

Charles L. Griffasi, Sr. is on a mission. He believes, despite the cliché, you *can* fight city hall. Or at least the *Buffalo Arts Commission*. Griffasi is the man behind the Buffalo Cultural Walk of Fame; a section of sidewalk on Elmwood Avenue just north of Bidwell Parkway with inlaid granite plaques commemorating famous people with a Buffalo connection.

Griffasi founded the Walk of Fame two years ago but he has long been involved in Buffalo's cultural sector. Decades ago he was president of the Allentown Arts Festival and helped it grow to the attraction it is today. He is also involved with the International All Star Sports Council, but spending just a few minutes with Griffasi shows his passion for the Walk of Fame. Griffasi is truly Buffalo-first and seems delighted to be doing his part to improve Buffalo.

But why a *walk of fame*? His eyes sparkle as he remembers back to his childhood, when he thirsted for knowledge; history, culture, theater, art. Griffasi wants to

awaken that passion in today's children and what better way than to bring Buffalo's luminaries down to a child's level. He imagines a curious boy or girl asking their mother, "Who was Chauncey Olcott?" What a great opportunity for the child to fulfill their own curiosity by seeking out the story behind the writer of "My Wild Irish Rose," and "When Irish Eyes are Smiling."

Currently the walk consists of eight members – art patron John J. Albright, poet Robert Creeley, writer Taylor Caldwell, actress Katherine Cornell, song writer Ray Evans, writer and *Buffalo Express* editor Mark Twain, artist Evelyn Rumsey Cary and musician Pete Johnson. Black granite plaques, 12-inches by 12-inches, are recessed in the sidewalk, one for each inductee. Griffasi envisions the markers stretching up and down Elmwood as the inductee list grows. Thus far Griffasi has purchased all the plaques and as chairman, selected all of the honorees.

For 2008, Griffasi added journalist Tim Russert, showman Lew Fisher,


movie theater pioneers/brothers Mitchell & Moe Mark, Olcott, R&B singer Frank Brunson, comedy writer Al Boasberg, drummer Angelo Brucklier, music patron Edward L. Kleinhans and playwright Marian De Forest. While names like Russert, Fisher and Kleinhans are well known in these parts, the research required to learn about the others is worthwhile. Brunson and the band Peoples Choice earned the top R&B song on the Billboard charts with their funky hit "Do it Any Way You Wanna." The Mark Brothers opened what many consider to be the world's first permanent movie theater in the Ellicott Square Building in 1896. Boasberg, a prolific film writer with 47 films to his credit, might be best known for developing stand-up comedy with Jack Benny.

It would seemingly be a no-brainer to consider Griffasi and his Walk of Fame an asset to Buffalo but many don't see it that way. While the Buffalo Common Council has approved Griffasi's plans, the

Public Works office, the Elmwood Village Association and the Buffalo Arts Commission won't allow Griffasi to install the 2008 plaques and want the 2007 plaques removed. Responses to a post on BuffaloRising.com also indicates that several residents don't like Griffasi's sign. Some say it is an interruption – even an eyesore or desecration – to Olmsted's Bidwell Parkway. I believe that Elmwood – near Kleinhans, the Albright-Knox and the Burchfield – is indeed the perfect location for the Cultural Walk of Fame. The plaques are not a danger to anyone and they add more charm to the village.

While some of the negative backlash goes overboard, it should be noted that the Cultural Walk of Fame – for better or for worse – has been a one-man operation to this point. In the last several weeks, according to Griffasi, he formed the Elmwood Village Council with several prominent, but anonymous, supporters. Eager to resolve the issue, the Common Council will meet the week after New

Year's. Griffasi said, "It looks like [the Walk of Fame] will happen but we have to get some heads together."

It is clearly not a cut-and-dry issue, but it seems wasteful to curb Griffasi's ambition. There will need to be a nomination or selection committee, multiple voices and certainly some compromise for Griffasi's plan to become a permanent Elmwood Village landmark. Hopefully Buffalo can get out of its own way and let this man's passion do something good for the city. 



Evelyn Rumsey Cary's plaque



The Buffalo Cultural Walk of Fame on Elmwood Avenue.

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