

ARTS | NEW JERSEY

A Center Bursting With Life and Raring to Open

At Centenary College, a new space for stages, stations and studios.

By TAMMY LA GORCE

HACKETTSTOWN, N.J.

FOR a space that had not officially opened yet, the David and Carol Lackland Center at Centenary College was already buzzing with small colonies of activity earlier this month.

Windows thick enough to silence the beats within allowed for a view of dance students swaying in stocking feet in the dance studio.

Lights flashed and hummed in the CCTV Channel 23 television studio, where Jon Lewis, 45, the college's broadcast manager, negotiated a sea of equipment and a crew of installers.

And in the Edith Bolte Kutz '42 Theater, actors with the Centenary Stage Company, the Equity theater in residence at the college, studied lines from 'The Prisoner of Second Avenue,' a Neil Simon comedy, which begins its run at the 485-seat Sitnik Theater — the centerpiece of the 68,000-square-foot, \$30.5 million Lackland Center — on Oct. 1.

The center opens formally with a gala concert featuring the singer Maureen McGovern on Friday, and Carl Wallnau, the Centenary Stage Company's artistic director, said he hoped it would 'cause people to think about northwest New Jersey as not just a place to go snowboarding.' The center owes its existence to its namesakes, David and Carol Lackland, of Watchung.

'My husband is a violinist, and I'm a pianist; we love music and theater, and the college didn't really have a place to encompass those wonderful things,' said Mrs. Lackland, 76, a 1954 graduate of the college. She said she was looking forward to performances by the Chamber Orchestra Kremlin on Oct. 24 and the New Jersey Ballet Company on Oct. 30 at the Sitnik. 'We wanted to give back, and as music and theater lovers, this was our opportunity to do something we really wanted to do.'

David Lackland, 78, co-founded the Lackland Self Storage company in Piscataway in 1977; he is currently the

owner of Lackland Associates, a real estate company, in Warren.

Although the Lacklands will not specify how much money they donated to the college to build the center, campus officials said it would not have gotten off the ground, let alone become the two-story, glass-encased center for the arts it is today, without their generosity.

'We always had a strategic plan in place for an arts center, but in 2003, before the rumors started about this actually taking shape, that strategic plan was 15 years down the road,' said Mr. Wallnau, 57, of Hoboken. 'When the Lacklands came along, that changed. They were very specific about what they wanted to do here.'

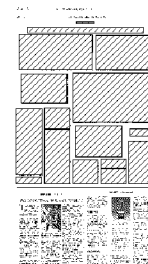
In addition to the two theaters, the dance studio and the TV station, the Lackland Center is home to a 400-seat dining hall, where students in flip-flops and pajama bottoms can already be seen, orange juice in hand; a 55-seat cafe; classrooms for communications students; a boardroom; offices; and a studio for WNTI-FM (91.9), the listener-supported radio station, which is attached to the TV station by a spiral staircase.

The radio station's relocation to the new building was of special significance to Mrs. Lackland, who took a Centenary radio course in the 1950s.

'That radio course is what gave me the confidence to go into New York City and apply for a job at CBS, which I got,' she said. Later, she worked as an assistant to a radio producer at NBC. 'I had a really wonderful career,' she said. 'And I know I would never have had the confidence to go and find a job like that if it wasn't for Centenary. It opened my whole world.'

Who exactly allowed her to pursue her dream is still something of a mystery. Mrs. Lackland grew up in Plain-

field; when she was 11, her father was killed by a hit-and-run driver. She said her mother brought up the family 'on very little money.' She did not expect to go to college, but was encouraged by a



high school music teacher, she said, to apply for a scholarship at Centenary. She got the scholarship, but by the end of her freshman year, she was short \$500 to enroll as a sophomore.

“That would be like \$5,000 today — it was more than I could imagine,” Mrs. Lackland said. “I was ready to leave school, but then I was called in by the dean and told an anonymous donor had given the money, and that I would be able to finish.”

Mrs. Lackland never learned the donor’s identity. “Whoever that person was, he inspired us to give back,” she said.

Their inspiration seems to be contagious.

“I loved the old space, but it isn’t this,” said Allen Lewis Rickman, 50, of Manhattan, who plays Baxter on HBO’s “Boardwalk Empire” and is a frequent cast member in Centenary Stage Company’s productions. The company plans to have five productions this year, up from three last year, as a result of the new theater spaces.

Mr. Lewis, the college’s broadcast manager, who is from Port Murray, could not agree more with Mr. Rickman. “I’m coming from a TV station that was in the basement of a dorm” at Centenary, he said. “Once I get students in here, our TV program is going to explode. I can’t wait.”

The David and Carol Lackland Center is at 715 Grand Avenue, Hackettstown. For tickets and information: (908) 979-0900 or centenarystageco.org.

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Clockwise from right: Workmen lay stones bearing the names of donors and sponsors of the center; the artistic director of Centenary Stage Company, Carl Wallnau, left, Allen Lewis Rickman and Liz Zazzi in the center's Sitnik Theater; a view of the 485-seat theater; Lea Antolini-Lid and her class in a dance studio; and Jon Lewis, the college's broadcast manager, in the TV control room.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM WHITE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES