

FOR ATTRACTION – MAY 2011

Academy Art Museum Director Hopes to Expand the Museum's Reach in the Community

By Amy Blades Steward

Erik Neil, the director of the Academy Art Museum, had an interest in museums at an early age. Growing up in Arlington, VA, in close proximity to the nation's capital, he often visited the nearby Smithsonian museums. He recalls attending the public opening of the Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC, by himself at age 12 – motivated by his fascination with all that museums had to offer, including their architecture, educational opportunities, and overall intrigue.

While his parents were passionate about chamber music and provided him with a cultural musical upbringing, during college his interests grew to also include art, film, photography and architecture. Because Neil's mother was a teacher and his father worked for the Appropriations Committee in Congress, he was instilled with the importance of education and public service, both of which he has embodied throughout his life.

After completing a bachelor of arts degree in Modern European and American History from Princeton University, Neil continued with his academic studies and completed both a master of arts degree and doctorate in the History of Art and Architecture from

Harvard University. While at Harvard, he worked at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum and at the National Gallery of Art, both of which further exposed him to the instrumental role museums play in their communities.

Neil comments, "Although I enjoyed the scholarly part of teaching art history at Tulane University, I quickly decided I wanted to have a broader scope to what I did – in particular, I wanted to be involved in educating the public in a broader community sense – reaching more people and shaping an institution and its programming. It was at this point that I entered the museum world and became director of the Newcomb Art Gallery at Tulane."

After he and his family survived Hurricane Katrina in 2005, experiencing significant damage to their historic home and losing important books and research materials, Neil decided to leave the uncertainty of the Gulf shores and took a job as executive director of the Heckscher Museum of Art in Huntington, NY. It was during this time that he also continued his scholarly interests by beginning a book about an 18th century Sicilian architect, Tomaso Maria Napoli. The book is soon to be published.

When the opportunity arose for Neil to apply for the position at the Academy Art Museum, he was interested in returning to the Mid-Atlantic, to raise his family. He and his wife Luisa, whom he had met in high school, have four daughters: Maggie (20), Nora (17), Juliette (13), and Anna Sofia (age 9).

He states, "I knew the Academy Art Museum had a strong exhibition program and diverse programming, which included music and the performing arts. In addition, it was running in the black and had no debt, which is rare for museums today." He adds, "I could feel that the Museum had made an impact on this community and is valued by the community."

As Neil looks toward the Museum's future, he hopes to sustain its strong exhibition programs, while growing the Museum's permanent collection of art. He also hopes to strengthen the Museum's educational programming by offering a wide spectrum of unique exhibits, classes, trips, concerts, and lectures for participants of all ages.

He adds, "In particular, we would like to collaborate with more schools on the Shore, linking what we do to their curriculums."

Neil is continuing to collaborate with community partners to expand the Museum's reach and to establish it as a cultural leader in the region. This effort ties into the Museum's strategic plan to meet the needs of a diverse community. Partnerships to date have included the Talbot County Mentors, Chesapeake Film Festival, the Women and Girl's Fund, the Waterfowl Festival, the Plein Air Easton!, Temple B'nai Israel, and the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Sciences, Horn Point Laboratory.

Neil says, “We want to expose the residents of our community to the arts. Our doors are always open and we encourage anyone who may not have visited us to stop by and see what we are all about.” He adds, “Institutions like the Academy Art Museum have a key role in the fabric of the community here on the Eastern Shore. People realize these institutions benefit their quality of life.”

Neil lives with his family in Royal Oak. His wife, Luisa, is a sculptor and works in real estate.

Pictured is Erik Neil, director of the Academy Art Museum, with children visiting the Museum from Hurlock Elementary School in Dorchester County. (Photo courtesy of Tom McCall).

