

## Valley pop-up painting parties spark creativity

Beth Roessner, The Desert Sun 6:01 p.m. PDT August 2, 2014



(Photo: Michael Snyder/The Desert Sun)

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Noelle La Barbera has a lot of responsibilities at her second job.

La Barbera, a catering manager by day, is tasked with taking a group of adults, sometimes over 30 in number, and turning them into artists in a two-hour time frame. Many of her students have had no

previous experience with painting outside of elementary school art classes.

On a Tuesday night in July at the La Quinta Red Robin, each student sat in front of his or her own canvas, with a brush in one hand and a drink in the other. They listened to instructions and mimicked La Barbera's brush strokes.

As they painted drifting balloons across a mountain sunset, they quipped that their canvases would be on display only in the garage, but La Barbera had faith in their abilities to create a masterpiece.

"No one ever thinks that they can paint the painting that they see," said La Barbera, 36. "They don't think they could do it... It's that first initial 'Oh, I have never touched a paint brush. I don't know what I'm doing.' And then at the end they're like, 'It wasn't that bad.'"

La Barbera is a social painting instructor of Paint Nite Palm Springs, a local business that sets up pop-up-style painting parties at bars, restaurants and other venues, promoting the slogan "drink creatively."

"We're different than a lot of the other paint companies out there where they might be a little more serious," said Stephanie Chambers, master artist licensee for Paint Nite Palm Springs. "Our classes are more of an event, more like a paint party."

Paint Nite events are designed to bring a crowd into a pub's slow night and spice up what would have been a dull weeknight.

"You actually get a hands-on activity," said Lezley Hills of Palm Springs, who was at the Red Robin event to celebrate her birthday. "You don't need an artistic background. It's possible even for someone who is a beginner."

Through Paint Nite's website, users can search by date, artist, venue or location to find an event.

Paint Nite often plays host to birthday parties, dates or a girls-night out. They've also done corporate events and fundraisers. Sometimes painters come alone and mingle.

"One of the first events I ever had, I had a couple that were both painting solo," said Chambers. "I had them switch with other people so that they could sit with one another. And now they just got engaged."

Paint Nite has even witnessed a few proposals.

What started as a way of entertaining a group of friends over two years ago in Boston, blossomed into a thriving business, said Sean McGrail, co-founder of Paint Nite.

McGrail and fellow co-founder Dan Hermann were at a party with friends, when they broke out the paint brushes and canvases. Seeing the excitement in their friend's eyes as they painted, snapped photos and rekindled their love for art, the duo created a business plan on a napkin based on that first experience. Six months later, they tried their first remote event in New York City.

"We didn't want to really invest the money in a storefront," said McGrail. "We thought of taking the trivia model and applying that to painting to see if anyone would show up."

McGrail and Hermann modeled Paint Nite after attending several pop-up trivia events at bars, where businesses get a boost from the influx of people. It's a relationship based on mutuality.

Now, Paint Nite has licensees scattered throughout the world, including Canada, Argentina and Australia. They're in nearly 90 different markets and about 70,000 people per month come to the events, said McGrail. Paint Nite instructors have some kind of background in art and are peer-rated after each event.

"There's sort of a gap in the marketplace," said McGrail. "For most of our jobs, we're sitting staring at a computer screen. The creativity has been taken out of it. Right now, people's creativity is somewhat limited to whether they're going to choose bold or italic or what kind of font they're going to use. Most people don't have a creative outlet.

"On the other side of the spectrum, their option is to sign up for an art class, a college-level art class or adult education, where it's going to cost a couple hundred dollars to attend a series of classes to really learn a lot of skill. I think a lot of people don't really want to make that kind of commitment..."

Paintings taught at the sessions are often original creations conceptualized by other licensees. If a painting is selected for a class, the original artist earns \$10 for every time it's selected, said McGrail, giving them a chance to earn up to \$870. If the painting is really successful, it can be continually recreated.

"Oftentimes these are artists who struggle to sell that same painting at a local art show for \$100 or \$200. Now they can make a couple thousand dollars," McGrail said.

La Barbera admits that several paintings, upon initial scrutiny, have given her a challenge.

"I just see the picture," said La Barbera. "Nothing's going to be exact and that's what I tell my students... No two birds are alike."

Attendees learn brush strokes, color blending techniques and layering. They only work with five colors, the primary colors and black and white. They're painting things like wide-eyed owls, glowing fireflies, detailed orchids or sandy beaches.

At the end of the class, they're often impressed with how the work came out.

"The valley is great for art in general," said Chambers. "That's why I wanted to do Paint Nite in the desert. It seems like for younger or middle-aged people there's not a lot going on especially during the summer months."

Chambers hosts Paint Nite events in the Coachella Valley and in San Diego. An interior designer specializing in murals, Chambers has been an artist her whole life. Through research, she discovered Paint Nite and saw they were established in Los Angeles and San Francisco, but not other parts of Southern California. She earned her license for these regions and started just about a year ago.

Chambers has the flexibility to choose when she works, what paintings she does and what venues she's in, while the company takes care of the advertising, marketing, customer service and online ticket sales. There's one other licensee in the Coachella Valley.

Chambers buys supplies in bulk. Canvases, for example, are bought in groups of 2,000 and take up space in half her garage. Chambers purchases all of her own supplies and splits the revenue from an event with Paint Nite. She gets 65 percent.

Back at the Red Robin before the Tuesday-night lesson started, La Barbera had all her attendees strap on "gorgeous, sexy aprons" in a bright shade of lime, and take an oath.

"I will not throw my canvas across the room... I will have a good time."

### **Brush up**

To learn more about **Paint Nite**, or to find an upcoming event, visit [www.paintnite.com](http://www.paintnite.com)