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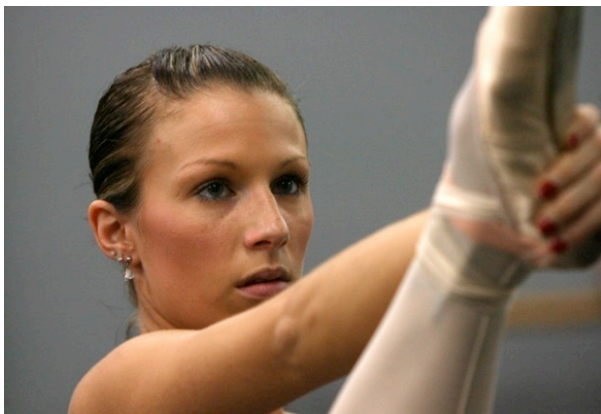
LAKE

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Despite down economy, local arts scene stays up

THEY'RE NOT BREAD AND BUTTER, BUT ARTS ARE STAPLE OF WELL-BALANCED LIVING
By Kathleen Quilligan



JOHN J. WATKINS | THE TIMES Bailee Serocinski practices during a class at the Academy of Indiana Ballet Theatre.

It's a fact, one Shannon McMullen and others in the arts have to deal with whether they like it or not.

"One of the obvious, expected effects of a troubled economy is (arts) funding often gets cut first," said McMullen, an assistant professor of art and design at Purdue University. McMullen doesn't like it, but she knows where a majority of people rank the arts compared to other areas that need funding. "That doesn't mean you stop making art. You make different choices." The troubled economy has hit the Northwest Indiana arts scene hard, with layoffs and decreases in funding. But through the

tough times, local arts groups plan to continue giving the region a quality of life boost.

Gregg Hertzlieb, director and curator of the Brauer Museum of Art at Valparaiso University, has had a rough fiscal year. The museum's operating budget, provided by the university, was reduced by 20 percent, and one member of the three-member staff had to be let go. Hertzlieb also has seen a small decrease in donations, and two museum endowments couldn't be tapped because the principal fell below the original balances. "Everyone just has to work harder," Hertzlieb said, adding he's determined to continue offering the same quality of programs he's put on for the past 10 years. Recognizing that many peers are in a similar crunch, South Shore Arts, which is grappling with a \$200,000 budget cut, focused its Regional Arts Summit last month on stretching the available arts dollars. Executive Director John Cain says he's not surprised that support for the arts has plunged along with the economy. He says many people don't consider the arts a "bread-and-butter" staple, though their impact on quality of life is indelible. "The value is enormous, particularly in children," he said.

That philosophy is echoed by Jeff Casey, managing director of Hammond's Towle Theater, 5205 Hohman Ave. He said local theaters sometimes are the only places children see live performances, often through field trips. At Friday morning's performance of "Parker in the Park" for local schools, Casey said there were empty seats, something that never would have happened even a year ago. He attributes the attendance drop to a decline in state funding. "One decision, or one cut, can dramatically impact ... an entire community," he said. Over the course of the past year, he said the way people buy tickets has changed, too. Many now wait until the week or day of the show instead of purchasing weeks in advance. "People are thinking, 'Maybe I might need that money to fix my car,' " he said. Still, he said the theater's location has worked to its advantage. Many of the people who visit the Hammond theater also attended shows in Chicago in better times. But with so many people cutting back, patrons are choosing Towle because it's less expensive, he said.

Gloria Tuohy, founding artistic director of the Indiana Ballet Theatre, said her company and dance school haven't been immune to the economy, but they have found ways to make it work. Instead of performing the annual spring ballet at the Star Plaza Theatre in Merrillville, Tuohy's troupe visited six region communities and used children from those communities in the performances. It got the children involved and secured their interest in ballet. Already, the ballet's two school shows of "The Nutcracker" are sold out, with many seats to be filled by children involved in the spring ballet. Meanwhile, Robert Radzinski is waving off the economic turmoil to press ahead with his effort to bring a new cultural outlet to the region. He pitched an art gallery for the space above the antique store his mother manages in Crown Point. And the building's owners told him to run with it. Radzinski, of Highland, will open The Attic, 208 S. Main St., on Thursday. He said he'll focus on local contemporary art. "I think the economy is on an upswing. I'm starting to feel positive," he said.

For her dissertation research, McMullen studied the role of art in transforming communities in Germany that were destroyed by the collapse of coal and steel. She found that in that area, art became more local and buildings were used for art in new ways. "Nobody is quitting or giving up," she said. "Everybody is doing a little more."

This article can be found at: http://nwitimes.com/news/local/lake/article_783d5ab4-13e3-5c22-b63c-8d39eedd6356.html (accessed November 9, 2009)