

Raue leader looks to brighter future

Author(s): BRYAN WAWZENEK - bwawzenek@mwherald.com

Date: February 27, 2010 **Section:** News

When times are tight, local entertainment venues often are the first to suffer. If people are struggling with mortgage payments and grocery bills, they don't usually splurge on a night at the theater. Few people know this better than Richard Kuranda, the executive director of the **Raue Center** for the Arts. The nine-year-old Crystal Lake venue – which is a 501(c)3, nonprofit organization – saw more than a third of its ticket sales disappear during the worst of the recent recession.

Kuranda helped see the theater through the financial uncertainty by cutting staff, choosing headline acts more carefully, and getting behind smaller shows with local talent, including the Lucy's Café series. He also credited community support for the venue's survival.

Kuranda recently discussed with reporter Bryan Wawzenek how the **Raue Center** endured the recession and what the venue has in store for the future.

Wawzenek: Where did the **Raue Center** feel the recession the most?

Kuranda: Back in November of 2008, we started to feel it at the box office. That's trouble for us, because if we're losing numbers there, we have to step up our fundraising, make sure we're covered financially other ways. And we trimmed the staff. Luckily we've got a great board, including Paula Dorion-Gray. We started having almost weekly meetings about the situation.

Wawzenek: What other steps did you take to counteract this?

Kuranda: We needed to redirect our programming. From that November until about nine months [later], we saw a 35 [percent] to 40 percent decline in ticket sales. We've had to pick our national acts more carefully. We often schedule them a year or more in advance.

These artists are not taking a pay cut, so we have to decide who is worth the financial risk.

Wawzenek: Were there strategies that didn't work?

Kuranda: Three years ago we began a program where we froze ticket prices for all McHenry school groups for the daytime school programs at the theater. However, those schools had to cut budgets, too, and some chose not to continue. We'd like to see that change. Our public shows have noted a drastic decline in family attendance. We started a family subscription package where a family of four can see a show for \$60 or less. Now, those are starting to track up.

Wawzenek: Why do you think you've endured?

Kuranda: If there's anything good that came from the recession, it's that it helped us identify our strengths and showed us what the community really wants. Something like Lucy's Café has seen 20- to 45-year-olds come out in large numbers whether the show is comedy or music. It's been selling out months in advance.

Wawzenek: Do you have plans to reach out to other McHenry County residents?

Kuranda: Yes, in two areas. There are a lot of retirees out there, and we want them to know that we offer a lot of social programming. We're reaching out to those groups with the Friends of the **Raue**. And the Young Affiliates Group has been well-received. It's run by Mark Davids and Brett Berg. A group of young professionals not only has a say in programming, but also in our fundraisers.

Also, we've begun selling rush tickets. If you sign up for our online newsletter, you'll get a message a few days before an event that a limited number of tickets are available for a huge discount. Of course, they are not the best seats in the house. I'd also like to reach more underprivileged groups.

Wawzenek: What new features would you like to bring to the venue?

Kuranda: We're a relatively young theater, only about nine years old. We're always struggling to build an endowment. We're a community theater. We have to apply for grants and funding. Fortunately, we have amazing people to work with, including a base of 400 volunteers. I'd like to continue to partner with groups like the McHenry County Youth Orchestra and Voices in Harmony. We see the **Raue** as a base for the community.

Wawzenek: Where do you see the **Raue Center** in five years?

Kuranda: Ideally we would have a deep endowment so we won't have to cut programming. I'd like to have an in-house repertory theater company. Every year, we see 30 or 40 requests for a local,

professional theater group. And we would have expanded to a full, year-round venue. We do great arts education programming in the summer. I'd like people to be able to come to lecture in the winter.

Technical problems: If you have a technical problem with your account please e-mail newslibrary@newsbank.com.

Copyright 2010, Northwest Herald, The (Crystal Lake, IL). All Rights Reserved.