

THE Durango HERALD

Smiley Building celebrates 20 years

Despite some early resistance, building now provides an important space in community

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Wednesday, May 30, 2018 5:04 AM Updated: Wednesday, May 30, 2018 8:39 AM



On any given day behind the doors of the Smiley Building, the halls could be filled with kids playing a piano, business meetings over coffee and co-workers eating a snack at the Smiley Cafe. The busy atmosphere is a complete contrast to the scene 20 years ago, when the building, an abandoned school, was vacant.

This week, the Smiley Building will celebrate its 20-year anniversary as a cultural community center in Durango. Built in 1936, it has been updated to be a local leader in energy-saving methods and currently has 53 tenants that cover an array of interests, including art studios, community groups and local nonprofits.

In 1997, Charles Shaw; his wife, Lisa Shaw; and his brother, John Shaw; bought the old school with a grand vision to transform a slowly deteriorating building into a vibrant meeting and office space. After beginning renovations, the trio opened the building Jan. 5, 1998.

From resistance to a vision

The Smiley Building's doors first opened in 1936. It was named after Durango School District Superintendent Emory E. Smiley. The building was used as a junior high and senior high school until 1994. A year later, the district declared it surplus property and put it up for auction.

"The hopes were that someone would honor the building, whatever they did with it," said Kathy McKenzie, who attended the junior high school in the late 1950s.

Plans to repurpose the building were met with some resistance in the 1990s by residents on East Third Avenue who wanted to retain the area's residential feel and worried about the lack of parking at the building. Neighbors circulated a petition in 1995 seeking to keep the building out of the local housing market. At the time, there was talk of converting the building into apartments.

An article in The Durango Herald in the fall of 1997 said the school district was unsatisfied with the bids it received. Charles and Lisa saw the article and decided to tour the building with John and a vision developed.

"Right away, we thought of a community center," Lisa said. "All those ideas started circulating."

The trio put together a bid and proposed the idea to the school board, which accepted it in November 1997.

Initial reactions to the purchase were mixed. Lisa owned a dance studio and was known among the local dance community, which advocated on her behalf, but the three were not otherwise well-known. Charles and Lisa had moved to the area only two years earlier, and many questioned the group's ability to execute their plan.

"I understand that there were those pockets of people who were very concerned," Lisa said. "And I don't blame them. They didn't know who we were."

Starting work on the restoration of the building was the first step the trio needed to take toward fulfilling their vision. The roof was leaking, floors had to be redone and the electrical work had to be reconfigured. Fortunately, Charles and John had previously built a few houses together and had experience in carpentry, electric and plumbing.

“Charles and John did all the heavy lifting,” Lisa said. “They did all the infrastructure that needed to be changed.”

The Shaws received grants from the Colorado State Historical Fund to restore the exterior and maintain its historical look. They renovated the building’s 300 windows, restored the original door and rebuilt the brick arches on the sides of the building.

They knew construction would take a long time, so they refurbished the building room-by-room to allow tenants to move in as quickly as possible. They started on an old science lab that was turned into Lisa’s dance studio – the first tenant. Then they began work on the next room, and the process continued until the building was full.

“We are grateful to those early tenants that had to put up with construction and all kinds of stuff,” Lisa said.

A model of energy efficiency

One of the most well-known aspects of the Smiley Building is its energy-conservation methods. The trio is passionate about environmentalism, and the decision to be energy-efficient was made early in the process, Lisa said.

“Our vision was how can we maintain this historic building, which is so beautiful, such a solid piece of work, and yet update it and make it efficient in today’s world?” she said.

The building currently powers 95 percent of its annual energy usage through solar panels installed on the roof. The panels were installed in 2000, and additions have been made little by little for 18 years, Charles said.

The decision to be environmentally friendly helps cut costs. When they first purchased the building, the electricity bills were around \$4,000 a month, Charles said. They trimmed costs by installing motion sensors for lights, water-saving toilets and a heat pump. The building also uses compact-fluorescent lighting, high-efficiency wood and natural gas-fired boilers.

“As it evolved, we realized we could be a model for other buildings,” Lisa said.

To do so, the owners are constantly researching new ways to conserve energy and protect the environment. “We’re constantly changing and updating our technology so that we can continue to get the best available electrical equipment,” she said.

While updating the energy conservation techniques, the owners wanted to maintain the old-school feel of the building. After the purchase, the building was registered on the National Register of Historic Places.

“Having been built in 1936, it’s a treasure,” Charles said. “It’s a solid piece of work, and sadly, buildings just aren’t built like that anymore. It’s so important to us to preserve it so that we can preserve the beauty of it, the integrity of the original architecture.”

Currently, Charles and Lisa run the building. John has left to form his own solar energy company.

The building serves as one of the most recognizable and the unique buildings in Durango, said Tim Walsworth, executive director of the Durango Business Improvement District.

“That building is a gem for Durango,” he said. “They’ve invested a lot of money to make a really cool community hub that is one of if not the most environmentally friendly buildings that we have in this town. We’re pretty lucky to have the Shaws make the investment in that building to get it where it is today.”

Lisa enjoys welcoming tenants into the building to pursue their dreams. The variety of tenants and their various passions means the halls and offices are always buzzing with different guests, Lisa said.

“Without these people, it would be a beautiful building, but it wouldn’t have the life that it has,” she said. “I’m so grateful that people continue to come and support it.”

She is proud of the accomplishments her family has made during their 20-year run.

“I think we’ve shown that we pulled it off,” she said. “I am just so proud that we really have done what we said we would do. And we’re not finished.”

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