



EVENT HAS A LOT OF HEART
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GO

MARCH 6, 2016

GUIDE



A FIRST AND A FAVORITE
Yellowstone National Park remains popular, Page 7

THE ARTS IN ALLENTOWN



APRIL BARTHOLOMEW/THE MORNING CALL

Artist Brandon Wunder is co-founder of The Alternative Gallery at The Cigar Factory in Allentown, where he oversees the creative direction of the building. The building has 45 artist studios and retail space and holds exhibits, open houses, concerts and more.

BUILDING THE ARTS

Allentown's Cigar Factory has become a thriving artist community and community booster.



CHRIS SHIPLEY/THE MORNING CALL

Emily Strong is one of the young artists renting studio space at The Cigar Factory. She also is acting as a curator for exhibits. The Cigar Factory (right) opened in November 2013, in a renovated factory building dating to the late 1800s. It is an expansive space, with wide hallways for hanging art, gleaming hardwood floors and much of the original brick.



APRIL BARTHOLOMEW/THE MORNING CALL

BY TIM HIGGINS
Special to The Morning Call

You know you're doing something right when the mayor of your city gives you a shout-out during his State of the City speech.

On Jan. 29 Allentown Mayor Ed Pawlowski praised The Alternative Gallery at Fourth and Tilghman streets and made sure to mention its founder Brandon Wunder.

Pawlowski spoke of "what makes a city great" and said it's more than the new, improved downtown with its arena, office buildings and restaurants. For a city to thrive, it needs a "cool factor," he said.

"Now when I say culture it is not just about art museums and symphonies, it is also about the smaller local artists who through their talents are making a difference in the community," said Pawlowski. "I'm talking about places like the Alternative Gallery on Fourth street. This is a unique location with over 45 studios for rent to local artists, spaces for local art exhibits, film screenings, band rehearsals and concerts."

Pawlowski was actually referring to The Cigar Factory, a four-story building that houses The Alternative Gallery, which

THE CIGAR FACTORY

- **What:** Historic four-story building with 45 artist studios and gallery and retail space
- **Where:** 707 N. Fourth St., Allentown
- **Owner:** New York developer George Huang
- **When opened:** November 2013
- **How big:** Four floors, 40,000 square feet
- **Oldest tenant:** The Alternative Gallery
- **Retail businesses:** Coffee House Without Limits, Jay and Brian's Excellent Video Store
- **Studio sizes:** 180 to 660 square feet
- **Cost to rent studios:** \$340-\$800/month
- **Hours:** Open daily 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Last Thursday Open House, 6-10 p.m.
- **Info:** 646-572-6416, cigarfactoryartists.com

specializes in everything experimental, from pop to street to conceptual art.

The Cigar Factory opened in November 2013. The ribbon cutting attracted local dignitaries,

CIGAR

Continued from GO 1

including Pawlowski.

The 40,000-square-foot former tobacco production facility, which dates to the late 1800s, is owned by New York developer George Huang and Allentown Heights Associates and was renovated with private funds in a three-year project. It has a first-floor space for exhibits and events, retail businesses and The Alternative Gallery. The fourth floor has 45 studios; 15 were rented when the building opened. The second and third floors are being used by commercial clothing manufacturers. Much of the original brick remains and the hardwood floors gleam.

The Cigar Factory builds on a new energy of artistic creation in the region that includes SteelStacks, the Banana Factory and Easton's artistic community.

In Allentown, there is the art museum, Symphony Hall and the 19th St. corridor, but the struggle to create an arts center has been mired by the problems of most downtowns — mainly crime.

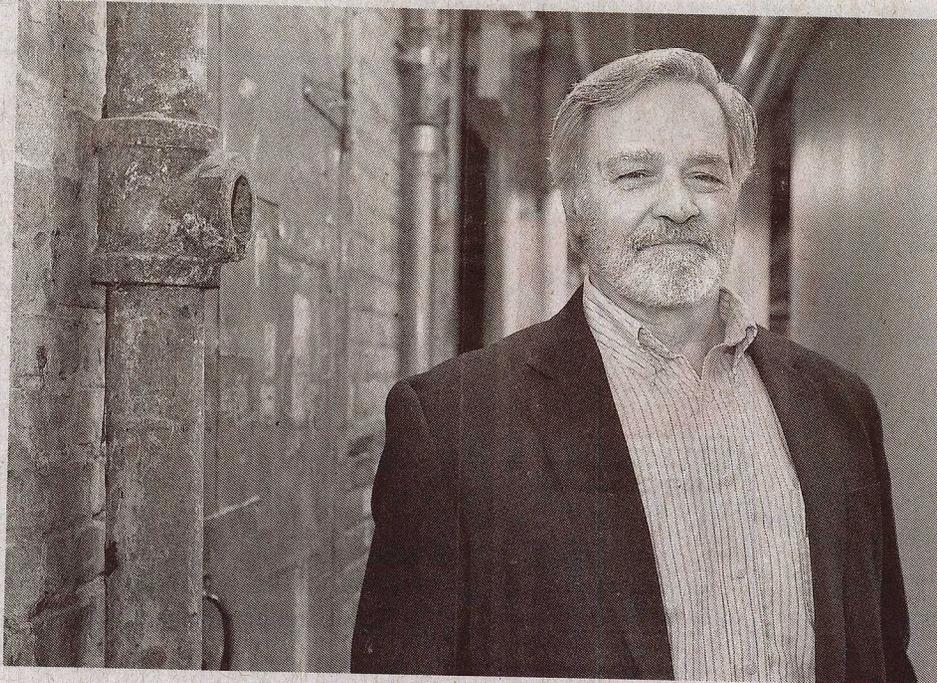
"A few years ago no one — and I mean no one — wanted to come into Allentown," Pawlowski said in the same speech. "I probably would have had a better time convincing people to come into downtown Kabul than I would have had getting people to come into downtown Allentown."

The Cigar Factory neighborhood has its problems, evidenced by a drug-related shooting just a day before the mayor's speech — the city's first homicide of the year — in the C-Town grocery store parking lot across Fourth Street from The Cigar Factory. There's also not enough parking.

The Cigar Factory is trying to make a difference by not only being a center for the arts, but also by being a neighborhood booster.

"We really believe in Allentown," says Wunder, an artist who is now building superintendent, overseeing the creative direction of the building. He has organized street fairs, concerts, exhibits and a monthly Last Thursday Open House. "What we do here caters to a wide audience ... folks of all backgrounds."

"We have about 65 percent occupancy



APRIL BARTHOLOMEW/THE MORNING CALL

Gene DiPalma, building manager for The Cigar Factory, says the building provides great spaces at affordable prices. 'The atmosphere is one of the biggest sellers,' he says. 'It's very laid back ... tenants are even allowed to bring their dogs in.'



APRIL BARTHOLOMEW/THE MORNING CALL

that studio space is not the only reason she chose the Cigar Factory. "The community here was important as well. Maybe even moreso than the space issue. There's also the prestige of being in a gallery space."

Strong emphasizes that the gallery offers artists a place to promote their work with its Thursday night open houses and musical events.

Recent additions to The Cigar Factory include commercial photographer Patrick Schuck, who moved his company FGX Creative to the building in December. Schuck does digital media for Crayola, and he moved to the Lehigh Valley from Colleagueville to be closer to his client.

Cantrell Hollingsworth, another young artist who began renting at the end of the year, says he moved from Montgomery County because, "this is an amazing community. I couldn't find anything else like this where I was." Hollingsworth considers his woodcuts and silkscreen to be "anti-painterly," and after showing his work in art leagues and coffee shops, he discovered The Cigar Factory.

"They don't fall in line with mainstream art," he says. "Here, we're all alternative artists. When dealing with other galleries you often get turned away. Here, I was immediately introduced to everybody."

Chris Jones, a well-known Allentown folk-pop artist, also recently took up residence in the building. "I've known these guys since they had a place on Hamilton," he says, "and I've had art here since they moved in 2013."

"I like what's going on here. I really like the energy here and the fact that everybody helps each other."

Another established Lehigh Valley artist who is renting studio space at The Cigar Factory is Janet Dean, a contemporary figurative landscape painter who moved in in November. "The space had a good feeling about it," she says. "It's not as restrictive or stringent as other places."

"The energy was very positive and I felt immediately comfortable here. When I first moved into my studio ... there was a warmth to it."

Many have compared The Cigar Factory to the Banana Factory, ArtsQuest's arts and education center in Bethlehem. But, says Wunder, "They have a different flavor than what we do here. We're raw, loud, experi-

"The atmosphere is one of the biggest sellers," says Gene DiPalma, building manager for The Cigar Factory. "It's very laid back ... tenants are even allowed to bring their dogs in."

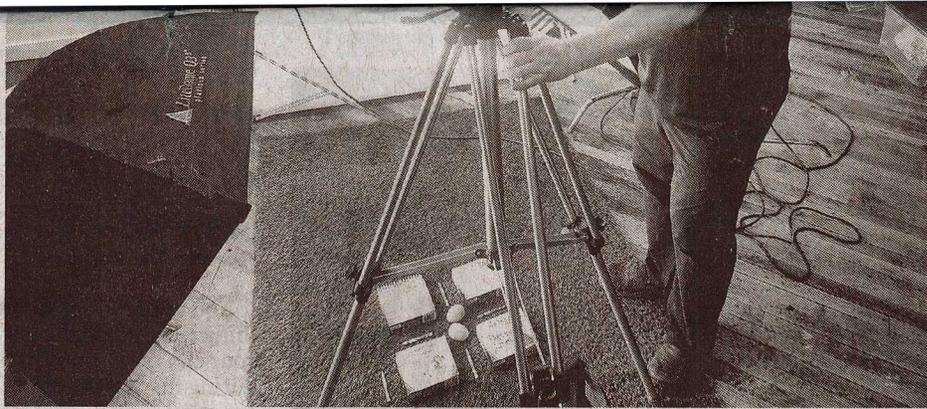
DiPalma says most of the tenants would like to make a living from their art, but they're not there yet and are working hard to get to that point.

Wunder's Alternative Gallery began as a project in the basement of the home of Jessica Echevarria of Bethlehem. In 2012 it opened as a kind of temporary space in a hallway of the Holiday Inn at Ninth and Hamilton streets in Allentown. It moved to The Cigar Factory in 2013.

"We were suddenly given two weeks notice to move out," says Wunder about the Holiday Inn. "I was thinking that the gallery was over forever when a friend put me in touch with Gene DiPalma, the property manager at The Cigar Factory. I loved the space and Gene believed in what we were trying to do so I left that meeting with a key to the building."

The Alternative Gallery is the last remaining original tenant. Soon after moving in, the original superintendent of the building left and Wunder and his team of gallery artists became the building's creative force.

The Alternative Gallery applied for non-profit status in 2014 and received it in 2015. Wunder says he is always busy apply-



CHRIS SHIPLEY/THE MORNING CALL

Recent additions to The Cigar Factory include commercial photographer Patrick Schuck, who moved his company FGX Creative to the building in December.

ing for grants for programs and is also working with the Wescoe School of business at Muhlenberg College in Allentown to help manage the building, attract interns, train people and keep track of inventory. He also has started a children's workshop that meets on Saturday afternoons.

Currently the gallery handles some 80 to 90 visual artists from the Lehigh Valley region and around the world, with artists from Latin American and European countries often showing their work. The gallery will be hosting Haitian artists this year. In

addition, Wunder spearheaded the creation of the Allentown ArtsFest, a three-day "alternative" arts festival at Cedar Beach in September of 2014 and 2015 that has featured things like avant-garde bands, underground theater and film, graffiti artists, stand-up comedians, breakdancing and skateboarding.

Among the other renters is Emily Strong, 23, a figurative artist who moved into her studio in July of 2015. Strong has a degree in arts and psychology from Moravian College in Bethlehem and planned to be an arts therapist. She cuts the cost of renting at The Cigar Factory by also working as a gallery curator in the building and attracting new artists.

"We try to appeal to a wide range of people," she says. "It's a mixed crowd but mostly younger artists."

"I needed a space to work in because I create large works," says Strong, adding

The owners converted a similar facility into an arts center in Yonkers, New York, in the 1990s, known today as the YoHo Artist Community. Their study of Allentown demographics suggested a similar fit for an arts-related facility in Allentown, says DiPalma, and Haung spent a lot of time walking through Allentown, Bethlehem and Easton meeting with established artists. They were looking to provide artists with spaces at a reasonable cost as well as a place to learn and provide art classes.

In January, Billy Mack opened Coffee House Without Limits at The Cigar Factory. Mack says he chose the building after going to concerts there.

"I wanted to open a coffee shop for about six years," says Mack. "I have always loved the community-building aspects of coffee shops."

The coffee shop has attracted a crowd with music, art shows and a board game night.

Jay and Brian's Excellent Video Store, owned by Jason Overdorf and Brian Goren, moved in in December.

The Postal Carriers Union maintains an office in the building as well. There are two band practice rooms in the basement complete with street art murals by local graffiti artist Meano. A recording studio is in the works, says DiPalma.

"Over time it will be a complete arts building," says Wunder. "In about 10 or 12 years or so, we hope all floors will be fully converted."

"We want this to be the destination in Allentown," says DiPalma. "Word is starting to get around but it's a slow process. The goal here is to get those with experience to meet with those with less experience. It's a place to gather as well as a place to show their product and sell their work."

"Art communities are never mainstream," adds DiPalma. "We're just outside the Allentown Arts District [the area around the Allentown Art Museum]. We would like to make this the second arts district."

DiPalma points to cheap housing rent near The Cigar Factory as an incentive. "They can walk to their studios and hopefully we can bring some life to the area and make the neighborhood better. Within 10 years we would like to be the catalyst for the Tenth Ward to be the new arts district in Allentown."

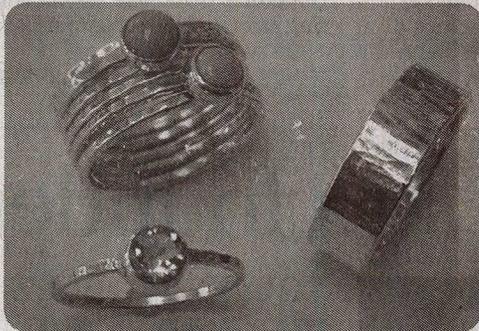
DiPalma and Wunder are thinking big. Very big.

"We eventually want to grow into a museum," says Wunder, "and build a permanent collection with archiving and preservation facilities."

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Sun. 2:30, 5, 7:30 // Mon. 7
Tues. 7 // Wed. 2, 7 // Thur. 7

The Lady in the Van (PG-13)

Sun. 12, 5:15 // Mon. 7 // Tues. 4
Wed. 7 // Thur. 4