



Arts Put Cedarburg on the Map

Cultural center, PAC showcase a range of music, theater, art

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Ozaukee County art aficionados, jazz lovers and theater buffs agree: all roads seem to lead to Cedarburg.

The city, which has already parlayed its past into a flourishing tourist trade, has become the cultural mecca of Ozaukee County. With the opening of the Cedarburg school district's Performing Arts Center two years ago, the community boasts two of the county's premier exhibition and performance facilities.

In its 12 years of existence, the Cedarburg Cultural Center has made its mark by showcasing the works of local artists and hosting popular jazz and blues programs.

The center also remains true to its original mission of preserving local history by operating the Kuhfuss House and General Store Museum.

Just blocks away, the PAC with its 580-seat theater has begun to attract larger audiences and bigger acts like the recent "Winter Solstice" concert by three Windham Hill recording artists and next spring's appearance by the Glenn Miller Orchestra.

"Cedarburg seems to be wonderfully obsessed with history, culture and art," said cultural center executive director Sarah Hall.

"The very fact that there are so many vestiges of our past here reminds us of the importance of preserving our aesthetics and motivates us to continue focusing on those same sorts of priorities in the present."

Hall, who was born and raised on the East Coast, moved to Wisconsin with her family eight years ago. She discovered Cedarburg almost immediately and was instantly reminded of home because of its historic buildings.

"It was about the only place in Wisconsin that truly reminded us of New England," she said.

PAC executive director Joe McKenna, a Boston native, also links the community's emphasis on art to its interest in historic preservation.

"There was a vision about the historical role of Cedarburg," he said. "This is just sort of an extension of what was already here."

Vicki Reed, who moved to Cedarburg from Milwaukee 18 years ago, said she knew the first time she saw the community that it would become a cultural enclave.

"I just had a feeling that this is where the arts will flourish," said Reed, a photographer who is president-elect of the Cedarburg Artists Guild. "It just seemed to be an appealing area that would draw creative people."

Creative mecca

She was right. Cedarburg has become home to so many artists that McKenna compares it to an informal artists' colony. Hall and Reed also believe the natural beauty of Cedarburg has helped attract artists and art lovers to the community.

Whatever the reasons, Cedarburg's development into a cultural mecca has posed challenges, especially for its two primary arts venues.

Although Hall and McKenna have a good working relationship, cultural center backers were worried about competition when the PAC opened in 1998.

The fears proved groundless due to differences in the facilities' physical structures and their overall missions.

"The reality has been that we're so different, we haven't stepped on each other's toes," Hall said.

"We have a common goal but we offer very different things," McKenna agreed.

Carl Edquist, who helped found the cultural center, said he and others were motivated by the growing realization that the city was losing much of its history through the disappearance of its "portable artifacts."

Photographs, antiques and other memorabilia once stored in attics was being discarded or given away as the descendants of old-time families moved away.

Originally located in the Lincoln building, the center moved to its current quarters on Washington Ave. in 1990. The space is flexible, which allows the cultural center to change its programming daily.

"I don't know of another institution that is an art gallery, museum, performing venue and community gathering place," said Hall. "We're never the same thing two days in a row."

The space can be arranged to accommodate anything from a talk on antiques for 25 people to an all-day jazz festival attended by 300. The space also allows the center to offer different types of cultural experiences at the same time.

Visitors can listen to a concert then walk into the adjacent gallery and view the latest collection of art.

Many of the programming decisions are based on surveys of visitors and the community, Hall said.

The size of the facility dictates other choices.

Local artists and local history are emphasized because of the center's mission to preserve and celebrate regional history.

Despite Cedarburg's proximity to Milwaukee, the center has carved its own niche, Hall believes. Its jazz series draws nationally known artists and fans from all over the Midwest.

The center is totally dependent on public contributions and profits from programs.

This means Hall must be careful to choose programs that will appeal to her contributors. However, she is also mindful of a need to present programs that stretch people's imaginations. The center rents part of its space to a conservative Christian congregation whose members have been critical of some of the artwork on display.

"Sometimes we have to tread the line between pushing the envelope and not offending somebody," Hall said. "I don't think we'd be doing our job if we didn't stir up a little bit of controversy."

Ozaukee County's almost exclusively white population was a contrast from the diversity she was used to as an East Coast resident. Some of the center's programs are deliberately chosen to promote diversity.

\$100,000 goal

Funding is a major challenge for the center, which recently launched an aggressive fund-raising campaign. The goal is \$100,000, which Hall admits is a "stretch." The facility has also streamlined its operations in an effort to cut costs.

Funding also has been a challenge for the PAC, which is supported almost exclusively by the school district. A non-profit corporation was formed recently to begin raising money to help defray some of the operating costs.

The district's support of the PAC has generated controversy in the community.

However, McKenna believes the PAC has accomplished much so far and has limitless potential as a unique facility that blends education and fine arts.

"I think we've done a good job in a difficult environment identifying who we are and what we are doing," McKenna said. "I think to abandon anything now would be the greatest risk, a greater risk than to continue what we are trying to do."

Because of its school district connection, the PAC is more than a performing venue.

Students and staff assist the center's professional staff with theater operations. Outside artists spend part of their time working with students and staff. In some cases, students have appeared onstage with the performers.

The ability to connect with students and staff is a key criteria in his choice of outside artists, McKenna said.

"As much as the performance itself is important, it is a snapshot in time," he said. "It's over and done with. The lasting effect is what happens to our students and teachers and how it affects them."

When he chooses performers, McKenna is also careful not to compete with the Cultural Center or Milwaukee venues.

He admits that not all of his programming choices have been popular. Two acts in last year's visiting artists series - Wild Space, a Milwaukee experimental dance troupe, and a revue of songs by German composer Kurt Weill - drew small crowds.

"Part of the job of a venue like this is to push everybody a little bit," McKenna said. "If we just present what we like and know, I'm not sure we're doing our job."

Kevin Miller, a Cedarburg actor who has founded a professional theater troupe, Cedar Creek Repertory Theater, believes the PAC will bring Cedarburg even more attention as a regional cultural center. He decided to start his group after touring the facility and recognizing its potential.

"People are just hungry for all of this," Miller said.

Plans for his group are still evolving but he hopes to present a first show sometime next year at the PAC. The addition of a professional theater company and the continue growth of the PAC will generate new artistic excitement in the community, he believes.

"When this is up and running, you're going to see buskers (outdoor singers and entertainers) on the street. You'll see sidewalk art," he said.

He also expects more tourists.

"It will just be another reason to come back to town," he said.

Other links of Interest: [[Cedarburg Players looking for a venue to fill the bill](#)], [[Concordia's stage lights are bright in Mequon](#)]

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