

A home for creativity: Beloit Art Center coming into its own

Since 1999, many emerging artists have shown their work in gallery space at the Beloit Art Center.

By [Anna Marie Lux](#)

BELOIT—All Cindy Vondran needed was a start.

With encouragement from a friend, she entered her first photography contest in March 2013 at the Beloit Art Center.

“I decided to go for it,” she said.

Vondran did not win anything, but the process of entering helped build her confidence.

A year later, she had her first solo show at the center.

“It was a springboard for me,” Vondran recalled.

Since then, the Rockton, Illinois, artist has garnered 14 international awards, and her photography has been exhibited in London and Athens.

She also has received many national awards and recently showed her work in California.

In addition, her photos have been published in the annual Best of Photography book published by Photographer's Forum four years in a row.

Today, Vondran has not forgotten the Beloit Art Center, nestled in the historic Bell Telephone Company building in downtown Beloit.

“I try to attend every monthly opening of a new show, even when it is not a photography show,” she said. “I get inspiration from looking at the work of other artists.”

Vondran's story is not unique.

'WE ARE REALLY ROCKING'

Since 1999, many emerging artists have shown their work in gallery space at the art center. Others have taken classes. Some have rented studio space.

In addition, community members have embraced the center as a meeting place to enjoy and celebrate many art forms.

Board of directors President Jerry Sveum believes art is part of what makes life wonderful.

The retired pharmacist works hard to get the word out about the center, which has earned a positive reputation and a place in the community.

But it wasn't always that way.

“Five years ago, we were really struggling,” Sveum said.

The art center could hardly pay the electric bill and had only one tenant occupying the building's studio space.

“We were down to a vote as to whether we would close,” Sveum said. “Then we changed the board, had strategic planning and started getting corporate funding.”

Today, he calls the nonprofit, private art center financially stable.

“The excitement people see for the art center has opened up their wallets,” Sveum said. “There's a new spirit. The enthusiasm of the board and the effort in the community are starting to work. We are really rocking.”

Seventeen artists now pay for studio space to unleash their creativity.

In addition, the Beloit College Ceramics Club rents space.

Learning is important at the center, where people can discover their inner artists or hone their skills by enrolling in classes.

Susan Swedland teaches painting and pottery, while Steve Bogdonas offers photography classes.

Every Thursday night, Dan Wuthrich hosts an open studio for artists.

“He will help a beginner get started, or he will let a more accomplished artist learn skills using his airbrush,” Sveum said.

Sveum called the art center “a hidden treasure, unknown about by most of the community for years.”

Some of the low profile might have come from the center's former name, the Beloit Fine Arts Incubator.

“We believe that 'incubator' in our name was confusing,” Sveum said. “I think people thought we were hatching chickens.”

A PROJECT WITH ROOTS

The evolving art center started almost 20 years ago when the Greater Beloit Economic Development Corporation bought the brick building at 520 E. Grand Ave.

At the time, Beloit was in the early stages of its downtown revitalization program.

Buying and renovating the building into an art center was “a strategy to make downtown more appealing and vital,” said Andrew Janke, executive director of the economic development corporation.

Ultimate goal for the art center is to own the building, and about \$110,000 remains on the initial mortgage, he said.

The art center pays \$1,000 in rent monthly, which goes into an escrow account to be applied to the purchase of the building.

But the center needs to do more than pay off the mortgage.

“One of our big needs is an external elevator to make our building accessible to everyone and to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act,” Sveum said.

The cost to install the elevator is estimated at \$150,000.

The center also wants to have a cushion of \$100,000 on hand in case of a major expense, such as a new roof.

Late last month, the center mailed letters seeking membership support, and it continues to seek corporate backing.

Both are critical to the center's success, Sveum said.

In addition, people who care about the center are vital.

“Everything we do is volunteer,” said Terry Meyers.

He recently stepped down as the art center's treasurer, and he served on the board for 12 years.

“We put our sweat and blood into it to make sure artists have affordable space and to offer gallery shows,” Meyers said.

He is proud of his association with the art center, where gallery shows are booked through the first half of 2019.

“They are quality shows,” Meyers said. “People are interested in showing in our unique space. When they see the galleries, they comment on how they wish they had something like them in their community.”