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Healdsburg Jazz Festival board resigns; Jessica Felix reinstated

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Just five weeks after canceling next year's Healdsburg Jazz Festival and laying off its founder and artistic director, Jessica Felix, the festival's board of directors has reversed both decisions.

After reinstating Felix as the festival's artistic director, all five board members resigned, leaving Felix free to recruit a new board and make plans for the festival.



EUGENIA MORRISON
Jessica Felix

The board's actions followed a month-long outpouring of outspoken protest from the festival's fans and professional jazz musicians across the country.

"I don't think the board realized how much support the festival has," Felix said Tuesday. "I didn't realize how much support I had. I just want to express how proud I am of everybody for their support of real jazz."

In late July, the board announced it was eliminating Felix's position and putting the festival on hiatus because the event had operated at an annual deficit of \$30,000 for the past three years.

"It was primarily a financial decision," Pat Templin, former head of the festival board, said Tuesday.

After dozens of festival supporters wrote comments in protest of the decision on the festival's web site, healdsburgjazzfestival.org, Felix started her own site, healdsburgjazz.com, which drew another wave of supportive comments, many of them critical of the festival board. Felix's boosters included New York jazz pianist George Cables and many other nationally known jazz musicians.

Felix also posted a petition form on her web site, urging her reinstatement and the festival's return, and 135 were filled out and sent in.

"There was so much that was divisive going on in the community. We really wanted to bring the community together to support the festival," Templin said of the decision to reinstate Felix. "Some of Jessica's supporters said they would help fund the festival, so we said, 'Let's do that.'"

The former board also included Healdsburg-area leaders Howard Wollner, a retired Senior Vice President of Starbucks Coffee Company; Doug Lipton, environmental scientist and founder of the Lipton Environmental Group; Circe Sher, co-owner of Healdsburg Hotel and h2hotel; and Ernie Shelton, co-owner of Shelton's Market.

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Felix originally founded the festival in 1999 and ran it without a board of directors until late 2002, when the Healdsburg Jazz Festival was incorporated as a nonprofit organization and she recruited the initial board. Templin joined the board of directors four years ago.

While Felix already has one donor willing to put up \$10,000 for the festival, she said she'll need to stage fund-raising events up to and throughout the next festival to continue the annual event.

The June festival, which has drawn as many as 5,000 fans, has an annual operating budget ranging from \$300,000 to \$450,000. The festival's current debt is roughly \$30,000, Felix said.

The outgoing board of directors had planned to revamp the festival, but had not announced details. The only festival event the board still had scheduled for 2011 was Operation Jazz Band — a weeklong music workshop for Healdsburg area fifth-graders, ending with a public concert — co-founded by drummer, percussionist and educator Babatunde Lea of Gettysburg, Pa.

But like many jazz musicians who had appeared previously at the Healdsburg Jazz Festival, Lea said he didn't want to continue without Felix. The drummer said Tuesday he'll definitely be back next summer to help Felix with the revived festival.

"I'm really glad this turned out the way that it has," Lea said of the decision to bring back the festival and reinstate Felix.

"Maybe this will inspire the region to really support what Jessica has been doing for all these years, for fear of losing her and the festival," Lea said.

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