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'This will be our new home': Performing arts community find another use for former North Carroll High School

By KRISTEN GRIFFITH
CARROLL COUNTY TIMES | JUL 08, 2021



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FEEDBACK

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Justin Patterson took to the North Carroll High School stage on a recent evening for a rehearsal.

“There’s going to be some voice cracking,” said Patterson, a cast and board member of Players on Air Inc.

He and his cast mates ran, jumped, hit the floor and belted out the song “Pandemonium” during a practice performance of the musical “The 25th annual Putnam County Spelling Bee” on July 1 at the shuttered school.

FEEDBACK

No longer in use for education, the North Carroll High School facility has become not only the hub for a new sports complex but it also home to the performing arts community.

Since the school closed back in 2016, it has been in use by the Carroll County Sheriff's Office. In December, county commissioners [approved a contract to sell the school](#) to Chesapeake Real Estate Group LLC, which will install turf fields and make the school a multisport complex.



FEEDBACK

Cast members practice a dance routine from The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee during a rehearsal by members of the Collegiate Players group of Players On Air in the auditorium of the former North Carroll High School on Thursday, July 1, 2021. (Brian Krista/Carroll County Times)

This past spring, Matthew Laraway, the executive vice president at the real estate group, allowed for theater groups and dance companies to utilize the space after receiving approval from the county. He also sees it being used for concerts and a speaker series.

He said his vision for the high school was to utilize the entire campus, but the use of its auditorium in the last couple months was a “pleasant surprise.”

Laraway said the high school has four sections. One section will be the offices for the athletic club and another will be for the wellness, sports medicine or yoga related activity. The middle section, he said, will be branded as the center of the arts and the gymnasium and fields will be for sports.

Carroll County Commissioner Richard Weaver, District 2, said he didn't want the school to close when it did. But he also didn't envision it being used the way it has been. He said the collaboration to utilize the space is an “example of people working together for a positive thing. And it really works well.”

Laraway said an informal steering committee was started to gather public feedback on how to utilize the facility. The group was comprised of people from the community, and Laura Wonsala, a founder of Players on Air Inc., was one of them.

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FEEDBACK

She said in an interview her group has bounced around to a few different locations since it started in 2017. “And now this will be our new home,” she said.

Not only is she on the committee and helps run a dance company, Wonsala also helps coordinate the auditorium's schedule.

“We have people in there Sunday to Sunday,” she said. “We'll be the first group doing a theatrical performance on stage since North Carroll closed.”



The auditorium of the former North Carroll High School is currently being used by Players On Air and other local theatrical arts production companies. (Brian Krista/Carroll County Times)

On July 23 to 25, Players on Air will perform “Jesus Christ Superstar.” And “the 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee,” which is performed by the group’s Collegiate Players, will be performed Aug. 6 to 8.

FEEDBACK

“It is so exciting to be in one place, to be able to rehearse in one place and know this is where we’re performing,” Wonsala said. “Everything is in one location, which we never really had before.”

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The auditorium has 825 audience seats, and Larway said if you include the orchestra area, it brings the total number of possible occupants to 1,000.

Many classrooms and offices inside the high school are empty, however, performers have already utilized some of the space.

Debbie Brengle, a board member for Players on Air, said the empty space is a little sad given that’s where her son graduated from.

Near the auditorium was a room full of costumes and props from prior performances. They were once sitting in Wonsala’s basement, Patterson and Brengle said. The props for the group’s annual “Christmas Carroll” performance had it’s own room and the three-year old pinecone props made the space smell like cinnamon.

They said the old band room will double as a dressing room and green room, a place for cast members to congregate offstage, and an old art space with mirrors on the wall could be used as a dance studio.

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Brengle said the building allows for multiple groups to practice at the same time.



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Entering the building a little before 7 p.m. that night was Miranda Secula who helps run Small Town Stars Theatre Company. Since the group started in 2015, they haven’t been able to do full season of performances “until the opportunity to use this space became available.”

They went from rehearsing in a backyard, to a recreational center, to a barn. They found someone who had an extra building on property and later performed at Carroll Community College, “and now we’re here,” she said.

Secula said Wonsala, who knew “both groups had a mutual need for a home” told her about the auditorium.

Secula said Small Town Stars will be performing "Puffs" July 30-31 and Aug. 1.

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"It's been fantastic just having one place to call home and knowing where we're going to be everyday," she said.

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