



THE INTERIOR of the Vault Art Gallery. The Vault has several spaces that have rotating displays of artwork by local artists.

The Vault Art Gallery celebrates 10 years after shaky start with uncertain future

TUSCOLA — The Vault Art Gallery in downtown Tuscola has good reason to celebrate its 10th anniversary on Saturday, Aug. 26 — and that’s because there have been times that it seemed like it might not survive at all.

“Every time there’s turmoil or we lose a group of artists, I think, ‘Oh, no, how are we going to survive this?’” says longtime Vault artist and board member Joanna Drost of Sullivan. “But we’ve managed to hang in there somehow. We always get new artists to replace those who leave. I guess it’s a leap of faith. The only way the Vault stays open is that we have artists there who want to keep it open.”

The Vault will celebrate being open a decade from 1 to 5 p.m. Saturday with live music from The Halos, of Charleston, along with food and beverages. The event will also give customers a chance to meet and talk with the artists.

The Vault started by John McDevitt as the Vault Arts Collective in August 2013. He had previously owned a similar gallery called the Factory Art Studios, located in an old shoe factory in Sullivan, about 35 miles south of Tuscola. When the owner of the building died, McDevitt started looking for other locations to move the gallery and Tuscola won out — a large tax increment financing (TIF) loan and grant from the city was a major factor.

The Factory Art Studios was known for hosting large events with live music, bringing an edgy, youthful feel to sleepy small-town living. The idea was to transfer that same vibe, along with the work from local artists, to Tuscola. The new name, the Vault Arts Collective, was inspired by the large

vault located in the former bank building.

“We were trying to copy (the Factory Art Studios) as much as possible,” said McDevitt, who now lives in Florida. “The original idea was to start it as a not-for-profit, but we ran out of time for that. In talking with the Tuscola city staff, it was such a unique situation. They were open to new ideas. They wanted to try something different and were more than happy to work with me. I also had a lot of help and advice from Laura Davis and Ainslie Heilich of Vintage Karma. I’m not sure we would have succeeded in any other place.”

While the collective was initially a success, family concerns developed for McDevitt, along with financial issues. He decided to close the business in 2017. At the last minute, a buyer stepped up with long Tuscola ties, Mike Carroll and partners Jim Higgins and Jerry Reynolds. With the purchase came a slight name change, to the Vault Art Gallery, to more accurately describe the space where local artists sell paintings, photographs, ceramics, jewelry, woodworking, soaps, vintage clothing, records and more. Artist and Tuscola resident Kirby Pringle was appointed manager.

“There is an extreme amount of pride in what we started,” McDevitt said. “In some ways, it was bittersweet that we had to walk away, but I am thankful that there was a core group who kept in going, and I appreciate that. At the time, I was viewing the Vault as more of a civic project that could stand the test of time. You are always hopeful, but you never know for sure what’s going to happen.”

And that has been the crystal ball for the Vault Art Gallery —



JOANNA DROST of Sullivan is a board member and one of the Vault’s longest serving artists.

never quite knowing what was going to happen. Carroll and his group owned the Vault for one year, and decided to close the business in 2018 as it was not doing as well financially as hoped. Instead, a group of 50 artists rallied together and were able to form a cooperative that was able to purchase the Vault. The city of Tuscola owns the building and the Vault artists lease the building.

But then the COVID-19 lockdowns hit and the Vault closed its doors in the winter and spring of 2020. It was uncertain whether the Vault would survive the financial hit. And because of its cooperative structure and the lack of any paid staff — Vault artists work one day per month as part of their rental agreement — it did not qualify for grant money. The uncertainty of the past decade is also why the anniversary celebration is being called the “Miracle on Main Street.”

“It’s amazing in many ways that we are still here,” Drost said. “I don’t know what it is about Tuscola and the Vault, but that building wants us there. I want that place to be open, not just for Tuscola, but for the whole area. I’m glad it has remained open not only for the artists as a venue to sell their artwork, but as a cultural center for Central Illinois.”

Board President Debbie Nivens of Tuscola has similar thoughts.

“I think the title of our anniversary celebration says it all. Despite the many challenges, we have proven that we are something that the area enjoys,” Nivens said.

“We’re still here. And not only are we still here, but we are thriving.”

There is still discussion about whether to make the Vault Art Gallery a not-for-profit, either as a structural transformation or as a sister organization. That would allow the Vault to compete for grants, hire a full-time manager (Pringle worked on a contract-for-hire basis and retired in 2020) and offer more classes and workshops.

“I would like to see us become a center of the arts for the entire area, that includes music, dance, theater, art classes, photography classes — anything art-related that we can get in there. I think there is a demand for that,” Nivens said. “Nearly every customer we get mentions what a cool and unique place it is. I’ve never heard anything negative. Everyone is always complimentary. We want to build on that uniqueness.”

Meanwhile, Brian Moody, Tuscola’s director of economic development and fire chief, said the Vault continues to be an asset and that the city is proud to have it as one of the anchors of its downtown.

“The Vault is a tremendous asset to the community. It’s hard to believe it’s been 10 years already, but at the same time, we are glad that the artists have managed to make it work over the past decade. The Vault draws people not only from the community, but from throughout the area,” Moody said. “The Vault is an example of the diversity and sense of community that we offer in Tuscola.”



THE EXTERIOR of the Vault Art Gallery. With its two floors, the Vault is one of the largest privately owned galleries in Downstate Illinois.

Zucchini season is here; try this casserole recipe

It’s that time of year for zucchini from the garden, and for some, way too much zucchini! There are many ways to use that zucchini, and here is a recipe that I have not seen before. This comes from Lois Kramer of Farina, Illinois. This sounds like a winner!

Zucchini Casserole
Submitted by Lois Kramer
2 lbs zucchini, chopped (2 cups)
1/4 cup chopped onion
1 cup chopped carrots
1 can cream of mushroom soup
1 cup sour cream
1/2 cup melted butter
8 oz pkg Stove Top Stuffing mix, herb flavored

Mix dry stuffing mix into melted butter. Spread half the stuffing mixture into the bottom of a greased 9x13 baking dish. In a bowl, mix all other ingredients together and spread over the stuffing. Spread the rest of the stuffing mixture over the top.

Bake at 350 degrees for 25 minutes.

Lois says she has used Pepperidge Farm seasoned stuffing. She also says you could add chopped chicken, and use cream of chicken soup instead of the cream of mushroom soup.

Recently I tried this new recipe, Scampi-Style Shrimp.

While it didn’t taste as good as what I’ve had in restaurants, it turned out pretty good and is easy to make.

Scampi-Style Shrimp
Makes 4 servings
2 Tbsp sliced green onions
4 cloves garlic, finely chopped
2 Tbsp butter
2 Tbsp olive oil
1 lb. raw shrimp, peeled and deveined
1/4 cup lemon juice
1/8 tsp kosher salt
chopped parsley

In a large skillet, over medium-high heat, melt butter olive oil. Add green onions and garlic. Stir and cook for one

minute. Add shrimp, cook and stir until shrimp turns pink. Add lemon juice and salt, heat through. Garnish with parsley.

Did you notice the title of the above recipe? “Scampi-Style shrimp” can’t be the same as Shrimp Scampi, can it?



Let’s Cook

By Linda Hoskins

fact about Shrimp Scampi. The word ‘scampi’ is Italian for a type of small crustacean akin to a mini lobster. Traditionally Italian cooks used small lobster like crustaceans called scampi, also known as Dublin Bay prawns or Norway lobsters. However, most people now use shrimp.

If you have a recipe or cooking hint or a funny story about a kitchen mishap to share, please send to letscook!@heraldpubs.com or mail to Mascoutah Herald, PO Box C, Mascoutah IL 62258. Thanks and Happy Cooking!