



# *Tibbits Foundation and Arts Council*

IN DOWNTOWN COLDWATER,  
GRASSROOTS ORGANIZERS  
SAVED AN IRREPLACEABLE  
COMMUNITY RESOURCE

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Photos and Story by Phil Eich,  
Storyville Social, as part of the  
Michigan Main Street Story  
Series

My dream was to be a Rockette. I loved the choreography, how precise they were. But then I found out how hard it was to get in and how much work it was to be a professional dancer, so I went to Eastern Michigan University for arts management instead. It was a way I could still be connected to the arts by enabling artists to be creative and not worry about the business side of things.

A lot of what I love about what I do is this building, the Tibbits Opera House. It's an amazing piece of history with gorgeous architecture. The building was constructed in 1882 at a time when opera houses were a dime a dozen. But this one was special in that it was a standalone building, as most of them were on the upper floors of other buildings.

At the time, almost every community had an opera house...but most of them had nothing to do with opera. Calling them 'opera houses' was a way to get around the stigma of theaters, which were considered somewhat disreputable. They also served as a community gathering place: graduation ceremonies would've been here, community meetings, rallies advocating for women's right to vote, or against prohibition would have been in a place like Tibbits Opera House.

When vaudeville became 'the thing,' this became part of the vaudeville circuit. Then when film came around, it was changed into a movie theater, taking its glorious Victorian façade and turning it into an Art Deco movie house. It's unfortunate, but it also saved

the building: instead of being renovated, most of the opera houses of that time were being torn down to build great big movie palaces.

As movies made their way to television and people could watch entertainment at home, the theater was closed and boarded up. There were several other movie theaters in town, three of them owned by the same company, so this is the old one that got boarded up in the late '50s. There was talk of tearing it down, but the community came together and did everything they could do to reopen it. They created a grassroots group, requesting a member from every civil service club to represent the club and help 'Save the Tibbits.' A community theater group at that time called and signed a contract for the building, but once they made the arrangements, they couldn't afford the payments, so in 1960, they formed the Tibbits Opera Foundation, which took over and eventually purchased the building.

That started the whole renovation of the 1960s. They took out the Art Deco facade and realized that they needed new lights, curtains, chairs, a boiler system, heating system, all these things that had been boarded up. There were so many expenses that they hadn't seen, and on top of that, they were trying to get a brand new organization going at the same time. So rather than restore at that time, they just covered it up. 'Historical preservation' wasn't really a thing in the '60s, and even some of the wonderful things they did then have increased the deterioration. But covering it up was a good thing, and in 2012, we uncovered it and



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started the process to restore its beautiful façade.

It was 100% restoration according to all preservation standards. The façade is all recreated from nothing because it was all gone. They recreated it from napkin drawings and photos with amazing craftsmanship. The doors on the front of the building are each 400 pounds, requiring custom hardware because of the torque on the building.

But the adage is 'it's not about the building.' It's what we do with the building.

We do professional stock summer theater as part of our programming, hiring entire companies from around the country. We have four main shows this year and five popcorn shows, which are geared towards kids and family. Musicals, comedy, something for the kids, something for the adults. We're also doing a film in concert.

The rest of the year, we do concerts. We've brought in Jeff Daniels and Cloris Leachman, who did a one-woman show. We do jazz and blues. We do a lot of tribute bands because those are very popular and they fill the house. People love them!

We also do a lot for kids. The same stage that had Jeff Daniels is used by our high school to do their performances here. We also produce our own children's theater and a cast of almost 50 kids, 4th to 8th graders, put on a show themselves. They draw the characters, they help with the costuming, they learn about memorization, they learn about teamwork, and



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what goes into being a theater. They learn public speaking, and it builds self-esteem. They learn a different kind of teamwork. Not everyone's an athlete. Not everyone is academic, so this fills a gap for those creative kids and helps them find their way.

Having a place like this in Coldwater is critical because the arts have a way of communicating differently. They have a way of opening up people's eyes. They show different perspectives in sometimes subtle ways. And I think compared to some of the other small communities I've been to, there's more openness in Coldwater. I feel it's partly because people have grown up with people coming here from



all over the country, out there living in our community, and with that, there is exposure to different people and different ideas.

We've also worked very hard at being inclusive. As you look at the Coldwater community, it's very diverse. I believe a third of our community is now from Yemen, so we've worked with that community by doing performances with Arab artists. We've had some of them work with our schools. We've done speakers here in the broader community organizations so that they can hear from people directly and ask questions. They are our neighbors, part of Coldwater, and the same goes for our Spanish-speaking community.

I love my job. I love this building. I love this community.

—Christine Delaney of the Tibbits Foundation and Arts Council, Coldwater, Michigan





# Michigan Main Street Story Series



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