

The perks and pleasures of volunteering for St. Louis arts groups

Jane Henderson Mar 13, 2023 4



Volunteer usher Margo Barnidge inserts cards into playbills for attendees on March 5, before an evening performance of "To Kill a Mockingbird" at the Fox Theatre.

Jane Henderson

Last year, Ann and Ellen Fusz had more time onstage than they'd had in 40 years with Opera Theatre of St. Louis.

"Unfortunately, we were in comas," Ellen Fusz says. "And wheelchairs," adds her sister.

As nonspeaking extras in "Awakenings," they performed happily for free as unconscious patients. "It was so fun," Ellen Fusz says.

Not just supernumeraries (extras), the sisters are super-volunteers. During countless hours spent helping the opera organization, the Fusz sisters of Webster Groves have been theater guild presidents, backstage dressers and committee leaders. They've picked up singers from the airport and found certified teachers to wrangle children involved with productions.

The sisters' service to Opera Theatre may be extensive, but it's not exactly rare: Volunteers to St. Louis arts and cultural institutions make up a largely hidden army of willing, enthusiastic workers. And although they don't receive paychecks, they say the perks and pleasures of volunteering can — usually — make ushering, selling concert merch, giving tours or planting flowers worth the effort.

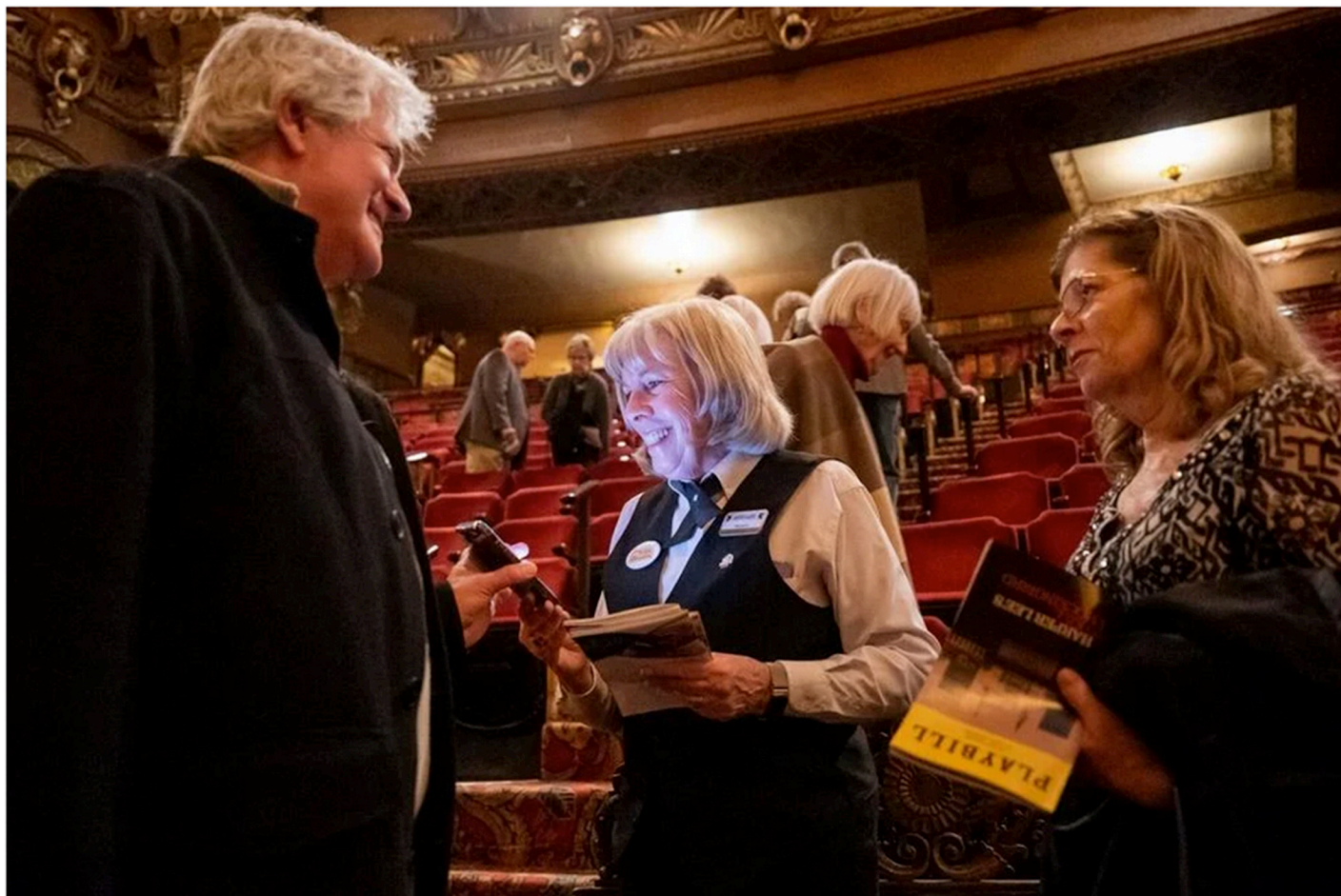


Ellen Fusz plays a patient who briefly emerges from a coma in "Awakenings," a 2022 show at Opera Theatre of St. Louis. Laura Huff is the nurse.

Courtesy of OTSL

'The hardest workers'

Aleece Vogt oversees cabinets packed with vests and ties for ushers at the Fox Theatre. Currently, there's a roster of about 750 ushers, with approximately 35 on duty per performance.



Volunteer usher Margo Barnidge, center, helps direct Ken, left, and Gail Slavens to their seats on March 5 at the Fox Theatre.
Photo by Jordan Opp, Post-Dispatch

"We appreciate them so much," says Vogt, the theater's director of guest services. "They are the hardest workers there."

Like Opera Theatre, the Fox has had dedicated volunteers for decades. A 92-year-old usher recently "resigned." "She was one of the fastest ushers I had," Vogt notes.

When Fox co-owner Mary Strauss got the idea to ask for volunteer ushers through a newspaper ad, thousands of people showed up in 1982, stopping traffic on Grand Boulevard, Vogt says.

Fox ushers commit to a night or day of the week they prefer to work, then sign in when they arrive a good hour and a half before a performance starts. To remain in good standing, they need to work 60% of their assigned days' shows, whether theater or concert or comedy.



Ushers attend a meeting March 5 at the Fox Theatre before an evening performance of "To Kill a Mockingbird."

Photo by Jordan Opp, Post-Dispatch

After seating patrons, the ushers can sit to watch — so long as they aren't right next to a guest. That usually means a seat on a far side.

Margo Barnidge of Crestwood worked recently and stayed to watch **Richard Thomas star in "To Kill a Mockingbird."** If she's seen a show before, sometimes she leaves soon after it starts.

But overall, Barnidge, 69, says, "It's really fun and you get to see lots of plays — for me, plays I wouldn't necessarily go buy." Many she enjoys (she "loved" "Mockingbird"); others "not so much."

She's been volunteering at the Fox since before she retired as a Special School District teacher in the Lindbergh schools. But in the last 15 or so years, she's amped up her volunteer game: She sells 50-50 tickets for Cardinals Care at Busch Stadium, works the Mother's Day art fair at Laumeier Sculpture Park, ushers at the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis and tells stories to students for Ready Readers. She also works for 100 Neediest Cases, Operation Food Search and as an educational surrogate for students in group homes.

Yet Barnidge insists she's not necessarily "altruistic." She likes staying busy, for one thing. "I do it for me," she says, not totally convincingly. "I do things that I enjoy."

She likes the perks (although she's passed on a plethora of free T-shirts). Several organizations hold parties for volunteers. And when Barnidge is at Busch Stadium, she can have dinner in the press dining room and is welcome to stand and watch the eighth and ninth innings of a baseball game. Usually Barnidge is ready to go home, though.



At the annual Laumeier art fair, the free admission is a relatively small perk, Barnidge says, but she also enjoys seeing

Volunteer usher Margo Barnidge, center, helps direct Ken, left, and Gail Slavens to their seats on March 5 at the Fox Theatre.

Photo by Jordan Opp, Post-Dispatch

some of the same people year after year. The park provides volunteers with food, attendance prizes and has a big party once a year. "Everyone is really friendly," she says, and the annual event runs like a "well-oiled machine."

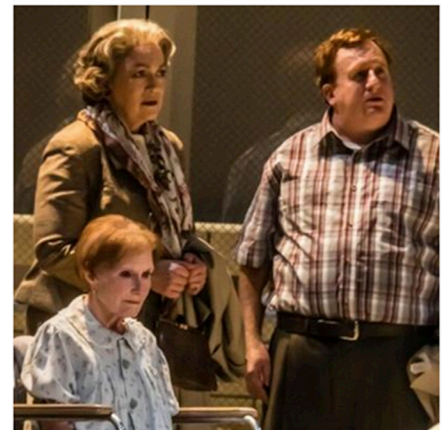
What she doesn't like is when an organization has nothing for her to do or when it doesn't seem appreciative of the help. "Just say 'thanks for coming,'" Barnidge advises.

Service hours

Arts volunteers, like those at hospitals, shelters and other places, usually pick jobs or venues they have an avid interest in. With dozens of venues, from museums to the multiple options associated with the Kranzberg Arts Foundation, workers can help educate others or take in a free concert.

Last summer, the Kranzberg's Arica Foster rounded up almost 80 volunteers for **the two-day Music at the Intersection festival**. A shift of several hours rewarded volunteers, who ranged from 25 and up, with a \$79 festival pass. Foster believes that many helpers, though, just "enjoyed serving" and wanted to get close to the festival culture.

The Fusz sisters, now in their 70s, started attending Opera Theatre when it opened in 1976 and they were young teachers. They immediately fell in love with opera and within a few years were volunteers as extras. (Although when Ann Fusz was told by a director he wanted her for a "nude scene," she was aghast. Relief followed when the scene turned out to employ clothes.)



Ann Fusz (seated) plays a patient in the Opera Theatre of St. Louis 2022 production of "Awakenings."

Courtesy of OTSL

At that time, volunteers didn't expect "perks," and perhaps they still shouldn't, Ellen Fusz says. But then she counts off the thrills of just being involved with top singers at one of the country's best regional operas. "It's so good for your mind and your soul."

Although many volunteers are retirees, their ages, race and gender actually vary considerably, says Vogt of the Fox. And although they usually love what they do, sometimes the volunteer hours are requirements. Theater students often volunteer or can become interns at various venues.

Hadiya Abdul-Mumin, 16, says her school, Hazelwood West High School, requires 50 service hours for graduation. She lives near the Buder library in south St. Louis and decided to be a "Book Buddy" who listens to young kids read or who reads to them.



Hadiya Abdul-Mumin, 16, volunteers as a "Book Buddy" at the Buder library branch of the St. Louis Public Library.

Courtesy of St. Louis Public Library

"I think volunteering is important to stay in touch with the community," says Hadiya, who is an enthusiastic reader. Younger children often seem to look up more to teens, she says. The Book Buddy program is casual: "The librarians really wanted us to just get the kids involved."

David Hults, 60, of Sunset Hills is also required to put in volunteer hours every year to keep his certification as a master gardener. He says there are dozens of places in the St. Louis area where anyone who simply likes “digging in dirt” can volunteer (including parks such as Forest Park and Tower Grove Park). Hults, who has his own garden design business, lives near Laumeier, so he often helps with planting and planning landscapes there.

In addition to beautifying the park, volunteers work with the park’s education staff to introduce plants in collaboration with programming, such as its health and wellness initiative, says Julia Norton, the park’s volunteer coordinator.



Nancy Willis (left), 60, a gardener on the Forest Park staff, and Mike Normile, 69, a volunteer, along with other staff members and volunteers, plant Crusader tulip bulbs in 2018 near the World's Fair Pavilion in Forest Park. An army of staff members and volunteers are planting more than 56,000 bulbs.

“Laumeier is fortunate to be an arts institution where nature abounds,” she says. About 275 volunteers engage with Laumeier during the year, with about half of those donating some 500 person hours to the weekend art fair.

School athletic organizations have often enlisted parents to work concession stands or parking garages at Busch or the Hollywood Casino Amphitheatre in Maryland Heights. Volunteers at the amphitheater food and drink stands get to listen to some of the concert while their sports organizations receive a percentage of profits for their teams.

Keys to success

In the 1930s, a rulebook for the Fox told ushers: “Do not watch the picture while on duty, or allow the music to make a dreamer out of you.”

Some 21st-century venues do use paid ushers, but many seek volunteers and entice them with perks.

Jim Jordan, a volunteer house manager and usher at the Sheldon Concert Hall & Art Galleries, loves music. A former STEM community educator who lives in Maplewood, his career ended so he could care for his son, Aidan, who has multiple disabilities and is nonverbal.

But like his dad, 25-year-old Aidan loves live music, and Jordan’s volunteer work provides some opportunities for his son, too. Not only does Jordan get to choose which concerts he’s interested in working, after so many volunteer hours he earns a couple of free tickets to attend a show as a guest. Aidan also attends some daytime events for school groups.

When Jordan volunteers, though, he gets a care provider for his son: “It’s my break,” he says.



Although Jim Jordan, left, volunteers at the Sheldon Concert Hall & Art Galleries, he often takes his son, Aidan, to other events. Here they are with blues guitarist Guy Davis after his “audio play,” “The Adventures of Fishy Waters” at the Sun Theatre on Grandel Square.

Courtesy of Jim Jordan

He believes volunteers deserve perks. A great volunteer should understand three things, he says. They are there to help “meet the mission of the institution”; “provide great customer service”; and “have a good time and be rewarded.”

If volunteers don’t feel valued or have a good time, “there’s no way you can provide great customer service,” Jordan says.

Sometimes it’s even up to them to deal with unruly or noisy audience members. “Usually people at the Sheldon are convivial, and there’s no problem,” he says.

But sometimes a tipsy guest will be too loud and an usher will remind him it’s a “listening room.” If all else fails, a security member might be called in to remove the guest.

Like other volunteers, Jordan has some memorable stories: A lively concert with Jerry Jeff Walker meant the bar staff had to make several “beer runs,” he says.

Problem solving can come with the job. Ushers recount patrons who have lost their dentures in the dark. A young boy walked out of the Fox without his pants, performers’ zippers break and an opera singer, who brought her exercise bike to St. Louis, refused to leave the airport without it — even though it was too big for the car.