

Tahawus Cultural
Center



SMALL BUT **DETERMINED**

By Shelley Hazen



The basement (aka, future maker's space)

ART has the power to change lives and maybe, with enough determination, an entire community.

Rebecca Kelly and her husband, Craig, have that determination. They hope what they've done so far at the Tahawus Cultural Center (TCC), and have planned for its future, can accomplish just that — revitalization in Au Sable Forks.

"We want the town to become curious and engaged in his future," says Kelly, who's the center's artistic director.

The interest, passion and talent necessary already exist in town and its environs. Kelly says her dance workshops are as well attended as those she might put on New York City (her hometown), and amateur and professional artists are everywhere.

"These very small towns have lots of talent," she says.

And the area is brimming with ideas, according to Kelly, which come both from people who've relocated and those who've lived here their whole lives. All that's needed is a spark from someone who takes a risk, succeeds and inspires someone else to do the same. The TCC wants to be this spark and, so far, has been an exercise in determination and an example of how passion can turn ideas into reality.

The building was built by the Masons in 1911 to serve as their lodge. Originally, they used the top two floors and rented out the ground floor, which had storefront facing the main street. Later, the Masons relocated to the bottom, shuttered the storefront windows for privacy, and the top floors were abandoned. During this time, the *Adirondack Record* newspaper did business in the basement.

“The Masons designed a beautiful building,” Kelly says. “When the town was in its heyday, it was one of the heartbeats of Main Street.”

When Kelly first saw the old Masonic lodge, it was well past that heyday. In the mid-80s, she and her husband — whom she describes as “dance people from New York City” — started coming up to the Adirondacks to run a summer program for aspiring dancers out of the Lake Placid area. During those visits, they explored the North Country, made friends, fell in love with the area and eventually bought land near Ausable Forks to build a cabin. Kelly says they would often pass the old Masonic lodge, shut up and abandoned, and their imaginations began to brew; eventually, they started to ask themselves where their future lay — in the city or the Adirondacks?

They chose the Adirondacks.

Around 2010 or so, the Appleby Foundation, which runs Kelly’s ballet company and various other creative enterprises, purchased the Masonic lodge, and she and her husband learned what kind of state the building was in.

There were issues with the roof; windows needed to be replaced; and asbestos abounded. A year or so after they bought the building, Kelly says an April flood filled the basement with 4 feet of water. If that wasn’t enough, Hurricane Irene blew through that summer, which brought another 6 feet. The contents of the basement were flushed out with the flood waters, and the heating system was destroyed. With grant money, they were able to secure the basement.

Since this dramatic start, the Masonic lodge has been transformed into a cultural and artistic center, restored as closely as possible to its original historic condition. The building is now on the National and New York State Historic Registry. The once-abandoned and shut up symbol of a bygone era now hosts a dance studio and art gallery, and it’s still expanding.

The name, “Tahawus Cultural Center,” comes from the lodge’s original title. It’s a made-up word that translates into “cloud splitter,” which Kelly learned from a Mohawk friend and artist. “Tahawus” is another name for “Mount Marcy,” and its symbolism suited Kelly and her burgeoning arts center well: “reaching for the sky.”

In fact, her dance studio is called the Cloud Splitter Dance Studio, in honor of this unique heritage. The studio occupies the third and top floor of the building — the tallest in Au Sable Forks. It has a “proper dance floor” and a wall of mirrors and plays host to all kinds of physical activities, from yoga and line dancing to ballet.

“We always have to be mindful that people aren’t always looking for the kinds of activities we bring. They have discovered them and sample for themselves,” Kelly says. “We are all about health and fitness and finding beauty in your life at any stage.”

The Windows Gallery is on the second floor, a space “dedicated to spotlight talent in the surrounding area.” Through June, the gallery is hosting an exhibit by Larry Vanderburgh from Schroon Lake called *Through Seven Lenses*, which features watercolors of varied subjects, from landscapes to old machinery to trains. After that is the Craftworks Exhibit, featuring 10 female artisans who work in wide-ranging mediums, from paper sculpture and knitting to stained glass and beadwork. Later in the summer is an exhibit by the Champlain Valley Arts & Crafts Club.

The point of featuring local artists is not just to spotlight talent that exists right here in the North Country, but also to include people who might not think of themselves as “artists.”

“There’s always the question that a lot of people ask: ‘Am I an artist?’ We want to validate something that we think is worth sharing, that is filled with skill and attention and the forces of creativity,” she says.

The TCC will turn its attention next to a new venture, the “last frontier” of the building as Kelly calls it, a space where creativity in all its forms can be explored and practiced — the basement. Someday, Kelly hopes to make this once-flooded, currently unfinished, former newspaper office into a maker’s space, a catch-all term that can accommodate any creative venture: to build something, hold a rehearsal, teach a course and everything in between.

“The community needs ways to come together to develop their ideas,” Kelly says. “They don’t need to worry about affording a place to meet.”



Windows Gallery

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Right now, the renovation to do list is quite long, and they have enlisted the expertise of an architectural firm to guide the project. They need to replace windows and the plumbing destroyed by the floods; build a new floor; knock down walls to turn several rooms into one; put in a bathroom; and rewire and weatherize the space. This last element will include making sure that the basement will never be flooded again. And, of course, whatever they do will preserve the building's, and by extension the town's, heritage.

"We want to bring it back to his historic bones, and we want it to be beautiful," Kelly says.

Before the maker's space debuts, the TCC has another inspiring project up its sleeve.

At the back of the building there is an unassuming cement wall in a part of the property that's a bit neglected and forgotten. Kelly calls it a "grotto." Starting in July, Georgeanne Gaffney, an artist from Saranac Lake, will paint a trompe-l'œil — a realistic, three-dimensional optical illusion — mural of the Ausable Gorge. Gaffney is still sketching out the details, but the concept enraptured Kelly from the moment she heard it.

"She wants to create this river scene with a strong curve that draws you into the image," Kelly describes; a rocky portal, perhaps a train trestle, will frame the view in the foreground. "It will look like you walk under a bridge into the gorge. [...] It's this beautiful place in nature, and she'll bring it right down to the town."

The painting will include local wildlife, plants and insects, which Kelly hopes to use as an engagement tool

for local children.

The mural will be relatively small, compared to other murals, about 7 feet by 14, and it's in an unassuming place, hidden and not facing the street. This is intentional; Kelly wanted the job to be manageable for the artist and for the center to maintain.

If the TCC can succeed, perhaps its accomplishment will inspire others to pursue their own energetic ideas and foster the abundant talent that is already right in town. After that, anything is possible.

"We're small," Kelly says of the center. "But we're determined."

The Tahawus Cultural Center is located at 14234 State Route 9N/Main Street in Au Sable Forks. For more information or updates, visit tahawusculturalcenter.org.



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