

Curtains Up

The Creation of the Riverside Arts Center

BY BARRY LARUE AND KIM CLARKE

A Fine Tradition

The Ypsilanti community has a long history of supporting the arts. Venues such as the Follett House in Depot Town and downtown's Hewitt Hall hosted local and traveling shows in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. A fine opera house opened on Michigan Avenue and later became one of two movie theaters. The Masonic Temple also housed a substantial theatre space. The Ypsilanti Players, the third-oldest community theatre group in the country, operated for many years in the twentieth century.

Yet, in the early 1990s, Ypsilanti had no central space devoted to the arts. The stage was set for the Riverside Arts Center (RAC).

Seeking a Performance Space

It's hard to imagine how an abandoned Masonic Temple, a derelict car wash, and an empty utility building could evolve into a vibrant arts center in downtown Ypsilanti.

Starting in 1992, the Ypsilanti Downtown Development Authority (DDA) held a series of community conversations focused on revitalizing its downtown business district. It used psychographic data about Ypsilanti and the surrounding area to develop recommendations on how best to improve the central business district's economic vitality while encouraging Ypsilanti's ongoing historic preservation.

In the fall of 1992, local arts supporters tried to entice the Ark, a folk music venue in Ann Arbor, to relocate in Ypsilanti's former downtown Masonic Temple building, which had been empty since 1987. While the effort failed, it spurred discussions about whether the vacant temple building could fit into Ypsilanti's future. Two years of research, public meetings, and focus groups led to the recommendation that Ypsilanti would benefit from a downtown arts and entertainment district.

Two opportunities emerged simultaneously in 1994. First, the city purchased the



Riverside Arts Center

remains of Atomic Car Wash, a derelict facility located on the north side of the Masonic Temple building on North Huron Street. The facility, which had become an eyesore as an illegal “chop shop” for stolen automobiles, sat on land that had potential as a pedestrian link between Riverside Park and downtown Ypsilanti.

Second, the DDA targeted the 18,000-square-foot Masonic Temple building as a community arts center. Next came a series of community conversations, driven by DDA Chair Bill Kinley, about creating and supporting a multiuse arts facility. Volunteers drew up rough budgets and researched staffing and capital needs, leading to the overwhelming conclusion that Ypsilanti was ready for an arts center. On June 2, the DDA voted to purchase the building for \$290,000 from a private owner. It would be called the Riverside Arts Center and would serve as a venue for all manner of arts and educational organizations.

The DDA demolished the car wash and now owned the three-story temple building, making room for a parking lot, plaza, and connection between the downtown and neighboring park.

A Center for the Arts

While volunteers worked to clean, restore, and improve Riverside’s interior, others worked to file articles of incorporation for the Riverside Arts Center Foundation and obtain IRS tax-exempt status for the organization as a non-profit.

The first meeting of the Riverside Arts Center Foundation board took place on April 27, 1995. Bill Kinley and Jim Nelson were elected co-chairs with the following members: Fred Davis, George Goodman, Doug Harris, John Kirkendall, Ben Koerber, Barry LaRue, Ron Miller, Al Shelton, Larry Smith, and Cynthia Wilbanks.

The first order of business was to accept a \$10,000 award from the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) for an architectural feasibility study. Over the years, many grants followed from SHPO and the Michigan Council for the Arts and Cultural Affairs. These grants have led to gallery improvements: walls, ceiling, lighting, and kitchen upgrades; interior and exterior painting; HVAC upgrades, handicap-accessible restrooms, ramps, and doorways; a new roof; refurbished and expanded dressing rooms for performers; and a dance studio/classroom complete with new ceiling, lighting and windows overlooking the plaza.

The Riverside Arts Center grew in 2005 when it expanded south into a vacant DTE Energy office on North Huron Street. A long-term lease of \$1 a year allowed for a new, two-story space that came to be known as the Off Center. It houses classroom and exhibition space, a spacious dance studio, and five artist studios.

In April 2022, the Riverside Arts Center took its most significant step ever: purchasing its home, the once-abandoned Masonic Temple, from the Downtown Development Authority. Between a generous grant from an area family foundation and donations from board members, the organization came to own both the building and the parking area.

Arts Programming

The real impact of the Riverside Arts Center has been its continuous programming that serves the community. It offers renters and patrons a 115-seat black box theater, a 3,000-square-foot gallery, a 2,000-square-foot professional dance studio, and three rehearsal studios.

Some 17,000 people visit the Riverside Arts Center annually (before the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic). Their engagement with the center contributes some \$672,000 to the local economy, based on 2017 calculations by the Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation.

The first public event—a fundraiser to support the Frog Island Jazz Festival—took place within two weeks of the DDA purchasing the building in 1994. It has been active ever since.

Programming through the years has been rich and diverse: theater performances, summer youth camps, dance recitals, and live music. The Riverside hosts writing workshops, swing dancing, yoga, tai chi, ballet, a twenty-four-hour film shootout, and art classes for learning-disabled youth. Over the years, the lower-level gallery has exhibited the works of countless artists and hosted their opening receptions. In winter, a portion of the Riverside has opened as a warming center for the homeless.

The RAC's resident theatre company, PTD Productions, has called Riverside home since 1995. The organization typically stages at least four productions a year and has presented such diverse titles as *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *Steel Magnolias*, *The Lion in Winter*, and *August: Osage County*.

Riverside users throughout the years provide an impressive palette of arts and educational organizations: Accelerate Dance Arts, Arbor Opera Theater, Center Stage Productions, Comic Opera Guild, DIYpsi, Do Better, Explorers Home School Association, Father Gabriel Richard High School, Funaach Academy of Dance, Horizon Performing Arts, IFFYpsi, Pencilpoint Theatreworks, Pittsfield Opera, Pure Dance Ensemble, Rasa Festival of Dance and Theater, Spinning Dot Theatre, Tableau Cadre, and TEDxYDL. In addition, the University of Michigan's acclaimed Penny Stamps Speaker Series and University Musical Society also partner with the Riverside.

An artist residency program launched in 2021 provides grant support and studio space for artists in all disciplines: music, dance, film, plastic arts, visual arts, drama, writing, architecture, and emerging disciplines.

Financial Support

Private and public resources sustain the Riverside Arts Center, which has been financially supported by many who believe in the power of the arts.

Ypsilanti couple Jim and Marla Gousseff, through their James W. and Marla J. Gousseff Fund, made bequests to establish an endowment supporting the mission of the Riverside. The Buhr Foundation of Ann Arbor has provided grants for capital improvements. The Sappi Paper Company awarded the Riverside and Eastern Michigan University funding to rebrand the organization and create new marketing materials.

Most significantly, an anonymous \$250,000 grant from an area family foundation in 2022 allowed the Riverside to purchase its building from the Ypsilanti DDA. It was the largest grant in the Riverside's twenty-five-year history. And individual donors through the years have given consistently and generously to advance the center.

Equally important has been financial support from the Ypsilanti Downtown Development Authority and the State of Michigan. A 2002 grant from the Michigan Department of Transportation to the City of Ypsilanti went toward creating a plaza between the Riverside and an adjacent parking lot. Known as the West Park Link, the project consisted of erecting a colonnade, decorative brick walks, an overlook, and stairs to Riverside Park.

A 2008 grant from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC), coupled with funds raised by the Riverside and a modest loan from the Ypsilanti Downtown Development Authority, allowed for a \$549,000 connector linking the space between the main building and the DTE/Off Center.

As the Riverside approached its twenty-fifth anniversary, the State of Michigan



Volunteers after a Clean-up Day. Sitting (L to R): Barry LaRue, Bette Warren, and Bill Kinley. Standing (L to R): Zachery Schultz, Emily Tuesday, Akosua Dow, Cre Fuller, Linda Yohn, and Rick Katon (Photo by Sally McCracken)

awarded it a \$450,000 enhancement grant for improvements to the unfinished third floor of the center. The planned improvements will make the space usable for arts education and possible career development activities as well as life/safety upgrades generally.

Behind the Scenes

Over the years, the Riverside's operating model has morphed from being solely dependent on volunteers to employing a combination of paid professional staff and volunteers. Early volunteer gallery coordinators were Robin Remick and Dee Overly, joined by building managers such as Noemi Ybarra, Joe Tiboni, and Larry Newhouse. Executive Director Emily Tuesday, who served from 2017 to 2019 and returned in 2020–21 in an interim role, brought a new level of expertise and professionalism to manage the center. The Riverside's latest executive director, hired in 2022, is Liz Warren.

A volunteer board of directors governs the Riverside Arts Center. Since 1994 there have been five board chairs: Bill Kinley, Barry LaRue, Donald Loppnow, Akosua Dow, and Sandra Murchison. Board members come from all corners of the community, including arts professionals, educators, developers, and other professionals. Interns from the University of Michigan, including the Ross Business School Board Fellowship Program, and Eastern Michigan University also assist the Riverside.

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically impacted the Riverside. The Board of Directors chose to furlough its three-person professional staff, dial back the building's utilities, and wait until it once again was safe to hold indoor events. While the building was closed, the organization could preserve its fund balance and be well-positioned to re-open. While visitor numbers remained below pre-pandemic levels by late 2022, the Riverside Arts Center is focused on its next twenty-five years of engaging and entertaining Ypsilanti and Washtenaw County.

A Note on Sources

Images are provided by the Riverside Arts Center.

About the Author

Barry LaRue was initially a member of the Board of Directors, Operations Board, and Facility Committee for Riverside Arts Center. After the Ops Board was dissolved, he was Board Chair for two years. Kim Clarke is a professional writer for the University of Michigan.