

Artists in the Neighborhood

New Clifton center to be major community resource

When a school tax levy is on the ballot, supporters talk about how schools are important for the entire community, not just kids and their parents. In Clifton, residents without kids are playing a significant role in the design and planning for the new Fairview German Language School and breathing new life into the old Clifton School building.

"People on our board, on the school planning team and in the community engagement don't have children," says Cindy Herrick, president of the Clifton Cultural Arts Center (CCAC) board. "Having the community learning center is important. It is a project that excites across age groups, whether you have kids or not, married or single. That's been one of the gratifying things for me."

The arts center, a nonprofit organization independent of Cincinnati Public Schools, formed as a direct result of the Community Learning Center engagement process and has the sole purpose of developing the non-school buildings into an arts resource for students and the community. The renovation of the Clifton School, which closed its doors early this year, and the carriage house across the street on McAlpin Avenue will bring arts programming for all ages to the neighborhood.

Arts Mecca

Even though the rent is cheap — CCAC will lease both buildings from the Cincinnati Public Schools for \$2 annually — the opening of both facilities depends on fund-raising efforts. The carriage house lease begins Jan. 1, but the school lease doesn't begin until September 2008.

Herrick says she doesn't have children but has been involved because the campus that's being created is important to the entire community.

"What it's become is actually an arts and learning center campus on nine acres right in the middle of an urban core," she says. "The work of the architects on the school ... looked to draw all that together. The idea is to have it be like a Mecca of arts programming, where existing arts organizations come and provide the arts programming."

"The carriage house has a more intimate nature to it. Gallery space, artists in residence, black box theater — we're even looking to put a kitchenette on the first floor so it can be (used for) community meetings, clubs, organizations."

Accessibility for residents extends as much to the physical space as to programs. Residents are used to being able to cut through the Fairview School property, bordered by Clifton and McAlpin avenues, to get to Wood Avenue and other side streets. The school design takes this into account and uses that habit to increase residential involvement.

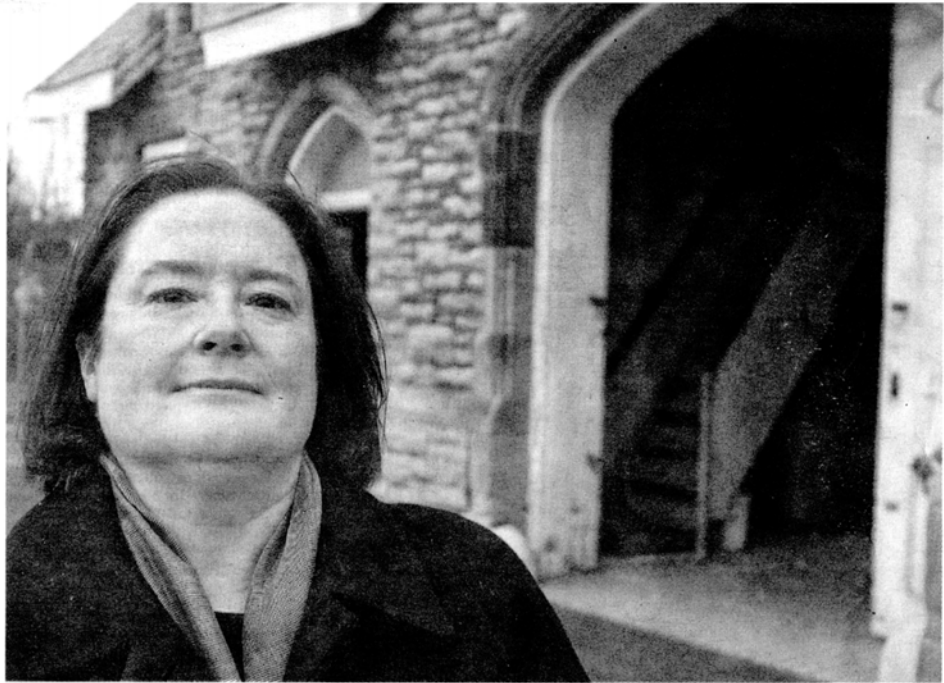


PHOTO: JOE LAMB

The Clifton Cultural Arts Center (CCAC) will have programming for children, adults and even passing pedestrians, according to Cindy Herrick, president of the CCAC board.

"One of the primary uses we see is an artist-in-residence program, where it keeps changing," Herrick says. "An artist may come for a week or a month, creating a piece of art and creating a curriculum that ties in with the art teacher so that the children can come and watch that happening and then go back to their class and learn some more or try their own."

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Renovation of the carriage house is the first step, with a target date for opening when the new Fairview School opens in March 2008. The CCAC is already working on programming for the old Clifton School, tentatively scheduled for opening in 2009.

The Art Academy of Cincinnati would like to use that building as a satellite, Herrick says. UC's College-Conservatory of Music is interested in having community outreach classes there for seniors and

kids with special needs. The Institute for Lifetime Education has been looking for a space.

"Those would be the three majors ... that bring people in the door," Herrick says. "Other, smaller arts organizations will provide after-school programs."

In addition to lots of classrooms, the third floor of the old school has a gymnasium that's been divided into classrooms and a theater. The plan is to restore both to their original functions.

"The idea is to use the space as much as possible, to not make it dedicated space to such a degree that it can't be used for a lot of different things," Herrick says. "The size and scope of the building give us the opportunity to do diverse programming with area artists, arts organizations that can be ongoing or one-off type situations or for a quarter."

The covenant

The combination of past and present cranks up Herrick's enthusiasm, which is already pretty high. When she first visited the Clifton School, she saw an original plaque in the entrance hall that emphasizes the importance of community and the arts. That inspired her to find the original deed.

"We found there's a restrictive covenant on the property," Herrick says. "In the deed, it says that it's to be used to cultivate a taste for literature, science and the fine arts. A lot of the streets in Clifton — Resor, Howell — their names are signed on the deed. It was a legacy gift

100 years ago, and we see it as a legacy project now for the area."

As if reinforcing the importance of preserving history and the focus on the arts, an old spinning wheel was found in the building.

"It had a note attached to it that it came across from the west in 1799 and then it was donated to the board in 1933," says Robin Brandon, project manager for the Fairview German Language School.

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— Cindy Herrick, president of the Clifton Cultural Arts Center board

A Cincinnati Art Museum staffer looked at the piece and explained how to clean it to preserve it for the next few hundred years. The spinning wheel will most likely be on display along with the many examples of Rookwood Pottery and stone reliefs housed in the building.

To make this happen, a multi-phase fund-raising program is getting underway. Herrick sees the job as big but not impossible.

"It's important for people to know that this is an arts center that will serve Greater Cincinnati," she says.

To learn more about how you can offer artistic programs, volunteer your time or make a contribution to the CLIFTON CULTURAL ARTS CENTER, visit www.cliftonculturalarts.org or call 513-497-2860.