

tasweekend

JUNE 22-23, 2019  MERCURY

NEW HUB IN AN OLD FRAME

A 170-YEAR-OLD SITE IS POISED
TO BECOME THE STATE'S MOST
EXCITING ARTS PROJECT

FOOD ALL THE RIGHT SIGNALS TRAVEL POWER COUPLE'S KOALA HAVEN ART A CRUSHING OBSESSION



Picture: NIKKI DAVIS-JONES

Community artists have their sights set on opening up a rare and unique creative hub — and say it will be a game-changer for their region

WORDS TRACY RENKIN
MAIN PORTRAIT EDDIE SAFARIK

You don't have to stroll very far in the Derwent Valley before you bump into someone creative. Just ask Mt Lloyd artist Alexander Okenyo, who was lured to the area 15 years ago by its natural beauty. Late last year Okenyo opened up a New Norfolk cafe with his family, just down the road from the Drill Hall Emporium in Stephen St. "I'm meeting creative people every day," Okenyo says. "There are so many artists out here — painters, poets, writers, actors, authors, dancers and musicians — some that have been here for a long time and some that are new to the area, and many of them unaware they are surrounded by other artists."

The Derwent Valley is now so full of creatives that Okenyo laughs how he can't even get a haircut without discovering a fellow artist. He tells *TasWeekend* about the time last year when he sat down in his local barber's chair and got chatting to the assistant Yue Basser, who had recently moved to New Norfolk from Xinjiang province in China.

"Turns out she's amazing with oil paints," Okenyo says. "She's an extraordinary oil painter just doing her thing in the barber — clip, clip, clip — but her art is just incredible."

Okenyo paints every evening in his home studio. From June 28, his paintings will be exhibited for the third time by Bett Gallery in central Hobart. Okenyo is just as fired up, however, about helping up-and-coming artists who can't afford to exhibit in Hobart's premium art spaces.

At the latter, even established artists can often wait more than a year for exhibition space. Up-and-coming artists often struggle to get their foot in the door.

Okenyo is on the board of a group that formed last September called Derwent Valley Arts. The group already boasts 400 members. Its goal — to unlock the potential in some of the many dusty and derelict buildings in New Norfolk to create permanent spaces for creatives.

The hope is the outcome will be a new artistic hub that will help build the cultural activity of the area.

It's a goal that took a big step forward late this week. On Thursday the Derwent Valley Council approved a joint proposal from Derwent Valley Arts and their collaboration partners the Salamanca Arts Centre to lease two buildings.

The first is the iconic Barracks building, the original mental

asylum and hospital at Willow Court that dates back to the 1820s. The second is the eight-bedroom Frascati House nearby. The buildings are neighbours of both Rodney Dunn's popular Agrarian Kitchen and the site of the recently approved rum distillery in the heritage-listed Alannah House.

Now the lease is approved, the next step for the group will be about exploring how the available spaces can best be used for community, arts and cultural activities.

There is already a renovated wing in the Barracks building, so some artists could move straight in, but the rest of the building still needs a lot of work. Some rooms in the Barracks building don't even have a floor any more. Frascati House is also in need of a lot of TLC. The thinking there is to focus first on doing up just some of the rooms so they can be used to accommodate travelling artists.

Derwent Valley Mayor Ben Shaw says the council's decision will finally allow the potential of the Willow Court site to be realised. "The Barracks building is one of the most significant buildings in the state," Shaw says. "It is older than the Port Ar-

thur buildings." He says the approvals of the rum distillery and the arts group plans have been the most significant decisions since council took over the Willow Court complex 19 years ago.

"This is so exciting," he says. "This is a fantastic thing for our community and a great win for this historical site. I can't wipe the smile off my face. Having the proposal passed through council is the first step. It's saying: 'yes, we want them to take over the buildings as an in-principal agreement and we'll work out all the details later'."

The job of helping the Derwent Valley Arts group through the logistics of converting the historic buildings, that have sat empty for decades, into contemporary arts spaces has fallen to the chairwoman and the head of the Salamanca Arts Centre, Margaret Reynolds and Joe Bugden.

The two groups have signed a memorandum of understanding, under which the Salamanca Arts Centre has agreed to provide its expertise and administrative support.

Bugden says he instantly understood the benefits of the Derwent Valley Arts vision when he was first approached by its chair

Derwent Valley dreaming



Left to right: Alexander Okenyo; Derwent Valley Mayor Ben Shaw inside one of the renovated buildings at Willow Court; and Salamanca Arts Centre CEO Joe Bugden.

and co-founder Nathan Males last year. It reminded him, Bugden says, of the transformation 45 years ago of the seven Salamanca warehouses that were dilapidated and derelict buildings when they were rescued from demolition by a group of passionate artists.

Their hard work breathed new life into the now iconic sandstone buildings that today host a thriving mix of commercial businesses, art galleries and office space.

"I thought it had a lot of merit, and certainly a lot of challenges," Bugden told *TasWeekend* in an interview at the Salamanca Arts Centre's top-floor offices that are crowned by the original exposed convict-laid beams.

"I did think back and try to imagine those people in the mid-'70s who were faced with a similar opportunity here — and I can imagine it required a great deal of courage, a great deal of vision, and a great deal of determination to metaphorically and perhaps literally crash through some of those barriers."

Bugden says the unused buildings at Willow Court provide a similar opportunity. "Those buildings have been around for 170

years," he says. "And buildings do have a life beyond a human life. They might have had a previous purpose and a previous life, but what is important to me is to imagine in decades to come generations of local people and visitors to the Willow Court site who are enjoying those buildings in a new way."

Prior to serving as a Labor Party Senator in Queensland, Margaret Reynolds was a special-needs teacher at Willow Court in the 1960s. She remembers having afternoon tea on the verandah of Frascati House with the medical superintendent when it was known as Lachlan Park.

And she says the atmosphere of the space is ideal for creative arts — "because it's an old building and it's obvious that building itself has witnessed many stories".

"When you are in that building telling stories through creative arts in various forms you will feel, well, that this is what the building is meant for," Reynolds says.

Males dreamt up the idea of a community arts hub with his two Derwent Valley Arts co-founders, Okenyo and the respect-

ed local potter Lee Farrell. Males says the idea came about following the artistic resurgence in the Valley — and the resulting need to find a home for artists to practise and showcase their work, to teach others their craft, and to inspire and connect the community through cultural activities.

He says many local artists have been working in their home studios and are sometimes oblivious to the fact there are lots of other artists in the area.

Males describes New Norfolk as a "treasure trove of locked rooms". He says his group has worked closely with both the Friends of Willow Court and the Friends of Frascati House on their plans. They are both keen to create historical displays in both buildings, he says. Their approval and the green light from council for stage one of their project is "beyond exciting".

"There are all of these amazing, derelict spaces and buildings at the Willow Court site," Males says. "The rooms inside the Barracks building will be used as artist studios and offices.

There is a grassed area inside the u-shape of the Barracks building that would be perfect for concerts and sculptures and outdoor concerts and art markets. Frascati House is a big house with lots of bedrooms and a small ballroom that could be used as a small gallery."

Males acknowledges, however, that it will be slow going. He's estimating that around \$1 million will be needed just to finish stage one of the plan. So far, they have zero dollars. But he has a plan to apply for assistance through state community funds, Federal Government regional art programs, and local crowd-funding.

Males says he is also crossing his fingers that some cashed-up benefactor might also come forward to help. And already, he says, Mona has expressed an interest in working with their spaces. "Not everything will happen at once," Males acknowledges. "Stage one will need to be staged out. Some bits are in very poor shape, and some bits are not too bad. The restoration process will be fairly slow going."

The second stage, he says, will be to secure a building that gives them a performance space. And there are two buildings on-site that are suitable. The council-owned Occupational Therapy building, for example, has a cinema screen, a stage and rooms perfect for studios. The privately-owned administration building boasts a ballroom with a stage. ▶



Left to right: Lee Farrell in her pottery shed in New Norfolk; Ben Shaw in front of the buildings at Willow Court; and Chinese artist Yue Basser paints a picture of the Derwent River alongside the river at New Norfolk.

"These buildings are like stepping back in time," Males says. "They are all remarkable and their doors have been locked. The dust has settled but it's time to dust them off now and open the doors again."

Males says the interest from the arts community has been staggering. The State Cinema is already keen to run cinema nights, and ceramists are excited about running workshops. He's keen to see dance classes and singing and music lessons happening in a performance space.

Musically gifted locals such as Susan Reppion-Brooke and husband Roger — formerly the lead bassoonist with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra — have plans for other musical programs for the region. Australian actors like Ben Winspear and his partner Marta Dusseldorp are keen to base their theatre company in the Derwent Valley. And various writers in the valley are keen to start a valley writers' festival.

Males says a performance space could also be used for more contemporary musicians to perform. And he knows what he's talking about. Stroll past the pretty St Mathew's Anglican Church in New Norfolk's Bathurst Street on a Thursday night or Sunday morning and one of the majestic voices that will wash over you belongs to Males. He's part of the 50-strong choir under the tutelage of oratorio soloist Susan Reppion-Brooke that's making quite a name for itself.

Males says when the locals were asked what they wanted for their community in a vision survey last year, overwhelmingly they said they wanted access to more cultural facilities. "So what's amazing is that loads of creative people are coming back into the town," Males says. "And there's this groundswell of creativity."

Males says a cultural arts hub would help New Norfolk reinvent itself. When Willow Court closed in 2000 and the paper mill Boyer cut its staff from 3000 to 300 he says a lot of the cultural infrastructure for the town disappeared.

"This is a really exciting opportunity around changing the perception of the Derwent Valley," Males says. "Over the last 20 years, the perception has been that it is a down-and-out place because it has gone through that hard time where it has had all



of this economic activity disappear. Now it is reinventing itself really fast as a fabulous place to live. If we can get this thing going it could be amazing. It would be such a game changer for the town."

Mayor Ben Shaw agrees. He uses the "game-changer" phrase several times during our short interview and says the plans that Derwent Valley Arts has to create a cultural hub at Willow Court will attract more interest and investment to the site. "What it means," he says, "is the whole space is just activated again."

It's this potential mix of activity of commercial enterprise, arts and culture and community, and other not-for-profit groups in one place that Joe Bugden says increases the likelihood of a



OTTOMAN
♦ E M P I R E ♦

RUG UP FOR WINTER

at the

OTTOMAN EMPIRE

WINTER SALE

All Rugs, cushions & pots **20% off**

SELECTED ITEMS UP TO 50% OFF

SATURDAY JUNE 15TH TO SUNDAY 30TH

WEDNESDAY TO SATURDAY 10AM-5PM
SUNDAY 1PM-5PM

185 CAMPBELL STREET HOBART
03 6289 6946

www.ottomanempire.com.au






Picture: EDDIE SAFARIK

successful outcome. He's predicting the arts centre at Willow Court will be a big tourism drawcard that will also attract artists from all over the world.

"So at Salamanca Arts Centre we have individual artists in studio, we have arts organisations, we have commercial galleries, we have smaller co-ops," Bugden says. "There are a number of different activities that mean we bring diversity of market and audience and community — and they work well and feed off each other in terms of bringing that creativity and light to one complex.

"We would certainly welcome the opportunity to work with our neighbours out there — the Agrarian Kitchen and whoever else might move into that centre."

One group particularly excited about the prospect of securing a local performance space with proper acoustics is the 120-strong Derwent Valley Concert Band. Made up of musicians from seven to 70-year-olds, the group currently rehearses in the New Norfolk Memorial Hall. It's a building it leases off the council but doesn't have sole occupancy of.

What that means is that several times a year all the equipment needs to be packed up so that other community groups can access the building.

That's not the perfect arrangement for a multiple award-winning band, says its musical director Layton Hodgetts. In 25 years the band has grown into a very active and versatile community band organisation with four ensembles and is rated as one of Australia's most highly acclaimed, travelled and successful community bands. "We've had a number of successes," Hodgetts humbly says. "If we could find a more suitable venue for us it would be amazing."

When TasWeekend first spoke with Male's colleague Farrell for this story last summer, she was hot and sweaty after weeding the Agrarian Kitchen on-site vegetable garden all morning. The people inside the eatery were dining off ceramic plates Farrell crafted in her home studio and enjoying vegetables she'd lovingly grown as the restaurant's organic gardener.

She's not interested in building her business — Farrell says she can't keep up with demand as it is — but she's very keen to share her pottery skills with others. And an arts centre would allow her to do that.

Given she's lived in the area for a quarter of a century, Farrell remembers when it used to be difficult to get artistic ventures up-and-running in town, but she says there are so many opportunities for art-based activities to thrive now.

She's seen the repeated destruction left behind by Willow Court vandals and says the Agrarian Kitchen is proof that all that stops when empty buildings like the beautiful Bronte building are opened up again and brought back to life.

"I'm watching the people now as they leave the Agrarian Kitchen and they wander around the Barracks," Farrell says. "If there was an arts centre here then they would be in there poking around and buying things in there too, because art in all its forms is what humans need and crave.

"Putting an arts centre in Willow Court would bring it back to life. It would put colour and movement and sound back into the buildings — and that's what art is all about."

Rodney Dunn says an arts centre at Willow Court would "go hand-in-hand" with his high-end eatery. "It would be a beautiful synergy and I think we would attract the kind of customers who



Picture: EDDIE SAFARIK

would have an interest in the arts and vice versa." Cr Shaw says the opportunities such as a hub could instigate are exciting. "We have some brilliant, artistic people in our community. But sometimes we only see them every now and then, so this may bring them out and get them more involved in the community. Who knows who we will uncover?"

There could, for example, be others like the hairdresser's assistant-cum accomplished artist Yue Basser. Chinese-born, she has been perfecting her incredible, detailed oil painting skills for the past 16 years — the last two in the Derwent Valley. Her dream is to create meaningful paintings people will commission her to make.

"Painting makes me very happy," Basser told *Tasweekend*. "But it's not very easy for me to know where the other artists are." She says the village in rural China where she grew up resembled a war zone with large military tanks in the dusty streets and military officials creating an oppressive and fearful environment.

So, as soon as she could, Basser escaped first to Beijing with "all the other creatives". But she says, in comparison, living and painting in New Norfolk feels like she's landed in heaven — and that has unlocked her creativity even more. "If I cannot paint," Basser says. "I feel like I cannot live."

Okenyo agrees. He says his paintings allow him to reflect on his experiences of being alive. "Practising art is learning to think," he says. "I think all art is storytelling. If you are an artist, then you are a story teller. It's always the artists that find the old warehouse or buildings. Historically it is the artists who have taken up old spaces and made them popular again. It's a brilliant thing that creativity does in society. It makes a place interesting and brings a community together."

The next exhibition to be held at Willow Court will showcase ceramics, which were made at the Derwent Valley Autumn Festival. Little Things will open at 2pm on Sunday, June 30, at The Barracks, Willow Court, The Avenue, New Norfolk