

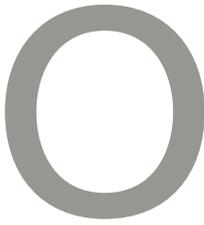
# ARTS Oil City brings new perspective to downtown

By Joann Wheeler

*By the beginning of 2012, the city's approximately \$135,000 investment in the program over a five-year period had resulted in well over \$1 million in property purchases and rentals in Oil City.*



*Downtown Oil City*



*Oil City, nestled in the hills of northwestern Pennsylvania, has found an innovative way to respond to the challenges brought on by the loss of business in the last two decades.*

Once the home of the corporate offices of Quaker State and Pennzoil, Oil City, just as its name suggests, was bustling with businesses related to the oil and gas industry. And the Venango Area Chamber of Commerce, founded 100 years ago as the Chamber of Commerce of Oil City, maintains its office on Main Street in the building that was the first Buick dealership in the nation.

Chamber Director Susan Williams recalls, “In the late 1970s – early 1980s, jobs were plentiful and downtown Oil City was filled with restaurants and retail stores that were thriving. The next decade fell hard on our

community, as companies closed or relocated, not only leaving many unemployed, but also buildings unoccupied.”

While the story of Oil City and Venango County are not unique, one of the strategies that the city has used to respond to its

**“As our local businesses compete to attract the most talented workforce, it is critical to offer a high quality of life for the employee and their families. Oil City’s vibrant arts community offers a rich cultural experience whether you are a participant or an observer.”**

■ **Susan Williams, executive director, Venango Area Chamber of Commerce**

challenges is clearly innovative. ARTS Oil City, the city’s arts revitalization and artist relocation program continues to show a strong return on investment. Now in its fifth year, the program is one piece of the overall downtown development strategy recommended by the Shepstone-Fairweather study in 2005 and implemented in July 2006 as a component of a plan to repopulate the city and revitalize its downtown. It is showing steady progress on both fronts. The program is administered by 0.5 FTE Joann Wheeler from the ARTS Oil City office in the National Transit Building. It operates under the auspices of the Oil City Arts and Cultural Commission (formerly Oil City Arts Council). Fiscal and clerical support is provided by the Oil City Department of Community Development.

By the end of 2011, the city’s approximately \$135,000 investment in the program over a five-year period had resulted in well over \$1 million in property purchases and rentals in Oil City. Arts-related programs and businesses now fill 22,200 square feet in the National Transit Building, and 8,000 square feet in two downtown commercial buildings.

In spite of a stagnant housing market since 2008 and an economy which is not yet really in recovery, artist relocations in Oil City are keeping pace with those of its model artist

relocation city, Paducah, KY. Paducah now boasts about 50 relocations over an 11-year period; Oil City can claim 23 in five years. By the end of 2011, the city’s investment in the program over the five-year period had come back nearly tenfold in property purchases and rentals. For the first time, total school and property taxes paid as a result of the artist relocation program equaled or exceeded the city’s expenditures in running the program, so moving forward, it is essentially paying for itself.

### **Arts investment having positive impact on struggling downtown**

In addition to filling the formerly empty National Transit and additional commercial buildings, other parts of the downtown are thriving as well as a direct result of the city’s investment in ARTS Oil City.

**Mosaic Café/Art** on Elm is the labor of love created by Mary Morgan, the first Transit artist to

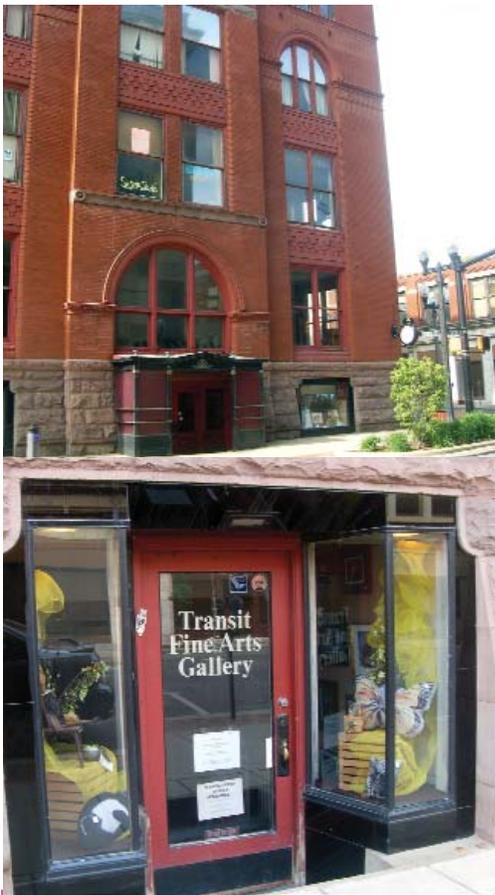
launch a street-level, arts-based commercial venture. Located in the heart of downtown since February of 2011, Mosaic Café offers inventive cuisine, which also draws customers into Mary’s photography gallery on the Elm Street side of the building. The central Impromptu Room is the scene of live music and poetry performances, open mic nights, and visual art exhibits by emerging local talent. Photographer/entrepreneur Mary Morgan relocated here in 2009, and her son, Creole Chef Dave Gundrum, joined her here in 2011 to open the Mosaic Cafe.

**The Stuffed Tortilla** on Seneca Street now occupies the former Howling Dog, the first building renovated as a result of the Arts Revitalization by painter Charlie Whipple. The current tenants continue to welcome displays of art on the restaurant walls.

Early in the life of ARTS Oil City, Classic Salon and Classy Catering moved to Seneca Street’s Daydia Building in order to take advantage of the new vitality downtown.

It is anticipated that synergy with the Main Street program will continue the forward momentum in the downtown business district in 2012.

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**Arts-related programs and businesses now fill 22,200 square feet in the National Transit Building.**

## **Downtown arts hub: National Transit Art Studios**

The National Transit Building in Oil City's North Side business district serves as a hub for the arts movement in Oil City. The Oil City Civic Center, which manages the National Transit Building, actively supports the growth of the arts, so ARTS Oil City is able to offer workspaces to area artists in a beautiful, historic structure at the very affordable rate of \$0.49/square foot. In addition to the Oil Valley Center for the Arts, the Transit Fine Art Gallery, and the Graffiti Gallery, the Transit Building now houses 25 arts-based small businesses. Jewelers, photographers, painters, china, paper, mixed media, and glass artists all work and exhibit in the second-floor National Transit Studios. Studios are open to the public every second Saturday and for special events.

### **Graffiti Gallery**

Graffiti Gallery, located in the basement of the Transit Annex, is the second nonprofit art gallery in the Transit Building under the auspices of the Oil City Arts Council. It opened in September of 2010 and, with the help of an initial rent waiver from the OCCC, has been able to implement improvements like lighting, painting, etc. costing approximately \$2,000 from gallery revenues.

### **New developments**

August 2011 saw the transformation of the third floor of the Transit Annex into a premier New York City-style dance studio by award-winning Franklin dance instructor Darin Paden. More than 200 dancers of all ages and styles now flock to lessons in the Performing Arts Academy and bring new life to a part of the building that had previously stood empty. The Performing Arts Academy is already thinking of expanding.

### **Artist relocations**

Overall, Oil City has welcomed 23 artists to the area. The most recent relocating artists in 2011 are Tasana Camara and Shon Gaworski. Camara, an internationally-known performer from Guinea, West Africa on traditional, handmade African string and percussion instruments, first visited Oil City as a performer at First Night 2011. He now makes his home in Oil City. Gaworski is a painter who relocated here with her family from Winston-Salem, NC. Gaworski explains that the transition was an easy one for her young family. Her husband works from home and Shon works out of her studio in the National Transit Building.

"Those who have always lived here often miss the real beauty here. Besides the natural beauty of the region, we have found the people to be so embracing and supportive," she said of the region.

These comments are echoed over again by other artists who have moved to Oil City. Anisa Gage, a fine artist and poet, traveled throughout the country looking for an artist community to live in.

"It was the reception I received for those I met here that made this my choice."

Gage, like several of the others, purchased a home.

Artists from as near as Philadelphia and as far as California are taking advantage of Oil

relocate. My husband and I have lived all over the world so we are always willing to try something new."

### **Community collaboration**

ARTS Oil City's steady growth builds on the successes of the long-established Oil City Arts Council and on community collaboration. Formally recognized as the Oil City Arts and Culture Commission in 2010, the Arts Council offers a full calendar of festivals and musical events, two non-profit art galleries, and art classes through the Oil Valley Center for the Arts.

ARTS Oil City also promotes arts-related downtown business development. To that end, coordinator Joann Wheeler is a member of the North Side Business Association, works



*Oil Painter Shon Gaworski*



*Illustrator John Manders*



*Jewelry Artist Swantje-Elke*

City's low real estate prices and commitment to the arts. A move to a rural area from a big city can offer both a change of pace and a way for an artist to lower overhead, and when an active arts community is already part of the mix, it becomes doubly attractive. People relocating here are looking to keep their costs down but still live in an attractive home in a friendly community with like-minded, creative people.

John Manders is a children's book illustrator. Formerly from Pittsburgh, John and his wife, Lisa, were attracted by the affordable studio space and the opportunity to live with fewer restrictions.

"There is actually more privacy here and a rural setting allows us more freedom than living in the city."

Swantje- Elke creates one of a kind jewelry pieces from wire and stone beads.

"I read the advertisement for Arts Oil City in a magazine and left it open on the desk of my Los Angeles office for a full year," she said. "After talking with Joann Wheeler, we planned a visit and after two more made the decision to

close with Take Pride in Oil City, and has served on the Main Street promotions committee. Oil City's Main Street effort has a role for ARTS Oil City artists, with a focus on design, promotions and involvement of fledgling arts-based businesses.

Finally, ARTS Oil City is engaged in a lively collaboration with the Oil City Area School District via regular youth art exhibits in the Transit Annex.

Oil City continues to face its challenges, perhaps the most pressing being additional vacant buildings. There are several opportunities for development and with a community that offers a rich cultural and recreational setting, affordable housing and close proximity to several of the country's most vibrant metropolitan area, Oil City should be a consideration for any business looking to establish or relocate. ♦

■ **Joann Wheeler** is coordinator for ARTS Oil City. For more information, visit [www.artsoilcity.com](http://www.artsoilcity.com) or call ARTS Oil City at 814 676-5303.