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DAUPHIN COUNTY

A HOME FOR PLAYHOUSE

Business community supports acting troupe

BY JULIA TAYLOR
juliat@journalpub.com

There is an inherent paradox in the Hershey Area Playhouse. Despite its name, the troupe of amateur actors actually has no "playhouse." Instead, the group has put on shows everywhere from a soccer stadium to a volunteer fire station.

The organization is working to erase the paradox.

"We always joke that we have an 'edifice' complex," said Susan Cort, a member of the nonprofit Playhouse's board of directors.

The Playhouse board is made up of amateur actors, but most are seasoned professionals. For Cort, the Playhouse is a 40-hour per week commitment. Other board members put in significant hours, as well. Together, they have rallied the support of the Hershey-area business community and raised nearly \$1 million to construct a physical location. The Hershey Co., for example, donated \$100,000.

But the business most in the Playhouse's corner is Country Meadows Retirement Communities, employer of Playhouse treasurer Theresa Ridge. Supporting a nonprofit community institution such as the Playhouse is good for business, Country Meadows executives decided.

The money the Playhouse raises will pay for the renovation of a barn in Country Meadows' backyard. The barn — paint peeling, basement dank and littered with scraps of evidence from its 136 years — hardly seems a place to put on a play. But former Central Pennsylvanian Charles Alexander, an architect in Maryland, sees something different. He envisions a 150-seat theater, snack bar, dressing rooms, proper lobby and stage lighting, all attributes the Playhouse has had to slap together in each of its different venues.

Years of redesigning lighting, cleaning up debris from Astroturf-covered soccer fields and playing to audiences inside cavernous high-school auditoriums have made playhouse members yearn for a permanent home where they can roost and stretch. In the next few years, Playhouse board members hope to hire a full-time director for the nonprofit. They also hope to offer more acting classes and summer camps once the playhouse is complete.

Country Meadows' management sees the playhouse as a way to bring visitors to the retirement community, provide entertainment for residents and give the actors' a home.

"It's a win-win," said Michael Leader, chairman and chief executive officer of Country Meadows. The Playhouse often performs in Country Meadows' Rose Room, but the space sometimes grows cramped. "It brings the community onto Country Meadows' campus. It can really change someone's preconceived notion of what a retirement community looks like."

Country Meadows is leasing the barn to the Playhouse for \$1 per year, and the George M. Leader Family Corp. gave the Playhouse a \$100,000 donation. Michael Leader's business network has also helped the fundraising effort, said Ridge, manager of budgeting and benefits at Country Meadows and a lighting designer and member of the Playhouse's board.

That wasn't the only help the group had in raising its first million. The playhouse board hired Nancy Saidis, a fundraising consultant, to help identify and solicit potential donors. Cort, who heads up communications firm JPL Productions' public relations by day, also has extensive experience soliciting public attention.

One million dollars is not quite enough, however — the group still needs to raise about \$500,000 to cover the restoration and renovation costs. Board members hope to bring in more corporate donations to cover costs.

Construction keeps stalling. Brechbill and Helman Con-



PHOTO/LIZZIE HEARD

Susan Cort and her daughter, Mallory Royer, sing from their music book during a Hershey Area Playhouse rehearsal. They are rehearsing for "Cinderella."

struction Company Inc. of Franklin County is the contractor. Cort expects to break ground this summer on the barn. The project was originally scheduled to start in fall 2005.

Rehearsing in the chorus room of Lower Dauphin High School for the group's production of "Cinderella," the actors who don't sit on the group's board are pretty much unfazed by the non-playhouse situation. They take jabs at one another like siblings, reveling in the time away from work and responsibility to assume their fairy-tale roles.

"It'll make a difference to the people that are organizing it, and I think people will enjoy coming more," said Rick Anderson, who works by day as a salesman and plays the king.

"For us, we enjoy doing what we do no matter what ... This is my vacation time. It's the only time I get to be creative." ■



ILLUSTRATION/SUBMITTED

This rendering depicts how the stage area of the Hershey Area Playhouse will look when it is completed.