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Locating artists

Paducah program helps artists find new home

"It's like a family reunion," Mark Barone remarked as he guided an informal tour of Paducah's Lowertown neighborhood. "Some of the buildings are rag-tag, and some are upscale. But wait till more artists move in. I envision this as a completely renovated area with trolleys running through the studio area and weekend travel packages."

Barone earns his living as a visual artist, not as a minister of local tourism. His time is divided between making art, which he sells through galleries in Chicago and Washington, and renovating his turn-of-the-century house and studio in the historic Lowertown area.

Lately he has been wearing a third—and most unlikely—hat: coordinator of Paducah's Artist Relocation Program.

"A year ago, if someone told me I'd be working part time for the city, I'd say they were nuts," Barone admitted. "But this program is about getting historical property saved, about reclaiming a part of Paducah through the arts."

The purpose of the Artist Relocation Program is to revitalize downtown Paducah by providing incentives to artists who want to move there. Lowertown, an historic residential neighborhood zoned for business, is adjacent to downtown, enabling artists to enjoy the advantages of working in a community that supports the arts and nurtures small and large businesses.

Establishing the program has been a group effort, involving the vital arts community that already exists in Paducah as well as the banks, city government, local property owners and others. The package they have put together includes a low-interest loan program that will finance up to 100 percent; health insurance, Web site links, marketing and advertising, and a range of tax and community incentives.

"Once the city got on board, things really got going," Barone said. "Then the banks came on and it snowballed.

People have helped us all along the way and it has taken on momentum."

Ads in national publications sparked inquiries from artists in about 30 states. One, a doctor in northeast Maryland who is also an artist, decided to visit Paducah in January and check out the claims in the marketing materials.

"He wanted to come at the worst time of the year, the ugliest and coldest," Barone explained. "He was looking for something to knock his socks off."

The Yeiser Art Center, Market House Theatre, the National Quilt Museum, the River Heritage Museum, the city planner and commissioners and others pitched in to make an impression on Bill Renzulli.

It worked. "We have decided Paducah is where we are going to relocate," Renzulli said. "We hope to move within a year."

Renzulli and his wife were enthusiastic about the spirit of the city.

"I see Paducah as a place I could devote all my time to my art. I want a place to settle," he said, "and I want to have the support of the community."

The economic incentives were also attractive. Buildings in Lowertown are affordable, and many of the structures are architecturally distinctive Victorians.

Another reason for Renzulli's decision to relocate may confuse those who think of the river city as a small town on the Ohio River.

"I'm looking to get back to a more urban lifestyle," he said, adding that he currently lives in a rural setting on 18 acres. "I want a postage stamp yard. I want to be able to walk to town."

The Paducah Artist Relocation Program hopes to achieve five to eight relocations by the end of the year. Already, two or three have made the move.

Charlotte and Ike Erwin, both working artists who had run a



gallery on Broadway in downtown Paducah, were headed to studio space in Brookport, Ill., when they learned of the program.

Once Mark Barone heard about Charlotte and Ike, he helped them change their plans and decide to stay in Paducah.

"Mark goes out into the community to find houses and goes to the banks to find support. He's a working artist with the tenacity of a bulldog," Ike Erwin said.

With Barone as their guide, the Erwins found a 100-year-old house in Lowertown. Queen Anne style with a turret worthy of a fairy tale, its other architectural amenities include stained glass, oak molding, a rounded porch and a gracious foyer.

The Erwins call it their "baby mansion."

So far, they have reglazed windows, caulked, jacked-up the floors under the house and painted. Their toil is not finished yet, the way Ike sees it. "It's nothing that can't be repaired with a little hard work—or maybe a lot of hard work."

Throughout the process, the Artist Relocation Program pitched in when problems emerged. When the Erwins could not find a broker for homeowner's insurance, they turned to Barone.

"In a few minutes he called back with an insurer," Ike Erwin recalled. "He is finding cooperation in the community. That is what it takes."

"Paducah has a lot to offer the creative soul," Charlotte Erwin said. "It's a small town with a lot of people who care about the arts. It's a good place to live and work, and Lowertown has beautiful old houses that need creative minds to tackle renovation."

For more information, call Mark Barone at (270) 444-8690 or visit the Web site at www.paducaharts.com.

—CONSTANCE ALEXANDER