

Downtown Chelsea Cuts the Ribbon on the Chelsea Art Alley — a Community-Built Outdoor Gallery

CHELSEA, MI — June 5, 2026 — On Thursday evening, as the season's first *Sounds & Sights on Thursday Nights* filled downtown Chelsea, about 50 neighbors, artists, and visitors crowded into the pedestrian corridor between 105 and 107 Main Street. At 7:30 p.m., Brenda Fineman picked up the scissors and cut the ribbon on the **Chelsea Art Alley** — and very nearly lost her composure doing it.

"After Terris from the Chamber spoke, I already had watery eyes — there was no way I was getting through everything I wanted to say," Fineman admitted afterward. What she wanted to say was a story that started a few years and a few hundred miles away.

On a trip to Munising — the small town on Lake Superior in Michigan's Upper Peninsula — Fineman and her husband, Ben, wandered through its art alley, a humble little stretch of public art tucked between buildings. "We took one look and said, 'someone should do this to that alley in Chelsea,'" she recalled. The thought refused to leave her. She even considered lobbying the Chamber to take it on. Then a grant came available through the **City of Chelsea**, and the answer arrived all at once. "It turned out that the 'someone' who needed to do something about the alley was me — and, really, all of us."

A gallery with no ticket and no closing time

The result is something Chelsea hasn't had before: a **24/7, all-weather outdoor gallery** built right into the fabric of a downtown walkway. The inaugural exhibition features **24 works by artists from across Southeast Michigan**, reproduced on durable aluminum panels so the art stays vivid through every Michigan season. A QR code beside each piece lets anyone meet the artist and learn more about the piece — no admission, no gallery hours, no reason not to stop.

Anchoring the corridor is the Art Alley Residency, a "fishbowl" studio with large windows onto the alley, that artists can rent on a short term basis to create and sell art in full view of the public — turning the creative process itself into something passersby can watch unfold.

For Chris Dragan, one of the 24 inaugural artists, that openness is the whole appeal. "There's no ticket and no gallery hours — you just walk through and take it however you want," he said. "That's the best kind of audience an artist can ask for."

"It turned out 'someone' was all of us"

If the idea was Fineman's, the execution belonged to the community, a point she returns to again and again. Grant funding came from the **City of Chelsea's Downtown Development Authority**. The **Chelsea Chamber of Commerce**, with support from **Destination Ann Arbor**, is coordinating a custom wrought iron sign to mark the entrance. And the alley itself was made possible by neighboring property owners **Curtis Gough**, owner and designer of **La Jolla Fine Jewelry**, and **Bill Ballagh** of **State Farm**, who opened the walls of their buildings for public use.

"So many people helped, in big ways and small," Fineman said. "I wanted to thank every one of them by name. They know who they are."

Terris Ahrens of the Chelsea Chamber of Commerce, whose remarks at the ceremony nearly brought Fineman to tears, sees the alley as Chelsea doing what it does best. "Projects like this don't happen because one person pushes hard enough — they happen when a whole community decides it wants something," Ahrens said. "Brenda brought the vision. Chelsea brought the shoulders to lift it."

Chelsea Mayor Kate Henson, who attended the ceremony, framed the project as exactly the kind of partnership the city hopes to see more of. "The Art Alley is what makes downtown Chelsea special — local businesses, artists, and neighbors coming together to give something back to everyone who walks through," she said.

The studio behind the alley

The Chelsea Art Alley is curated and maintained by **Geek Brush Studio**, the art studio and shop Fineman runs directly behind it at 108 E. Middle Street — and in many ways, the alley is a natural extension of what happens inside.

A **Certified Bob Ross Instructor®**, Fineman built Geek Brush Studio around a deliberately unintimidating idea: that you don't need talent to make art, just a little joy. Its signature Bob Ross oil painting classes are only part of the picture — the studio also offers painting sessions in other styles for all ages and skill levels, from curious first-timers to seasoned hobbyists, alongside community workshops and "stress-free" paint nights. And it's as much a gallery and

shop as a classroom: the storefront carries retail art supplies and gifts and devotes its walls to a rotating gallery of work by local artists. That same welcoming instinct now greets anyone strolling through the alley. The reception following Thursday's ribbon cutting was held inside the studio, where guests mingled among the artwork.

That ethos carries into the alley's residency program, too. The **Art Alley Residency** — a 283-square-foot storefront studio facing the gallery, **rentable by the weekend, week, or month** — gives regional artists a flexible, short-term pop-up studio and retail space downtown, with the option to display works and host classes in the main Geek Brush Studio space. Applications are open year-round.

Help pick the Main Street Masterpiece

Running as part of Chelsea's popular **Sounds & Sights on Thursday Nights** is the inaugural **Main Street Masterpiece** competition, open now through **July 23**. Anyone can scan the QR code by any piece and vote for their favorites — one vote per piece, per day, so it rewards a return trip. The winners, announced **July 25 at the Chelsea Sounds & Sights Festival**, earn an extra year on display in the alley's place of honor. Details on the alley, voting, and the residency are at geekbrushstudio.com/pages/art-alley.

As for Fineman, the woman who once thought "someone" else should build Chelsea an art alley has one simple hope for it now: "I can't wait for people to come down and see it in person."

About Geek Brush Studio Located at 108 E. Middle Street in Chelsea, MI, Geek Brush Studio is a creative sanctuary specializing in Certified Bob Ross® oil painting classes, community workshops, and art retail. Founded by Brenda Fineman, the studio blends technical instruction with a welcoming, "stress-free" philosophy — proving you don't need talent to paint, just a little joy.

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Photos:

1. Chelsea Art Alley Ribbon Cutting.jpg -

Full: Geek Brush Studio owner Brenda Fineman cuts the ribbon on the Chelsea Art Alley on June 4, during the season's first Sounds & Sights on Thursday Nights, joined by Mayor Kate

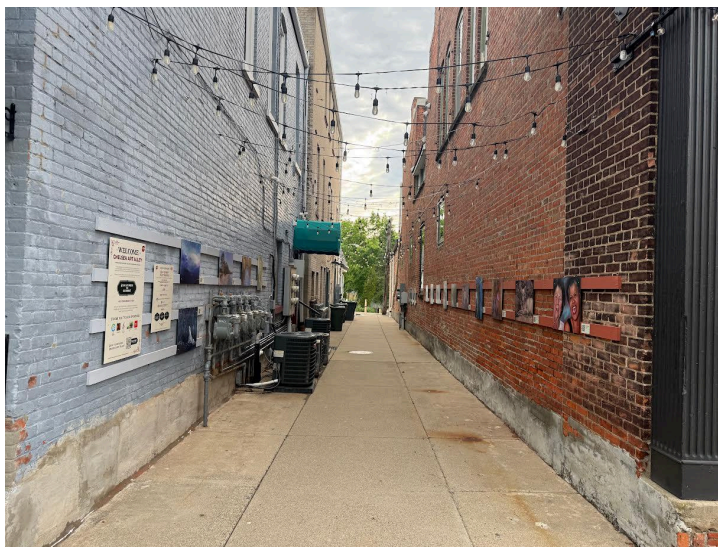
Henson, the Chelsea Chamber's Terris Ahrens, and a crowd of about 50 neighbors and artists. (Photo courtesy of Life in Michigan)



2. ChelseaArtAlley_GalleryView_Day_01.jpg

Short: The new Chelsea Art Alley, a 24/7 outdoor gallery in downtown Chelsea. (Photo: Geek Brush Studio)

Full: The Chelsea Art Alley, a new 24/7 outdoor gallery in the pedestrian corridor between 105 and 107 Main Street, displays works by 24 Southeast Michigan artists on weatherproof panels along both walls. A "Welcome to the Chelsea Art Alley" sign orients visitors, who can scan a QR code beside each piece to meet the artist and vote. (Photo: Geek Brush Studio)



3. ChelseaArtAlley_ArtPanels_Day_02.jpg

Short: Some of the inaugural Chelsea Art Alley works, reproduced on weatherproof aluminum panels. (Photo: Geek Brush Studio)

Full: Works by the inaugural Chelsea Art Alley artists line the alley's brick wall, each reproduced on a durable aluminum panel so the gallery holds up year-round. A QR code beside each piece lets passersby meet the artist and vote in the Main Street Masterpiece community contest, open through July 23. (Photo: Geek Brush Studio)



4. ChelseaArtAlley_NightLights_03.jpg

Short: The Chelsea Art Alley glows under string lights after dark. (Photo: Geek Brush Studio)

Full: Open around the clock: the Chelsea Art Alley glows under string lights after dark, between 105 and 107 Main Street. The all-weather outdoor gallery is free to walk any hour of the day or night. (Photo: Geek Brush Studio)

