

How Amy Amdur became the queen of the art festival



Amy Amdur, CEO of Amdur Productions, produces some of the largest art festivals in Chicago and the suburbs, including the Port Clinton Art Festival she founded in Highland Park. (Denys Bucksten / Pioneer Press)

By **Bruce Ingram**
Pioneer Press

MAY 10, 2017, 11:28 AM

If you've attended an art festival in the Chicago area, there's a good chance you've attended one run by Amy Amdur.

Amdur's name has become synonymous with some of the city and suburb's largest art festivals. As a festival producer, she took the first step toward her business Amdur Productions in 1984 when she created the Port Clinton Art Festival as a means to promote the new Port Clinton Square shopping center co-developed by her father Steven. Then the Highland Park native spent the next 15 years developing art fests as a side business without pay, supporting herself with other full-time work, until deciding to devote herself to it full-time after the birth of her first child.

Amdur's 2017 season has already begun in April with the Chicago Art and Design Show on Navy Pier, but she has plenty of major shows ahead of her in the coming months including the Barrington Art Festival May 27-28, the Gold Coast Art Fair June 17-18, the Chicago Botanic Gardens Art Festival July 1-2, the Evanston Art & Big Fork Festival Aug. 18-20 and the Port Clinton Art Festival Aug. 26-27. We caught up with Amdur for a chat about why art has always been such an important part of her life and how she nurtured her festival business by working without salary for years.

Q: On spring days when the sun is out and it's obvious that your busiest season is on the way, do you ever feel some form of panic?

A: (Laughs) I know what you mean but, actually, no, I don't. I'm one of those lucky people in the world who loves what I do. Every season, I really look forward to it. Not to say that I don't take a deep breath, because I know how much work is coming. But I really love the festivals and I find them incredibly rewarding on a personal level.

Also, I'm very fortunate to have a great staff. They really make it all possible. I couldn't do it all on my own anymore.

Q: It seems you've been active with your own artistic output your whole life, basically.

A: My whole life. I started painting classes when I was 5 years old. At that time, I used to go with my mother to Crossroads, when it was a brand new shopping center in Highland Park, where they had a painting school called The Suburban Fine Art Center. And it eventually ended up becoming the Art Center of Highland Park.

Back then, though, my mom would leave me to watch the painters while she did her shopping — different time, different world, right? — and I loved it. So, when I was 5, turning 6, she enrolled me in weekly classes with a woman named Florence Singer.

Florence Singer was really important to me because I continued to take painting classes with her all the way through high school. She gave me my art sensibility and taught me how to look at art. That's in addition to teaching the real techniques artists use to paint — like learning how to mix colors. It wasn't dumbed down for beginners or amateurs.

Q: Is it true that you also had your first art festival experience at the age of 5 — as an exhibitor?

A: It's true. I have a photo of myself at that show here in my office. I was exhibiting my paintings from that first summer of classes. And someone offered to buy one of them for \$25. And I said no. (Laughs.) I didn't want to let go of them. They were too important to me. I actually still have that painting up in my office. It has yellow flowers in a blue vase against an orange background.

Q: The story goes that your career producing art festivals began in 1984 when you suggested the Port Clinton Art Festival to your father, real estate developer Steven Amdur, when he was looking for ways to promote the new Port Clinton Square shopping center.

A: That's true. Though I didn't go straight to work for my dad after graduating from Northwestern. I got some other business experience first for a couple of years. The idea of the development was to revitalize Highland Park.

So, I said during a meeting, 'Aren't we going to have some sort of grand opening, to bring people in?' That was back when women wore little man suits and man ties and high heels to business meetings, you know. (Laughs.) And everyone in the meeting just turned to me and said, 'You handle it.' Because none of them wanted to do it.

I actually created a number of things including Music at the Plaza, working with Ravinia, and a Taste of Highland Park. But I couldn't figure out how to get people to go out of the main plaza and into all the twists and turns of the south plaza. And then I thought, 'Well, that's what an art festival does.' And that led to the first art festival I ever produced. We started that year with 40 artists and the public loved it and the artists sold and it grew and grew and grew over time.

It wasn't always easy. At times it was an uphill struggle with businesses not wanting an art festival in Highland Park and I was young and I was a woman and it was a different time, 30 years ago, to be a 20-year-old woman in the business world. It took a lot of persevering.

But I had a vision and I think I learned about the importance of having a vision from my dad. So now, 34 years later, we have 260 artists in the Port Clinton Art Festival, we have a youth division, we've incorporated the Taste of Highland Park, we have music and main stage entertainment, a whole area for nonprofits, and we have Art for Autism with 10 percent of sales of art will go to the Autism Response Team.

Q: Is it true that after creating Port Clinton Art Festival, you continued developing festivals as sort of a sideline while pursuing other full-time work? And that you didn't draw a salary for a long time?

A: That's correct. I nurtured the art festivals while continuing with other full-time jobs, whether it was with my dad or other firms. I worked seven days a week and put those hours in. I didn't take days off. I'd come home from my day job and work until midnight or 1 a.m. on the festivals. And for the first 15 years, I didn't take a penny for that work. I incubated those businesses by maintaining other full-time jobs the whole time. It was only when my daughter Hannah, who's 19 now, was born that I said I can't do it all. So, at that point I made running festivals my full-time job.

Q: How many festivals are you producing now?

A: That's a good question. (Laughs.) I'll have to count them. Actually, we have 28 on the calendar and another two that aren't officially confirmed yet, but I'll say 30. Thirty festivals and we're also launching www.artzipper.com, which is an online art commerce site. It's in beta, but it's open now as a way for people to shop art festivals from their phones or their desktops. If you've been to a festival and saw something you liked, you can go online, look up the artist find their images and buy it there.

So, that's what we've been up to. That and another arm of the business a lot of people don't know about — a production company for events.

Q: Are there any fests you're most proud of?

A: I'm very proud of Port Clinton. Not only because I've gotten to know so many amazing artists over the past 34 years, but because I feel it's important for a community like Highland Park to have things like this that bring people together in an entirely positive way. There's enough negative stuff out there in the world.

Q: What would you say has given you the most satisfaction, looking back over the past 34 years?

A: I think what's most gratifying is going from having an idea to seeing it happen in real time. That's pretty powerful and it's always satisfying.

I only wish my parents and my brother (Steven, Barbara and Scott Amdur, ed.) were here to see it all. But they did see it happen to a point and I'm grateful for that. Fortunately, my kids can see it all and I'm really thrilled about that. I guess that's what I'm most happy about, to be able to share these festivals with my children.