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## More than a theater: Residents converting church into multi-use facility

BY ROBYN BRADLEY LITCHFIELD • RLITCHFIELD@GANNETT.COM • FEBRUARY 28, 2010

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Jogging alongside his shaggy red dog early this past week, a young man paused briefly in front of what was Cloverdale Christian Church.

The parking lot was empty and there's been little sign of life there since its congregants elected to close its doors for good. But that soon will change as a group of Montgomery area theater enthusiasts are preparing to convert the red-brick church building into the Cloverdale Playhouse, a state-of-the-art multi-purpose facility for theater productions, music concerts, lectures and children's drama programs.

News of such a venture delighted Eleanor Davis, who was active for so many years in Montgomery Little Theatre (MLT), which closed its doors in the early 1990s after six decades in operation.

"Oh, I was just elated, and the response from everybody has been overwhelming," said Davis, who now serves on the Cloverdale Playhouse board.

Davis first learned of the idea for a new community theater back in 2003, when she ran into Susan Starr and Morris Dees at 1048 Jazz and Blues Club. Dees invited her out to the club's porch and shared with her his dream to acquire the church down the block and bring back community theater to the area.

Dees had served on the MLT board for many years and thoroughly enjoyed being part of the audience. (Laughing, the lawyer said he wasn't interested in acting on stage and then added, "I do little one-act plays in courtrooms around America, and I get one review.")

Since he and Starr, his wife, moved into Old Cloverdale about eight years ago, he'd been closely watching the church around the corner from their home, counting the number of vehicles in its parking lot during Sunday services and paying attention to the amount of activity.

At one point, he even approached church leaders and asked that they contact him if they ever were interested in selling, which eventually happened this past summer. Dees and Starr jumped, quickly submitting an offer.

Located at the corner of Cloverdale Road and Fairview Avenue, in the heart of the artsy community, the facility is in a prime location. The lighted "The Cloverdale Playhouse" sign out front has caused quite a stir, he said, adding that people definitely are interested in bringing back community theater to the area.

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This is a rendering by Iain Stewart of the Cloverdale Playhouse, which will be a state-of-the-art facility for theater productions, concerts, lectures and children's programs. Stewart can be reached at

www.stewartwatercolors.com. (Contributed)

### FIND OUT MORE

What: The Cloverdale Playhouse

Where: 960 Cloverdale Road (formerly Cloverdale Christian Church)

Current activities: The focus is on fundraising, and the capital campaign development committee is hard at work

Information: There's a Facebook page dedicated to the theater, and there currently are more than 700 fans. Or check out [www.cloverdaleplayhouse.org](http://www.cloverdaleplayhouse.org) periodically (information will be added to the new site as things develop)

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On its Facebook page, the theater has received hundreds of hits and is up to more than 700 fans, many of whom have volunteered to help scrape paint, construct sets, act and such.

Right now, however, the focus is on fundraising.

Once church members decided to sell, Starr and Dees borrowed \$325,000 to purchase the building (valued at \$970,000) and have agreed to pay all operating expenses until funds can be raised to make the playhouse a reality.

Others, too, have stepped up to ease the financial burden. Goodwyn, Mills & Cawood, with the help of Greg Tankersley, have developed remodeling plans at no cost; the law firm of Bradley Arant, Boult and Cummings has done all the legal work at no cost; and the accounting firm Jackson Thornton is offering its services through the capital campaign.

Bob Vardaman, a theater veteran who now operates an events management company, was privy to Dees' plans from the very beginning. Within days of placing a "for sale" sign out front, church members were meeting with Dees and Vardaman.

"It is this beautiful jewel-box church, just charming," he said.

Entering the building, he said they could see all these possibilities. "Morris bought it that morning."

The sale was bittersweet for church members. Though they were selling, they wanted their church to remain a vital part of the community. After hearing plans for a community theater, they gave Dees and his supporters their blessing, Vardaman said.

A visual artist, Starr is interested in many forms of art, including dance and music. And she would very much like to see the theater space used for a variety of performances.

"What I would like to do is bring more integration of contemporary thoughts and views into it," she said.

And offering lectures, performances, workshops and other activities in the Cloverdale Playhouse spaces would be a great way to introduce people to different perspectives.

Those working with the Cloverdale Playhouse hope to make a positive impact on the community in a variety of ways, including children's theater programs for youngsters from around the Capital City under the direction of Sam Wooten. An actor, he has just moved to Montgomery from Chicago, where he focused on children's theater.



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"Kids are always the exciting part of it for me," he said. "And I really like the idea of finding ways to use theater for outreach. Just serving Cloverdale would be great, but to reach out to adjacent neighborhoods would be incredible."

Dorman Walker agreed.

An attorney, Walker grew up in Cloverdale and knows the church well. In fact, it's on his regular running route, so he has passed it countless times. He had just never been inside.

Walker said he backs this project 100 percent, but he quickly pointed out that he is no actor. A fifth-grade presentation was the beginning and end of his theater career, he added, laughing.

"But I look forward to seeing this project become something special," he said.

Once renovations are complete, there will be a "black box theater" on the main floor, and a children's theater area with classrooms and an area for building sets on the lower level.

Walker said just being a theater is a lot, but the Cloverdale Playhouse -- with this building and many talented people behind it -- can be so much more. It's just a matter of getting the idea off the ground and seeing what can be accomplished.

And, Vardaman added, "No small contribution can be given. No short amount of time can be donated."

With help, Dees and the others involved in this endeavor are confident they will make this dream a reality.

Dees believes the essence of community theater is allowing people to do what they love.

"At the Cloverdale Playhouse, we want people to get involved," he said.



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