

Needed: Charter members

African American center has mission, address, now seeks helping hands

By Amy Biancolli

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It has an address: 135 S. Pearl St. It has a mission: to promote awareness of "the rich and vibrant history, contribution and culture of African-Americans" in Albany and beyond. And now, it wants members.

At 11 a.m. Wednesday, the African American Cultural Center of the Capital Region will host a ribbon-cutting at its new Pearl Street digs, the first of two events marking the latest growth phase of the nascent organization. The second, an evening jazz reception at the Palace Theatre, kicks off the AACCCR's five-month charter membership campaign.

The jazz reception is at capacity, but the AACCCR will offer charter memberships via its website (<http://www.aacccr.org>) through April at least. "We're right now in our infancy. Of course we have the building ... and we have volunteers, and we have folks working really, really hard to raise the funds that we need to refurbish the building," said Nell Stokes-Holmes, interim executive director of the AACCCR. "We're gonna need lots of hands to help us do this."

The South Pearl building — a former Key Bank site — requires a lot of work. "Right now we have a shell of a building," said Linda Jackson-Chalmers, the program committee chair. "But we will ultimately see events and programs going on in the building or elsewhere in the community."

Already there's talk of a theater, offices, a community space and room for outreach and educational programs. Programming committee member Karen Christina Jones envisions arts classes, health programming and — planned for next year — a film series.

If that sounds eclectic, it should. "We want to be eclectic. We want to embrace everything," Jones said. "You need people who are going to be involved economically in the community."

"You also need people who are going to be involved in fostering unity. It has to be all things for all people, because people in the area have different needs."

The idea, said Chalmers, is not to "overshadow" the work of the Hamilton Hill Arts Center and other, similar organizations in the region, but to complement them. "There's room for more work to engage with the community — not just the African-American community, but the whole community."

Stokes-Holmes said the cultural center offers five levels of charter membership, beginning at \$10 and running to \$550 and beyond. For more information, call 635-3086 or visit the website at <http://www.aacccr.org>.

At each level, members receive gifts — a commemorative stamp, their name on an honor roll or, at the highest level, a plaque.

But beyond that, "What they get is the opportunity to be part of history in the Capital Region — to be a part and to say that they supported us initially when we started out," she said. "The person who becomes the charter member, they're investing in our success. And they get the privilege of bragging about that in

the future. When we're doing all these awesome things in the Capital Region, they can say, 'Oh, I'm a charter member.'"

For her part, Jones looks to an even more distant future. "It's not just community leaders we're thinking about" and hoping to attract in the membership drive, she said. "We're thinking about members of the community who want to get involved — who see this, who want to make this happen. So that 30 years from now, we'll be celebrating at the Palace."

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