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A fairy tale ending in Barre

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Jeb Wallace-Brodeur Staff Photo

Studio Place Arts Executive Director Sue Higby hangs artwork Thursday for a show titled “Tell Us a Tale.” The exhibition is part of a citywide celebration of children’s literature and books, and is presented by the Barre Cultural Alliance. There will be numerous exhibits and events at locations around the city through June.

BARRE — Once upon a time there was a gritty little city named Barre (pronounced “berry” or “bury”) that quietly evolved into something of a multicultural cultural Mecca.

It all started more than a century ago when a wave of immigrants — many of them skilled sculptors — washed into the bustling central Vermont community to work in the local granite industry.

After they arrived they helped build a library, a labor hall, an opera house, a network of neighborhood schools and downtown commercial buildings like the one that is now home to a new wave of artists that washed into town at the dawn of the new millennium.

Things were good ... until they weren't.

The opera house closed in 1944; the labor hall was sold, eventually abandoned and very nearly demolished in 1994; the Nichols Block — now home to Studio Place Arts (a hint that there's a happy ending here) — was gutted by fire that same year; and the crown jewel of Barre's old neighborhood school system — an architectural treasure that served as the original Spaulding High School and later as Spaulding Graded Middle School — was abandoned in 1995.

Only the Aldrich Public Library made it through all those years unscathed and constantly occupied, which is somehow fitting because Library Director Karen Lane — an active member of the Barre Historical Society in her spare time — is among those responsible for a renaissance that arguably started in the 1970s.

That's when a group of Barre boosters decided it was time to reopen the once-vibrant opera house that in its heyday hosted the likes of Helen Keller, socialist Eugene Debs, George M. Cohan and his family, John Philip Sousa and his band, and Tom Mix and his horse. After being shuttered for nearly four decades, the Barre Opera House reopened in 1982 and received a million-dollar, community-funded makeover that was completed — addition, elevator and all — in 1993.

Just the next year the Nichols Block burned and Lane and other members of a newly reconstituted Barre Historical Society had to act fast to rescue the Old Labor Hall on Granite Street from being torn down.

To make this very long story short: They succeeded.

The move to preserve what members viewed as an important piece of Barre's cultural and political history would take six years and \$350,000 in renovations to pay off, but on May 16, 2000, the century-old labor hall, which was built by Italian immigrants one red brick at a time, was designated a national historic landmark.

If you are looking for a turning point in this very Barre story it would have to be 2000 — and not just because the opera house was thriving again and the old hall that was once home to Barre's Socialist Labor Party received recognition from the National Park Service.

It was a year that began with then-Gov. Howard Dean swinging a golden sledgehammer, signaling the start of renovations that would eventually transform the fire-gutted Nichols Block — a building that also dodged the wrecking ball thanks to the historical society's fast action — into Studio Place Arts. Before it was over, the taxpayer-funded renovation and addition to the local library was complete, as was the sale of the former Spaulding school building to the Vermont Historical Society.

Things were good ... and then they got better.

Despite some early growing pains, Studio Place Arts soon settled into its downtown digs and fulfilled its vision of creating a center for the visual arts.

Meanwhile, the Vermont History Center sprouted in the Spaulding building, and the Vermont Historical Society slowly but surely kept its pledge to turn the former school into something really special. The still-evolving project is now home to an impressive research library, a boatload of open storage for the society's massive collection and the state's archaeological artifacts, and the Vermont Heritage Galleries. One of those three galleries features an all-Barre exhibit.

And that is how the Barre Cultural Alliance — an organization that includes representatives of the library, the labor hall, the opera house, the history center and the local arts center — was born.

The group boasts a wealth of experience, from Lane and her husband, Chet Briggs, now the president of the Barre Historical Society, to Dan Casey, executive director of the Barre Opera House, Sue Higby, executive director of Studio Place Arts, and Mark Hudson, executive director of the Vermont Historical Society. After meeting for more than a year, the alliance — which wants to build on the buzz about cultural tourism in Barre and aid the revitalization of the city's historic downtown — is ready to roll out its first collaborative venture: "Story Time in Barre: A Celebration of Children's Literature and Books." The monthlong series of special events will start Saturday.

Higby says the alliance, which was created by a combination of "good karma and good intentions," makes sense given the group's shared interest in promoting arts, literature and cultural heritage.

"This is what makes Barre tick in all ways," she says. "This is who we are."

And when it comes to "Story Time in Barre," the alliance hopes its first collaboration is, well, the beginning ...

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