

Bright Future



Fort Pierce is aglow whenever the Sunrise Theatre has a performance. SUNRISE THEATRE

Foundation assures Sunrise Theatre has lots of history ahead

BY WHITNEY JOSEPH

Fort Pierce's landmark Sunrise Theatre has celebrated glitzy nights and endured dark days. Its 101-year history even included a period, during the 1980s, when its doors were shut and its future uncertain. One steamy Saturday this past August, however, about 200 supporters helped raise \$34,000 to ensure its continuance, at the Sunrise Theatre Foundation's annual fundraiser. This year's theme was Studio 117 — a disco-themed gala named for the famed Studio 54, with a play on the theater's address of 117 S. Second St.

Sunrise Theatre Foundation Chair Christopher Cichorek said that, while the event raised the "second highest net in the history of the foundation," it didn't match the take from last year's Speakeasy fundraiser. Of course, that centennial celebration was 100 years in the making, so its fundraising total of \$58,000 and its 350 attendees were high bars to top. Following the Studio 117 event, Cichorek said, "preliminary numbers show we had 200 attendees and raised \$34,000." Acknowledging he was a little disappointed, Cichorek said that foundation members still considered the event a success.

Cichorek wound up at the Sunrise Foundation after moving to the Treasure Coast with his wife three summers ago from Rockland County, New York. Ever since, he's worked diligently with his colleagues on the board of directors and other theater supporters to beneficially "transform the way the foundation did business." Since his arrival, one of the foundation's main accomplishments has been the development of a strategic plan in conjunction with the St. Lucie Economic Development Council.



Comedian Jay Leno enjoys a chat with chairman of the board of directors of the Sunrise Theatre Foundation Christopher Cichorek and his wife, Valencia Cichorek, on the evening of

Cichorek called that partnership “a valuable resource” in helping the Sunrise right its financial ship. “We started out with \$5,800 in our checking account in 2021,” he said. “Now we have \$150,000 in our annual budget — but close to \$100,000 in our community foundation. So that’s significant.”

Leno’s appearance at the Sunrise in January of 2024. JOE SWEAT



Sunrise Theatre’s Studio 117 fundraiser raised \$34,000 — its second highest net proceeds on record — this August, thanks to attendees like, standing, from left, Barbara Franke, Elaine Dobson and Maria Franke, and, seated, Karen and Tina Franke. MARYANN KETCHAM



A historic photo of the Sunrise Theatre, circa-1923, is proof of how long the theater — and its iconic building — have anchored the city of Fort Pierce.

VISION STATEMENT

The foundation is not involved in the day-to-day operations of the theater and it comprises volunteers from the Treasure Coast. Its vision statement says it aims to “bring the theater experience of the performing arts to children of the Treasure Coast and to support improvements which will enhance the Theatre to fulfill its purpose within the community.” After all, it has been a downtown landmark since there was barely a town around it.

Built by R.N. “Pop” Koblegard, the Sunrise originally opened in 1923 as a vaudeville movie house. “He built a 1,300-seat theater when there weren’t 1,300 people living in Fort Pierce,” said Cichorek. “So, he had a vision that if you build it, they will come.”

And come they did — for the better part of the next century, with a few highs and lows. Facing financial adversity, it became a live entertainment venue in the 1930s and ‘40s. By 1983, what was once Fort Pierce’s showcase theater “fell upon hard times and shut down,” Cichorek said. “It fell into disrepair, and, at some point, the city purchased the property.”

Though vacant, the building continued to anchor Fort Pierce’s downtown, a constant reminder of its past role — and its future potential. Locals dedicated to the art deco gem had faith in brighter days ahead. A community movement organized to save the historic structure and, by 1997, the St. Lucie Preservation Association Inc. purchased the building. It partially reopened in 1999, following renovations funded by a \$750,000 grant; more work was done in 2005. The full resurrection of the Sunrise occurred in 2006.

“There was a movement to rebuild,” Cichorek said. “Through private donations, and state and federal funds, we raised about \$14 million to rebuild. We wanted it to be as architecturally accurate as possible. Even the carpet is a replica of what the carpet was, years ago.”

He described what it was like walking into the renovated theater.

“The first time I walked in through the doors, I looked around and saw the posters on the doors of all the people who walked through here — people like Tony Bennett, Willie Nelson, Ringo Starr and some of the other really talented people of all the music genres. It was pretty amazing. And now they cracked out the signed guitars that are out on display, too, which I think will be permanently on display.”

Cichorek said that he connects most with the architecture. “It’s intimate,” he explained. “But it’s a 1,300-seat theater, so there’s really not a bad seat in the house. And personally, I’ve met so many great people in the short time I’ve been here. It’s kind of cool to walk up and down the aisles and see people you’ve met along the way.”



Attendees at a Happy & Hopeful Ticket Event at the Sunrise Theatre gather around a Children’s Services Council poster in the lobby. BRAD WHEELER



Thanks to funding provided by the Children’s Services Council, the Sunrise Theatre Foundation provides scholarships so local students can attend its Children’s Summer Theatre Camp, seen here in July of 2024. CJ CICHOREK PHOTOS

CHILDREN’S HOUR

He’s clearly proud of the programs that allow local children to attend the theater, especially those who might never have had the opportunity. “Through all our annual programs, we serve about 3,000 children each year — and about 85,000 children, since our inception in 2008,” he said. “Also, the summer camp’s base funding is provided through the foundation from the Children’s Services Council. The foundation also provides scholarships for financially qualifying students, directly from us. This year, we will provide 22 scholarships; both contributions total \$29,650.”

Nevertheless, Cichorek worries that access to the arts is getting tougher. “It was in the news this week; the legislature is cutting children’s arts,” he said. “We’re happy to provide an avenue in our own little, small way.”

Two years after the Sunrise re-opened as an entertainment-only venue in 2006, the foundation got involved as the theater’s nonprofit arm — initially just to help fund the children’s theater camp.

That and a whole lot more has happened since, in large measure due to the foundation and staff members who are “all on the same page and all very dedicated to the mission statement and our goals,” Cichorek said. “We’re even changing the way we do business, which has been well received and how we’re going to be successful moving forward, changing the way things were done in the past.”

He was blunt about why that’s so.

"It's really rather simple: We're running the foundation more like a business rather than like a hobby," he explained. "For people like me and many members of the board — yes, we're all retired and have time to give. But we also need to be effective with how we spend our time and preserve our fundraising efforts. The best way to do it is to run it like a business, with profit and loss statements; going towards performance metrics upheld by other charitable organizations will help us always try to achieve those. Some people in the past didn't give that a second thought. That's not good if you're not achieving 80% or 70% of your return on your financial efforts. Those are the types of goals we're turning towards."

It's paying off. This year's financial documents show the theater has doubled its budget for the Happy & Hopeful Ticket Program and secured a matching funds grant; doubled its budget for the Adopt-A-Bus school transportation program, which buses students from Martin, St. Lucie and Indian River counties to see up to six shows a year; and raised enough money to support the theater directly, with a high-definition video projector.

FUTURE PLANS

Cichorek is already looking ahead. "Our next project is installing a handrail inside the lobby to honor John Wilkes, the [late] former executive director," he said, adding that donor contributions have already paid for the \$10,000 project.

He's hoping they'll dig into their wallets again for the upcoming capital project to digitize the marquee boards: an estimated \$50,000-\$100,000 job. "We got our first \$10,000 donation as soon as we announced it, so we're on our way," he said. "We're really, really happy about it."

"We have very high aspirations of what we want to do."

Cichorek said the foundation's "long-term plan is to attract donors who wish to include us in their will," in order to ensure the Sunrise can cast its glow for decades to come.

"We have developed really great relations with the Children's Services Council of St. Lucie County, who partner with us to underwrite the Summer Theatre Camp and our Happy & Hopeful program, where we give tickets away to underserved kids to regularly scheduled age-appropriate shows," he explained. "The obvious outcome is exposing kids to the living arts; the unintended consequence is helping groom our next generation of theatergoers."

For more information on the Sunrise Theatre Foundation, go to [sunrisetheatrefoundation.com](http://www.sunrisetheatrefoundation.com) (<http://www.sunrisetheatrefoundation.com>) or call 772.200.4766.

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"We trick kids into learning," said Sunrise Theatre Foundation Board of Directors Chairman Christopher Cichorek, excitedly describing the Adopt-A-Bus fundraising arm that makes theater, with math and science interwoven into the performances, accessible to roughly 2,000 students annually. WENDY FRIEDER

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