St. Stephen’s Art Show in Coconut Grove, Florida, got its start 30 years ago, when volunteer parishioners of the St. Stephens Episcopal Church began selling hot dogs and sodas to the patrons of the already well-established Coconut Grove Arts Festival. “They were approached by artists who asked if they could have space on the grounds, as well,” said Daisy Holcombe, director of the St. Stephen’s Art Show. “Within five years an artistic director had been named and the art show expanded from the church frontage through the oak grove and the entire campus. We’ve grown from a simple hot-dog stand to 160 booths, musical stage, and food court.”

Both shows continue to be held in Coconut Grove over President’s Day weekend each year. “The Coconut Grove Arts Festival is over 50 years old, and St. Stephens is the younger sister,” Holcombe said, adding that the organizers for both events have worked together to coordinate traffic, application deadlines, and guest experience. “Miami is the place to be in the winter months for all outdoor festivals and events. There are now four art shows in the county that same weekend, as well as a famous boat show.0 Guests take advantage of the multiple things to do by flying in and staying for five or six days, enjoying all the activities.”

**Construction disruptions**

Starting in 2018, St. Stephen’s faced an additional challenge in planning and producing the art show. “We are replacing an older school building with a new arts and innovations center,” Holcombe said. “It’s two stories tall, with open glass classrooms and room for more students during the academic year.

“Our campus is known for its dappled shade and intimate feel, thanks to the oak grove. Protecting those trees, moving and mitigating the effects of the construction, has doubled if not tripled our project timeline. The good news is that preserving the integrity of our oak grove, the center of the show, means it remains a classic venue where people want to stay and commune.”

However, having was originally planned to be a one-year project stretch into two and possibly more has been a logistical challenge for Holcombe. With the construction site in the center of the show venue, Holcombe couldn’t be sure exactly how much space would be available for the various booths until shortly before the event.
For two years now, the construction has required that artists be flexible and patient in waiting for their final booth location. Our artists have been phenomenal in understanding that the layout of the show is a moving puzzle that puts their interests and the comfort of the patrons first. We’re taking the time required to do it right while being innovative,” Holcombe said. “Now, the last tree root is in place and the building is going up rapidly, but after so many delays, we’re assuming that at least one more show will be affected before the project is complete.”

Introducing MakersFest

One innovation the show introduced two year ago was the establishment of a new area of booths for MakersFest open to musicians and the shows new Makers category, open to creators who “combine traditional craft techniques with modern, offbeat, and unconventional styles, context, and subject matter.” Maker booths include extra space allotted for demonstrations and other interaction with the attendees.

“We were wowed by the response,” Holcombe said. “The combination of fine art, music makers, and indie crafters was a hit. We’ve found that patrons have increased their average staying time considerably. The hand-crafted experience of sound, color, and flavor, from mostly locals, at MakersFest, complements the international fine art exhibits. With fine art, functional art, and Makers, we have something for every visitor at our show — it’s the whole package for a guest’s experience.

“This year’s artistic director added a category of awards for Makers of Merit, and the winners are a great representation of variety within the Makers area. The winning artists were Daniela Viteri (ribbon and yarn scarves), Monica Zah (hand-painted crystal nail files), Candy Tree (handmade beaded animal sculptures made with wire and beads, using woven telephone wire), and Carlo Raciti (gluten-free baked good from Miami). Other makers produced original music, tea leaves, coconut music speakers, and pop-up cards, to keep the area varied.”

Looking to the future

With so much going on, Holcombe said, the show organizers wanted to research their patrons and get feedback about the show. According to their research, “patrons reported multiple visits to the show within one to three days, and said they were highly likely to re-
turn the next year. Patrons consistently reported that the show felt accessible to them as buyers. It was shady, welcoming, and the place they purchased the most — and repeatedly. ‘An art-show oasis’ was how one comment summed things up.”

Such feedback and especially welcome because the show is almost entirely run by volunteers, which inspired the show’s slogan, “Art is in the Heart.” “Mine is the sole paid position,” Holcombe said, “with 102 volunteer slots filled by our church patrons, neighbors, and fellow charities. There is so much passion and commitment to this outreach event for our parish that each year both the artists and patrons leave touched by the experience.

“Artists have a gift to share with the world, and we are proud to highlight them. We consider the production of our show as if we are creating alongside them. It is the most tiring and the most joyful weekend of the entire year.

“Miami is a young city, and the Grove is its oldest waterfront property, so we assume expansion and growth will never cease,” Holcombe said. “The St. Stephens Art Show will continue to create unique experiences for our patrons and phenomenal service and location for our artists. We have been through so many changes over three decades that it’s understood that change is an important part of growth.”

The application deadline for the 2020 St. Stephen’s Art Show is October 31. Find out more at www.artshowss.org.