

Rebecca Kelly Ballet all-in on Tahawus Center

GIVING BACK

PEOPLE WHO
ARE PAYING
IT FORWARD

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Fundraising continues for restoration

AUSABLE FORKS — When ballet dancer Rebecca Kelly took her first trip to the Adirondacks in 1987, her stay at the Last Chance Ranch provided her with the kind of welcome to the wilderness experience that immediately helped her to fall in love with the area.

It was during that stay that she and her group of self-described “city kids” got to hiking on a trail near the ranch, taking in some of the most beautiful vistas in the state. But the group also encountered a mother black bear with her cub, a true Adirondack eye-opening scene for Kelly.

“We were told to make noise (if we encountered a bear),” Kelly recalled with a laugh. “We had received some advice before we went on the trail, don’t look and don’t divide the mother and cub. It was berry season. It must have been August, and we must have been passing through a berry patch.”

These days, Kelly is no

longer just passing through the Adirondacks; she is embedded in its culture and business as she now calls AuSable Forks home for part of the year. She lives here with her husband and business partner Craig Brashear for four months in the summer as well as long weekends throughout the rest of the year.

Kelly and Brashear are the proprietors of Rebecca Kelly Ballet, a New York City-based chamber-sized dance company that prides itself on using dance to celebrate movement while exploring human challenges and social issues.

In the decades since her first stay at the Last Chance Ranch, Kelly and her dance company have had a close connection to the Adirondack region. For years, they’ve worked hand-in-hand with the Lake Placid Center for the Arts, where the company has had artists-in-residence during summers since 1987.

But in July 2006, Kelly’s connection with AuSable Forks really began. It was at an event at the Strand Cultural Center in Plattsburgh when a question from New York’s then U.S. Sen. Hillary Clinton turned on the light bulb for Kelly.

“When we were introduced, she knew a lot about us and asked really precise and perceptive questions and challenged us to think about how many years we’d been in the Adirondacks,” Kelly recalled, “and (Clinton) said: ‘What do you want your legacy to be, what do you want to do? Where is your building?’”

“It was like a light bulb went off for both Craig and I,” Kelly continued. “It was just sort of one of those moment’s you couldn’t have predicted, how it happened.” At the time Kelly and

Brashear had built a cabin home of their own in the Silver Lake area along the Saranac River, a 20-minute drive from AuSable Forks.

During many drives into town to get gas, eggs and other goods, they had noticed an unassuming loft-like building that had a familiar nature compared to the kind of New York City loft they inhabited. At 30-by-60 feet, the couple began to realize this loft-like structure, the Tahawus Cultural Center, may be their answer to Clinton’s question.

“We thought it had plenty of space for a dance studio,” Kelly said.

Fast forward more than a decade, and Kelly has opened up the long-neglected 105-year-old building to her dance company and to the public over recent summers. But Kelly said the restoration of the center is at a critical juncture right now as fundraising efforts are ongoing so it can also be used during harsh Adirondack winter for similar activities.

Kelly said the Center needs \$70,000 to renovate the electrical service of the center’s two upper floors. *Funding would also go to the removal of a chimney, roof repair, other electrical upgrades and implementation to the floor.* The goal is to make it a year-round facility.

A huge chunk of critical funding has come in for the project, \$14,000 in the form of a leadership grant from the Cloudsplitter Foundation. And on the fundraiser’s Adirondack Gives page at www.adirondackgives.org/campaigns/tahawus-center-rising/, the foundation said another \$2,050 has been raised or received from 14 different backers.

Still, Kelly said a shortfall

between \$18,000 and \$22,000 remains, and efforts to garner more interest and financial support between now and a deadline of sorts late in the spring is critical to the improvement project becoming a reality.

"The Cloudsplitter Foundation gave us a grant meant to leverage additional money, so we are trying to figure out what entities to approach and individuals to approach to see who could be interested in supporting a good effort," Kelly said.

The improvements would add to the replacement of 22 of the building's 26 windows, the insulation of its attic and two basement repairs that crowdfunding has helped to enable in recent years.

But Kelly sees the fundraising as more than that. As she's fallen in love with AuSable Forks more and more over the years, she sees a stronger Tahawus Center as a way to help jolt the local economy.

Kelly said she likes AuSable Forks because of its authentic old small-town Adirondack character. And she and Brashear said they have a vision beyond just the center. They would like to spur for creativity, commerce, and community, entrepreneurship and productivity in AuSable Forks, and they think a revived Tahawus Center would provide jobs.

They are just hopeful a few more people are willing to take a chance on the little town on the river banks, just like they have.

"We are going to bring back our historical roots and freshen them up," Kelly said. "That straight forward honest vibe is part of the charm of AuSable Forks, it's what

we want to support ourselves.

"I think that a vibrant small town is the heartbeat between the mountain peaks. People want to come down from their beautiful houses in the hills and have a place to gather because it's very human to gather every now and then. It was just to me exactly what a town needs.

"And you see it in Saranac

Lake and Lake Placid, those types of enterprises make you glad to be apart of the community. We just need more of them, more brave people not afraid to take risks who will take on a venture. I think it's important to be a part of the adventure, whether it succeeds or fails. Being that way is already an asset of the community."



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Tahawus Cultural Center, AuSable Forks

