

## Two Decades of Creativity

By Jessica Klarp

*This is the third in a four-part series documenting the evolution of the Black Mountain Center for the Arts in celebration of its 20th anniversary.*

The original vision for the Black Mountain Center for the Arts was simple and ambitious. The mission statement “To bring arts to the people and people to the arts” guided decision-making and programming that has never wavered. Since the renovation of the old City Hall at 225 W. State Street into the non-profit Black Mountain Center for the Arts, under the guidance of (now retired) Executive Director Gale Jackson, the community of Black Mountain worked together to successfully realize that mission.

Though the Arts Center functions with a bare-bones staff, it is really the people (Board members, committee chairs, donors, volunteers, sponsors, artists, teachers, actors, musicians, and most importantly, participants like students and ticket buyers, gallery visitors, event attendees and word spreaders) who make the Arts Center a special, vibrant, important resource for the community.

With the Upper Gallery where the town library used to be, the public has been able to visit for free over the past 20 years at least 200 shows featuring local and national artists. There have been solo shows, blended media shows, group shows and retrospectives in a wide range of media. Almost every exhibit came with an opening celebration with food and wine where patrons and friends could meet the artist(s).

“A clean, white, windowless room with good lighting is invaluable to visual artists,” says artist Julia Burr who has had several solo shows and inspirational installations in the Upper Gallery, served many years on the board, was instrumental in entertaining at the yearly Auction for the Arts, created the tile mural on the side of the Clay Studio and who continues to consult on the gallery committee. “There are surprisingly few display spaces of this caliber available in the region. The Upper Gallery is a real asset to the community.”

The theater space that was once home to town council meetings and all forms of jurisprudence has transformed over the years. The Arts Center has played host to seven years of *Way Back When* performances based on local oral histories, six years of Front Porch Theatre productions, and was on the way to blossom yet again with the simplified BMCAT before the pandemic hit. Dozens of comedies and dramas helped give opportunities to local actors and directors, and provided audience members a chance to enjoy high quality live theater and storytelling in their own community.

The stage has also supported countless musicians and concerts from UPbeat concert series in the early days, to Michael Jeffry Stevens’ jazz series, to the annual Acoustic Corner Thanksgiving concerts, and the presence of Natalya Weinstein and John Miller of Zoe and Cloyd on a yearly basis.

Thousands of local children have taken advantage of the excellent teachers from Beth Magill’s years long KinderMusic classes, professional musician Keithie Knowles’ Suzuki lessons, to the regional Junior Appalachian Musicians program and Amy Maze’s thriving dance program. Adults have benefited as well under the instruction of artists Lorelle Bacon and Bob

Travers, ballet instructor Casey Kristofferson, renowned harpist Sue Richards and through the many talented instructors in the Clay Studio (which blossomed after the renovation of the old town garage in 2008).

For nine years Rita Vermillion was Program Coordinator charged with everything from developing classes and office management to maintaining the donor database and helping with fundraising events. "I was always amazed at the breadth of talent in this area. It was a privilege to offer a platform to develop that talent and offer arts opportunities to everyone from school children to seniors." During Vermillion's tenure the Arts Center weathered economic ups and downs and created many annual events.

In an effort to make raising money fun and attract new participants to BMCA, events such as PumpkinFest, Run for Your Arts, Fashion Shows, Golf Tournaments involved the efforts of the board and volunteers. More successful for fundraising and involving more of the community have been Art in Bloom (14 years, hundreds of volunteers, gallery shows, gala dinner, garden tours) and the Auction for the Arts (16 years of community support, recently transformed into the Funkraiser dance party and auction). Though donations and involvement are what keep the Arts Center afloat, it's not always about money. It's still about bringing arts to the people and people to the arts.

For four years board member and artist Libba Tracy developed community wide events focused on raising awareness for endangered monarch butterflies, bats, birds, and honey bees. Each event included a wide variety of work along the theme such as gallery shows, expert presentations, video presentations, haiku, an iconic fiber art sculpture, four local third grade classes who paraded from town square to BMCA with a puppet in hand, supported by sponsors and Rotarians.

Tracy, who worked with husband Tom in the early years to raise money for the Arts Center and can remember sweeping out the building during the renovation, says she was met with a resounding "Yes," when she brought the Awareness Event idea to Jackson.

"It was a grand partnership," says Tracy. "What a gift to have an idea and a pathway to bring it to fruition with multiple layers that included the art and the artist and the kids and the experts, having it be a community thing that would bring people who would never have come in BMCA and see what was possible inside the walls."

"Being a Part of the Arts has been one of the great privileges of my life, both professionally and personally," says Jackson who retired from BMCA in May of 2019. "To work with so much talent, to experience so much generosity, to nurture so much creativity and to affect so many children could only happen in a place as special as the Arts Center. It is essential to the fabric of our community that this local treasure continue to develop and thrive."

When Jackson announced her retirement, the board undertook a nationwide search for her replacement. In July of 2019 local arts and school administrator Lori Cozzi was named Executive Director.

*Part four of this series will focus on the Arts Center's current handling of the Pandemic and its goals for the future.*

The BMCA is open from 10am-5pm Monday through Friday. For more information call 828-669-0930 or visit [blackmountainarts.org](http://blackmountainarts.org)