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Stillwater / ArtReach getting ready, but not yet

Center opening postponed for finishing touches

By Mary Divine

mdivine@pioneerpress.com

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Carol Marie Parendo is known for her watercolor and acrylic paintings; Diana Hatchitt is an acclaimed print maker.

But lately the artists have been focusing on a much larger easel — the walls of ArtReach Alliance's new center for the arts in downtown Stillwater. Thursday, they painted the walls of the center's entryway a khaki-brown color called "squirrel's tail."

"I really enjoy doing this," Hatchitt said, stepping back to admire their handiwork. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't like it."

ArtReach staff are relying on volunteer artists such as Parendo and Hatchitt to help spruce up the center, which is located in a historic house at 224 N. Fourth St. The center was supposed to open to the public this weekend, but the grand opening has been postponed until spring because of the weather and construction delays.

"We want to make sure it's done right," said Jessica Pack, ArtReach's executive director. "It's so important for us that when people come in and see the building that they can see the potential for this community — a home for the arts in the St. Croix Valley."

The Stillwater-based nonprofit arts organization will change its name to ArtReach St. Croix in 2010, said Bill McCarthy, the group's board chairman.

"Our mission is to make the St. Croix Valley a nationally recognized destination for the arts," McCarthy said. "We want to play a bit bigger game. This new center is one more step toward that."

ArtReach has been identified

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for years with programs such as Valley Reads, the Historic Tour and St. Croix Valley Jazz, he said, "but without a physical presence, I think it can be confusing for people. This helps to solidify our identity."

Once open, the ArtReach building will serve as a community arts center. It will house gallery space, studio space, classes, workshops and other events.

McCarthy, a published poet, said a local writers' group will soon begin meeting at the new center. "The Loft (in Minneapolis) is a great place, but wouldn't it be great to not have to leave home?"

The 4,200-square-foot duplex, built in 1878, required a major renovation to bring it up to code. Among the improvements: The building is now handicapped-accessible, and a sprinkler system has been installed.

Although ArtReach staff have moved in, and paintings, sculptures and photographs are already on view, there is still a lot to be done. The exterior needs to be painted, a second-floor bathroom is missing a sink, and a kitchenette

and conference room need to be created out of what used to be a kitchen.

Pack is optimistic. "Every time I come here, it looks better and better," she said.

The center's front door is framed by fused-glass artwork created by Lauri Wilson, a Wisconsin artist. Wilson is also creating a chandelier that will hang in the center's entryway.

As Parendo and Hatchitt worked in the entryway Thursday, they talked about possibly sharing framing equipment at the center in the future.

"We do different types of art, but we have similar needs," Hatchitt said. "It's nice to have another artist to bounce things off of."

"It's easy to be isolated as an artist," Parendo said. "Here, we have community."

"That's what I missed. This is exactly what I was looking for," said Hatchitt, who moved to Stillwater from Indiana a year and a half ago because she was attracted, in part, to its arts community.

ArtReach's new center will be a gathering spot for artists like her, she said.

"It's hard for many artists to find a place to actually do their work," she said. "It's kind of hard to focus at home, and it's inspiring to be around other artists. It makes them more productive."

Mary Divine can be reached at 651-228-5443.

How To Help

Volunteers are needed to help with the final touches, like painting, landscaping and cleaning. For information on how to pitch in, contact executive director Jessica Pack at 651-439-1465 or jessica@artreachalliance.org. For more information on

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