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Staging a revival in Nicholasville

Former appliance store becomes a playhouse

By Greg Kocher

NICHOLASVILLE — With the arrival of the Euro Wine Bar and Main & Maple Coffee House and Café, more people are going to downtown Nicholasville as an evening destination.



The Bluegrass Performing and Visual Arts Association in Nicholasville moved into a former appliance store on Main Street last November. More than 100 seats from a Morehead cinema are helping to fill out the space.



Susan Pose, right, gave character instructions to Raleigh Matlock, 9, as Chloe Frederickson, 12, Jaxon Weitlauf, 6, and Bella Weitlauf, 4, listened at the Main Street Playhouse.

Teg Evans hopes to encourage that activity this fall as the Main Street Playhouse aims to draw more people downtown for night concerts, dances and theater productions.

Evans is director of the Bluegrass Performing and Visual Arts Association, which leases a space formerly occupied by The Appliance Store for the playhouse.

"I've looked high and low for a place that would be suitable for some community theater productions," Evans said. "I've looked at every pole barn, and nothing really fit.

"This is the best fit for this building if we can persevere and make it work."

The association moved into the building last winter and has had a few events there already, including a swing dance during Nicholasville's Wine & Vine Fest in May.

But as late summer and fall approach, Evans has an ambitious schedule that casts the playhouse as a main character in the continuing saga of Main Street.

On Tuesday, *Dreadfully White*, a play about domestic violence and growing up in a violent family, will be presented at 7 p.m.

On Sept. 19, the playhouse will host a gala event with performances from a Frank Sinatra impersonator and a group that does a Beatles revue. Those attending may opt for a dinner and a show, or just the show.

Then in October, the playhouse will stage *Trouble at the Tropicabana*, which Evans describes as an "interactive murder mystery" based on the characters from *I Love Lucy*.

Auditions for that show will be 7 to 9 p.m. Monday at the playhouse, 114 South Main Street.

"My desire would be to do three or four productions a year, and also do live concerts," Evans said. "There's so much local and regional talent that we could bring here that a small venue would be perfect for."

The foot traffic that such a place attracts could turn Nicholasville into "a culture spot," said Jim Davis, owner of Main & Maple Coffee House and Café.

"Main Street used to be an entertainment district once upon a time," Davis said. "I think it's really important to have that on Main Street."



Drama instructor Susan Pope, standing in the background, worked with Madeline Matlock, 11, center, and others on a recent Monday at the downtown Nicholasville space rented by the Bluegrass Performing and Visual Arts Association.

The main room of the playhouse — the showroom where refrigerators, ovens, washers and dryers once were on display — has 3,200 square feet.

Evans has already moved 60 seats from a Morehead movie theater into the space, and he has 48 more in storage.

He acknowledges that 18-wheelers rumbling through downtown will cause the windows to rattle. But Evans has heavy curtains to buffer some of that noise.

He envisions the playhouse as a place to participate, and not just to be a passive observer. Private music classes in piano, guitar and voice begin Monday at the playhouse. Ballroom-dancing classes begin there on Sept. 15.

On Aug. 3, the playhouse offered a drama and theater workshop to home-schooled students. Evans also offers after-school program to students in the public schools.

The Bluegrass Performing and Visual Arts Association — known simply as the Bluegrass Arts Association on its Web site — is successor to other arts groups in Jessamine County, including the Bluegrass Youth Chorus.

The association is funded through a mix of public dollars and private contributions. Before opening the playhouse, the group's most visible activities have been a series of "Front Porch Concerts" at Rock Fence Park near downtown Nicholasville, and performances by the Jessamine Jazz Ensemble.

The concerts and jazz performances are assembled through contacts Evans has made in the community. He has offered music lessons since 2001, a year after his family moved to Jessamine County.

"He's got a passion for it, which is what it takes," said Perry Barnes, a member of Nicholasville Now!, the downtown revitalization group, and a director of the arts association. "He's got the connections, too."

Now that the association literally has a roof over its head, Evans hopes to seek more private contributions and to apply for grants. "There are tons of grants out there, but you have to have a house to hook them to," he said.

Meanwhile, the association's ambitions aren't confined to downtown Nicholasville. The group is in rehearsals for *Blow Ye The Trumpets, Blow*, an original play about the expulsion of African-American refugee families from Camp Nelson during the Civil War.



**Teg Evans, director of
The Bluegrass
Performing and Visual
Arts Association.**

The two-act play — written by Georgie Riddell and Donna Phillips, two employees of Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill — will be performed next spring at Camp Nelson Civil War Heritage Park south of Nicholasville. The play is based on the testimony given by Pvt. Joseph Miller, a black Union soldier whose family was among those driven out.

"They were expelled because the Army did not know what to do with them," said Mary Kozak, special projects coordinator for Jessamine County who oversees many of the Camp Nelson activities. "So on a winter day, they expelled them. They were not clothed properly. They didn't have shoes and a lot of them didn't have coats, and it was freezing outside. Many of them perished."

For the moment, the association is concentrating on more light-hearted fare for the Main Street Playhouse. People are ready for more downtown entertainment options in the evening, said Kozak, who also is a director of the arts association board.

"They don't want to just go to a movie or shopping. They want to go for a good meal and to be entertained," Kozak said.