



Centrum celebrated its' golden anniversary at Fort Worden's McCurdy Pavilion on July 10 with the help of Canadian jazz pianist and 1984 Centrum alumni Diana Krall, John Clayton, Jeff Hamilton, and Anthony Wilson. When Krall applied for a scholarship to attend Jazz Port Townsend in 1984, she was 19 years old and had recently left the Berklee College of Music in Boston. Since attending Centrum, Krall has sold over 15 million albums, including nine gold, three platinum and seven multiplatinum. Centrum raised nearly \$300K for scholarships during their evening concert and gala. *Leader photo by Lloyd Mullen*

**BY KATHIE MEYER  
FOR THE LEADER**

It seems an unlikely story now when looked at through today's post-millennial lens. Most of us can't imagine the way federal money flowed into the arts after the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was created in 1965. Even Richard Nixon saw value in funding art.

On the state level, Washington had a progressive Republican governor named Dan Evans (1965-1977). He believed troubled kids should not be institutionalized so he closed down the Juvenile Diagnostic Treatment Center at Fort Worden. Then he turned around and asked the legislature to fund a state arts center in the same location, an arts center that came to be known as Centrum.

To get there, three different state agencies – the Parks Commission, Arts Commission, and Washington's Superintendent of Public Instruction – worked together to make it happen, a feat Joe Wheeler, Centrum's first executive director, later called "an all-time miracle." Those agencies also collaborated with local leaders who typically and understandably had their own opinions about the direction of art and culture in Port Townsend. Wheeler, initially hired as a consultant, would lead Centrum for 23 years from 1973 to 1996.

Gov. Evans was pleased to do something he later told Wheeler was "fun," Wheeler said in an oral history interview conducted by the late Peter Simpson for the Jefferson County Historical Society in 1997. When Centrum board member Ancil Payne, the former CEO of KING Broadcasting Company, invited Evans to attend the McCurdy Pavilion dedication in 1991, Evans asked, "Is Joe Wheeler still there?"

Payne replied that, yes, Wheeler was still in charge, to which Evans then confided, "you know, I've watched that program, and the truth is that I never truly thought it would succeed."

This year, Centrum turns 50.

**THE POWER OF CONNECTION**

With him, Wheeler brought Donn Trethewey and Bill Ransom to help develop programs.

"The three of us were on the ground first: Joe, Donn and I," Ransom said. "Joe designed music programs; Donn, visual arts (incorporating the Summer School of the Arts in a rescue move); and I did writing and kids' programs.

"I've asked Trethewey whether he thought this would go for 50 years, and we thought the same:

***"Who's the kid with the great chops?"***

**ROY CUMMINGS  
JAZZ INSTRUCTOR**

Neither of us thought about longevity at all. We were scrambling to think as far as making next year happen, much less a decade or two or five.

"He and I were talking about that recently and concluded: We designed what we thought was a perfect venue for faculty and participants, covering multiple aspects of the arts. What would we want to teach in and what would we attend were the key questions we asked each other at the start. We must've had some right answers.

"I think this answers your 'longevity' question. Good ideas presented at great risk that happened to work and keep working."

Peter McCracken has been program manager off and on again for Fiddle Tunes, among other programs, since 1987. As Centrum's most senior employee, he's moved up over the years to be the go-to guy on staff who can speak about Centrum's early years. He believes Centrum's longevity is because art has the power of connection.

"It's because what we're doing is totally valid," he said. "To witness life-changing experiences every year,

I'm so grateful. The concept of bringing aspiring artists together with tradition bearers is so precious."

Jazz vocalist and pianist Diana Krall, who appeared July 10 as the premier benefit concert for Centrum's 50th anniversary, knows about this power of connection firsthand. Centrum is where she met drummer Jeff Hamilton when she was a 19-year-old fresh from Boston's Berklee School of Music in the early 1980s.

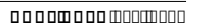
Between Hamilton and the legendary bass player, Ray Brown, Krall began to believe in herself and her talent. After attending Jazz Port Townsend, Krall wrote a letter to former Port Townsend mayor Barney McClure, who managed Jazz Port Townsend at the time, and is an accomplished jazz pianist as well.

"I wish to thank you for all your help and encouragement in P-Town. The clinic was absolutely wonderful and I was very fortunate to be able to spend a week with such incredible players...To think a couple of months ago, I was ready to consider doing something else," she wrote.

Wheeler spoke of that same kind of connective potency in his interview as he recalled "this really skinny kid with a lot of really curly hair standing there jamming." Wheeler turned to Roy Cummings, a University of Washington (UW) jazz instructor, and said, "Who is the kid with the great chops?"

"That's Ken Gorelick," Cummings told Wheeler, "He's an accounting major, but he's a great saxophone player." Cummings had asked the kid to join the big band being formed for the first jazz festival. The performance setting was the now infamous used circus tent used in Centrum's earlier years.

Gorelick, of course, went on to become Kenny G, famous saxophonist. Like Krall, he returned to Fort Worden to play fund-raiser concerts for Centrum at the height of his career.



# The next 50 years

**AMBITION.**

That's what set Rob Birman's vision for Centrum apart from the other 139 candidates vying for the job in 2013.

"I had run symphony orchestras all over the country and I have learned that the way to raise money is to have ambition," he said.

That's how, he said, he sold the Centrum Board of Directors on his leadership, at a time when the world was just beginning to recover from the Great Recession.

And in his wake there's an undeniable trail of success.

"I would say the thing that's most different since then is the ambition of the organization. At the time I arrived, the organization was a little bit timid."

Birman wasn't. He and his wife were living in Louisville at the time but his mother-in-law lived in Port Ludlow

so he knew the area well and he was determined to land the job.

Since that time, programs old and new have flourished, one for which he claims no credit.

"We started the Ukulele Festival in 2013 and we did not spend a penny of advertising on it. Yet it was just wildly successful and continues to be so to this day."

He said he believes the success of that festival has something to do with the instrument's versatility.

"You can play Flamenco, rock and roll, folk music, the instrument is amazing that way."

More than a dozen organizations have been created during his tenure and he credits the institution for those programs.

"I don't believe in magic wands," he said "there have been other, high



**Jazz faculty member Matt Wilson with Centrum Executive Director Rob Birman at Jazz Port Townsend. Photo by Jim Levitt**

profile non-profits like, The Race to Alaska, and in the aftermath of their success some people said 'what is

Centrum going to do?"



He told Wheeler that an opportunity to play in a band led by Lew Tabackin, also a saxophonist, and Toshiko Akiyoshi, and to getting to know some of the players in the band, gave him the chance to see how he stacked up to very established players.

### THE POWER TO SHOCK

In the beginning, McCracken noted, hosting arts education workshops rather than merely producing performances was not as common as it is now. Residencies were not common either, usually for lack of living space, but Wheeler saw past the knee-high grass between the future Centrum building and the Commons, and all of the other abandoned buildings in disrepair. Since then, the grounds have cleaned up nicely, and the buildings shelter 50 to 70 artists and writers, working at their mediums and genres, per year in Centrum's residency programs.

One of the most notable residencies in Centrum's history may have been artist Michael Spafford, who personally, if not intentionally, experienced art's power to shock over the course of his career as a visual artist. For Spafford's residency, Joe Wheeler himself reached out with an invitation after Spafford's painted murals, "The Twelve Labors of Hercules," caused a statewide uproar. The murals were covered up with plywood only a few weeks after installation on the walls of the state House of Representatives' chambers in the Capitol Building in Olympia in 1981. Someone had complained they were "sexually suggestive."

When the murals were taken down altogether, Spafford, a UW professor of drawing and painting, and a Harvard-educated classical mythology scholar, was deeply hurt and wanted them destroyed. In 1987, Joe decided to put Centrum's print studio to good use and invited Spafford, who had become incredibly weary of the issue, to hop over the bridge and head down that long country road, far and away from the rest of the world, for a much-needed residency, to do a series of the images.

"You can revise the images however you want to, but do this because we ought to save those images somehow," Wheeler told Spafford. The result was a small run of 30 woodblock prints with a few artist's proofs. One set of images was the first piece of art acquired for the Microsoft Art Collection.

The original murals were eventually installed at Centralia College in 2002 following a long, acrimonious legal battle. Spafford lived out the rest of his life as a highly respected and lauded Northwest artist until his death in 2022, and any retrospective of his work is incomplete without these prints made at Joe Wheeler's request.

"I think it's wonderful that they weren't lost. They are powerful images," said Wheeler.



### THE POWER OF DEPTH

Linda Okazaki, a local visual artist, has enjoyed two Centrum residencies to produce her art. She's also participated in several workshops in blues, gospel choir, and jazz ever since she moved to Port Townsend in 1980. She's not sure, maybe she's missed one, but otherwise she's been to every jazz festival since she's lived here. Sometimes, in order to afford workshop tuition, she'd create the poster or T-shirt designs as a work trade.

It isn't that she's such a great musician, she said. She's not. Her forte is visual art, and her vita shows a lengthy, productive career. A student of renowned Northwest painter Gaylen Hansen while getting her Masters of Fine Art (MFA) at Washington State University in the 1970s, she'll open the first retrospective of her career at the Bainbridge Island Museum of Art on the first Friday this October.

She'll never make a career out of music, but the workshops and performances draw her back, year after year. "I enjoy learning so much. It's a gold mine of opportunity," she said. Okazaki has records of her presence in the audience at every faculty concert she has attended. "I have many, many sketchbooks of drawings of the faculty during the faculty concerts," she said. She writes their name and the song they're playing on the page as well.

"For some reason when I'm drawing, I seem to hear the music with greater depth," Okazaki said. "I think it sort of opens up my concentration level." That, she agrees, must be a kind of power she gains from making her art.



### THE POWER OF MINDFULNESS

This year, Linda Okazaki's own son, guitarist Miles Okazaki, came home from the East Coast to teach at Centrum's jazz festival. It's his second time on the faculty roster, but the first time was during the pandemic, so this was Miles' first time as a faculty member with students in-person, on campus.

It is not, of course, Miles' first time on Centrum's campus.

Miles grew up in a neighborhood right on the edge of Fort Worden. He was six when his mom moved him from Pullman to Port Townsend in 1980, and by the summer after 7th grade, he worked his way into the jazz workshop even though he wasn't really old enough.

"I think you had to be 14, and I was 13. I think it was Joe Wheeler, somebody let me in," said Miles. It really could have been any one, maybe Peter McCracken, since Miles counts him as an old family friend.

"I guess it determined my whole direction in life. The most interesting thing in town was whatever was happening at Centrum," he said. His generation was likely the last group of kids growing up and going through school K-12 without the internet the entire time. For a couple of years, when they first moved to the Olympic Peninsula, the Hood Canal Bridge was still out. Going to Seattle even after the bridge reopened was a rarity. Naturally, feeling a bit isolated, Okazaki was curious about the goings on at Fort Worden.

"I could barely play [the first year], and I got put in with [jazz pianist] Hal Galper," Okazaki said. Galper asked Miles what he wanted to play, and Miles said, "All Blues" by Miles Davis.

Okazaki played, and when he got to the solo, he channeled Davis. Galper stopped him and asked why he was playing it like that. Okazaki said because that was the way Davis played it. Galper explained to Okazaki that it was his time to use his own talent and improvise, not copy someone on a record.

Up until that "aha" moment, at 13, Okazaki had the idea that all music was somehow predestined.

"I thought everything was planned. That was pretty cool," he said, reflecting on how Galper opened him up to improvisation and the delightful spontaneity of jazz.

Miles went back for a total of five summers. He mentioned Emily Remler, John Stowell, and local music teacher Chuck Easton as "formative teachers." He said he'll never forget George Cables, who taught Diana Krall at Centrum, playing "Over the Rainbow." Easton and Cables are still a part of the jazz faculty.

"By the time I finished high school, I knew I wanted to be a jazz musician," Miles said. The musical superpower he draws from his art is mindfulness, but it's even more than that, he explained.

"It's sort of like when you're in a dream, and you're not really aware of the passage of time. You're not really thinking about the things that are annoying in life. At the same time, it's also fun - to perceive and react to the exact moment that you are living."

In 2018, Miles received critical acclaim for his six-album recording of the complete compositions of Thelonious Monk for solo guitar. It was an unprecedented project that critic Nate Chinen called "the six-string equivalent of a free solo climb up El Capitan." That same year, Okazaki was voted Number One rising star guitarist in Downbeat Magazine critic's poll.

Today, Miles teaches at Princeton. He is exactly what he said he would be, and when he shows up this summer to teach at Centrum, his mom is going to be the woman who beams brightest as she draws his image in her sketchbook when he's on stage for the faculty concert.

### THE POWER OF CLARITY

One finds generational stories like the Okazaki's all over the place during the summers at Centrum. Joel Savoy, Fiddle Tunes artistic director, first attended the festival when he was a three-year-old with his famous Cajun tradition-bearer parents, Ann and Marc Savoy who formed the Savoy Family Cajun

Band.

McCracken's daughter Miriam's band now hails from New Orleans. Both of McCracken's daughters, Miriam and Pilar, help paint the stage backdrop for Fiddle Tunes every year, including this year, with their mother artist Martha Worthley who has also worked for Centrum during her career.

"Mary Hilts' grandson is on crew. And my daughter, Nathalie, ran the box office one summer. I'm sure there's more," said Hali Miller, Centrum's registrar.

But it's really no contest when it comes to Centrum's legacy staff and participants. Officially, Hali has worked for Centrum for the last 15 years as the registrar, but unofficially, she's worked there a lot longer than that.



"She worked at Centrum, licking stamps and filling envelopes at age five-years-old. I don't know anyone who knows the on-the-ground view of Centrum better than she," Ransom said. The aforementioned Bill Ransom, a poet and arts educator, is Hali's dad.

"We moved here for Centrum," she said. After they got settled, Bill's (now ex-) wife, Kathy, worked for The Leader, creating and pasting up ads, Centrum's among them. Hali remembers her mom taking a class from another UW art professor, renowned Seattle painter and sculptor George Tsutakawa (1910-1997), while he enjoyed a Centrum residency.

The last 15 years are a blur of program after program to her; the things that stand out to her most now are from when she was "little." To keep her busy, her dad would set her up to take tickets at performances which she deposited into a cigar box as she sat at the entrance of the circus tent, just like in a Mickey Rooney movie.

Ransom remembers another strategy used for keeping the kids busy.

"Hali and the Wheeler kids ran Maestro Burger [where The Cup is now] after Jackie [Wheeler's first wife] died, and Joe bought it. He told me he thought running the place while they were all in high school would be the best education they could get out of the classroom, and he was right. I think Hali was impressed that they had so little knowledge with so much responsibility. Joe trusted them and was not disappointed, and they all talk today about what they learned about retail business and the public," he said.

"That was my first real job. And I served Jim Zorn and Steve Largent," Hali said. "The logo was the Beethoven bust holding a burger."

Really, there's barely a time when Centrum and all of its art wasn't a part of Hali's life somehow. She's had the opportunity to witness more than most people, and the effect of it, she said, gives her a feeling of clarity.

"[Art] opens your eyes in a different way," she said, "it accesses a different part of your brain that is connected to your heart. I think it's the most human

thing about us.”

Her memories also include Joe Wheeler coming over for dinner. He was generous, smart, and funny, she said. His nickname for her was “Legacy.”

“It’s the best nickname I’ve ever had,” she said.

### THE POWER TO INFLUENCE

Bill Ransom still teaches a class occasionally at the writers’ conference. Presently, he’s working on a collaborative book project for Centrum’s milestone. He calls his draft, “Centrum at 50.”

Ransom really has seen it all, or more than most, for sure. Almost as soon as Centrum was getting on its feet after the “startup scramble,” he said, a 1979 storm sunk a good portion of the Hood Canal Bridge, and it took a couple of years to repair it, and then open back up again in 1982. The Hood Canal Bridge is the best link between the Olympic Peninsula, Port Townsend, and the rest of the world. Otherwise, it’s a longer, windy trip around the canal itself. Or you need a boat.

“Centrum didn’t really change programming,” Ransom said, “but did work with as many transportation options as possible. Volunteers drove people from the airport and [a limo service was started]. The Edmonds ferry came to PT, which helped, except it was a 90-minute ride, and the ferries served alcohol. That dumped lots of drunk drivers onto Port Townsend streets, and I was just [newly] into EMT/firefighter world.

“For the adventuresome, the journey added mystique,” noted Ransom who also said he’s written up “some interesting tales about out-of-area faculty and their creative ways of getting to PT” during that lengthy bridge closure for the book.

But there were positive aspects to the isolation.

“I felt that more locals attended as a percentage of audience as a result of the bridge, and in many ways it was our first bonding with much of the community.

“Port Townsend in general was quite

suspicious of these arts types suddenly invading the town, taking over buildings. It took a while to make a place in the PT community, and I think the bridge going down helped with that,” Ransom reflected.

Just like the other programs, the quality of the writing faculty making the trip was quite remarkable. Artists like Alice Walker, Tom Robbins and Margaret Atwood - how were they lured to this brand-new outfit with a circus tent?

“Most of the notable writers were people whom I knew about because we were published in the same magazines, which helped as introduction when making a pitch. I worked with

Carolyn Forché at the Bread Loaf Writer’s Conference in Vermont the year before we started planning Centrum. Writer friends and their writer friends recommended people. Cold-calling worked sometimes then, more often now because the reputation’s so much bigger,” explained Ransom. “Yes, I invited Alice Walker who was wonderful, gracious, and generally brilliant.

“I got turned down for song writing by Paul Simon, who was teaching at NYU at the time, and by Ursula LeGuin twice because she and her husband always went to Australia when we scheduled conferences. We had a run of old Wobbly [an Industrial

Workers of the World member] writers like Tom McGrath who also found other writers for us and may have been the connection for Kay Boyle.”

Boyle was a member of the Lost Generation writers living in Paris during the 1920s. Later in life, she and her husband, Baron Joseph von Franckenstein, were blacklisted during McCarthyism. They were both cleared in 1957. After losing her job as a foreign correspondent with The New Yorker, her writing became more political in nature.

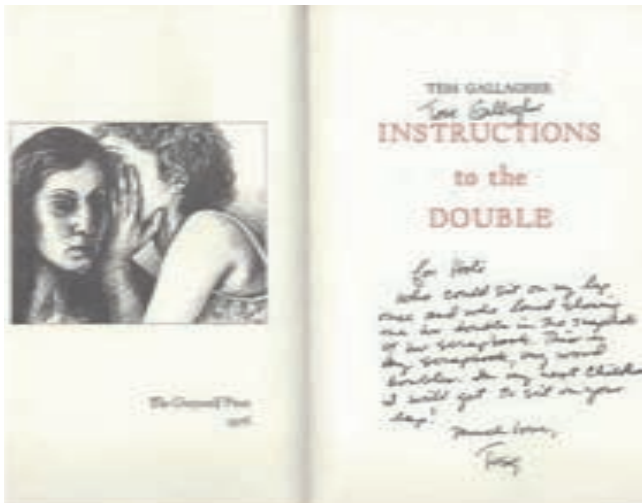
In 1991, Copper Canyon Press, co-founded by Tree Swenson and Sam Hamill, published Collected Poems of Kay Boyle. Hamill and Swenson had a letterpress printer like Centrum had and, in 1974, Wheeler invited them to move from Denver to Fort Worden and become a part of Centrum. They later split off to become the highly lauded non-profit publishing house they are today, also celebrating their 50th anniversary this year in the same small white building in Fort Worden where they’ve always been since the move. Hamill directed Centrum’s writers’ conference for a time.

“Mostly [it was] word of mouth in the first years because we were being extra cautious. We wanted to avoid the drunk poet scene,” Ransom explained.

While he designed the writer’s conference curriculum, Ransom also took great care with the youth programs.

“I’ve always been proudest of that, and I still feel the youth programs are the most important things Centrum does,” Ransom said. “Every youth program involves ‘gifted’ students who get admitted for writing, art, dance, drama etc. But when they get here, they can’t do their one thing. All gifted programs are multi-disciplinary – a writing student who comes in will do writing of course, but also two other arts. The idea is to show what we all learned when older – creativity in one art boosts creativity in another, methods are similar in most of the arts, and seeing how one discipline solves a problem can solve problems in another. Perspective, for example.”

“[Wheeler had] just hired me for Poets in the Schools program in



Tacoma, Olympia, Tumwater, Renton, and Auburn, 'twas a busy year. All year, Trethewey (also hired for Artist in the Schools) and I commuted to all these schools, and in the car we came to the youth programs idea. Why drive to all these schools, sometimes two a day in different towns? Why can't we bring the kids to us, in a controlled setting, kids like us who were the only kids we knew who did what we did – write, visual art, music, dance – sometimes at the peril of our grades in other subjects.

“Donn was instrumental in selling that idea to the [state] arts commission and the Superintendent of Public Instruction, who happened to be a classmate of and divorce lawyer for my mother. He wanted students with straight As to be defined as ‘gifted.’ I made a deal with him for one year to let us choose the kind of student we wanted – students that were often disruptive, that teachers wouldn't miss while they were gone, who were passionate about one of the arts. That notion has never been challenged again, to my knowledge.”

Wheeler also remembered the antics of the now-famous Mark Morris, a dancer and choreographer who grew up in Seattle. When Centrum arrived, there was already a summer dance camp that occurred annually, and Centrum was asked to run it as well; the most memorable of the thousands of kids that went through that camp would seem to be Mark Morris.

“He singularly caused more trouble than any kid, probably, that ever attended,” said Wheeler. “he started food fights in the mess hall. He booed one of our staff members when she gave lessons.

Ransom also remembers some bad boy behavior.

“So many unforgettable moments, to pick one is tricky. Kenneth Rexroth destroying the hot chocolate machine in the dining room was a high point. He was a friend of Hamill's who convinced me to hire him, and he was, at minimum, difficult,” Ransom said. Rexroth was dubbed “Father of the Beats” by TIME magazine. He mentored Lawrence Ferlinghetti and



introduced Allen Ginsberg to Gary Snyder. He died in 1982.

“Writing gives me more opportunity than power – the opportunity for disappointment, of course,” Ransom said, making a joke that writers understand.

“My standard line to students is from ‘Princess Bride’: ‘Get used to disappointment.’ Writing is hard; having written is fun.

“Seriously, writing has given me the power to influence powerful people, and that's something.”

Bill Ransom also remembers Wheeler, with great fondness.

“Joe Wheeler was the most gregarious person I knew,” he said. “He could eagerly shake every hand, always genuinely glad to meet people.

“The Poets in the Schools program that he directed [in Tacoma] gave him great contacts at the National Endowment for the Arts. They really loved us those first few years because of Joe, and we wrote for every grant that came available. He was fun to be with, an excellent musician and father, and he also liked to fish.”

The NEA still loves Centrum and what they do, recently awarding \$25,000 in grant money to support the Fiddle Tunes and Acoustic Blues workshops.

#### THE POWER OF VISION

This year also marks the 10-year anniversary of Rob Birman's onboarding as Centrum's fifth executive director. Like all organizations who have the bulk of their programming in the summer, the year 2020 brought Centrum to a full stop, for about a minute.

As she was impressed with Wheeler once upon a time, Hali was also impressed with how Birman led their staff through COVID-19. She said they worked on things they couldn't get to in a busy year like paint the ceiling in Building 205's studio space.

“We were still using our time well except we just weren't selling Fiddle Tunes tickets,” she said. They met regularly over Zoom and dug into a diversity, equity, and inclusion course. They were employed the entire time,

and they all received a raise at the end of the year. The U.S. Small Business Administration came through with a Shuttered Venue Operators Grant that totaled \$870,916.

“It was kind of an incredible time,” she said, “we were all afraid, but it was also a positive way to pass the time.” She said she thinks if Birman has any superpowers, it's the ability to see the future.

“He's always been forward thinking, excited about the future, and not afraid to do the work to get us to where he wants us to be.”

It does seem as if the S.S. Centrum is sailing pretty smoothly these days under Birman's confident and experienced steerage. COVID isn't even his first disaster as an arts administrator.

“The pandemic was certainly, at the least, one of the biggest challenges in my career,” Birman said.

“What made it perhaps less than the greatest challenge ever was the fact that everyone was dealing with it, worldwide.

“During my career, I took an \$8

million performing arts organization through Chapter 11 reorganization through the federal courts. That may rank as hardest of all but worthwhile, nonetheless. We succeeded, by the way, and that organization thrives today. My take-away from that experience is that sometimes it is important and useful to say, 'no.' Many organizations want to equate growth with success. But sometimes, non-profits do better when they focus on improving what they do, not necessarily expanding it.

"What I'll always remember about the pandemic is the total-team approach we took to navigate the giant uncertainty of it all. My senior team met on March 12, 2020, including senior staff and our board president, and we created a decision matrix to guide us as the very early days of the pandemic were upon us. In every respect, Centrum stayed ahead of the curve during that two-year period, and we leveraged available relief funds to bridge ourselves to the place we are today. We were sharing weekly updates with our global constituents online, and we also started producing quarterly reports for our donors, to make sure they knew what we were doing."

In 2022, the local community noticed that Centrum had made it through the pandemic with barely a leak in the vessel, and named Birman "Business Leader of the Year" in Jefferson County.

Even though Birman stayed the course in the choppy seas of COVID, with all of his education and hands-on experience, he's not so unflappable or hard to impress that he wasn't completely wowed his first season at Centrum, the same season that was also Anat Cohen's first year on the Choro faculty.

"Her contribution to the public performance that week was electrifying, so much so that she literally could not stay in her own seat on stage," he recalled. "I had never heard Choro music before, and I think everyone in the hall that night will not soon forget how energizing that exchange was between master performers, some of whom were performing together for the first time on our stage."

If Birman himself shows up in a workshop, he's mainly there to observe, but he was once persuaded to join a Fiddle Tunes band in a lab, he said.

"They needed a bass players and I jumped in, even though I've never played the bass! It helped that I have a degree in music, and as a beginner lab band, the tune we were doing wasn't very complex!"

"I think the greatest power from creating art is in seeing the world and its possibility in new ways. Creating art, in and of itself, isn't necessarily hard, but to achieve excellence – at any level – is."

"One of the things I love about Centrum is that there is no judgment here. We value the creative process from beginner to professional, and we try to affirm each person's accomplishments while concomitantly trying to show them what artist excellence can look like."

Still, a non-profit's bottom line is nothing to ignore either. Birman's focus for the future is to build the endowment



fund which currently holds \$1 million. Before the pandemic, Centrum operated with a \$4 million annual budget, 60 percent of which came from donor contributions. Centrum is also debt-free with a three-month cash reserve. Not bad when one considers Wheeler started out with an annual budget of \$123,000 (worth \$840,397 today), however 80 percent of those dollars were public funds, the kind of money that doesn't last forever.

Today, the state's initial investment has paid off more than anyone imagined. One might say that Port Townsend, the City of Dreams, made its way on to the map because of the arts, and Centrum is now at the center of that.

"Centrum," their web site says, "enjoys a high degree of stability in its staff and board and is now engaged in a process of developing a new five-year strategic plan to guide its growth and development, post COVID. Our future is motivated by creative ambition and increasing commitments to community building, a hallmark of our legacy of multi-generational workshops and artist residencies that are the emblems of our core values and dedication to lifelong learning."

That's a long way from a circus tent and paper tickets in a cigar box.

"The longevity of Centrum is a testament to Joe Wheeler's original vision to combine the benefits of multi-generational learning with immersive arts experiences in a retreat-like setting," said Birman, "to this end, we thrive – in part – because there are few things like Centrum available anywhere in the world. The only possible comparison I can think of is Chautauqua in New York, which has some of the same ingredients that make Centrum special: campus, lodging, theaters, classrooms, rural setting, etc."

#### THE POWER TO THRILL

As audience numbers grew, the circus tent needed to be replaced. And so began a vigorous and taxing fund-raising campaign to convert the rusty balloon hanger into a larger

performance space. Before too much planning had taken place, the estimate for rehab was \$500K, but by the time it was finally complete, the campaign scrambled to raise the actual cost of \$2.5 million. Wheeler admitted he considered quitting.

He said, "The campaign took a lot from all of us. The staff was fully committed to it; the staff gave far beyond what most people would give. They put in far more time, far more energy... Dan Harpole, Mary Carter Creech, Pat Simpson, Carla Vanderven. A lot of us just dug in and did it."

Wheeler stuck it out, and planning with the Seattle Symphony, led by world-famous conductor Gerard Schwarz, to play at the dedication ceremony of McCurdy Pavilion in June 1991 ensued.

When the day finally came, the anticipation must have been like kids waiting for fireworks on the Fourth. First on the program was Beethoven's "Coriolanus Overture," a stately piece chosen to christen the venue as a serious concert hall.

As the musicians played, a crew sat poised. Then, at the precise moment the first half of the concert finished, they opened the big doors to reveal the versatility of the pavilion and show the outdoor green later to be named for Ed Littlefield because of his generous donation to the pavilion project as well as Centrum in general over the years.

Next, Schwarz and Wheeler had decided to have the symphony play Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture," whereupon Wheeler had said, "We have to have a cannon."

Public parks permits proved that idea unworkable.

"We'll use shotguns and steel barrels, and they'll work well, particularly in that facility." The symphony's world-famous conductor Gerard Schwarz suggested.

Wheeler agreed, and they "did the shotgun routine." Boom!

It was though, the encore that provided the biggest bang. Only Wheeler's wife, Renate [whom he married after Jackie's death], and a handful of others

knew the secret up until Wheeler ostensibly went to take bows with Schwarz after the last piece. After the bows and the wild applause for the facility they worked so hard for, Wheeler hopped up on to the podium to conduct John Philip Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever" while Schwarz left the stage. Although he was "scared silly," it also thrilled him to the core as the orchestra played while he guided them. In his hand, Schwarz's wand must have felt electrifying.

"...there was that fraction of a second when you gave a downbeat, and you hoped that they would, in fact, play." Wheeler laughed. "They did, and they even watched me, because I did take a little ritardando in one spot and they followed."

"It was great fun – one of the more thrilling times of my life—if not the most thrilling. I conducted the orchestra again with a different march years later at my retirement party, but that time I actually went to Seattle and rehearsed the music, and we had a lot of fun, so that was a piece of cake."

It feels a bit auspicious somehow that the post-pandemic reopening aligns with the 50th year of Wheeler's vision – a vision of such design that it would seem only a trio like Wheeler and his two cohorts, Trethewey and Ransom, could have packaged and sent it into a forward trajectory that has lasted long after Wheeler retired in 1996 and his death in 2009. It's a vision that has lasted through bridge closures, the threat of bridge closures, and even a pandemic. And yet here we are.

Think of the number of musical notes that have been played here now. Think of the force of the woodwind and brass players; gospel, jazz and blues singers; all blowing and singing, breathing in and out. Imagine the number of broken strings, the number of guitar picks lost in the cracks of the wooden floorboards. Consider the slow wearing of the porch boards as the musicians have slapped them with their soles, keeping time while jamming. Think of the number of strokes and keys that have struck the canvases and the pure cotton of letterpress paper. Typewriters, and keypads too, making their mark, using their power, for five entire decades.

Think of this as you enter the fort for a performance or workshop this 50th year – the energy and power that has been instilled into that once deserted landscape with unmowed fields of grass. Think of the force of artistic intention accumulating like a kind of compound interest. Give Centrum a couple more years, and the organization can say they've been in existence longer than Fort Worden served as a U.S. Army base, and the balance of purpose from soldiers to students will have tipped over to the other side.

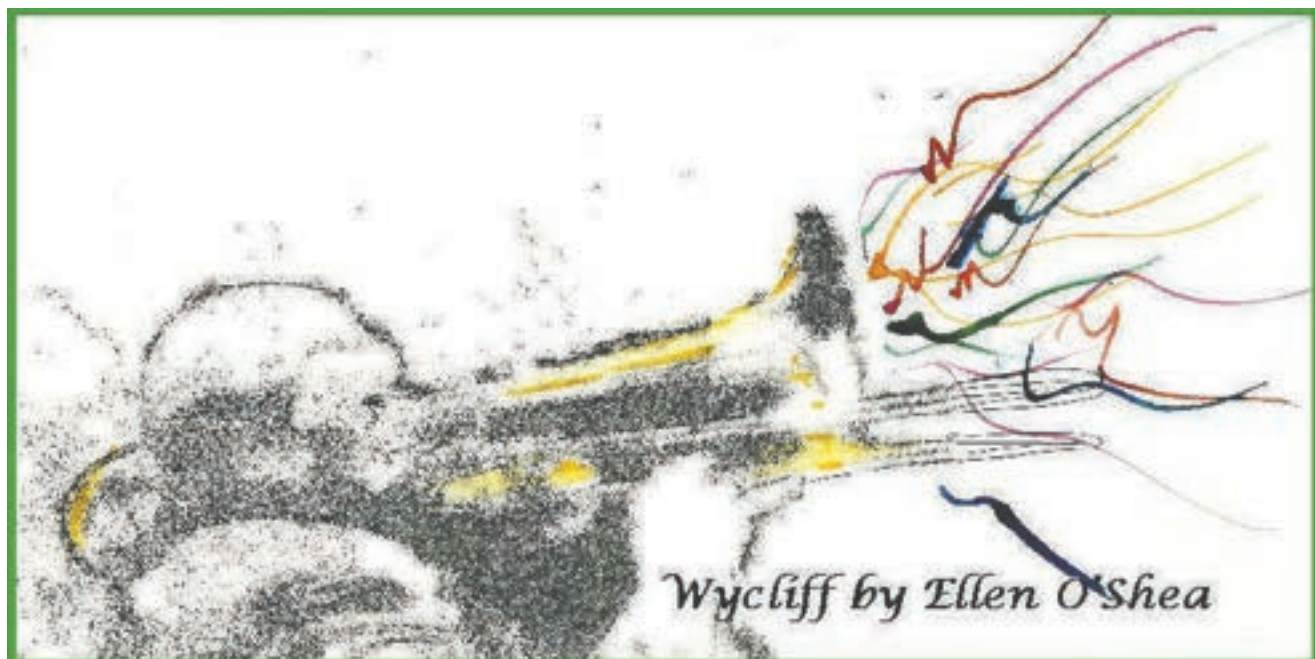
Fifty years of pushing the arts and their creators to be the best they can be in that very moment is quite a milestone to celebrate. There will likely be cake and a toast or two. One hopes there is one for Joe Wheeler, for another 50 years and more. Peter McCracken doesn't hesitate with an answer at all when he's asked what superhero Joe Wheeler would be if he were a superhero.

He'd be Joe Wheeler.



Photos courtesy Centrum archives.





Artwork by the author.

# But oh, I love my life, and all that Jazz

BY ELLEN O'SHEA  
FOR THE LEADER

Whoosh - another magical weekend. You know, I'm beginning to think that this job I have working at a pub at Fort Worden is a portal opened up to me to help my creative spirit grow - no, not grow, to explode!

It was the weekend of Jazz Port Townsend. Most of the music happened at Fort Worden where I work. I'm a server and all-around connector between food, drink, and human connection. Providing hospitality. That's what I do. It's fun, it's good, it feeds the social worker in me.

What is extraordinary is I am providing all this connection in the middle of what others have described as a creative wonderland- Fort Worden and the Centrum. There is so much going on at Fort Worden, in Port Townsend that blows me out of the water, so to speak. This last weekend the canoes landed at the beach for the annual tribal canoe journey. And then there was the Jazz Festival.

I think a lot of local people miss out on how incredible these events are.

Others, (tourists, as we locals call them) travel hundreds of miles and in many cases from faraway places to take part in the activities at Fort Worden.

And I, in my place of work, a very old guardhouse building turned pub, get to experience the music, and serve. My place of work is situated directly across the street from a small performing arts theatre and a Ballon hangar-turned-performance hall. I hear the music. It bounces off the front porch of this pub. And it attracts the most unlikely people, many of whom have traveled from across the world to perform.

While others pay dollars to sit in a theatre or open space to hear the musicians, I get to serve some of them. The conversations that flow can only be described as mystical. This weekend it was jazz greats Wycliff Gordon and Terrell Stafford, award-winning and

prestigious Jazz Trumpet and Trombone players.

"Do you like Jazz?" one of them said. The conversation began.

"Yes," but I have been out of touch with live performances of Jazz for a long time. I listen to Jazz on a local Seattle radio station, and it is the background for much of my creative work".

I told them that I am a visual artist, not a musician. Most of my connection to Jazz performances was a long time ago when I saw George Benson and Hubert Laws at the Paramount in Portland, Oregon in 1977.

"Oh, you are a Jazz Legacy fan?", he said. "Yes, you could say that", I said. "I just lost touch. But I have good memories. And I enjoy the music."

Then I told them about an extraordinary encounter

I had with the great Jazz Guitarist, George Benson right here in Port Townsend in 1981. I told them that Port Townsend used to have an extraordinary bar downtown called the "Town Tavern". It was rumored to be a secret getaway for many performers who once they became famous craved the small club connection with other musicians and the "People". These musical craftsmen and women would suddenly appear at the town tavern and start jamming with others including locals

and non-locals, to the delight of the local people. Tavern customers would get on their phones and bring everyone they could think of downtown to hear the greats. Stephen Stills, and other rock, jazz, and blues greats.

I haven't been in this town long enough to know the history of that tavern, locals know more. All I know is that

pulled up, and several larger-than-life men and one woman emerged. It was George Benson and friends fresh from a large performance in Seattle. They entered the tavern with instruments and what took place could only be described as a Jam session extraordinaire.

I felt like one of those paupers in the Middle Ages forced

to stand outside the church craning to hear the mass and receive communion. Yes, the music was like a communion, a holy sacrament. Soul-connected music.

Suddenly,

George Benson emerged from the building and started talking to us outsiders. He said music belongs to the people, it started with the people, and we all need to be together, the musicians and the people. And he asked the tavern staff to provide extension cords so he could plug in outside to his beautiful

Jazz Guitar. They brought a keyboard out and another performer took to the keys. This was a pleasant warm summer night. No city permits were required. The street in front of the tavern began to fill and no cars could pass. That was the old Port Townsend. Now most of the places we could have an intimate musical experience with have closed. Maybe some of the magic of Fort Worden will spill down to Water Street once again. We have so many hidden musical gems here: Chuck Easton and Joe Breskin,

George Radebaugh, Barney McClure our past mayor, and frequent guests Overton Barry and the late Stan Getz just to name a few. Here's hoping the clubs can be revived in Port Townsend. We just need a place to connect.

On Sunday, the final day of the Jazz Festival at Fort Worden, the finale concert took place in the McCurdy Pavilion. The concert featured the Matthew Whitaker Quintet. Blind from birth Matthew was a child prodigy winning many awards including at a young age winning the Child Stars of Tomorrow competition as part of the Amateur Night at the Apollo. He plays the keyboard. His quintet has also received many accolades and awards.

His closing show was spectacular. I could only hear parts of it because I was helping customers. But the sound from the pavilion bounced off the front of the pub and provided plenty of grooves, jams, rifts, and smooths. It was all Jazz. The finest in the world.

After the show, my place of work filled up fast. The courtyard and porch were filled. The brews, ciders, and wines flowed. People were happy and talking about the show. High energy.

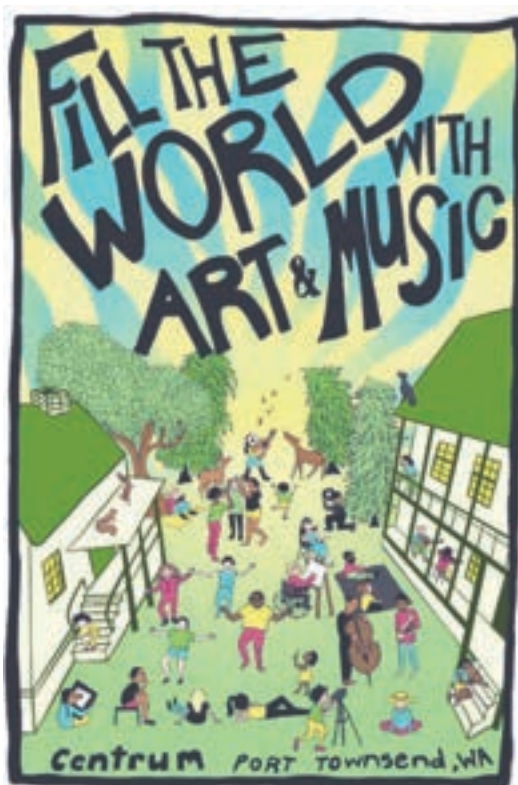
Then Matthew Whitaker and friends walked past the pub. All the patrons rose to their feet and clapped loudly. He responded with raised hands and a big smile.

The music came back to the people. On our little porch at the old Guardhouse.

Blessings to all that is good for providing me with employment. I truly appreciate the chance to serve, and I am fed daily by the spirit of creativity.

Rumor has it that there was an impromptu jazz playoff in one of the old houses at the Fort late at night. Wycliff and Terrell took on a jam session in the next room. The horns played loudly through the old wooden walls of the fort. Someone said they thought the horns won.

PS: I am no longer a Jazz "legacy" follower. The new Jazz is phenomenal.





ONE OF BIRMAN'S FAVORITE ASPECTS OF CENTRUM IS THE MULTI-GENERATIONAL ELEMENT OF THEIR WORK, AS WELL AS DIVERSITY IN WHAT THEY DO. THIS, FROM CENTRUM'S YOUTH PROGRAM, EXPLORATIONS, WHICH SERVES STUDENTS IN GRADES 7-9. PHOTO BY DAVID CONKLIN

# Leaving the Joneses behind

CONTINUED from B-1

But what is achievable for one organization is not necessarily achievable for the other and Birman said he doesn't believe in keeping up with the Joneses.

"We want durable solutions - sustainable and enduring and not just a flash in the pan.

"Slow and steady wins the race. Moderation and persistence," he said.

While running orchestras he played witness to some in his profession "chasing celebrities and trying to sell tickets on the backs of that.

"But that is not a sustainable way to run a business. And you don't want to build something up that's your vision, it needs to be the institution's vision."

That's where, he said, the Board of Directors comes into play.

"Ideally, I think the Board's job is to really scrutinize the

job we're doing, and from time to time, to put on the breaks if need be or to step on the gas.

"Their job is to represent the community, to consider what's best for the community."

And the community, Birman said, continues to offer more resources in ideas, volunteers and funding.

He said that during his tenure, Centrum has invested more than a million dollars into infrastructure alone, including replacement of lighting with LED which resulted in a 90 percent reduction in energy usage. So does it get harder to build momentum when an organization has achieved so much?

"To me, it's not difficult at all. Success builds on success and as we prove capable our funders are willing to invest more. We're not going a thousand miles an hour. If anything, our success allows us to be more picky in what we offer. The calendar is

really our only limitation."

Staffing has increased by more than 50 percent in the past 10 years and Centrum, he said, has invested in salary and benefit increases.

Those wins made the organization more visible and more of a presence. That continued success generates more interest in serving on the board, more interest in volunteering and more interest in funding the organization, he said.

The challenge at Centrum, Birman added, is that it doesn't do just one thing.

That makes it hard to create a single identity for the organization.

"When I reflect on Joe Wheeler's vision, the thing that cannot be understated is the support we get from the community and we have such a wide array of supporters.

The people who come through the gates here, come from all

over the world but we rely on this community for volunteerism and support and we get it, I think, because we bring value to the community - which brings support that small towns like ours would never otherwise see," he said.

Up next is defining how Centrum will finish out its first century and after January One rolls around, it will be time to develop a new strategic plan.

"So we'll take a beat and reflect on what's working and think about, 'what is it time to put to bed?'"

"We will examine our programming and decide what, we believe, will remain in demand. A lot of our programs have run for four or five decades."

He said that vision will take into consideration what changes in the community's population are expected.

"It's all about reinvention and renewal," he said.

## THANK YOU

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