admire those who do. How cool would it be to work closely with incredibly talented and creative people?" (I've since learned that some of volunteers who work with VLAA actually DO have artistic talent, including authors, photographers and actors.)

Little did I know how deep and broad the arts scene was in St. Louis and the impact that VLAA has had through the years. VLAA volunteers work with individual artists on a variety of issues, including tax questions, setting up LLC's, and helping with First Amendment and intellectual property issues. For me, volunteering with VLAA has been some of the most rewarding work I have done.

My first project with VLAA was to work with Sue to develop the "Arts Resolution Program" in which volunteer mediators and facilitators help artists and arts organizations resolve disputes. Most of my work with VLAA has been through the resolution program. I have mediated issues around rehearsal and production space-sharing arrangements between theater companies, mediated a dispute between a pianist and piano tuner over repairs of an instrument, taught groups of artists negotiation skills and I've facilitated strategic planning meetings for the boards of arts organizations.

Most recently, I worked with the leaders of two arts organizations, Art St. Louis and ChalkRiot, a chalk art organization. The two organizations had been collaborating for about a year and had produced some excellent projects. The organizations wanted to formalize their relationship. However, they recognized

that talking about business issues (including money!) can create difficult conversations. They contacted VLAA for help and VLAA contacted me. I worked with them to set up an agenda for their negotiations, helped them maintain a collaborative tone throughout their conversations, and asked questions to help them consider issues that might arise in the future. Through our work together, the leaders developed a "term sheet". Then they returned to VLAA for help in drafting a contract. Through VLAA services, Art St. Louis and ChalkRiot were able to negotiate the terms of their relationship, build trust and predictability in their dealings with each other, and have a firm foundation for their collaborations for years to come.

In addition to working with individual artists and organizations, VLAA hosts "clinics" for artists on many legal and accounting topics. Volunteer attorneys and accountants show their expertise and teach artists about key issues in law and accounting that touch on the artists' work. Then, the artists have an opportunity to meet one-on-one with the volunteers to get more individualized advice.

VLAA provides a whole host of other services to the arts community. The organization has a library of very readable publications on many legal and accounting topics, all of which are free of charge. VLAA's "Upstart" program sends speakers to art classes at local universities to build awareness of the business environment in the arts. Volunteers also talk with the boards of arts. Recently, VLAA started its "Every Artist Covered" program, to help artists get health insurance through Healthcare.gov. As part of the program, VLAA partners with agencies to connect artists and counselors to guide artists through the signup process.

Some of my most fulfilling work has been as a volunteer through VLAA. The artists are incredibly appreciative of the help they receive. As Sue Greenberg told me recently, "In legal practice, regular paying clients write a check and shrug. The artist client shows real gratitude."

So, what do you get when you bring together smart lawyers, dedicated accountants and creative artists? An incredibly rewarding volunteer opportunity and a chance to connect with, and directly impact, the arts scene in St. Louis.

For more information about VLAA, visit www.VLAA.org.



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