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Hoping for arts, commerce in AuSable Forks Tahawus Lodge Center looks to lead Main Street reinvigoration

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AUSABLE FORKS - For more than a century, the Freemason building has been a fixture on Main Street here.

Now a nonprofit organization is working to turn the historic structure into a cultural hub for the greater AuSable Forks community.

Rebecca Kelly and Craig Brashear, a married couple who split their time between New York City and AuSable Forks, are co-directors of the Tahawus Lodge Center, which bills itself as a center for culture, community and commerce in the North Country. The organization now calls the old Freemason building, located at 14234 Main St., home.



The building was completed in 1911. The second and third stories were used by the Freemasons for meetings, private work and other business. The street floor and basement level were rented out as commercial space.

"And we're going to do the same thing," Kelly said during a holiday open house last week.

During that reception, the center showcased work by photographer Todd Bissonette on the first floor. Kelly said in the future, the center hopes to turn the bottom floors into a lively commercial space for Main Street.

"We hope it would be something useful to the community - a butcher, a hardware store, a combination women's cooperative that combines five or six different destinations in one location - but we'll see," she said. "It's a depressed economy right now; people aren't necessarily looking to start new enterprises. But this is a wonderful space."

The center is celebrating its first year in operation. Kelly and Brashear acquired the building about two years ago; the first year was spent dealing with asbestos issues, which Kelly said "knocked us back financially."



Kelly said the focus now is to show the community the building's potential as a place for artistic expression in its various forms, like painting, dance and film. The top floor already houses space for a dance studio,

complete with a floor-mounted ballet bar. Kelly and her husband - dancers, teachers and owners of the Rebecca Kelly Ballet company - have hosted a variety of dance classes for the young and old.

The center plans to hold classes for aspiring entrepreneurs and will soon launch a filmmaking workshop for teenagers and young adults.

"We want Tahawus Lodge Center to become a hub, and it takes the investment of a community to make it a hub," Kelly said. "It doesn't matter what we wish; it really matters how the community engages and joins in. And it's beginning to happen."

Allison Maggy, who grew up in Plattsburgh, will teach the film class. The 23-year-old New York City resident, who studied film and journalism at New York University, hopes to establish a collaborative of filmmakers in the North Country.

"I kind of wanted to give back and promote the arts in an area that's coming together a lot more - there are definitely more programs out there," Maggy said. "I'd like to give people this outlet to create and work in film, and give them the equipment and the tools necessary to create a piece to tell a story."

Maggy said the Main Street space offers great potential for budding artists.

"It's nice because anyone can be a part of it," she said.

According to Kelly, supporters of the center include local residents, second home owners and seasonal visitors of all ages. The organization has received some support from the New York State Council on the Arts for architectural work, and it recently got a \$1,000 grant from the New York Council for the Humanities for repair work following Tropical Storm Irene.

Andrew Schonbek of Plattsburgh belongs to the center's steering committee. He said Kelly and Brashear have an ambitious vision for Tahawus.

"In buying this building and renovating it and making a place for something to happen that otherwise absolutely wouldn't have happened in this kind of an area, they're really doing something radical," Schonbek said.

"It's really gratifying to see how the local people who may have seen this as something a little bit alien at the beginning are now kind of catching the vision and seeing the potential that it brings to AuSable Forks, to have a cultural center at this very strategic location right in the heart of downtown."

