

Couple envisions Foundry project as an art, cultural hub



Jesse Matulis and Lynne Allard are shown in the living room of their home in Cohoes on Thursday.

COHOES — Lynne Allard and Jesse Matulis did a lot of brainstorming before picking a name for the arts and cultural center they're creating in downtown Cohoes.

The name they came up with — The Foundry for Art Design + Culture — speaks to their vision for the building they're renovating.

"Work is going to be made here," Matulis said. "The Foundry — it's where the work gets done."

When it opens, The Foundry for Art Design + Culture will be an arts center where local artists and residents can meet, show their artwork and offer classes and performances.

When Allard and Matulis purchased the building where The Foundry is based for \$121,000 in 2005, it was with the goal of providing an eclectic mix.

Allard said that ideally people in the community will bring their ideas for events to The Foundry and help shape the organization's calendar and mission.

"You tell us what you want," she said. "If you want to talk about fishing, we'll talk about that. If you want to teach people about how to use social media to engage the community, we'll talk about that. We're focused on culture in the broadest sense of the term." Too many people, she said, think of art as something you "collect and put on a wall, that you control and isolate."

Earlier this month the Foundry received a \$50,000 grant from the Pepsi Refresh Project, which invited individuals and organizations to apply for funding for projects that would "make a positive impact on communities."

The Pepsi Refresh grants were awarded on the basis of online votes from friends and supporters; Allard and Matulis rallied voters using word of mouth, a phone tree and online tools such as Facebook. Unlike the grants The Foundry has received in the past, the Pepsi Refresh award can be used for purposes other than restoring the building, such as purchasing equipment.

The Cohoes couple have been renovating The Foundry on and off for years and are hoping that the Pepsi Refresh money will enable to finish the project by the end of the summer.

The Foundry is at 119 Remsen St. in the heart of what the city envisions as an arts and entertainment district. It is across the street from Bread and Jam Cafe, a local hotspot for coffee, food and live music, and down the street from Harmony House Marketplace, which features a bake shop and wine store.

The building was originally built as a bank in 1931. After 10 years, the bank moved and the building became a jewelry store that operated for 60 years. When Allard and Matulis purchased the building it was an eyeglass store. "The whole place was a wreck," Allard recalled. "There was a lot of damage. The floors were covered with tile and glue."

Cohoes Mayor John McDonald said the city is very supportive of The Foundry. "The concept is very appealing to us," he said. "We're trying to create an arts district downtown. That building was begging for a proper steward, which [Jesse and Lynne] are."

"Arts in the downtown is a critical component for downtown revitalization," McDonald said.

Allard and Matulis, who are engaged, live on The Foundry's second floor in a large, airy one-bedroom apartment they built themselves. The first floor and basement will provide about 3,600 square feet of exhibition and event space, although certain types of events, they said, could filter into their living quarters. The goal is to have state-of-the-art facilities for activities such as video editing and woodworking.

Allard, 41, and Matulis, 34, met in 2003 when Matulis was running the now-defunct art gallery La Boheme in Troy. They had

both attended art school and were interested in finding a place where they could live and work on their art. Someone told them about the live-work studios at Harmony Mills in Cohoes and they decided to rent there. They soon discovered that they really liked Cohoes.

“I loved the feel of downtown,” Allard said.

“We felt like we could make something happen,” Matulis said. “We felt like this was where we needed to be.”

Allard and Matulis both have other jobs, though Matulis, who normally does public sculpture and video production projects, is devoting most of his time to the rehab of the Foundry. Allard works for the marketing group Oberlander, in Cohoes.

They said that one of their goals is to demystify art. People think living and working as an artist “is an urban myth,” Allard said. “But we are a viable part of the community.”