

Teresa Dalton Kindles Community Spirit at the FireHouse

By Scott Henderson

Teresa Dalton, Coast Guard veteran and owner of the historic FireHouse Arts & Events Center, is navigating the financial riptides now devastating small businesses that rely on indoor gatherings. It is rough, but generous lifelines are coming in from the community she loves.

"I grew up in Vancouver, Washington, and joined the Coast Guard straight out of high school in 1978," Teresa reflects.

"Although I enlisted on a dare, I served as one of the Guard's few women mechanics for 21 fulfilling years before retiring.

"Early on, I spent a month in Bellingham while my Seattle-based cutter was dry-docked. I was taken by the surrounding natural beauty and fell in love with the town," she said. "So I scoped out

the small Coast Guard Search and Rescue Station at the harbor, and in 2005 I secured an assignment. My daughters and I settled in the Columbia neighborhood, beginning our next 25 years in Bellingham."

During those years, Teresa assumed management of two Fairhaven buildings from her late husband and began participating in the merchant community. She moved to an historic house on South Hill in 2014 and was soon stopping for coffee at the FireHouse Café at Harris and 14th street.

When it was offered for sale in 2017, Teresa took notice. "I loved the building's history and the pride it brought to the south side. The owners, Matt and Alona Christman, had lovingly transformed it into a vibrant gathering space. I understood in my heart why they didn't want it turned into retail or office space. I had a wild idea of buying it, and when my friend, Glenn



Dehekker, shared my enthusiasm, we began the ups and downs of negotiating, financing, and the ultimate purchase," she said. "I too had fallen in love with the FireHouse."

The FireHouse that captured Teresa's

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heart was built in 1927, named Firehouse #2, and housed six men and their new gas-powered trucks. It served faithfully until 2001, when it was placed on the Historic Register and put it up for sale. Robert and Bess Christman saw great potential in the building and purchased it through a competitive merit process. "It was a barren, well-used building when we first stepped inside," recalls their son, Matt, "but it was also a beautiful, open space. Empty, but full of potential." After years of renovation, including a unique counter-weighted 85-seat system that can be lowered from the ceiling, the FireHouse Performing Arts Center opened in 2004.

For the next 13 years, the FireHouse blossomed under Matt and Alona Christman's stewardship, drawing the community in, and serving diverse artists and audiences alike. Teresa took their example to heart. "When I assumed ownership, my vision was to continue with the Café and performance space. But it soon became clear that opportunities and necessities would make changes inevitable," Teresa said.

The priorities, of course, were the obvious issues of a century-old building. "Within the first year we had to repair a broken water line, a leaking gas line, and then our dyspeptic boiler, as well as replace the café oven, refrigerator and other appliances," Teresa lamented.

But soon, enhancements could begin. Indoors, the sound system was upgraded, along with the crucial ventilation and air conditioning system. Another investment was refinishing the maple dance floor and adding a protective Marley covering. The basement apartment was converted into an Airbnb rental. Most noticeable, the outdoor spaces were outfitted with artwork, storage, seating and a covered deck area, all under the shade of the enormous Oriental plane tree. A beer and wine license brought the café new popularity.

Perhaps the most transformative project came as a result of the Covid shutdown. "When performances stopped, imaginative people saw opportunity. With sponsors like Steve and Eileen Nelson, and Valerie Dalena, we launched the FireHouse Studio, transforming the space into a recording studio, with services including video recording, editing, and creation of digital content for online or other distribution," Teresa said. "We've served performers and engaged WWU students in the process. This has been a bright light during a dark time."

Teresa has particular gratitude for her staff. "One reason we are weathering this period, is the dedication of our staff," she said. "I am so grateful to our baristas, Kate and Aaron, Katie and Miqua,

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Gabi, Aubrey, Isaac and Rachael, and our assistant manager, Jalyn. Nick is the Studio audio technician,” Teresa said. “And there’s potential to build a volunteer group in the near future.”

The FireHouse has always relied on robust rental income. Its versatile space has attracted a large variety of groups and performers, as well as audiences and participants of all ages and interests. “First, we rely on our on-going classes, such as dance, education, and wellness activities like Tai Chi and Yoga. Then, there are the dependable performance rentals for dance, music and theater. These had been our bread-and-butter until last year,” Teresa said. In addition, there are the recitals, weddings and receptions, workshops, craft fairs, talent shows, open mic nights, block parties, lectures, films, and literary readings, not to mention Tibetan sand mandalas.

With the pandemic, the already thin business model has become increasingly tenuous. “To put it starkly, we have lost about 85% of our rentals since gatherings became health risks,” Teresa said. “At the same time, the café has slowed tremendously during the winter months. It’s been a double whammy to our revenue, and we’ve dipped below break-even.



Sadly, small business grants and Covid relief grants have come up short. Now it is charitable contributions that are helping to bridge the gap.”

“One of the bright spots of the past months has been the incredible surge in community support,” Teresa said. “We’re now a non-profit organization, operating under the 501(c)(3) fiscal sponsorship of the Allied Arts Foundation of Seattle. Our website visits have gone up tremendously.” (firehouseperformingarts.com)

Most notable, the ‘lion’s share’ of charitable donations have come from an ongoing campaign launched by the Bellingham Harborview Lions Club, called ‘Whatcom

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At the same time, individuals and groups have been contributing creatively. Members of classes, such as Linda’s T’ai Chi, have been collecting donations. Ian Bivens and Pam Kuntz (Kuntz & Co.) organized a virtual benefit performance last October, titled “from where they are.”

Teresa sees this rallying of support as validation for the FireHouse and its mission. “The FireHouse has always been here for the community, and now the community is showing us that they are here for the FireHouse,” Teresa said. “We are already looking ahead at how we can show appreciation and give back to our supportive Bellingham neighbors. There will be applause and laughter and café chatter again, soon. We will keep the Fire going!” *SC*

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