



GRIFFIN



MARIONNETTES FIRE SURVIVOR OFFERS A VISION TO INSPIRE YOUNG ARTISTS

BY ABBY WOJCIK

Two years have passed since the deadly fire on Jan. 20, 2023 that burned the beloved CWE puppet theater Kramer’s Marionettes on 4143 Laclede Ave. This neighborhood treasure and internationally known cultural institution, owned by partners Dug Felch and Bob Kramer, was the oldest running on-site puppetry theater in the country.

Tragically, Bob Kramer, 77, died in the fire. Felch was rescued by firefighters and taken to the hospital where he was unconscious for five days.

After losing everything, Felch is moving forward in life with the help, support and love of those around him who encourage him to keep going.

“So, I’m working on that in my ‘new life,’” Felch said. “You know, I haven’t lived alone in 50 years, so that’s an experience. It’s been two years of wonderful healing with friends around me.”

Felch and his loved ones know the magic of Kramer’s Marionettes and all that was lost can never truly be replaced; nonetheless, there is continuing effort to preserve the memory of Kramer and the rich history of the Marionettes, as well as a strong hope for the future ahead.

The cause of the fire remains undetermined. There were theories of electric issues or possible random arson that started in the back coach house. Because the building was deemed unsafe, it was demolished

before anything that possibly have survived the fire could be retrieved. A collection of over a thousand handcrafted master puppets — adored, irreplaceable works of art that were brought to life on stage — are also being grieved.

“The thing is, it’s silly to say they’re like our children, but they are. You create them,” Felch said.

Felch’s good friends, the Kessler family, helped rescue about 120 puppets and marionettes, and there are more damaged ones in storage. Natalie Kessler personally dug through the rubble in the winter looking for anything to recover after the demolition, and she’s doing what she can to repair the puppets by hand.

“It’s going to take a long time, but as I restore, they get to perform with them again,” Kessler said.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF NATALIE KESSLER

One of Dug Felch’s favorite photos of him with his late partner Bob Kramer (right).

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RENOVATION OF GOODWILL BUILDING IS UNDERWAY

BY JEFF FISTER

The \$95 million renovation of the Goodwill Building at 4140 Forest Park Parkway received a boost last month when Mayor Tishaura Jones signed a bill providing incentives for the project. Washington University plans to transform it into office and lab space in the Cortex innovation district.

These incentives include up to \$4 million in tax increment financ-

ing and a sales and use tax exemption on construction materials, as well as a 10-year, 70% personal property tax abatement on project equipment.

Washington University bought the property in 2019 from MERS Goodwill Industries for \$5.6 million. Plans include renovation of the seven-story structure and a new 54,000-square-foot addition for a total of 175,000 square feet. Cortex has said the incentives are important to landing a commitment from an anchor tenant, St. Louis-based C2N Diagnostics, that could occupy nearly half of the building and add 170 jobs.

C2N Diagnostics needs to expand and currently has a smaller space at another Cortex location. C2N provides blood tests that can detect how well a drug for Alzheimers disease is working. The company was started by two Washington University doctors.

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ALBION WEST END STILL ON TRACK

BY ABBY WOJCIK

The Albion West End, a 30-story luxury residential tower planned by Koplal Properties and Albion Residential at the corner of Lindell and Kingshighway, is finally moving forward. Initially announced in February 2022, the City’s Land Clearance for Redevelopment Authority officially designated the Koplal-Albion development team as the developer of the property on Jan 28, 2025.

“Albion Residential, alongside our partner Koplal Properties, has worked diligently on advancing our Albion West End project over the past several years,” said Andrew Yule, Albion’s vice president of development, in a statement. “As with the whole of the real estate industry, we have navigated headwinds that include increasing costs and high interest rates. In partnership with

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MARIONNETTES *from Page 1*

A longtime dream of Felch and Kramer was to open a puppetry arts and education center to provide workshops and hands-on experience in the theater arts for the next generation. Felch now focuses his time toward making this a reality with help from the Kesslers. They're exploring connections and building interest in order to find an ideal location and raise funds.

"The idea of the center is, you're going to learn about puppets, but the center is not to create a whole raft of wonderful puppeteers," Felch

said, "which would be nice, but it's to open the children up to a creativity, their own imagination, and that they have made something."

Meanwhile, Greg Kessler is writing a book about Bob Kramer's life and career. He hopes to publish this summer to include as many photos and stories as possible.

Felch also continues performing with his intern Sylvie Kessler, daughter of Natalie and Greg. Felch assisted with Sylvie's senior thesis at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville, where she built her own puppets and performed a show. It's been restorative for everyone to create and perform again, Felch and the Kesslers said.

"This is what we hope to do with the center, is for the younger [people] to find a passion," Felch said.

Felch dreams of the vacant Orpheum Theater on North Ninth Street as a perfect location for the proposed puppet center, as it's not being used and it's where Felch and Kramer originally met. When it was known as the American Theater, Felch was touring with the show *Pinocchio* and he remembers being introduced to Kramer for the first time.

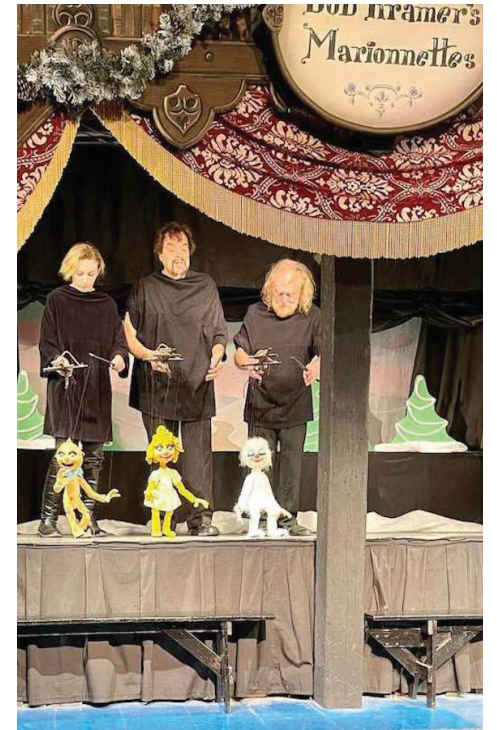
The historic downtown theater was acquired by Jubilee World Inc. at the end of 2016 with plans to finish final

restorations; however, a date to reopen has not been announced.

For now, the first priority is Felch's health and finding ways of bringing joy back into everyday life through performing when possible, working toward the goal of a puppetry arts and education center, and being surrounded by the comfort of friends and loved ones.

A Go Fund Me account organized by Harold Karabell and Brian Combs on behalf of Felch has reached 75% of its goal with over 800 donations.

"We just loved what we were doing," Felch recalled. "It was never a job, it was a calling and making people happy. Bob was like the heart and soul of Kramer's Marionettes, and I was the voice."



Sylvie Kessler, Dug Felch (center) and Bob Kramer performing together at Kramer's Marionettes.



Sylvie Kessler and Dug Felch on stage together.

KITTLAUS *from Page 6*

downtown, reach sporting and cultural events in minutes, walk to Grand Center, Union Station, Harris Stowe University and St. Louis University, and reach Interstate 64 a few blocks away.

Kittlaus, who laughingly calls herself "the Mini-Mayor of Midtown," is determined to improve the area by raising awareness. She meets with business owners regularly and applies for any grants that will benefit the area. "We unfortunately didn't get an American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) grant for lighting and way finding, but through the East-West Gateway, we received a Great Streets Planning Project that will look at connections across Olive from the soccer stadium north into City Commons."

"I'm all about pulling the city together," said Kittlaus. To that end, she's developed relationships with the Downtown Community Improvement District and Downtown Neighborhood Association, Grand Center Inc, Greater St. Louis

Inc., CITY SC, Covenant Blu Grand Center, the CWE's Kate Haheer, Samantha Smugula in the East Loop, and Park Central's Abdul Abdullah, among others. She's asking what's going on in other neighborhoods, and what resources the LBD might tap into.

With all the things Kittlaus has done in her career, she says that her current role as executive director of the Locust Central Business District blends all those pieces together beautifully.

CROSSWORD SOLUTION

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Lerner and Loewe
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