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The Lowe Down: Are visual arts saving Rutland and Barre?

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Two Vermont communities have unexpectedly become among the state's most important visual arts centers — and they have a great deal more in common.

Barre has been at the cutting edge of Vermont visual arts since Studio Place Arts opened in 2000. Much more recently, Rutland has enjoyed an explosion of art activity generated by its Chaffee Art Center.

But visual arts are not all these storied communities share. Both have been longtime homes to stone industries and the resulting stone art — and both are struggling to find their way out of the decline of America's blue collar industries.

The question is: Are the visual arts thriving because of the problems, or are they part of the rejuvenation of Rutland and Barre?

Neither of these arts organizations is alone in championing the visual arts in their communities. Barre's SPA is joined by the fledgling Granite Museum and, more importantly, the many active stone studios; the Chaffee is complemented by the new and innovative Castleton Downtown and the thriving Carving Studio and Sculpture Center in West Rutland.

Barre's SPA began in 1998 as a collective of intrepid central Vermont artists trying to find studio space. A fire had gutted the Nichols Block on Main Street and these artists, against all odds, bought the building and turned it into a combination of rental studios and gallery space (and, for a while, even a restaurant).

But it has been over the last decade that SPA moved to the cutting edge of Vermont's art scene. The catalyst has been Sue Higby, SPA's executive director. Not only has she inspired local artists to develop, but has attracted some of the region's best artists to exhibit.

Most importantly, Higby and SPA have forged a new relationship with their community. The annual stone sculpture show represents the city's fine arts' bond with its industrial arts. City Hall has trouble saying no to Higby. Consequently, Barre streets are now chock full of fine sculptures that have appeared over the last decade — thanks to SPA.

In just over a year as its executive director, Meg Barros has turned the woefully subdued Chaffee Art Center into a dynamo for the visual arts. Granted, the groundwork had been done previously, its new Chaffee Downtown complementing the original Main Street mansion.

What Barros has added, though, is excitement. Both locations have been brimming with art lately, and with growing innovation and quality. If that weren't enough, the Chaffee has brought topnotch sculptors and outdoor sculpture to Rutland — adding an air of cosmopolitan success to

the environment.

When it comes to Rutland sculpture though, the credit for inspiration since 1987 goes to the Carving Studio. Under the direction of Carol Driscoll, the center offers professional-level classes and invites sculptors from around the world who show their work — and inspire the community.

Newest is Castleton Downtown, Castleton State College's gallery on Rutland's Center Street. Under artist Bill Ramage's direction, this tiny gallery boasts the most cutting-edge and intriguing art seen in the area.

It may seem incongruous that Barre and Rutland, both better known for their devotion to sports and bars, can boast among the best visual arts in Vermont, but that's the way it is, and they have a right to be proud.

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