



SPIRIT OF THE SENSES

Conversations for the curious

BY SUSAN LANIER-GRAHAM

Spirit of the Senses has been bringing people together for stimulating conversation for more than 30 years. Founder Thomas Houlon and his wife Patty Barnes describe their conversations as arts, science and cultural salons. “We provide a means to exchange ideas, question opinions, wonder about new possibilities, learn about our world, and appreciate the visual and performing arts,” explains Houlon.

A Need for the Exchange of Ideas

Salons—the conversation kind—began in France in the late 1600s. King Louis XIV loved surrounding himself with the great thinkers of his day, usually artists and writers.

Fast-forward a few hundred years to modern-day Arizona. In an age when many people find themselves getting information from social media or listening to mostly contentious political arguments, there is a very real appeal for respectful live conversation.

Back in 1983, Houlon didn’t plan to create salons. The Phoenix native says he knew a lot of people and had visited some interesting places. “I wanted



to create a way for people to gather and exchange ideas,” he explains.

Spirit of the Senses (www.spiritofthesenses.org) caught on and has mostly grown by word of mouth. The people involved are from diverse backgrounds, all with differing ideas and beliefs. The common ingredient? Curiosity.

After New York artist Barnes married Houlon and moved to Arizona, she also became an active part of Spirit of the Senses. “People come to the salons looking for live conversation,” explains Barnes. “And we give them a respectful, safe space. It’s not adversarial!”

Access to the Best Minds

The salons feature such diverse topics as art, architecture, science, music, medicine, law and politics. “One thing often leads to the next,” explains Houlon, who works with Barnes to create about a dozen salons every month.

The couple also takes the salons on the road several times a year to California, Boston and New York City. Upcoming salons include such diverse topics as “The Brain and Aging,” “Nutrition of Dietary Fats and Oils,” and “Destruction of The Library at Alexandria.”

Each salon is held in a different location around the Valley. Some are in private homes in Phoenix, North Scottsdale, Paradise Valley or Tempe. Others are held at various locations, which have included Taliesin North, on the Light Rail, and at the Phoenix Art Museum.

“The experience is colored by being in different places,” says Houlon. For example, a salon focused on science might be held in an artist’s studio. During a recent NYC trip, the salon was in the Tribeca studio of photographer Will Cotton. Surrounded by Cotton’s images of such celebs as Katy Perry, the conversation was led by Dr. Joseph Ledoux, a lead researcher on the brain and emotions.

Understanding the Salons

The experience is always different—and may be different for each member. “Our members determine their levels of involvement,” explains Barnes. It is, after all, an interactive experience.

Spirit of the Senses is a membership organization. For an annual fee (currently \$330), you can select up to five salons every month. While some members may attend all five, others might attend only occasionally. Each salon lasts about two hours. The presenter guides the conversation and welcomes questions in a casual atmosphere.

According to Houlon, “There are social benefits to the salons. You can express your ideas in real time and get immediate feedback.” Barnes explains that there is no pressure, and no membership requirements. “We have both single and married members. There is no dress code. Wealth doesn’t matter. It’s just about exchanging ideas.”