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Lawrence University

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The Rabbit Gallery: Lawrence University Student Entrepreneurial Initiative Offers New Venue for Local Artists

Posted on: May 16th, 2011 by Rick Peterson

Sydney Pertl just wanted to help...her fellow student art majors, Fox Valley artists and the downtown Appleton business district. Becoming a budding entrepreneur in the process was just a side benefit.

After a year-long gestation and a fair share of sweat equity, the Lawrence University junior from Seattle, Wash., is looking forward to unveiling Appleton's first "pop-up" art gallery in the gift shop half of the former Conkey's Bookstore on College Ave.



Featuring paintings, drawings, sculpture, photography and digital works of more than 25 community artists, including Lawrence students and faculty, the Rabbit Gallery holds its official opening Tuesday, May 17 from 4:30-8:30 p.m.

As a "pop-up" gallery, the Rabbit Gallery is by nature a temporary venue that will utilize empty storefronts in downtown Appleton that are for sale or lease. Its goal is twofold: market the vacant properties to potential buyers and provide professional space for

local artists to showcase their work.

“No business district wants to see empty stores, so the gallery acts as a transitional storefront that we hope generates increased foot traffic downtown and eventually leads to a local business owner taking over the property,” said Pertl. “I hope the community takes advantage of the opportunity this presents.”

The Rabbit Gallery concept was conceived more than a year ago in the class “Entrepreneurship in the Arts and Society,” part of Lawrence’s new Innovation and Entrepreneurship program. Studio art major Krissy Rhyme, a senior from Green Bay, and junior Ranga Wimalasuriya, an economics major from Sri Lanka, were instrumental in bringing the project to fruition. Rhyme, one of the project’s founding members, oversaw the design of the gallery’s web site, while Wimalasuriya handled all of the project’s finances as its business manager.

The students were guided by an advisory board that includes three Lawrence faculty members: former Jansport CEO and community advocate Mike Cisler and representatives from Appleton Downtown Inc. and the Trout Museum of Art.

Adam Galambos, assistant professor of economics, said the Rabbit Gallery is breaking new ground in realizing one of the primary goals of the innovation and entrepreneurship program: to create student ventures that function as experiential learning labs.

“These students are using their unique skills and what they have learned at Lawrence to create something that has not existed in this community before,” said Galambos. “It is a great example of how liberal education can be translated into action to create positive change in the world.”

Jennifer Stephany, executive director of Appleton Downtown Inc.,

says the arts can be an economic driver in a city's downtown district. She cited a 2007 plan adopted by the city of Appleton that called for maintaining the vitality of the arts and entertainment district as a key initiative by creating new venues for arts activities and pursuing opportunities to attract artists and arts-related businesses to the district.

She sees the Rabbit Gallery as "an exciting and progressive project that brings positive momentum to several economic development efforts surrounding the arts in downtown Appleton.

"By hosting the gallery in a vacant available space it will generate traffic to the central businesses district and bring awareness to opportunity for entrepreneurial business development," said Stephany. "The Rabbit has brought synergy to the efforts of Appleton Downtown Inc., The Trout Museum of Art and Lawrence University to highlight downtown as the Fox Cities cultural core for the visual arts."

One of Pertl's strongest motivations in pursuing the gallery project was the potential benefit it has for her classmates.

"Networking is very important if you're going to survive as an artist," said Pertl. "Having the opportunity to showcase your work in a professional gallery while you're still a student is invaluable. There is a lot to be gained by connecting Lawrence student artists with the working professional arts community in the Fox Valley. The Rabbit Gallery should help open doors for art students after they graduate."

According to Pertl, the Rabbit Gallery will benefit local artists as well by charging a lower-than-normal commission for any sold artwork.

"Our gallery is designed to have the artists receive the majority of

the value for their work.”

Following the grand opening, the gallery, which will be staffed by student and community volunteers, will be open May 20, 5-8 p.m., May 21-22 and May 27-28 noon to 5 p.m. and by appointment.

After May 28, the gallery will close for the summer, with plans to reopen next fall in a new downtown location.