

Revival Theatre

Dignazio Drives North Country Renaissance

STORY BY LEAH CAREY

There has been a lot of talk over the past few years about the renaissance of Bethlehem, New Hampshire. Much of that growth and renewal can be traced back to the vision and decisions made by one man: Stephen Dignazio.

Dignazio is the executive director of the Colonial Theatre in Bethlehem, a space that hosts independent movies, national traveling acts, and local entertainment. He headed the effort to re-open the theater after it sat dark for many years.

"I moved here in the 1970s and went to Franconia College," Dignazio said. "I had a gardening business and organic farm before organic was really a thing."

When he gave up farming, he returned to his arts background and became the executive director of the North Country Chamber Players (NCCP). "I've always written, always done artwork," he said. "I was publishing a poetry magazine at the time. I was doing

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Steve Dignazio, left, executive director of Bethlehem's Colonial Theatre



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public art with the support of an artist group.”

During his time with the NCCP, Dignazio learned that the Colonial Theatre was up for sale. While it didn't make sense for the NCCP to purchase the building, it got Dignazio thinking.

“I'd been setting up chairs in every meeting house and grange hall and church basement in the North Country. The idea of fixed seating just started keeping me up at night,” he said. “I knew there were very few rooms like that around anymore, because all of the movie theaters had been cut up into smaller spaces so they could show two films at the same time. And I knew the room was just the right size for this area.”

Dignazio gathered people to form a steering committee. They created a non-profit and wrote grants to purchase the building in the early 2000s.

“We started with a \$5,000 grant from the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation,” he said. “And now our operating budget is pushing \$300,000.” This year they have \$300,000 worth of CDFA tax credits to raise money.

They have almost 600 paid members this year. “I've had people stop me on Main Street and say, here's 20 bucks for the theater.”

Dignazio said that one of the things he's proud of is that they offer the theater as a venue for local arts and non-profits. “I always say that the Colonial Theatre is a community cultural center, with the emphasis on community,” he said. “And we do it with one and a half employees.”

Dignazio's next plan is to expand the facilities for both artists and audience. “At this point I actually turn away artists because we don't have the infrastructure to support them – we don't have the dressing rooms, we don't have the bathrooms,” he said.

Last year comedian Paula Poundstone visited the theater. “She had to go to the bathroom. We had to bring her down through the crowd and cut in front of people at the bathroom. That's not very professional. So we're hoping to just add a whole lot of artist amenities, a whole lot of audience amenities, and fix the place up with new rugs.”

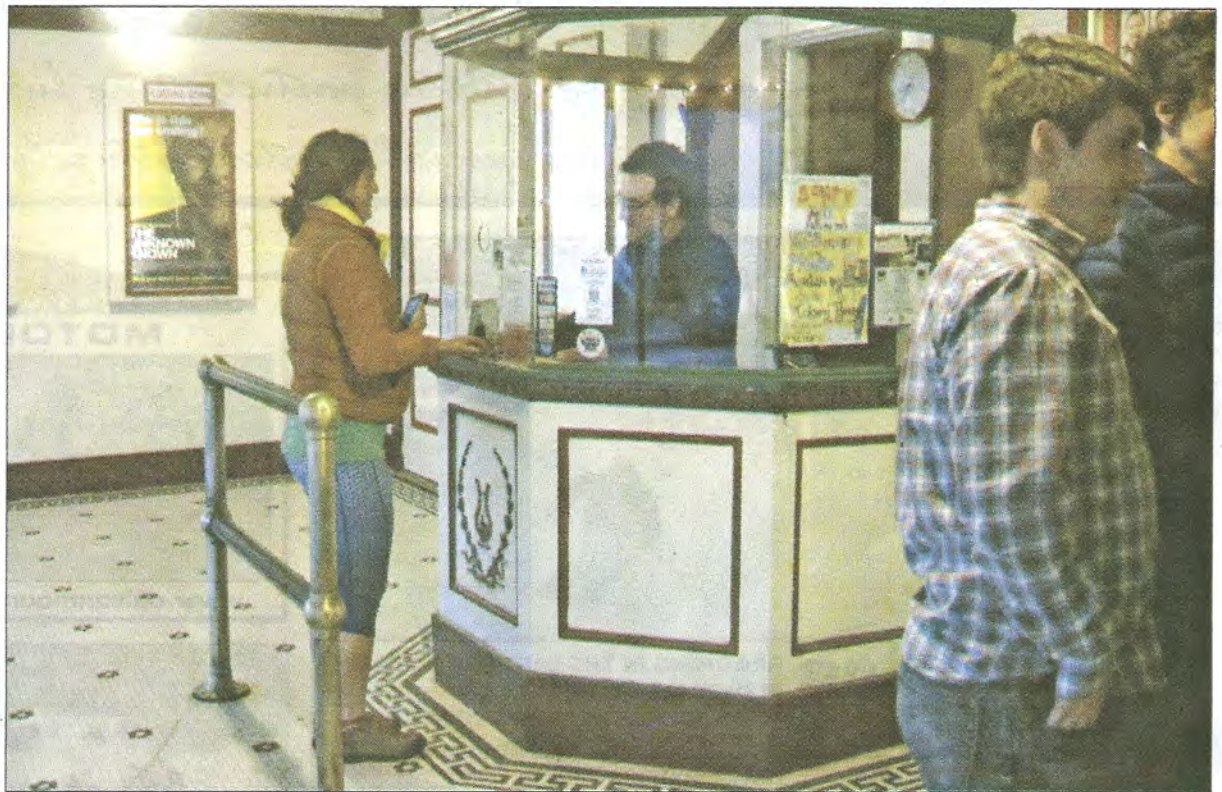
Eventually he'd like to see the Colonial hosting a self-generated film festival. “It's a perfect venue and perfect area for it. There's no reason why Telluride can have one and the White Mountains can't.”

Dignazio chose the North Country of New Hampshire because it allowed him the freedom to pursue the kind of life he wanted. “I had the opportunity to raise a family here. I had the opportunity to be a poet here, just live on the margins,” he said. “The North Country has been really good to me.”

He sees his place at the Colonial as one of giving back to the community that has given him so much. “I would like to leave the North Country with a really nice multi-functional arts space,” he said. “That's what I get out of it.”

With the Colonial Theatre at its center, along with the Cold Mountain Café across the street, the arts and culture community has flourished in Bethlehem.

“In the summer now, 42 Maple is doing art and a live event series. The Bethlehem Hebrew Congregation does a live event series and partner with us about a lot of stuff. We partner with WREN. The WREN Gallery has really exploded. We have the art walk. Katherine Ferrier is in town doing a lot of stuff,” said Dignazio. “We held [the USDA Rural Development] regional meeting at the Colonial last year, and the head of the organization said that we've be-



TOP: Stephen Dignazio mans the ticket booth at the Colonial Theatre during an event. (Courtesy Photo)
BOTTOM: Stephen Dignazio receives the 2013 Governor Arts Award from Gov. Maggie Hassan. (Courtesy Photo)

come to the arts what Hardwick is to the food movement. And it's true!”

Ferrier, who is the gallery coordinator at WREN and also organizes a dance festival in Bethlehem during the summer, has kind words for Dignazio's work at the Colonial as well. “The Colonial Theatre is the beating heart of downtown Bethlehem,” she said. “I know I can go to a show there and I'm going to take in world-class art and performance. But I'm also going to find my community and I'm going to have the opportunity to gather with people who care about live performance and film and culture as much as I do.”

“One of [Stephen's] super powers is he always has a great

team of volunteers. And a way of sort of supporting them to really take full ownership in the Colonial,” Ferrier continued. “He tends to inspire a lot of electric activity in town.”

Making A Difference is a new series profiling local citizens who are playing a positive role in their local communities, in large and small ways. Is there someone you'd like to nominate? Do you have a story of someone who has had a significant impact on your life? Send an email with the subject line “Making A Difference” to careyl@caledonian-record.com. Please include your name and contact information, the nominee's name and contact information, and some information about how they're Making A Difference.