

'Preserving the past': Lumberyard Arts Center completes phase one of construction



Nick Krug

Diane Niehoff, co-founder of the Lumberyard Arts Center, Baldwin City, hangs a piece of children's artwork in the gallery. The site opened earlier this spring with a gallery, classrooms and kitchen. A theater under construction is part of phase two. [Enlarge photo](#)

Cathy Hamilton

May 4, 2010

In September 2003, a group of Baldwin City volunteers got together to discuss building a proper home for the arts in their community.

Six years and eight months later, the Lumberyard Arts Center at 718 High St. opened its doors to the public.

It was a dream realized for Diane Niehoff who, with her husband, Jim, has put heart, soul and gallons of elbow grease into the project.

"I've got to give Jim the credit because he spent over 2,000 hours just last year in labor," Diane says, while sweeping the center's floor. "When we were putting together prices to see how much it all would cost, Jim took it to four area contractors. Then, we kind of averaged those (bids) together and it came in at 1.3 million dollars."

"By him running the job (as contractor) and doing half of the work himself, we've been able to do this much, the first phase, for \$367,000. So, it's well under the original estimate."

Not that there weren't plenty of others involved, as well. Sandy Gardens, co-founder of the Lumberyard Arts Center Project (LACP) and former president of the board, was another key player.

"Jim and Diane have done so much physical work in there, along with I don't know how many community volunteers," she notes. "The first time I walked in there and there were walls up, it gave me goose bumps. And tears. And I thought, 'Oh my gosh, I'm really invested in this.'"

The former Ives-Hartley Lumber Co., built in 1914, closed in 2002, shortly after the arrival of Home Depot in Lawrence. That left an

8,000 square-foot brick building in the middle of downtown empty, with no readily apparent use.

"There was all kinds of talk about maybe making offices out of it," Diane recalls. "The president of the bank that owned it said, 'I don't know what you want with that old thing. It's just an old pole barn.' And, it was. But, we're into preserving the past."

The grand opening March 26 marked the completion of Phase One of the project, which includes two classrooms, a gallery, multiple-stall restrooms and a fully equipped catering kitchen for receptions and other events.

"We had worked for about five years and raised quite a bit of money," Diane explains, "but people were losing interest because they weren't seeing anything happen. So, we decided to do the front half and perhaps that would spur donations for the second phase."

Phase two will be a theater, named for one of the former owners of the lumberyard and a major LACP contributor, Mary Swan.

"Mary was one of the initial donors to the project, and she's always been very interested in the theater," Diane explains. "So we told her, after that donation, that it would be the Swan Theatre someday. Mary has been battling cancer, so we wanted her to have something to see."

With the theater still resembling a, well, pole barn, the committee asked an artist from Design Specialties across the street to paint the theater doors in a swan motif for Mary. The finished space will have other swan influences in the design.

"It's only going to be 184 seats, so it's not going to be a gigantic thing," Niehoff says. "But it's a whole lot more than we have."

Cardens is glad to see the building's classrooms finally being used, especially when arts programs are being cut in local schools for budgetary reasons.

"Right now, we don't know if they'll have art classes of any sort offered for certain grades next year at the schools," she says. "I know they've cut back, and they don't have any art classes planned for the sixth grade."

"I'm delighted we'll be able to offer different classes through the Recreation Commission and through the Arts Council so children can still have some kind of enrichment experience. And not just children. We have classes for children through seniors."

Currently on display in the commons area and gallery are works by Baldwin Junior High art students.

"They made dinner place settings in an 'Alice in Wonderland' theme," explains Stephanie Minor, 18, a junior at Baldwin High School, who volunteers as an afternoon docent at the center.

Minor, who has performed in the town's annual production of "The Ballad of Black Jack" for six years, is enthusiastic about the Lumberyard's potential.

"I love it so much. I can't wait until they get the theater done," she says.

Watercolorist and 25-year Baldwin City resident Rosemary Murphy was the first artist invited to exhibit in the new building.

Murphy says the center fills a void for artists who, until now, have had few places to exhibit their work.

"There was a gallery called 'Art Affair' downtown, which was run by Baker University awhile back, but it closed," she says. "There's also a gallery on campus, but there haven't been any opportunities for us locally to exhibit."

Originally published at: <http://www2.baldwincity.com/news/2010/may/04/preserving-past-lumberyard-arts-center-completes-p/>