

LAWRENCE BUSINESS MAGAZINE

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IMPACT *of* VOLUNTEERING

Fueling Growth, Connection, and Shaping Our Community

“ If our hopes of building a better and safer world are to become more than wishful thinking, we will need the engagement of volunteers more than ever. ”

Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations

USHERING IN A NEW SEASON

JOHN & ERIKA

DVORSKE

The Lied Center

by Julie Dunlap, photo by Steven Hertzog

Volunteering at the Lied Center not only allows people the ability to connect with community members socially, it also offers a direct connection to the arts.

Three seasons into their tenure as Lied Center volunteers, Erika and John Dvorske are just as excited to greet audience members as they were the first time.

“Every season feels like a new adventure,” says Erika, COO of SCC CPA + Advisors, in Lawrence.

The Dvorskes are two of the more than 125 people who donate their time through the Volunteer Usher Corps for the many dozens of live performances annually at Lied Center, now in its 32nd season on campus at The University of Kansas. The Dvorskes’ experience with the volunteer program has impacted their relationships within and outside of the community in ways they never imagined.

“I get to do an activity for something I care about, which is the arts,” says John, an independent legal researcher and writer, “and the bonus is getting to see the shows. We sometimes pick (shows) we didn’t think we’d normally buy a ticket to and end up surprised at how much we enjoyed it.”

“We love going to shows we don’t know much about, and our world gets a little bit bigger,” Erika adds.

From scanning tickets of longtime patrons to seating first-time audience members, volunteers are the warm-up act for every performance. Erika says she and John land differently on the extrovert-introvert spectrum, yet they each find the service-level interaction as a volunteer usher highly fulfilling.

Erika, who previously worked as the executive director of the United Way of Douglas County, fully understands the impact volunteers can have on a community. Her time as a volunteer has only strengthened her connection to the community, with each show offering the chance to engage with old friends and acquaintances around town in a new and helpful way.

“It’s so nice to have so many of the members of our usher corps who are involved so deeply in the community,” says Lied Center Executive Director Derek Kwan. “It’s really meaningful and fulfilling to see patrons being greeted by name when they walk in the door.”

John recalls one special volunteer shift that allowed him to reconnect with a friend he had lost touch with during the pandemic.

“I have an older friend that I hadn’t seen for about three years because of COVID,” he explains. The friend happened to make his way to John’s volunteer post at a Lied Center show, and the two enjoyed a long-awaited, spontaneous reunion. This chance, face-to-face encounter restarted their relationship, and the two now enjoy meeting up regularly to catch up.

“Our volunteer usher corps is about creating a stronger sense of community,” Kwan says, noting the impact a diverse and inclusive usher corps has on the way patrons feel welcome at the broad range of events and performances the Lied Center presents each season. “We are so fortunate that so many individuals are willing to donate their time and their people skills to be the first face that patrons will interact with when they attend a show.”

Kwan is proud of the growth of the volunteer program throughout his 11 seasons at the university’s nearly 2,000-seat performing arts center.

“Our ultimate goal is to make sure every single person in our community feels welcome here,” says Kwan, adding that “there’s been more of an intentional effort to broaden the base of volunteers. So many of them have such incredible life experiences, the Volunteer Corps is like a family.”

As the Dvorskes eyeball a rapidly emptying nest, the chance to get to know a flock of fellow arts lovers of a variety of ages and backgrounds is especially welcome. But there is no bad time to start volunteering at the Lied Center. “Don’t wait until you’re retired; this is a great opportunity right now,” Erika emphasizes. “I love this gig.”

For more information, contact Jake Gillespie at LiedUshers@ku.edu. ▲

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