

## SPA sets campaign for promising future

Published in *The Times Argus*

Sunday, October 5, 2014

By David Delcore



*Chip Allen Natvig / Staff Photo*

*A granite ice cream sculpture is on display at Studio Place Arts.*

BARRE — Studio Place Arts is taking a metaphorical meat cleaver to its mortgage and there's at least an outside chance that meat cleaver could turn into a match before a newly launched campaign is over.

Burning the mortgage is probably a long shot, but then so was the idea of creating a visual arts center in a three-story brick building that was gutted by fire in 1993 and very nearly demolished to make room for a downtown parking lot just a few years later.

Studio Place Arts, better known by its acronym SPA, is a testament to the possibility of long shots — an improbable project, pulled off by a group of area artists with next to no money and absolutely no development experience.

Still, SPA happened.

And, while organizers will tell you it's been "happening" ever since the doors opened on Nov. 11, 2000, they will freely concede that is a happy, but head-scratching development.

"Our survival — mere survival — is a miracle," says Janet Van Fleet, a Cabot artist who is among the organization's founding members.

"The fact that SPA has triumphed so beautifully is beyond imagining," Van Fleet adds. "It takes your breath away."

Want to know what else takes your breath away?

A \$50,000 gift from a donor who prefers to remain anonymous, but understands the challenges of running a nonprofit arts center on a shoestring budget.

“It’s a huge deal,” Van Fleet says of the donation made by a long-time SPA supporter back in July and quickly used as seed money for a capital campaign — “Less Mortgage, More Art” — that will run through the end of the year.

The initial goal was to match the \$50,000, but that’s looking like a lock given money that has been quietly raised over the past month through “leadership level gifts” provided by Jane Pincus, Susan Z. Ritz, Mark S. Waskow and a collection of other anonymous donors.

When you add in the National Life Group’s recent pledge of at least \$10,000 toward the campaign, SPA Executive Director Sue Higby says the effort, which folks like Van Fleet refer to as the “Chop the Mortgage” campaign, has already netted more than \$90,000 towards its initial goal of \$100,000.

“I’m really pleased with the initiative of the SPA board members and donors in seizing this opportunity,” says Higby, who has been the organization’s only full-time employee for almost 12 of its near 14 years in existence.

It doesn’t seem that long to Van Fleet, who credits Higby and her “very part-time” help with changing out three floors of exhibits every five weeks, while running complete educational programs out of a building that is home to a dozen artists’ studios, including her own. Van Fleet also credits Higby with spearheading an effort that has led to the commissioning of a string of prominently placed public sculptures, including a couple that are on the way, in and around downtown Barre.

“SPA has been out there doing it for all these years and has become a really critical part of the community,” Van Fleet says. “It has proved its value to central Vermont on very meager resources.”

According to Higby, the importance of the capital campaign can’t be understated, but it can be quantified.

SPA’s mortgage with the Vermont Community Loan Fund currently stands at \$184,000 and requires a monthly payment of \$1,608. Assuming the campaign raises \$100,000 the monthly payment would drop to \$677. The more money that’s raised, the lower the monthly payment.

Higby says that means more art.

“It gives us an opportunity to build on some the things we already do and to have some financial stability for the first time in our organizational history,” she says.

Darryl Garland, chairman of the SPA board, agrees.

“Practically speaking, this campaign will significantly reduce monthly operating costs for SPA,” he says. “These dollars are better spent today on arts programming.”

The timing couldn't be better, because SPA recently had to absorb a spike in operating costs associated with the need to repay two block grants that helped finance the \$800,000 redevelopment project and a tax appeal that was only partially successful.

Still, Higby is pleased with what SPA has become.

“When we first started out, we had a building and an idea,” she says. “Now we have relationships, allies, and a reputation that is very flattering in the region.

“It's not just a space,” she adds. “It's a collection of people and talents.”

Community members and arts enthusiast who want to contribute to the campaign can make donations on the SPA website, [studioplacearts.com](http://studioplacearts.com), by clicking on “support,” over the phone (802-479-7069) with a credit card, or by mailing a check to Studio Place Arts, 201 North Main St., Barre, Vt. 05641, and writing “chop the mortgage” in the memo line.

Though the prospect of raising \$184,000 and paying off the mortgage might sound like a reach, Van Fleet says stranger things have happened.

“We're still here,” she says. “If anybody had looked at it realistically in the beginning, the idea that this would survive would probably not even have been in the running.”

[david.delcore@timeargus.com](mailto:david.delcore@timeargus.com)