

## Albany Barn fundraiser to benefit restoration of St. Joseph's Academy

Event aims to spur transformation of St. Joseph's Academy into spaces for artists to live and work

By Tim Kane Special to the Times Union

Published 02:00 a.m., Sunday, October 9, 2011

At St. Joseph's Academy in Albany's Arbor Hill, decaying floors are cluttered with debris, and holes gape wide like open mouths.

The school closed in 1978, and the building's use as a community center ended in 1993. Since then, it has turned into something like an unintentional art installation.

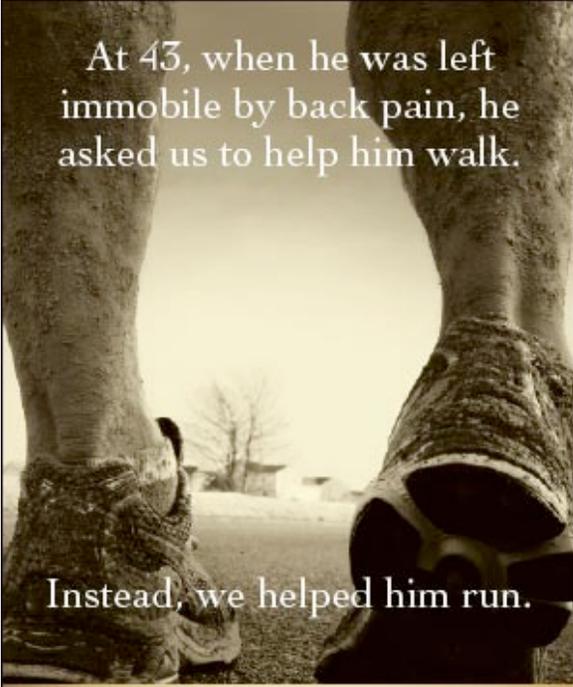
Sneakers lie on benches. Boxing bags hang ready. "Welcome to Miracles 101" is written on a board. Potted plants have embedded themselves into window panes. Hawk and pigeon skeletons -- some still with feathers -- lay about like a natural history display.

On Friday, the 103-year-old building and its ghostly presence in one of the poorest sections of the city will be celebrated at a fundraising event that aims to secure the building's future as a place for artists to live and work.

"Exposed," as the one-night event is called, will take place at the Washington Park Lakehouse and will include artists' interpretations of St. Joseph. It will be part of the regional MoHu Festival. Led by Albany Center Gallery's Tony Iadiciccio, the artists will use videos, light and images based on footage shot inside the building.

The fundraiser is being staged by Albany Barn Inc., a nonprofit dedicated to developing the building into a creative arts incubator and community art space. The event is raising money to cap off the nearly \$10 million in state grants, tax credits and other investments already secured to create 23 spaces for artists in what the organizers are calling a first for the region.

Jeff Mirel, director of the four-year-old nonprofit, said work could start as early as December, with about \$1 million of the \$11.8 million price tag remaining unfunded. The group has 20 board members from a range of endeavors, and a grass-roots element has been fundamental from



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its inception.

"The city and the state have really been responsive to the project and have been strong partners," said Mirel. "But the idea sprung from what we call our stakeholders, who came together to fill multiple needs, so this is for the broader community to contribute and get involved."

Most of the \$1 million will be for the interior -- Albany Barn is responsible for everything except the walls and main structure -- including computers, stage lighting, wiring and other equipment. Along with the 23 rental units, the plans include a performance area, studio spaces, an incubator for "creative enterprises" and a cafe.

All different kinds of artists and organizations are eligible. For living quarters, income and a portfolio review are the main criteria. Although yet to be finalized, the average rent will be about \$500 a month, while the review will probably have an objective scoring process, Mirel said.

"We call it the three C's -- culture, commerce and community," he said. "It's about artists, but also about, say, an innovative marketing company in the incubator sharing ideas and being in a place that's stimulating."

Artists have often been seen as catalysts for revitalizing decaying neighborhoods. And municipalities have sought to direct this form of economic development with more formal incentives.

"This project is a game-changer," says Darren Scott, director of planning and development at the Albany Housing Authority, the lead underwriter of the project. Scott said the project satisfies four main criteria in the city's plan to revitalize the Arbor Hill neighborhood.

"It ... improves existing housing and is affordable, provides economic development, fulfills historic preservation and quality of life. This is a model."

The last may be the most important. With studies identifying strong demand for artist-specific apartments and freshly renovated public meeting spaces in an urban environment, the neighborhood hopefully will gain population and foot traffic, reversing its decades-long decline.

Albany Barn's presence is already being seen on North Swan Street between Clinton and Livingston avenues. Earlier this year, they opened Stage One, a performance and gallery space hosting the "Summer in the City" arts program, which opened an exhibit Saturday. It has regular monthlong exhibitions featuring a wide range of local artists and is a base for the dance company ArtPartners/Tsehaya & Company.

Other residential development has occurred through the housing authority over more than a decade, creating refurbished homes amid crumbling buildings. Crime is still an issue. But without St. Joseph's on the mend, a resurgence can only move so far, those involved said.

"The layout and the way stuff was left suggested it was meant it to be a place for arts," Mirel said.

"It was just waiting for us."

Tim Kane is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.

At a glance

"Exposed!"

**What: A benefit for the Albany Barn's restoration of St. Joseph's Academy**

**When: 7-10 p.m. Friday**

**Where: Washington Avenue Lakehouse**

**Cost: \$40 per person; black and white cocktail attire. For ages 21 and older. Beer, wine and hors d'oeuvres included.**

**Info: 935-4858; <http://www.albanybarn.org>**

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