

BMCA Looks to the Future

By Jessica Klarp

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

After a months-long national search by the board of directors, local arts administrator and educator Lori Cozzi was chosen to lead the non-profit Black Mountain Center for the Arts into the future. When Cozzi stepped in as Executive Director of BMCA in July 2019, the organization was a thriving local enterprise occupying the old city hall at 225 W. State Street for almost 20 years.

There were more than 30 classes a week serving hundreds of students, a community theatre, regular concerts, and gallery shows open to the public daily. A new mural for the west side of the building was in the works and the 13th annual Art in Bloom fundraiser had just taken place. It was business as usual at BMCA: fulfilling the mission to bring art to the people and people to the arts.

Hitting the ground running, Cozzi brought a renewed energy and fresh eyes to the Arts Center. Her goals were dynamic but realistic; her calm professionalism reassuring to board and staff.

In an effort to complete the groundwork set by Gale Jackson and the mural committee, Cozzi worked to complete fundraising at a gathering hosted by Libba and Tom Tracy where she was able to meet many of the Arts Center supporters. By November the dramatic, colorful mural, designed and installed by Brushcan Murals, was completed.

Like all non-profits, money is an issue and fund raising is critical. Staying solvent and meeting fiscal obligations is key to offering programs and events. After 16 years the Auction for the Arts fundraiser was transformed into the Funkraiser, with more than 120 guests dancing the night away in early March. Then the pandemic caused a prolonged closure. No theatre, no concerts, no classes, no clay studio, no gallery, no Art in Bloom gala or garden tour, no visitors, no income.

Less than a year into her tenure, Cozzi was faced with an unprecedented situation. "I did what I could to secure emergency grants and government funding," says Cozzi. "I filled out every form and application I could get my hands on, and I appealed to our constituency for emergency support. We followed the governor's mandate and CDC guidelines once the initial restrictions were eased and we have kept safety our top priority."

With the building empty and her fresh eyes, she and Program Coordinator Marylee Rorick were able to enhance the main level gift shop with better display space and work from more local artists. Rorick put exhibits in the Upper Gallery and the gift shop online. With dozens of instructors depending on BMCA for their income, staff worked to provide a clean, safely distanced space for a reduced number of students. They deep-cleaned and repainted classrooms. With a grant from the Beautification committee new planters were created for the entrance and new signage ordered.

"Looking ahead," says Cozzi, "I hope to see more visual arts classes and workshops, more community events, more concerts, more diversity in our classes, on our board and at

events, scholarships for underserved students, and increased membership. We look forward to the day when the building is once again filled with the sounds of our creative community expressing themselves.” Visibility and outreach will help to fuel all of those plans.

Board member and CPA Philip Arnold echoes Cozzi’s goals. “Even though many residents come and go every day through the doors of BMCA, there are still locals who do not know we exist. So our challenge continues to be to let folks know we are here, and that we have fun stuff for every age from 3 to 103. If you like to laugh...or be inspired...or be creative, this is the place.”

Providing access to the arts is critical to a healthy, diverse community. BMCA and all it provides is a draw for locals and tourists, for those moving here, for young families and retirees.

Board member and VP of Explore Asheville Glenn Cox says, “COVID and its issues aside, the challenges we continue to face at BMCA are of a financial nature. The world is a hard place right now. Why should you support the arts? The arts and culture of a community serve as the catalysts for a healthy, self-aware and accepting community. Supporting the work of the Center supports your family, your friends and your neighbors, not just the artists and teachers we give space to.”

Cozzi’s goal is to expand the “bringing arts to the people” element of BMCA’s mission statement by creating more outreach and off-site arts programs along with increased partnerships with area schools, businesses and the museum next door.

Supporting Cozzi are long-time Clay Studio manager Charles Freeland, Event Coordinator Jessica Klarp, and Program Coordinator Marylee Rorick who has brought her social media and web design skills to the position at a critical time when a virtual presence is the key - and sometimes only- way to reach the community. Rorick and Klarp took the 14th annual Art in Bloom online with a virtual garden tour, gallery tour and video presentation. Together the team at BMCA is committed to weathering the COVID storm. They are transforming the Arts Center to meet the challenges of a reimagined future and are eager to welcome once again all the people who make this important community resource as vibrant as its founders had envisioned.

“For 20 years BMCA has brought so much joy to this valley,” says Arnold. “My hope is that the Center will continue to evolve, finding still new ways to make our lives richer.”

The Black Mountain Center for the Arts is located at 225 W. State Street and open to the public from 10am to 5pm Monday through Friday. To become a member or to learn more about the organization, visit blackmountainarts.org or call 828-669-0930.