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Building on a dream



JAN BILES/THE CAPITAL-JOURNAL

From left, Diane Niehoff, Jim Niehoff and Sandy Cardens were instrumental in raising money for the renovation of the old lumberyard in Baldwin City into an arts center. Jim Niehoff also donated hours of labor to the project.

Baldwin City lumberyard being transformed into modern-day arts center

BY [JAN BILES](#)

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BALDWIN CITY — Sandy Cardens' dream started with an old lumberyard in downtown Baldwin City and built from there.

Nearly seven years later, the gallery, classroom and catering kitchen of Lumberyard Arts Center are finished. The office, which will be shared with the Baldwin City Chamber of Commerce, will be completed within a few weeks. Its theater, however, is still under construction — waiting for more donations to bring Cardens' dream to fruition.

At least \$500,000 is needed.

"We will finish the theater when we get the money," she said.

Cardens said the "first light bulb" about renovating the old Ives-Hartley Lumberyard came to her during an art walk in September 2003.

"The lumberyard had closed in the middle of downtown and it was too perfect a spot to waste," she said.

Cardens believed the lumberyard — built in 1914 at 718 High St. and shuttered in late 2002 — could be transformed into an arts center, where local theater productions could be staged, artists could exhibit their works and children could participate in arts-related activities. After its closure, Baldwin State Bank retained ownership of the lumberyard building.

In subsequent days, Cardens said she talked to everyone she could about her idea — until a friend told her to stop talking and "do something about it."

She partnered with Baldwin City residents Diane and Jim Niehoff, who had also been eyeing the

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

For more information about the Lumberyard Arts Center and how you can donate money or time, visit its website at www.lumberyardartscenter.org.

lumberyard and wondering how it could be preserved. Together, they established the Lumberyard Arts Center Project.

In mid-June 2004, a community meeting was slated to gauge interest in the arts center project. The next step was raising money for the renovation project.

"The first donor was an elementary school class that gave \$100," Cardens said.

Jim Niehoff said the renovation began as soon as money started pouring in.

"We felt like we needed to get started because they were giving money," he said, adding they believed people would be more likely to get involved in the project if they saw work being done on the building.

Cardens said a financial boost came from a \$100,000 donation from Mary Swan, whose family operated the lumberyard in the 1960s. A park on the west side of the building is named in honor of her husband, Tom Swan, and when finished, the theater will carry the Swan name.

State Rep. Tony Brown and his wife, Becky Henderson, helped fund the 19-by-44-foot classroom, which has a partition that can be drawn to create two smaller work spaces, each with its own sink and cabinets, she said.

Bricks, engraved with the names of donors, will become a path from the front doors to the theater.

Cardens said the Niehoffs and their friends have put thousands of hours of labor into the renovation project. She said the renovation has cost about \$350,000 so far.

"It would have been more if Jim and Diane and their friends hadn't done (most of) the labor," she said.

"When I start something, I finish it," Jim Niehoff, who is retired from operating a heating and air-conditioning business, said. "I made my living in this town and I'm giving back to the community."

Cardens said Embarq and Heritage Tractor Inc. employees also donated time toward the renovation project.

In addition to the catering kitchen, 24-by-16-foot gallery, classroom and offices, the arts center has a lending library and courtyard. The building has a sprinkler system and is handicap-accessible.

The arts center will be home to Baldwin City Community Theater and Baldwin Community Arts Council and can be rented for business meetings or private gatherings, such as wedding receptions. Arts-related activities offered by Baldwin City Recreation Commission will meet in its classrooms.

Cardens said plans for the future call for applying for grants that will help with the arts center's continued operation and maintenance, as well as efforts to get recruit more young adults to volunteer at the center's activities and take on leadership roles.

Cardens said the arts center will draw more people to Baldwin City's downtown.

"We wanted to help revitalize downtown," she said, adding that a town must keep its downtown alive "or you die."

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