

local news

The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center Hits 5th Anniversary

By KRISTEN FIORE
Daily Sun Senior Writer

The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center has put itself on the map as a premiere entertainment venue in Central Florida. During its brief history, The Sharon has hosted concerts by the likes of Tony Bennett, KC and the Sunshine Band, and The Beach Boys, in addition to touring Broadway musicals.

This month marks five years since the opening of The Sharon, and staff and patrons are reflecting on the venue's journey to success.

Whitney Morse, who moved back to The Villages from Chicago to take on the role of artistic director at the center, compared the opening of The Sharon to having a new baby.

"We spent months putting everything together, arranging artists, lining up the appropriate staff, and putting together the opening gala," Morse said. "Once I had zipped up that gown and headed to the actual performance, it felt like we had gone through quite a trial together, but now we had something beautiful and uniquely ours."

On April 30, 2015, patrons filled the lobby of The Sharon dressed in gowns and tuxedos for the facility's opening gala headlined by Patti LaBelle.

While the event went seamlessly, putting it all together was a lot of work. As was establishing a reputation amongst entertainment power brokers.

In January 2015, The Sharon's booking coordinator, Elizabeth Constant, went to a booking conference in New York to speak to agents.

"At that time, The Sharon did not have a website, we had no business cards, nothing," Constant said.

Constant and her husband, Kenny, who is the technical director, were the first to join The Sharon's team alongside Morse and operations manager Jason Goedken.

"Jason and I went from booth to booth hoping artist's agents would take us seriously and sell us shows," Constant said. "One agent literally closed her binder during a meeting with us when we told her we didn't have the venue built yet."

But it came together. The staff grew from four to 10 to 30 and booking shows became a lot easier.

"Now agents call us," Constant said. "I don't have to go agent to agent asking for someone to perform like we did that first summer. Our location is really ideal for large touring artists."

Another important figure in the early days was the late Oscar Feliu.

"He was such an integral part of opening The Sharon because he ran Church on the Square," Constant said. "He taught us everything we needed to know about the building, and he taught me what I needed to know about working and living in The Villages. His memory still lives on there today."

Promoters Fernando Varela of Victory Productions and Joe Bamford of Get Off the Bus Concerts have also been integral in bringing shows to The Sharon, Constant added.

All proceeds from Bamford's concerts are donated to charity, and Varela has helped staff at The Sharon connect with and bring in top level artists.

"My goal is to continue to bring the highest level of art we can host without breaking the bank or patron's dollar, but still exceed expectations," Constant said.

And so far, The Sharon has done just that.

Steve Bova, of the Village of Hillsborough, attends shows frequently at The Sharon and is amazed by the top notch entertainment that the venue has brought into The Villages.

"It's a first class facility," Bova said. "The seating and the acoustics are absolutely outstanding. To have that kind of entertainment opportunity in our community is just fabulous."

The presence of the venue in Spanish Springs also boosts local surrounding businesses.

"I have to say that it has really helped the merchants of Spanish Springs, because they come in early to see a show and we have more people wandering around the square," said Candy Coldwell, owner of The Kings Gallery and secretary-treasurer of the Spanish Springs Merchants Association.

"It has been a great help, and the shows that they've been putting on - well, all of us want to go!"

Morse said it feels like the venue opened just last week and a lifetime ago at the same time.

"We have learned so much

since then," she said. "So much about what our patrons are looking for, about how to best coordinate productions and how to build good relationships in the business."

There's a sense of pride for everyone who helped make

it happen.

"I feel like we hit the ground running and gathered a lot of really great titles in just five years," Constant said. "I can't wait to continue to curate impressive line ups with Whitney and Jason to host for the town."

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Cindy Skop
Daily Sun



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