

Gaines Center for the Humanities

Jury Project Proposal

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“Daddy won’t you take me back to Muhlenberg County
Down by the Green River where Paradise Lay
Well, I’m sorry my son, but you’re too late in asking
Mister Peabody’s coal train has hauled it away”
John Prine – *Paradise*

"Two years ago the local chamber of commerce and our Extension office commissioned a survey of what area businesses liked and disliked about Muhlenberg County. Overwhelmingly, the respondents said they wanted to see a more vibrant arts community, with more opportunities for young people to get involved in cultural activities."

Mike Mercer – *President of First Kentucky Bank, Central City*
Graduate of the University of Kentucky, 1980

My primary and most intense connection with the humanities for the last decade has been music. It began with my first piano lesson in the 4th grade and continues here at the University of Kentucky, where I am a member of the French horn studio. Though Muhlenberg county and the surrounding region are known best for country and bluegrass legends such as Bill Monroe and Merle Travis, the Muhlenberg North Band Program, of which I am a proud alumna, has been the springboard for countless musicians who have auditioned successfully for All State ensembles, Governor’s School for the Arts, and college scholarships. My high school, one of two in the county, also produces entertaining and professional plays with limited resources, as well as wonderful young visual artists. I will refrain from the impulse to rave about the wonderful artists who were my predecessors, peers, and successors, and instead move to the more pressing issue of performance space.

For nearly two decades since the Muhlenberg County schools consolidated, drama productions, art exhibitions, and band concerts have been held in the school cafeterias or gymnasiums, spaces not at all conducive to artistic endeavors. There are occasional comments from the teachers who are involved or parents of performers, but no real push has ever been made to remedy the situation. The

University of Kentucky has proposed a Fine Arts Extension Agent to work in the county, the third position of its kind in the state and, for that matter, the nation, because the program is unique to Kentucky. This program will likely follow the model of the programs in Pike and Greenup counties with the exception that it will be privately funded, the fundraising efforts for which are being coordinated by the UK Office of Development. The extension program is set to be up and running by January 1st, 2009, and, with that knowledge, I thought there could be no more appropriate time to research the possibilities for a performing arts complex.

For my jury, I will conduct a feasibility study that explores the details and necessities for the construction of a performing arts venue. This will hopefully include an evaluation for availability and cost of land, projected costs of planning and building, and, most importantly, the benefits to various community populations, with specific attention given to students. If I get have enough time, I would also like to explore the costs of sustainability of such a venue, including personnel for maintenance, sound and lighting engineers, and administrative assistants.

I hope to propose three possible sites and schemes for the performing arts complex: one near the Board of Education in Powderly, KY; one tract along Highway 189 (possibly land owned by Peabody); and one alternate site yet to be determined, hopefully an existing building that could be renovated or restored. One other possibility would be the land surrounding Muhlenberg North High School, though this is less desirable for two reasons. First, much of the surrounding land is farmland not zoned for development, and I would also prefer an area more neutral for the use of all schools, particularly the two high schools.

One thing I hope to determine quickly is the size of the building, including, but not limited to: a stage capable of accommodating a full-sized band or orchestra, an orchestra pit for theater productions, wings, and seating. The extra spaces I would like to see included would be: an art gallery, rehearsal space, dressing rooms, and offices for ticketing and administrative needs. In my vision, the building would be as functional for as many art forms as possible, but would focus on music first, based in part on the extension program's focus on music, but also on the fact that both high schools have the largest numbers of students involved in band activities

compared to visual art or theater programs. The proposal must also include external space for parking. A building near the Board of Education or North High School would be advantageous in its close proximity to existing parking. An auditorium near the Board could utilize the parking for the Copper Creek shopping center, and a venue near the high school could use the school's parking.

Another immediate challenge is proposing whether the building should be public or private, though, in my mind, it seems most likely that it would be a combination of both. I want to ensure that priority goes to schools and educational outreach programs, but, ideally, I want the building to be used for as many possible types of events as possible: graduation and baccalaureate services, proms, church revivals, community theater, guest presentations for schools, etc. The more the venue could be useful to a variety of groups and types of events, the more ownership and pride the community would feel in such a space.

The obvious challenge for the entire proposal is money, and another important factor to be determined is how ambitious to be with the proposal. I must decide between a bare bones proposal that has a greater chance of being taken seriously and leaving out certain organizations or a grander vision that could be scaled back. In researching venues for schools and communities of comparable size, I found the Kenneth Shadowen Performing Arts Center at Marshall County High School, which seats 890 and has comparable capabilities to what I envision for the Muhlenberg County facility. Hopefully my proposal will fall somewhere between a building like this and more extensive centers, such as the Glema Mahr Center for the Arts in Madisonville, Kentucky, and the Hardin County Schools Performing Art Center located at John Hardin High School in Elizabethtown.

The ultimate goal would be that the Center would serve not only existing communities, but also become a springboard for future programs, i.e. an orchestra or community band, elementary drama programs, dance, etc. With the high usage of methamphetamine that Muhlenberg county is known for, a performing arts venue would hopefully engage more students in constructive activities. More arts exposure could also be beneficial to humanities areas for standardized tests, such as the statewide CATS assessments. The center, beyond its initial cost, could also be

positive economically, as it would provide more events and activities within the county borders. On a Friday night, one could go to dinner at a local restaurant and to a play or concert at the center rather than travelling to Owensboro, Madisonville, or Bowling Green for a similar experience.

For the moment, I have no conceived budget needs aside from fuel costs for any necessary meetings with people at home or from relevant relating facilities or organizations. The only other expense I can imagine would be materials for a board or model if I found an architect willing to do a sketch or representation free of charge, which seems highly unlikely. As far as a schedule goes, I am able to communicate mostly by phone and email. I hope to have invested 20 hours by winter break, and my time at home, in addition to the fact that school will still be in session, will allow more intensive work within the community. I have no special needs for coordination other than a desire to be able to send a copy of any progress to the newly hired arts agent soon after he or she is hired in January of 2009.

In the course of planning my jury, I have talked with many people, primarily arts teachers from Muhlenberg County, in order to find out the best people to contact for a stronger network of allies within the community. I talked extensively with Joe Allen, my band director at Muhlenberg North High School, who is now retired, and also with Candy Roscoe, the acting drama teacher at MNHS who is also a board member for the local theater company.

For jurors, I have a resource in the architecture department and one from the community in addition to my senior mentor. The architect is from western Kentucky, and has a special interest in projects in that area. My other resource works in management, and specializes in creative funding to a degree, so I expect both of them will be valuable resources and help me foresee and avoid possible obstacles.

Sources

Nathe, Carl and Kelley Bozeman. "Fine Arts Extension Coming to Muhlenberg County." University of Kentucky News. 25 Aug., 2008. 10 Sept., 2008.

<http://news.uky.edu/news/display_article.php?category=1&artid=3831>