

One woman’s faith, vision breathing new life into downtown Bucksport

BY MEG HASKELL
OF THE BDN STAFF

The pretty Penobscot River town of Bucksport, located just off Route 1 in Hancock County, was hit hard by the 2014 closure of the local Verso paper mill. The mill had been the center of economic life for nearly a century.

Now the town is struggling to reinvent itself. And as it does, 65-year-old seasonal resident Kathy James has seized the opportunity to realize a life’s dream. Behind a deceptively nondescript Main Street storefront, a team of workers is renovating a three-story, 9,100-square-foot space into a full-blown arts center. On track to open this fall, the Lighthouse Arts Center will feature gallery space for dozens of painters, potters, sculptors, jewelry-makers and other artists and artisans; studios for lessons, guest lectures and demonstrations; and a retail shop for art supplies and gifts.

“We want to make Bucksport a destination for the arts community,” James said. Her building won’t be ready in time, but she plans to have a limited opening event on Aug. 13, during the second annual Bucksport Arts Festival.

James bought the 150-year-old building last December, following the death of her husband, Roger. At the time, it housed a beauty salon on the street level and two small apartments upstairs. The renovations are being handled by D.A. Builders, a four-generation family business head-

quartered in nearby Frankfort.

Inside, the remodeled space is airy, with high ceilings and lots of natural light. Banks of windows line the southwest walls, offering compelling views over the river, the landscaped riverfront walkway, the soaring Penobscot Narrows Bridge and historic Fort Knox across the water in Prospect.

It’s easy to imagine creative juices flowing here.

A leap of faith

James, a dedicated watercolorist, calls her project “a God-driven dream.”

“Artwork is part of my faith,” she said. “I believe that all creativity comes from God. It transcends everything and takes us straight to God.” Artists and art lovers won’t encounter “organized religion” at the Lighthouse Arts Center, she said, but her personal faith has informed every step of the project.

It was God, James said, who planted the idea of the arts center, who “nudged” her to consider buying the 150-year-old wood-frame building on the riverfront and who softened the heart of the seller to make the purchase possible.

A lifelong Methodist, she has learned to trust her faith. The ambitious project has been fraught with complications and obstacles, James said, ranging from the out-of-reach original asking price of the building to problems achieving full ADA compliance in the renovation.

“There have been so many times when the

problems were so great I just couldn’t deal with it,” she said. “And then I would wake up the next day and the problems would have dissolved.”

Kathy James and her late husband bought a village house in Bucksport back in 2001, when they retired from their careers in telecommunications. Living at the time in Massachusetts, they were drawn to the town’s location near the coast of Maine and to its relatively affordable real estate market. Their plan was to spend half the year in Bucksport and the other half in Florida.

But life threw them some curve balls. First, Kathy’s elderly mother, Betty, started needing more support and was spending more and more time with them. So they sold the village house and bought a bigger and more modern home on the edge of town.

Then, three years ago, Betty suffered a major stroke and moved in with them permanently. At 91, she has recovered well but still needs a lot of care and company.

The biggest change was still to come. In September 2014, Roger James was diagnosed with cancer. He died the following January.

“I’m not over it at all,” Kathy James said. “He was my best friend. Maybe because we never had children, we were always just very close.” But she’s trying to move on with her life.

Building community

James said God brought her together with Joyce Greco, a 61-year-old mu-



ASHLEY CONTI/BDN

Kathy James, 65, shows off the three-story building on Main Street in Bucksport that she recently purchased Tuesday. James is renovating the space for an arts center -- gallery, studios, classes, supply and gift store. She is retired, widowed, caring for her 90 year old mother, and pursuing her dream to share and create art.

ralist and illustrator who recently relocated to Bucksport from Florida. Greco, whose Christian faith is also strong, has painted murals at a Disney World hotel and several elementary schools in Florida. She has recently illustrated a children’s book, “Wilbur the Christmas Mouse,” which she expects will be published.

“I had a dream about 10 years ago,” Greco said, explaining how she landed in Bucksport. “It was about a bridge in Maine -- that bridge.” She gestured toward the Penobscot Narrows Bridge, which opened in 2006. Greco said she had never actually seen the bridge before her dream.

Last year, following the death of her mother, she

went online, found the bridge, settled in Bucksport and connected with James, eventually signing on as the artistic director at the new arts center.

“I made this crazy move, and then the universe blessed me,” Greco said. “We’re at that stage in life when we could sit around and say, ‘Now what?’ But now it’s all purpose and drive and fun.”

Another Bucksport woman, 50-year-old Mindy Martin, will be the assistant manager of the Lighthouse Arts Center, freeing James to take her mother to Florida for the coming winter. Martin formerly scheduled art classes at the Hammond Street Senior Center in Bangor, which closed its doors

earlier this year.

James said she expects the for-profit center will break even, paying for itself through classes, art supplies and commissioned sales of art. She’ll be glad of extra cash from any of her own paintings that sell but isn’t relying on income from the arts center to support herself.

She is grateful for the challenging work of opening the arts center, the rewarding relationships she is establishing in the process and the opportunity to move forward from the loss of her husband.

“I tell people we’re doing things backward,” she said with a laugh. “Most people our age are getting ready to retire, but we’re just getting started.”

Text donations now available for American Folk Festival

The American Folk Festival on the Bangor Waterfront relies on nearly \$1 million in donations, grants, and sponsorships to operate every year. As the festival is open-to-all and a no-admission event, none of that operational money comes from attendees purchasing tickets to the festival. The business community and festival-goers from around the world have stepped up every year to show their support for the variety of cultures represented through music, dance, craft, and food at the American Folk Festival, and that support just got a little easier with the opportunity to “text-to-give.”

“It’s a very simple two-step process to use “Text-to-Give,” so we’re calling it the ‘Festival Two-Step,’” said Heather McCarthy, Executive Director of the American Folk Festival. “Understanding that we become less and less of a cash-on-hand society every year, we were trying to find the easiest, most universal way for festival-goers to still contribute. Text-to-give seems to fulfill any needs we have while offering ease and incentives for attendees.”

To donate through texting, text BUCKET to 20222 and reply to the message received. That reply will trigger a one-time donation of \$10 which will be added to cell phone user’s mobile

phone bill. While the text-to-give feature is available throughout the months of August and September, festival-goers looking to receive an “I Kicked In” sticker (indicating a donation) and a set of beads (indicating the suggested donation of \$10 or more was given) still have the opportunity to collect those incentives during festival weekend.

“Anyone using the text-to-give option only need to show a member of the Bucket Brigade the confirmation text they received to claim their I Kicked In sticker and set of beads,” said McCarthy. “Both the stickers and – more recently – the beads have become like a badge of honor for people who are proud to support this festival. Texting to give will not take away the opportunity for that badge.”

The Bucket Brigade – teams of volunteers with buckets collecting money – will still be accepting good ol’ fashioned cash throughout American Folk Festival weekend. Those looking to donate online without the use of texting can also donate through the American Folk Festival app available for Android or iPhone, as well as the festival’s website at www.AmericanFolkFestival.com.

The American Folk Festival on the Bangor Waterfront is scheduled for August 26th, 27th, and 28th and celebrates the roots, the richness and the variety of American culture through music, dance, traditional

crafts, storytelling and food. The Festival is supported entirely by public donations that make it possible to continue to present the Festival in our community.

For more information about the 2016 American Folk Festival on the Bangor Waterfront, please visit www.americanfolkfestival.com or call 207-262-7763.

Clifton church fair to benefit sick bus drivers

A free chicken barbecue, dunking booth and quilt show will among the offerings at its first Community Fair beginning at 3 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 27, at Clifton United Baptist Church. The fair will also feature various food contests, a sleight of hand (magic) exhibition and a fireworks show at the end of the day. Local musicians will perform during the afternoon. The Darlings Ice Cream for a Cause truck will be on hand 5-7:30 p.m.

“CUBC is the only church in town,” said Pastor John P. Walsh. “We want to show the community what we’re doing. We also want to show the region what Clifton as a town has to offer.”

Community groups have been invited to showcase their organization’s activities during the fair.

Donations received will benefit two local school bus drivers who are suffering from cancer.

For a full listing of events, see Clifton United Baptist Church on Facebook.com. or call the church at 843-5441.

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