



# *West Side Theatre*

## *A Live Piece of History*

BY KIMBERLY HORG-WEBB ♦ PHOTO PROVIDED BY THE CITY OF NEWMAN

*a* movie theater opened in downtown Newman in 1940. The West Side Theatre was the only place in town with air conditioning. Then, in 1984, it was converted into a rolling skating rink. When the popularity of rolling skating went out with the 80s, so did the rink.

In 1995, Newman resident Farris Larsen approached the City Council along with other locals in town about the possibility of the City purchasing the theater to be used for live productions. At the time, the West Side Theatre was vacant and becoming an eyesore. Then-mayor of Newman, James Silveira convinced the rest of the city council to use redevelopment monies to purchase the theater.

A year later the theatre was leased to the West Side Theatre Foundation. The joint partnership between the City of Newman and the West Side Theatre Foundation has since been a success. "Because of our unique arrangement with the city, we have a building and a way to raise funds," West Side Theatre Executive Director Farris Larsen said.





### *Starting with a Dream*

Larsen had a long time dream of creating a performing arts space in the town that she had grown up in. Her dream came true with the help of her husband David and their friend Jim Tacheira, who all spent endless hours restoring the building.

The trio got everyone they knew to volunteer their time to improve the building's interior. It is estimated that volunteers have spent at least 16,000 hours refurbishing it. Volunteers Agnes Silveira and Lorene Moeller spent over 400 hours alone restoring the murals (on either side of the stage) that were painted over when the theater was a skating rink.

"We had about five weeks to make the place at least presentable enough to host the local Fall Festival Wine and Cheese event," Larsen said. "There was no stage, holes in the lobby wall and a booth had been added to the corner when it was a skating rink. Luckily, the floor had been flattened so we could borrow equipment from the school district to make all of the repairs."

There were 350 people who attended the Wine and Cheese event that year. It oversold by 100 people. The theater was eventually refurbished to look as it did almost seven decades ago, with figures and faux marble columns in the interior of the walls, overhead chandeliers and 24-foot ceilings.

### *Getting Better All the Time*

A stage has been added and sound and lighting systems are constantly being upgraded. Restrooms are easily accessible, there is comfortable seating with good views from any location, and beverages and snacks are available in the lobby.

Various types of performers make appearances at the theater. It has a commitment to provide diversity to the Arts by choosing a wide array of performers, programs and events. This year the theater has two theatrical productions, but Larsen's goal is to

have at least four theatrical productions a year. Audiences range in size, anywhere from 50 to 350 people.

According to local volunteer and actor Jeff Vandervort, the community has been very supportive of the theater. He attended almost every event at the theater when his family first moved to Newman five years ago. After getting to know the volunteers, he decided he wanted to be a part of it. Now his entire family is involved.

"My son John was already a great kid, but theater has made him more outgoing and confident," Vandervort said. "The fact that it is something we can do together makes it very personal and special." He adds that other than sports, there are very few opportunities in communities for young people. Theater is an activity for all ages and walks of life.

Rick Nagle, West Side Theatre Booking Agent, is the second generation in his family to work at the West Side. His father, Richard Nagle was the theater's first projectionist when it opened in 1940. Nagle first got involved 10 years ago when he set up the website, and he started booking events when he moved closer to the theater.

"I've been almost exclusively the booker for live music performances for the past four years," Nagle said. "My involvement is spurred by my love of music, my desire to expose people to an eclectic array of idioms, and wanting to see the West Side Theatre flourish as a community gathering place."

The West Side Theatre is a non-profit organization, so volunteers are always needed. Tickets can be purchased over the Internet through [brownpapertickets.com](http://brownpapertickets.com) or by calling (800) 838-3006. For more information, visit [westsidetheatre.org](http://westsidetheatre.org) or call (209) 862-4490. *S<sub>M</sub>*