



# Dreaming the arts into Reality

The Shoreline Arts Alliance has a long-term plan for creativity

BY TOM SOBOLESKI

“Nothing happens unless first we dream,” wrote poet Carl Sandburg. It has long been a dream among the arts and cultural communities of coastal Connecticut to have a building devoted to their pursuits. Eagerly cultivating that dream is Eric Dillner, CEO and executive director of the Shoreline Arts Alliance (SAA).

Dillner overflows with enthusiasm while explaining his ambitious goal. As he sees it, within five years, there will be such a building in Madison that will be an “incubator of creativity.”

Dillner’s vision entails rehabilitating the old Academy School near the Madison Green into a regional multi-purpose center encompassing everything from music, art, video and photography studios, to classrooms for dance and culinary arts to a 500-seat performance auditorium.

If realized, the project would solve a major problem for the town and fulfill the arts community’s dream. “Our current mission is to develop a cultural arts center. We’re in the process of completing a lease with the town. Once that’s complete,” Dillner says, “we will start heavily fundraising for this. Five years is attainable.”

The three-story, 50,000-square-foot building dates from 1921. It has been vacant for more than 10 years and needs numerous upgrades. But that doesn’t discourage Dillner. He persuaded the Yale School of Architecture to do a study of the building. They produced a set of drawings detailing how it could be adapted to his vision. “It’s perfect the way it is,” he concludes. “We just have to clean it up.”

The SAA has been around for 35 years. It’s an umbrella organization representing about 100 members practicing all art forms. Its core region comprises 24 towns, but some of its programs are statewide. The SAA provides vital functions like marketing, training, and fundraising.

“We promote everyone else’s arts,” Dillner

says. “The arts are a huge driver of the economy.”

The SAA’s primary marketing is through two e-mail blasts each week. One highlights local artisans, and the other is an interactive calendar of all art and cultural activities in the region.

In addition to a program that awards \$1,000 scholarships across a number of artistic disciplines, the SAA has a mentorship program that connects 12 high-achieving students each year with professionals who can guide and advise them. “If someone produces a play,” Dillner says, “we go to Broadway and find a producer or a stage manager.” The program has been so successful that one SAA alumnus is now a drama mentor for *Bluebloods*, the popular TV show.

The SAA also provides opportunities for aspiring writers to be recognized. *New Voices in Children’s Literature*, the Tassy Walden Awards, is an annual statewide competition to highlight unpublished children’s authors and illustrators. Literary agents review submissions and choose finalists who will be judged by nationally acclaimed editors. “We have about 60 books that have been published,” by winners of this competition, Dillner says.

To fund these activities, the SAA relies on grants and membership fees. It was recently awarded a \$125,000 grant from the Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development to expand its staff. One big fundraiser—a dinner dance with silent auction—is held each February. The 2016 “Mardi Gras Gala” is scheduled for February 6 at the Guilford Yacht Club.

In March, SAA’s annual statewide, juried photography competition, *IMAGES*, takes place.

Dillner’s enthusiasm is contagious, and the hard work of the SAA is making dreams come true for many. “I have a 10-year plan for the cultural center project,” he says. “The possibilities are pretty remarkable. We like to say we make art happen. I think art makes us healthier.” ●