

Visions of An

The quest to build Marble Valley Regional Arts Center continues

 *By Bill Romanelli*

Twenty-eight years is a long time to chase a dream.

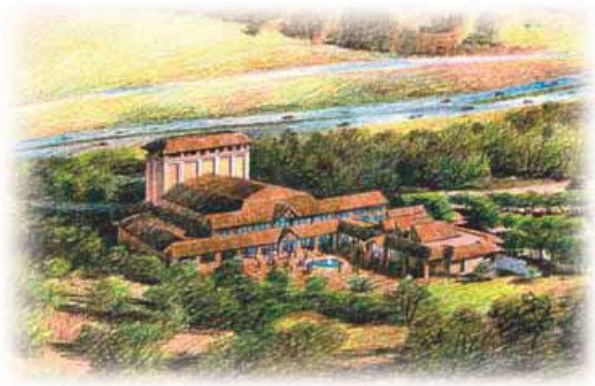
For a dedicated group of volunteers who believe a regional arts center is an absolute must for El Dorado County, the effort is worth every second. Today, the vision of Marble Valley Regional Center for the Arts (MVRCA) is alive and well. The land is there, the arts community and its supporters are there, and there's only one more thing necessary to make the center a reality.

Actually, it's more like a million little things. "We're not kidding ourselves here. We know we have a big job ahead of us to generate \$50 million, but we're committed," says Normadene Carpenter, a chief Marble Valley organizer. "This region is alive with arts and we need a center to showcase them."

Carpenter and the rest of the center's volunteer support team work out of a little red caboose parked on the west end of Placerville's historic district.

It's certainly not where everyone would like to be sitting. South of Highway 50, between the Bass Lake and Cambridge Road exits, is 22 acres that have been

Arts Mecca



the site of the proposed arts center for the past 16 years. Donated by the S.H. Cowell Foundation in 1990, the land has been a legacy of one of the sons of the famous Henry Cowell, who owned several limestone-mining properties. Portions of it were cleared in 2005 to create room for a series of small events, but since then, not a single spade of dirt has been moved on the property.

That's not to suggest that there aren't big plans for the space. As envisioned, the arts center would include a 1,000-seat performance theater, a smaller 250-seat theater that also would be available for business conferences, a visual arts "wing" and a visitor center. A virtual tour of the proposed facility is available at www.marblevalleycenter.org. "We envision a facility that will put El Dorado County on the map as a cultural arts destination," says Michael Hendren, MVRCA board president. "This is going to be something the whole region can be proud to call their own."

Carpenter and others take that vision even further, suggesting that the facility could help El Dorado County become a cultural arts

mecca like Ashland, Ore., or Santa Fe, N.M.

"Our mantra is 'If We Build It, They Will Come,'" Carpenter says, borrowing from the popular Kevin Costner film *Field of Dreams*. It's an altogether appropriate reference.

The dream began in 1978, when Carpenter and a handful of other arts lovers organized the Sierra Cultural Arts Association (SCAA). The group was born out of a desire to provide a permanent performance venue for the El Dorado Community Concerts Association, which was, and still is somewhat nomadic. Performances were held in local high schools, churches and even an armory. It was a colossal job just getting enough chairs to each location for the productions.

SCAA incorporated in 1979 and officials started looking for property. Twenty-six different sites were explored and, in the late 1980s, they almost found what they wanted. The El Dorado County Office of Education had some property it was willing to donate, but it included only enough room to build the center, without any space for parking or other amenities. The search continued.

When a gift gave the group an even better

piece of land in the heart of Marble Valley, the group changed its name to the Marble Valley Regional Center for the Arts. "If we find a donor willing to give us \$15 million or \$20 million, we'll probably change our name again, a la the Mondavi Center," Carpenter chuckles.

Finding the funding to build even the first phase of the project—the main theater and visitor center—(current price tag of \$35 million and rising daily) has been daunting. MVRCA's board members continue to search for large donations, but it's no easy task.

The next step is to organize a capital campaign to try to raise some portion of the needed funds in the coming months. MVRCA has found a potential ally in that effort in the form of the El Dorado Musical Theatre, which also is looking for a permanent home.

There's encouraging news for the property itself, which currently has electric service, but nothing else. On Dec. 6, the El Dorado Local Agency Formation Commission voted to approve the annexation of Marble Valley to the El Dorado Irrigation District. That vote

clears the way to build the water, sewer and other necessary infrastructure systems for the center and the surrounding area.

MVRCA may not have a facility, but that hasn't prevented its boosters from producing a first-class series of events throughout the past several years.

In September 2006, the center hosted its 28th annual Butterfly Concert, a tradition started by the Sierra Symphony. The group



CATHERY CORT/MARBLE VALLEY REGIONAL CENTER FOR THE ARTS (2)



also held its third annual "Moonlight in Margaritaville," featuring Garratt Wilkin & The Parrotheads, a Jimmy Buffet cover band, under the stars at High Hill Ranch this past August.

Both events are scheduled to return in 2007. Moonlight in Margaritaville returns Aug. 4 and the Butterfly Concert is scheduled for Sept. 9 (check the MVRCA website for tickets and information.). Several other events will be held, such as a regional dance festival and a piano quintet performance.


All of the events are fundraisers, but they also are meant to be "friend raisers." "Our attendance at these events is growing every year," Hendren says. "That tells me that people support what we're trying to do, and they would support an art center once it has been built."

Carpenter takes an even more pragmatic approach. "These events don't raise a million dollars, but they do help us make the project known to more people," she says. "There may be a very affluent person out there who loves the arts and is looking to leave a big legacy, and we want to make sure they know about us."

"THE ARTS ARE FOOD FOR THE SOUL," CARPENTER SAYS. "WITHOUT THEM, THE SPIRIT SIMPLY STARVES."

If fulfilled, the dream of building the regional arts center will mean much more than a building. For starters, there are economic benefits.

It's estimated that every dollar spent on arts entertainment generates another \$3 to \$20 in additional spending as people buy new clothes for their night out, or dine before the show, etc. That's good for local businesses and the county's tax base, which means it's good for residents who use government services.

There also are benefits associated with making the arts easier to enjoy. Carpenter and others say several studies show that children exposed to the arts perform better in school and are likely inspired to discover their own artistic talents. With arts programs on the endangered species list throughout most schools, a regional arts center would help fill the gaps. "The arts are food for the soul," Carpenter says. "Without them, the spirit simply starves." 



CATHERY CORT/MARBLE VALLEY REGIONAL CENTER FOR THE ARTS

Normadene Carpenter



CATHERY CORT/MARBLE VALLEY REGIONAL CENTER FOR THE ARTS

If there's one thing to be said about Normadene Carpenter, it's that when she takes on a cause, she follows it through to the end.

For almost three decades, Carpenter has been a member of the merry band of arts lovers who have been trying to build the Marble Valley Regional Center for the Arts, but that's just scratching the surface. As a single woman and a microbiologist fresh from UC Berkeley, Carpenter moved to El Dorado County in 1951 to start a career. She became active in the community quickly, joining the El Dorado Community Concerts Association and Friends of the Library where she worked tirelessly—for more than 20 years

Anyone who knows about Carpenter would call her dedicated. Anyone who's worked with her would consider her more of a force of nature.

"Normadene is an inspiration," says Michael Hendren, MVRCA board president, who met Normadene four years ago and was instantly caught up in her energy field. "She brings so much energy and enthusiasm to this project; she's an example to us all. If I could tell her anything, it would be to say, 'Thanks for never giving up on a dream.'"

Hendren's sentiment is shared by many, who use words like "amazing," "energetic," "passionate," "strong" and "a true lover of the arts" to describe Carpenter.

As for Carpenter herself, she's humbled by the praise and proud to be serving the community she calls home.

"I've traveled around the country quite a bit, and I think this area is one of the best places anywhere to live," Carpenter says. "This area has been good to me and I believe in giving something back."