

When Portsmouth's cultural commission set out to brand the city's creative scene, they struck up an unexpected conversation about the arts.

By Debbie Kane, Photos by Jason McKibben

Going Big: Behind the Campaign to Brand Portsmouth's Arts & Culture

In spring 2015, a group of Portsmouth creative industry pros gathered for a brainstorming session. Organized by Art-Speak, the city's cultural commission, the group was charged with developing a marketing campaign defining the city's eclectic arts and cultural scene. After months of talking and tinkering, they launched a concept on social media in mid-December: "A Tiny Bit Huge."

Within two days, A Tiny Bit Huge became a tiny bit controversial. What happened in the subsequent six months was an eye-opener not only for Art-Speak but the arts community as a whole. "A Tiny Bit Huge helped us discover the cracks and fissures in the arts community," says Mike Teixeira, Art-Speak's board president. "It fostered debate about who's an artist and who isn't. It's a great example of how community conversation effects change." It also laid the foundation for future opportunities to boost the city's fiercely independent arts community.

Developing a strategy

Teixeira and Duncan Craig are the type of guys you want developing your marketing strategy. They're creative, smart and articulate. They've worked in Portsmouth for years — Teixeira as head of creative for Calypso Communications, a marketing and public relations agency, and Craig as partner and co-founder of Raka Creative, a digital marketing agency (he also grew up in Portsmouth). They're passionate about the Seacoast, involved and eager to make a difference. So when Nancy Pearson, executive director of Art-Speak, wanted to expand the non-profit's marketing efforts, she recruited Teixeira and Craig to Art-Speak's board.

Art-Speak was founded in 2002, a result of Portsmouth's cultural plan. The organization's goals include promoting the city's cultural offerings and creating resources to support local artists. Pearson, who's also a Portsmouth city councilor, was keen for Art-Speak to do a better job of marketing itself, as well as raise money for its initiatives (the organization receives some funding from the city but is not a city agency).



Taking it from the top: Duncan Craig, Chris Greiner, Mike Teixeira and Ken Dodge

“We needed people who could take the organization beyond press releases and Facebook and make the community aware of what we do,” she says.

Brainstorming the brand

Teixeira and Craig pulled together a group of like-minded, passionate people, including digital agency creatives, writers, a photographer and a designer/illustrator. Meeting over eight to nine months, the group tossed around ideas for marketing Portsmouth's cultural community. “We wanted a rallying cry like ‘Keep Austin Weird’ or ‘I Love New York,’” says Teixeira. “Our goal to be inclusive was our biggest hurdle. Portsmouth is so many different things to so many people.”

The group identified Portsmouth as a small city with a large array of cultural amenities — thus, A Tiny Bit Huge. Illustrator Matt Talbot of Brown & Company Design developed a logo and the concept was ready to be unveiled.

The Launch

A Tiny Bit Huge officially launched with a crowd-funding page and a fundraising goal of \$10,000. Funds raised would enable Art-Speak to build and maintain a dedicated website show-

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casing local artists and arts organizations, sell branded merchandise to raise additional money and promote cultural events. A little more than \$2,500 was raised the first week.

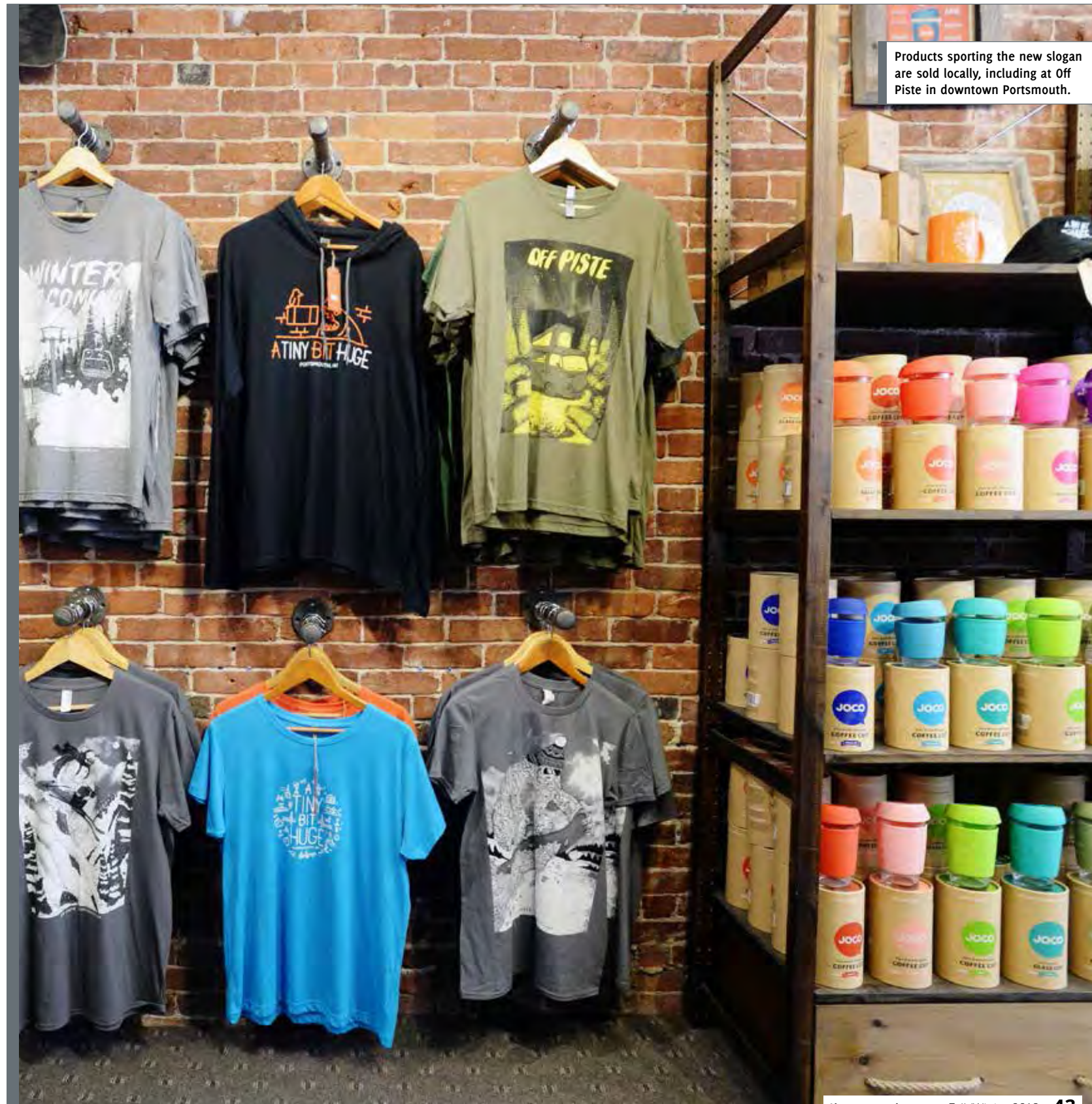
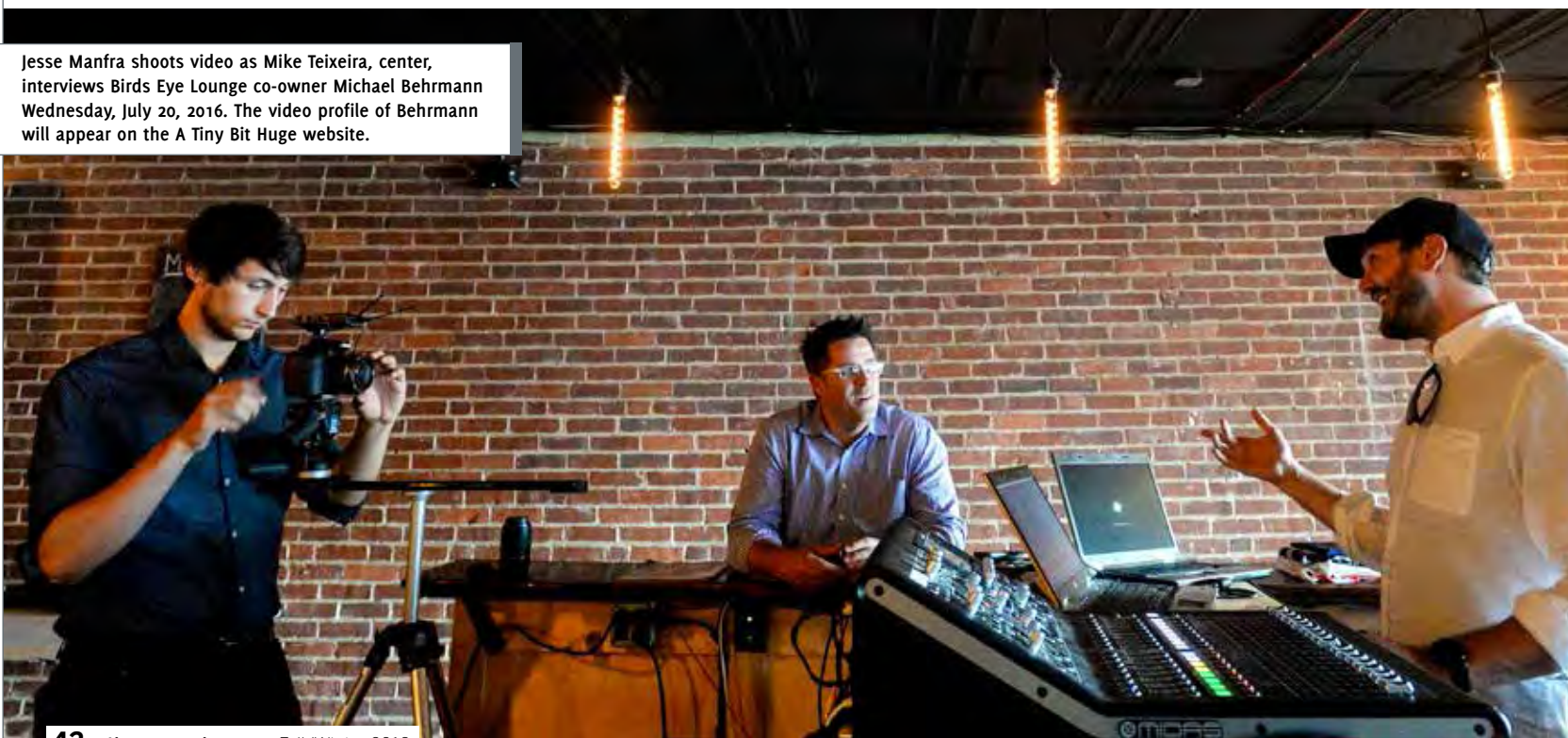
Then, artists and local residents started to weigh in about the campaign on social media; reactions were mixed. Some cheered the effort; some questioned a group of “non artists” trying to promote “working artists.” Others felt the campaign detracted from what they felt were real community issues, like lack of affordable housing and creative workspaces.

“When I saw the concept on Facebook, my first reaction was to ridicule it,” says Trevor Bartlett of Portsmouth. “I thought, ‘great, they’re trying to generate money on the backs of artists but they’re pumping that money into Art-Speak.’”

Todd Hunter, a board member of Portsmouth's Player's Ring, understood both sides of the issue. “I think the initial resistance was natural because some artists felt their point of view wasn't recognized,” he says. “That's the beauty of the arts scene here — everyone owns it and is passionate about it.”

The negative feedback galvanized Art-Speak. “The first question we asked our critics was ‘Can

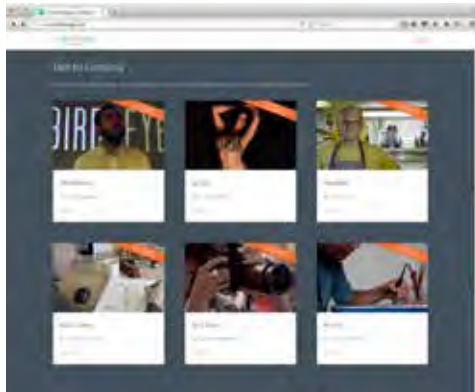
Jesse Manfra shoots video as Mike Teixeira, center, interviews Birds Eye Lounge co-owner Michael Behrmann Wednesday, July 20, 2016. The video profile of Behrmann will appear on the A Tiny Bit Huge website.



we talk?,” says Teixeira. He went on what Pearson calls “a listening spree,” meeting face-to-face with residents to hear their thoughts and explain the concept in depth. Bartlett was among the residents he chatted with over drinks.

“He really made the case for getting behind the concept,” says Bartlett, now a self-described cheerleader of A Tiny Bit Huge. “I think Art-Speak is doing what it can to fulfill its mission and I think artists are coming around. It was inevitable there’d be pushback. Their jobs as artists is to see things others don’t.”

Website and beyond



With initial criticism quelled, Art-Speak forged ahead. To date, \$8,000 has been raised, enabling Art-Speak volunteers to create and launch the Tiny Bit Huge website. The site includes videos about Portsmouth musicians, fine artists, dancers and others, as well as an easy-to-browse events calendar pulling listings from arts and cultural organizations. Themed merchandise with the Tiny Bit Huge logo is available online and through Portsmouth retailer Off-Piste; proceeds go directly to Art-Speak for artist promotions.

Teixeira is especially excited about featuring music compilations by local musicians; the compilations are available for download on A Tiny Bit Huge’s website on a pay-what-you-will basis. He asked Chris Greiner, a longtime member of the Seacoast music scene and former executive director of 3S Artspace, to produce the compilations. Greiner, recognizing that many area musicians would benefit, agreed. He recruited co-producers for each album, musicians active in each genre. The eight compilations released to date range from “A Tiny Bit Jazz,” “A Tiny Bit Eclectica” and “A Tiny Bit

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Indie,” to “A Tiny Bit Americana” and “A Tiny Bit Heavy.” Most of the proceeds — 60 percent — go to participating musicians; the remaining 40 percent goes to Art-Speak to promote other artists and support A Tiny Bit Huge.

Through his work with A Tiny Bit Huge, Greiner gained additional insight into the local music scene. First: it’s really vibrant. “We didn’t struggle to find good music for this,” he says. Second: Portsmouth’s changing demographics means A Tiny Bit Huge applies to the greater Seacoast, not just Portsmouth. “People like me who’ve been here for 15+ years, we remember the edgier, more rugged Portsmouth,” Greiner says. “For creative folks in their early 20s, that Portsmouth never existed. Younger artists say to me ‘we live in Dover or Rollinsford, we don’t play shows in Portsmouth.’ It hadn’t even occurred to me that that had happened.” Greiner notes that, despite initial skepticism, artists are excited to be part of the project. Public feedback has been good too: the site has had hits from 45 states and 42 countries.

The takeaway

The final takeaway: launching A Tiny Bit Huge was worth it. “It’s been an important learning experience,” says Pearson. “If we hadn’t gone through this, we wouldn’t have learned what’s in the hearts and minds of our creative community.”

Art-Speak plans to build on that awareness. During a State of the Arts presentation to the Portsmouth City Council this June, Teixeira referenced a 2010 Americans for the Arts (AFTA) survey showing that Portsmouth’s arts and cultural organizations generate \$41 million annually for the city, roughly 4 1/2 times more money than similarly-sized cities. Yet the income doesn’t go to local arts organizations. Teixeira urged the city to reinvest more aggressively in arts and culture. “The city is full of talent,” says Teixeira. “We have big ideas.” A tiny bit huge, indeed. □

atinybithuge.com
art-speak.org



Mugs, hats, stickers and more show Portsmouth creative scene pride.