

# Lexington's *Colonial Times*

APRIL | MAY 2008

Lexington's monthly feature publication

## Magazine



## The Munroe Center for the Arts

# Future of Munroe Center in question; Selectmen issue RFP



Members of the Munroe team in front of the Munroe Center for the Arts.



From left: Merrill Meadow, Elsa Sullivan and Dan Fenn discuss fundraising.

With the future of the Munroe School building in question; citizens rally to secure its future

By Laurie Atwater

What started out as a gamble by some a group of Lexington artists—a creative solution that reinvigorated an old building and provided them with a place to make and teach art, has become a vibrant success. The Munroe Center for the Arts (the Center), located in the old Munroe School on Massachusetts Avenue is a second home for many Lexington children. In fact, almost 2,000 of the 2500 Munroe enrollees in 2005 came from Lexington. The Center employs Lexington children and adults (teens act as counselors at the sum-

“We’ve both [Elsa Sullivan and Dan Fenn] been terribly impressed by three things that the leadership has done. They acted immediately to raise revenue. They have raised rents, imposed a building maintenance fee on each student and they’ve been expanding their services to the town.”

Dan Fenn



Munroe's new Director, Christian Herold

mer camps) and provides studio space for sixteen artists in many disciplines. The Center also works with the LABBB program at Lexington High School and has collaborated with the Lexington Public Schools on arts-based activities. The tenants of the Center present numerous performances to the public each year. They also operate a gallery open to the public.

In the 1980s when towns were saddled with outdated public buildings, arts groups jumped at the chance to move in and make-do. These groups are used to getting by with little money and lots of imagination. Reuse of old buildings was part of the “creative economy” theory—the idea that bringing arts into the community would help to revitalize downtowns, attract residents and add excitement.

Twenty years later

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## VIEWS FROM SEVERAL SELECTMEN

Selectman Peter Kelley says, “My position hasn’t changed much over the years. When the Munroe Center went in there over twenty years ago it seemed like a very good re-use of the building—it found a home for a very worthwhile service. I don’t think that has changed much.”

However, Kelley does want to see the issues around the building resolved. “The fact of the matter is that it’s a tired building and it has reached a point where we have to deal with it,” he says. “But I would like to see this resource available for the same worthwhile purpose that it has been serving all these years.” Kelley favors a direct buy-out of the building for two reasons—he feels that the liability for the town is too great at this time and he also feels that a private sector occupant will be able to repair the building more cost-effectively.

“I believe the Town wants the building preserved,” comments Selectman Norman Cohen, “And that many want it to continue as an arts center. An RFP will shortly be issued to determine whether there is any interest by an arts or cultural group, including the current occupants, to buy the building (but not the surrounding and underlying land). I am encouraged that the current occupants appear to be formulating a business plan that might enable them to buy the building.”

Jeanne Kreiger says, “We expect the Munroe building to be used as an arts and educational center long into the future. We are developing a RFP to transfer ownership of the building, but not the land, to a non-profit. Regardless of whether the building remains in Town hands or is sold to a non-profit, it will be a public space. The fire safety issues need to be addressed now. Using CPA funds is, in my mind, totally appropriate to stabilize the historic building and ensure public safety.”

Norm Cohen concurs on the subject of the CPA funds. “The Munroe School building clearly meets the historic criteria to qualify it for CPA funds.” Kelley favors waiting to expend the CPA funds until the disposition of the building is decided.

Selectman Hank Manz reflects that it’s been twenty years and though many of the “old arguments” are the same, the condition of the building has deteriorated. “There are some real problems. We don’t want to give a very worthwhile group a giant millstone. What we’re looking for is a group with a viable business plan. What I’ve seen recently from the Monroe Center is very heartening. I personally realize that they are a struggling arts group and I would love for them to be successful.”

many communities will tell you that a creative economy really has developed and helped them to flourish. Art studios, theaters, museums and galleries moved into abandoned old spaces while schools moved into modern new buildings and retailers moved to the malls. The creative pursuits brought new life to wonderful spaces like the Munroe Center and cities and towns that did not want to lose their character made good use of architectural gems for the small price of making the arts economically feasible by negotiating favorable deals for the use of surplus buildings.

The relationship between Lexington and the tenants at Munroe has not always been a smooth one. Over the past two decades the fate of the Munroe building has been repeatedly discussed, debated and evaluated. Most recently it was considered as a site for a Senior Center—a proposal which was finally deemed inappropriate given parking and accessibility issues.

Periodically disagreements over the structure of the arrangement between the tenants of the building and the town have provided opportunities to refine the mission and the structure of the organization. The last negotiation in 1994 took place when former town manager Rick White issued an RFP (request for proposal) for the Munroe building. The ensuing negotiations yielded many positive changes, but did not produce a lease. The agreement that was adopted allowed the Center to occupy the building without paying

rent to the town, but required the Center to provide maintenance of the building. As the building gets older, the operating funds of the Center are not sufficient to cover costly repairs. (See sidebar on history of the Munroe Center page 42).

Now, the honeymoon is over. Not just in Lexington, but around the country, beautiful old buildings from the early 1900s are now a century old and feeling their age. They are not green. They are not energy efficient. They are not accessible and they need lots of love and care. Mostly, they need money. And because so often, the tenants of these old buildings are not-so-profitable pursuits, many happy marriages between towns and groups housed in older buildings are hitting a rough patch because of the cost of maintaining the properties and tight municipal budgets.

The Munroe Center is caught up in this widespread problem. The town has issued another RFP for the building and it is currently under legal review. According to Selectmen interviewed for this article, the current RFP stipulates that the building will remain an art center. The RFP process can be lengthy and the Munroe Center will be allowed to remain in the building while that process moves forward.

The RFP process is open and competitive. The Munroe Center for the Arts, while nervous about the possibility of losing their home is also seeing it as an opportunity. They have been operating in

the building for the past decade without a lease which has led to some strain between the Center and the town. The question now: will the building be sold or leased to the current occupants—or another arts group? The issue will play out in the coming months as the Selectmen and the public balance the twenty year history of the existing Munroe Center—the civic value of its schools, and the community partnership that it has developed—against any other offers that may come along as a result of the RFP process.

### **A GREAT OPPORTUNITY**

Recently hired Executive Director is excited by the opportunity to take control of the future the Munroe Center for the Arts.

“We are thrilled that Selectmen have committed to preserving Munroe as an arts education center. Our foremost desire has always been to serve Lexington from this historic building that has been our home for so many years. Whether we buy or lease is less important than ensuring, in collaboration with the town, the ongoing vitality of the Munroe Building and of the Munroe Center's programs, productions, and community service,” Herold says.

Herold is no stranger to the challenges for the arts and nonprofits. He was an adjunct professor at NYU's Undergraduate Drama Dept, the President (and long-term board member) of the board-run journal *Women and Performance*, directed NYU's Intercultural Performance Col-

loquium and produced large-scale, musical, audience-participation events in NYC as the executive director of RingOut, Inc. He started out in the Boston area where he ran an amateur theater group--Animist Theater Company and taught creative drama in after-school programs throughout the area.

Herold has already begun to address the difficult revenue-side of the equation by raising tenant rents, instituting a per-student “building maintenance fee” and expanding programming. He doesn't favor raising tuitions to a point that they will be unaffordable for a Lexington family. He has hired a new Director for the popular ArtSpan Program—Hannah Hammond-Hagman, and she is brimming over with ideas, enthusiasm and a desire to take the program to new heights.

ArtSpan programming has enjoyed enormous community success. The program serves as an introduction to the arts for many children and has filled a critical need both for children's programming and arts-specific programs in the community. ArtSpan vacation camps and summer programs are consistently full and have a loyal following. Children of all ages and all abilities find opportunities to engage in the arts through these programs.

However, the sticking point between the Munroe Center and the town continues to be capital improvements to the building. The revenue generated by the

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Munroe Center for the Arts from tenant rents (rents from its largest schools and studio artists) combined with fees from ArtSpan programming does not leave much leftover for capital improvements when you factor in operating costs (and especially fuel costs). Also, in the ten plus years between 1994 and today, the Center has not undertaken a major fundraising and they realize that it's time to reach out to the community to generate funds to stabilize the building.

### FUNDRAISING EFFORT

Christian Herold has thrown himself into the business-end of this project with energy and savvy. He has identified and recruited an enviable group of volunteers that he is confident will lead the Center into a successful future.

He is thrilled to report that one of Lexington's foremost town fathers, Dan H. Fenn, Jr. has recently joined the Munroe Center Board of Directors. Dan was reintroduced to the Munroe Center by his friend Elsa Sullivan who has been an ardent supporter of the National Heritage Museum and the Lexington Symphony and is well-recognized for her generous spirit and hard work as well as her financial support.

Both Dan and Elsa have been encouraged by the recent progress at the Center and moved to help them make it over this next hurdle. "We've both been terribly impressed by three things that the leadership has done," comments Fenn. "They acted immediately to raise revenue. They have raised

rents, imposed a building maintenance fee on each student and they've been expanding their services to the town."

Most importantly they have begun a very serious program to raise funds. This is something that Fenn wishes they had begun sooner, but he is thrilled to see it getting off to such a great start. "They've recruited some marvelous people," he says. "Julies Pieri, Jessie Foster and Lisa Perry-Wood...this is a bunch of real pros and they really care about it."

Elsa is thrilled to be working with Dan. "When he talks," she says, "People listen to every word!" She is also very happy with the new leadership at the Center. "Christian came to us out of the blue," she laughs. "He is a very creative person and he has really gotten them [Munroe tenants] together."

For Elsa, the school holds lots of memories. Her younger daughter attended school there. "It's been part of my life for fifty years," she says. Elsa, who has an abiding love of the arts and was known to do a little theater in her younger days, is living proof of what it means to keep moving forward in a positive direction. Acknowledging that the school has had its ups and downs, she dismisses it all with a wave of the hand. "It's the children," she says. "Let's think about the children."

Both Elsa and Dan will be an important part of a fundraising effort that is being designed to stabilize the Center and to address the concerns of the Selectmen.

Merrill Meadow is also a new member of the Board and a new face in Lexington. Merrill and his wife Cheryl relocated to this area last June after he accepted a position at Harvard University. "At Harvard, I do strategic planning and proposal development for principle gift philanthropy — individual gifts over \$10 million — that support important, cross — University programs."

Merrill, who is an animated and engaged individual could not be more enthusiastic about the arts. He says, "Our whole family has an interest in the arts — art, theater, writing — and so we were very excited to find a program as solid and comprehensive as that offered by the Munroe Center." He and Cheryl have two children in the Lexington schools—Gabe is almost 15 and Zoë is 10.

Merrill became exposed to the Center through his kid's activities there. "The Center adds such value, in my mind, to the community. It's a place for creative and interesting people to gather and meet each other — I can't tell you how many friends I've made there in just ten months. The fact that the Center brings together so many different kinds of artists and performers makes its environment a wonderful catalyst for new ways of thinking and seeing."

Meadow has been contributing his expertise to the development effort. They have identified a short list of potential donors which they are approaching not only for financial support, but for advice and insight. "We are asking

questions and listening deeply to these important philanthropists," Meadow says. He hopes to use the information gleaned from this initial effort to structure a capital campaign and "to build a foundation of giving." Meadow is confident that they can activate not only lovers of the arts, but parents who see the school as a valuable part of their child's education.

Raising funds is one step in the process. Creating a strategic plan is another. Gary Garberg has signed on to the Munroe Center for the Arts Board of Directors to lend his experience in "strategic planning and financial work" to the process of moving the Center toward a sustainable future.

"We need a rigorous planning process," Garberg says. "I was totally amazed to find out that twenty four percent of school aged kids in Lexington interact with the Munroe Center!" Since Herold has been hired, Garberg sees incredible energy and dedication pouring into the Center. "ArtSpan is completely subscribed for April vacation and we have started to take enrollments for the summer!"

Lisa Perry-Wood has also been rolling up her sleeves. "Our biggest challenge has been to attempt a feasibility study (a series of interviews or focus groups to gauge the ability of MCA to raise a significant amount of money)," she says, "while at the same time address current fiscal and political pressures. It's not an ideal climate in which to do all of this, but the energy and optimism of this group is palpable and that can make a

huge difference to the end result.”

With new community support and sound planning, Herold is hopeful that they will be able to fashion an agreement with the town to stay in the building and enable them to not only maintain their excellent programming, but to expand and improve it

## COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

Each organization under the Munroe umbrella dedicates a part of their time and effort to community service. Munroe's ArtSpan camps offer Lexington parents an affordable alternative for summer activities and school vacations. ArtSpan Director Hannah Hammond-Hagman is bringing new energy to the ArtSpan programming and reaching out to the Lexington Public Schools to offer a truly collaborative vision.

Ami Stix is the ACT (Arts Created Together) Chairman for Bridge Elementary School. She recently met with Hannah to ask if the Munroe Center could bring in a drama workshop to Bridge School and she “was completely drawn in by Hannah's personality.” Ami says that they always invite Munroe to come to their Walk for the Arts and set up a crafts table, but she recently realized that they could be using them for so much more. “She [Hannah] brought in a couple, Christopher and Jessica Webb, and they did a drama workshop in each classroom. The kids loved it. The nice thing is that they're [Munroe] right here in Lexington. It's one-

stop shopping. And they are an invaluable resource for parents with funding for the arts so unpredictable at the schools.”

Community collaboration is something that both Herold and Hammond-Hagman look forward to nurturing and building. They have already succeeded in reviving ArtWalk in Lexington in collaboration with other arts organizations and cultural partners and Lexington retailers. He and envisions a revival of First Night Lexington along with an expansion of other performance-based programs. Herold also wants to expand programming for two underserved populations in town—teens and seniors.

The Munroe Center for the Arts is working hard to earn a continued presence in Lexington in the building that it has nurtured and loved since 1984. Knowing that it can be an incredible challenge for any arts organization to secure itself financially and achieve sustainability, Director Christian Herold is still optimistic, but the future of the building must be secured before any long-term fundraising can go forward. “This is a community that supports the arts. The continued success of this Center proves that. We have an energized staff and a great Board with new ideas and great vision. We are determined to make this happen.”

## A LITTLE HISTORY OF THE MUNROE SCHOOL BUILDING

After it ceased being used as a school in 1979 or 1980, the building was occupied for a short time by local cable TV and a Christian organization. In 1984 a group of artists approached the town to use the building to create an arts center that would provide rental space for artists in Lexington. That group called itself *Arts Lexington*. For the following decade each tenant had a lease with the town and paid rent for their space.

In 1994, Town Manager Rick White decided to forge a new arrangement between the town and the Center. An RFP was issued by the town and a new 501c(3) known as *Lexington Friends for the Arts* dba (doing business as) The Munroe Center for the Arts was formed with many of the original *Arts Lexington* members still involved.

Under this new umbrella nonprofit, a Director's position was created and the educational ArtSpan program was also developed. The major schools remained as tenants of the nonprofit entity. Most importantly, the new RFP charged the Munroe Center with making capital improvements to the building in lieu of rent. Unfortunately, and for unknown reasons, former Town Manager Rick White failed to follow through with a formal lease which would have clearly detailed the arrangement and clarified responsibilities.

Flexible lease and/or sale arrangements are not uncommon between arts organizations and towns with out-of-date, but valued buildings like the historic Munroe School. Many communities consider these arrangements a win-win because of the enormous contribution that the arts center brings to the community. These arrangements also allow tenants to leverage their nonprofit status to make necessary repairs through in-kind contributions of labor and materials and other less expensive channels than are available to municipalities. Lexington has negotiated similar arrangements with other nonprofits like the Waldorf School.

Since this revamped agreement was put into place, it is generally felt that much of the spirit of the RFP has been addressed by the Center.

However, the sticking point continues to be a commitment and a plan for making capital improvements to the building. The revenue generated

by the Munroe Center for the Arts umbrella organization from tenant rents (which are calculated on a square foot basis and are considered to be in-line with rents paid in other communities for facilities in similar circumstances—like Emerson Umbrella in Concord) combined with tuition from ArtSpan programming comprises its operating budget.

Like other organizations, Munroe is feeling the pinch of rising fuel costs and increased insurance rates. To date, the capital generated has not been sufficient to fund both the operating expenses of the school and address the major capital needs of the building that concern the Selectmen.

The building continues to age and the urgency around addressing such things as fire and safety systems, the heating system, and windows that are inefficient has focused attention on the capital needs of the building. Recent inspections by Lexington Fire Chief Middlemiss have revealed the need for a fire and safety upgrade and further improvements have been recommended to bring the building into compliance over time. All repairs must be done with sensitivity to the historic nature of the building.

Chief Middlemiss and Lexington Facilities Manager Pat Goddard submitted an application for \$575K to the CPC (Community Preservation Committee) for funding to execute the fire safety upgrades that are needed immediately. Use of Lexington CPA funds for the fire safety improvements was approved by the CPC and is awaiting the approval of Town Meeting.

The Selectmen are now more eager to deal with the fate of the building because the town is strapped for funds. They are committed to its designation as an arts center, but they are looking for an organization with a plan in place to address the capital needs of the building. The forthcoming RFP stipulates that the proposals for use of the Munroe School building must be limited to a community arts program whether it is sold outright or a lease is negotiated.

In the ten plus years between 1994 and today, the Center did not do any major fundraising. They are currently addressing their fundraising needs in response to the concern of the Selectmen. (See main story for details).

# Munroe center for the arts



LEXINGTON PARENTS  
VALUE THEMUNROE CENTER

Jessie Foster

"Many know of my love and support of the Arts over the years but my interest in the Munroe Center is deeper than that," says Jessie Foster. "For the first twelve years of my three children's lives much of their activities revolved around this center. They took dance lessons, piano lessons, karate lessons and many art classes at Munroe. They even played their first T-ball games on the back lawn. This was the first introduction my kids had to the arts and it has helped them to develop an appreciation and love for music, dance and art that has taken them into their college lives. I truly believe this center is a vital part of what makes Lexington so special."

Joan Zahka

"Neither of our kids, a son who graduated from LHS over 10 years ago, or our daughter who is a sophomore now, found their passion from being involved in team sports. They both did however, discover what would become lifetime passions, and in the case of my son, a profession, as a result of being exposed at a young age to arts education programs that extended beyond what was offered in the public schools.

How many of the students on sports teams in school go on to pursue the sport further in college, or as a profession? Not many even continue the activity for pleasure at all as young, or older adults. I suspect that isn't true of arts education. It certainly isn't so for my two kids who both attended Art and Performing Arts classes, art vacation and summer programs at Munroe Center. It must be more than a coincidence that they both participated in various Munroe arts education programs and both have gone on to discover and pursue talents, activities and professions within the arts."

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Munroe Center provides instruction at a time when public schools are cutting arts programs due to continual funding shortfalls. For many children who do not find a niche in sports, the arts is a refuge and a place where their creative spark is ignited and nurtured throughout their school years.

There is an unending stream of research reinforcing the importance of the arts in the overall intellectual development of children. Many children exposed to the arts at an early age develop a passion that can evolve into a lifetime pursuit. Who can argue with the social value of exploring creativity, nurturing true talent, in-

teracting with others outside the classroom and in areas that do not involve standardized tests. Plus, the value of providing opportunities for constructive after-school activities and diversion from less productive pursuits makes the Munroe Center is a great community asset for Lexington's parents and kids.



## Saturday at Munroe

