

## New center in U.F. would mix Christianity with arts

Project's leaders trying to gauge community interest

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UPPER FREEHOLD - For several years, Pat Weitz has had a vision of establishing a Christian arts center in the central New Jersey area.

The vision began to come to fruition when she first established the Community Christian Choir in 1995. The Community Christian Choir is an interfaith group of auditioned singers that now represents more than 40 churches of various Christian denominations throughout central and southern New Jersey and in Bucks County, Pa. The choir has singing divisions for adults as well as children and rehearses at the Allentown Presbyterian Church and other churches in the area because Weitz has yet

to find a permanent home for it.

The choir began as a means for Weitz to enliven the music program at her own church, but due to the choir's growing membership, she soon realized that music programs seemed to be starving throughout the area's churches.

Not only has the choir grown in membership and accomplishments over the years, but its popularity has enabled Weitz to offer comparable music and arts programs to area residents.

As the arts programs generated increased interest, Weitz, along with those who assist her in running the nonprofit organization, saw an opportunity to help her realize her dream of having a Christian arts center. In June 2005, they held the first official meeting to explore the possibilities and interest in such a project. Since then, a strategic planning team has formed to help make Weitz' dream a reality.

"There needs to be a place where churchgoers can go to develop their artistic gifts," Weitz said. "There needs to be a place where students can go to study with Christian teachers who will help them develop and use those gifts."

Although defining the exact mission and long-range plan for the center is still in the works, the leadership team has outlined some of the programs it would like to see the center offer. Classes may include photography, dance, visual arts, woodworking, cooking, sculpture and painting.

"People would come here," Weitz said, "to learn and develop skills that we hope they would then take back to their local churches [to use] to enrich and enliven the worship happening at those churches."

The center would be a multid denominational Christian faith-based educational training center, offering students in prekindergarten through 12th grade, young adults and adults opportunities to learn through vocal, instrumental, theatrical and production visual art training programs.

"The center will contain a Christian elementary school which teaches academic subjects with a heavy emphasis on the arts," Weitz said. "In a lot of elementary schools, the arts are being phased out. We want children to have a place where they can take violin or string classes as part of their curriculum."

Weitz said that when visual and other arts are incorporated into teaching subjects such as math and history, children often learn better and have an easier time remembering lessons.

The center would also offer a community venue for those who wish to put on events that will help spread God's word. In addition, a worship area and a contemplation garden would be set up in remembrance of Ken Beauregard, a professional landscaper who became very involved with the choir prior to his passing.

The center would team up as well with Upwards Basketball to provide sports opportunities for youths who like to play sports but for one reason or another have had limited opportunities to play elsewhere.

Weitz describes the center as a grand-scale version of the choir's Christian Arts and Music Program (CAMP).

"This new program is in its infancy," Weitz said, "but CAMP is like a microcosm of what we hope to do at the center - introducing arts and teaching Christian values to children.

"All different artists come in and teach water painting, the harp and their many other talents," she added.

The choir also sponsored a theater CAMP last summer during which children put on a play about the biblical story of Daniel in the lion's den. The young performers, who only had two weeks to rehearse, received a standing ovation when the play was over, according to Weitz.

The success of the programs and the choir, which is now in its 25th season and consists of about 140 members, has made Weitz and her leadership team feel that now is the time to introduce their idea of the center to the community.

Weitz said the leadership team for the project, which includes her husband, Lee, who is the choir's manager and sound engineer, and Betty Anderson, of Robbinsville, would like to see the center built in Upper Freehold Township.

Although members of the team did not share the specific location of the land they hope to acquire, they said they are currently looking to purchase a \$2.5 million parcel of 26 acres near the interstate.

"It would be so perfect for what we want to do," Weitz said. "It's near the highway, and when we build the center it's going to be a place of great beauty so you won't see it in the middle of a commercial site."

However, according to Weitz, in order to be able to purchase the property and build the center, the group will need financial and other support from members of the community.

"We need people who would like to help with sponsorship," Weitz said. "We need people who are interested in a partnership, people who know about planning and leaders to help us develop our idea. We need all kinds of people to come together."

The group is currently scheduling informational meetings in local communities to generate interest and awareness.

"We're letting the community know what we're trying to do, and we're trying to find Christian artists and

people interested in this," Weitz said.

She continued, "'Christian' [affiliation] closes a lot of doors for funding."

When asked if she thought the religious affiliation could also open other doors for funding, she responded, "I hope so."

"When we incorporate the arts into worship, the children get it," she said. "And not only do they get it, but when they get up and lead, the rest of the people that are there get the message more clearly as well."

"If we can make an impact on the children, we can make an impact on everybody because it's all tied in to families," she added.

Anderson said the center will offer the quality programming that her family and other members of the choir and the CAMP program have come to expect.

"It's going to be a center of excellence," Anderson said. "Pat puts everything she has into everything she does, and you don't see too much of that anywhere else."

Anyone interested in scheduling an informational meeting or learning more about the plans for the Christian Center for the Arts can contact the choir office at (609) 587-7076 or visit [www.ccchoir.com](http://www.ccchoir.com).