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Jerseyville First Presbyterian Church: A Celebration Of A Proud History And New Beginnings

May 23 2022 4:32 PM



JERSEYVILLE - Approximately 100 people turned out, on Saturday, May 21, to acknowledge the designation of the Jerseyville First Presbyterian Church to the National Register of Historic Places. The celebration was the culmination of a multi-year, labor-intensive process, spearheaded by a committee of the church.

"A good time was had by all!" Christine Bear, commented and that seemed to sum up the spirit of the day. She is a session member of Jerseyville First Presbyterian Church.

The 188-year-old Jersey County landmark – which was crafted from local Grafton limestone - is a stunning example of Victorian high Gothic architecture. On Saturday, the sanctuary and chapel were filled with families, former congregation members, interested citizens, and a large number of kids. Everyone traded memories; enjoyed an informative local history lesson; scoured the church for scavenger hunt clues; designed a make-and-take stained glass craft; and, of course, enjoyed a beautiful array of homemade cookies, amidst vases overflowing with fresh spring flowers from parishioners' yards. The dreary weather did little to dampen the excitement and enthusiasm of the church's special day.

"How wonderful to see so many people!" was echoed by Barb Ogden, Beverly Metzler, and Donna Tuetken, all longtime members. All three ladies agreed that people were interested and engaged, and they asked questions. Many visitors relaxed in the sanctuary and reminisced; while enjoying organ music (provided by Janet Flatt) and viewing a slideshow detailing the history of the church and its formation.

The committee began its application process pre-COVID. Once they learned they had received the recognition, their plans for an official celebration were put on hold. About the time the congregation revisited the idea of an open house, another opportunity presented itself. A group of local residents had been meeting, for a few months, with the idea of forming a local arts council, as a vehicle for providing a variety of fine arts activities for the community. In the process of trying to identify a "home base" for their endeavor, they were approached by a member of the Presbyterian congregation. Following a meeting with the church leadership, a partnership was formed, and the Jersey County Arts Council was born in the basement of the building.

Reverend Jeff Ott, the pastor of the church, shared, "Having the arts council use our building has been an answer to a prayer! Our elders had been trying to determine how to engage the community, and along came the Jersey County Arts Council. The Open House was a great way to celebrate this new collaboration, along with our church's listing in the National Register of Historic Places."

Since early winter, members of the JCAC have invested a huge amount of time and energy in cleaning, painting, and identifying how best to use the space. Visual arts

programming, for both adults and children, has been well-attended. Donations and countless volunteer hours have enabled the organization to get on its feet. Most recently, a Children's Community Choir has been created. They will host a public performance on August 9th, and also at the Jersey County Historical Society's annual Apple Fest, on October 1.

More programming is being scheduled for the summer and fall. In addition, several other collaborations are evolving with the Jersey 100 school district, the JCH Wellness Center, and other local entities. The JCAC will also be launching a membership /sponsorship campaign, in the near future; as one of their goals is to keep program costs for the public to a minimum.

Local artist and founding arts council member, Trudy Cairns, said, "For what started and ended as a rainy day, God let the sunshine during the open house. Many folks, of all ages, came to view the inside of this beautiful, historic church. We are so blessed to have this landmark for the JCAC to call home. What a wonderful day!"

Once again, Chris Bear, JCAC board president, summed up this event well. "Our open house – and the partnership we have with the arts council – have brought together the best of the old and the best of the new."

For more information regarding class schedules and registration, or to find other ways to be involved with the JCAC, contact them on Facebook (Jersey County Arts Council); call (618.639.5232); or send an email to jerseycountyartscouncil@gmail.com. A donation box is also located in the lobby at Grafton Technologies.