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Chenery Auditorium: A Community Treasure

By Zinta Aistars

Photos courtesy of Chenery Auditorium

Opening his office door on the second floor of Chenery Auditorium, Ray Jenkins steps out into the carpeted hallway in welcome. His shirt, a deep burgundy color with CHENERY AUDITORIUM embroidered over his left pocket in gold thread, matches the carpet, matches all of the auditorium in its rich hues. Jenkins blends in—perfectly, as one who belongs. He has been a vital part of Chenery since 1974, when he took the position as manager here, appointed by namesake Howard Chenery himself.

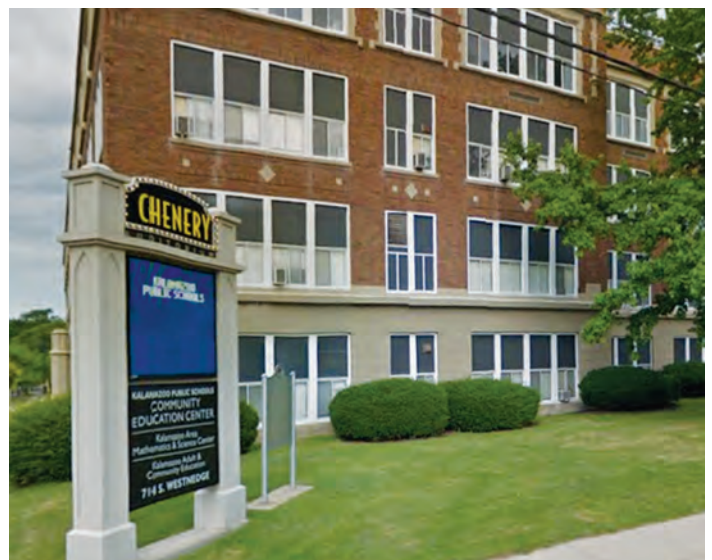
“My title hasn’t changed either,” Jenkins says. “Except that ‘building manager’ was added onto it some ten years ago. All that really means is that people bring their complaints to me.”

Chenery Auditorium, on the corner of South Westnedge Avenue and Vine Street, doesn’t seem like the kind of place that would ever be deserving of complaints. Since 1924, Chenery has been a prized venue for concerts, assemblies, lectures, musicals, and more, for the greater Kalamazoo community. The auditorium, owned by Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS), may have originally served for school productions for Kalamazoo Central High School, but it was also opened to community events.

Chenery has since served as a venue for Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra, the Kalamazoo Civic Players, Kalamazoo Community Concerts, touring symphonies from Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Cleveland, New York, Minneapolis, Berlin, Vienna, and others. The stage has resounded with the music of the Gilmore Keyboard Festival. Other performers have included Duke Ellington, Bob Hope,

George Burns, Rosemary Clooney, Victor Borge, Van Cliburn, John Legend, Tony Bennett, and many, many others. Authors, politicians, athletes, world travelers, and others have also brought their message to the Chenery stage.

“Oh, it’s hard to pick favorites,” Jenkins shakes his head. “Literally hundreds of greats have performed here.” But then, he recounts that renowned deep baritone voice of James Earl



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Jones, giving a lecture on the Chenery stage. And not to forget the countless dance concerts and competitions. And oh, that unforgettable balalaika orchestra ... Jenkins smiles, losing himself for a moment in memories.

The high school, Jenkins says, moved out of Chenery in 1971. "Back then," he says, "this was called Old Central High School Auditorium, but in 1973, it was formally dedicated to Howard Chenery, the first full-time high school drama teacher in the United States. Schools then all treated theatre as an extra-curricular activity."

Jenkins is a graduate of Loy Norrix High School, and that's where he met the theatre teacher, Mr. Chenery. The connection helped him land his job at the Auditorium. The building had been designed by Rockwell LeRoy and built by the DeRight Brothers.

"It had 2,700 seats at that time on dual balconies," Jenkins says. "The first renovation was completed in 1960, and we reduced the seats to 2,577 to make room for a lighting booth and a sound console in the back. With a \$200,000 grant from the Kalamazoo Community Foundation, we were also able to put in new ceiling chandeliers, auditorium doors, dressing rooms, orchestra pit, aisle carpeting, and lighting."

A second major renovation in 1997, funded by a school bond, reduced the number of seats again, to 1,900, allowing for more leg room and wider, more comfortable, reupholstered seating. It was the renovation no one saw, says Jenkins, focusing on replacing the lighting system, improvements to the stage floor, and an expansion of the sound booth on the second balcony.

The third and most recent renovation, with Friends of Chenery raising funds, completed in 2010, reduced seating capacity yet again, to 1,550, and eliminated the center aisle. A new entrance was added on Dutton Street, providing improved access for the disabled. A two-story reception and meeting room was added to the lobby. The balconies were embellished with new railings and carpeting. Lighting was relocated and acoustics were improved within the stage shell. Dressing rooms, orchestra pit, and signage got a facelift.

"There's a lot more here, though, than just the stage," Jenkins says.

He leads the way, down hallways, up and down stairways, through seemingly a maze of rooms and corridors throughout the building. That this building also houses the Community

Education Center is sometimes forgotten among all the glitz and glamour of stage stars. Jenkins weaves through the offices of facilities management, technology services, and food services on the first floor. Within the kitchen of the food services, 3,000 meals are prepared and delivered to elementary schools throughout the district. A new kitchen is in the works, however, that will take this function of the building elsewhere, Jenkins points out.

On the second floor, KPS offers adult education, with classes to teach English as a second language and GED preparation. The Title 1 Parent Office supports students facing such challenges to learning as homelessness. Pre-kindergarten and school readiness programs hold classes for the youngest learners.

If alluring aromas waft from the third floor, it is due to the KRESA culinary arts classes that take place there, but further down the hall, more than 500 people per year take tests at the GED Center, earning diplomas that have often led them on the road to higher degrees and leadership positions in the community. The Academically Talented Program meets twice a week, but Library Services catalog more than 10,000 books that then find their place in the hands of teachers and students in district schools.

Sure, there's an elevator, but why not climb the 84 steps to the fourth floor. Here, Kalamazoo's brightest math and science students gather for college-level instruction in the Kalamazoo Area Mathematics and Science Center (KAMSC).

Not missing a step, Jenkins concludes the tour back at his office. It is the fifth office space he has occupied in this building since he first arrived in 1974. It will be his last. Only days remain until his retirement. He sits down at his desk, considering the years behind him walking these hallways, overseeing the performances, arranging schedules, triaging technicians and support staff. Suddenly, his eyes glisten.

"What I want people to know," Jenkins says, "is that Chenery Auditorium is for everyone. It's our community treasure."





COUNTRY LIVING- BUT IN A NEIGHBORHOOD

By Zolton Cohen

Feature Photography by Zolton Cohen and Kristian Walker Photography

"This house," Lindsey says of the spacious and comfortable home she and her husband, Mark, built two years ago in Mattawan, "is like living in the country, only in a neighborhood. It was designed around our grandchildren and family."

The couple had lived on Eagle Lake for 20-odd years. As their children grew up and the house grew empty they knew it was time to downsize. Lindsey says, "We weren't using the lake as much, and I had always dreamed of having a pool."

They owned a sizable piece of land nearby, and after they put in a road, they sold off three lots, reserving the last one for their new home. Lindsey says, "We had a pretty good idea of what we wanted, maybe it was a concession to knowing we were getting older, but we opted for a one story home rather than one with multiple stories. We also wanted the hallways and doorways wider, and a shower that was wheelchair-accessible." Ironically, Lindsey broke her ankle while in Florida a year ago, and their foresight in making the home more accessible came instantly into focus. Of Phil Bonine, of Bonine Home Designers, who designed the home, she says, "I never expected to be using so soon those things that we had asked Phil to incorporate into the plans. But they really came in handy while I was recovering; it made life a lot easier."

As to the floor plan, Lindsey said, "Our previous house had a sunroom off the kitchen, and the family room area was down on the lower level, in a walkout. But we always ended up gathering in the kitchen anyway, with the overflow packing into the sunroom. This time, we wanted a great room, dining area and kitchen all on one floor. We thought, why not have one large space, on the main floor, along with the master bedroom suite? Phil took those concepts and put them into the design."

Lindsey says Bonine took great pains to make sure there weren't a lot of changes while the house was being built. "We worked it all out on our paper, including making the screened in porch larger and having a guest bathroom attached to the guest bedroom. The guest bedroom was specifically designed for our parents so they would have a place to live on the main floor. We didn't want them to have to go up and down stairs."

Bonine says, "Lindsey and Mark came to me with ideas they had for the house; the major limiting factor being that we had to work around the shape of the lot. As they were subdividing the property they left themselves the more challenging site to build on. But an unusual lot configuration can create an interesting final product; that's the way I like to look at it. It's not a generic house sitting on a lot. We stretched the house out because the property was thin and narrow, but



ABOVE LEFT: Located just steps from the open-plan kitchen and dining area, the great room provides comfortable seating for casual conversation with the cook while meals are being prepared. Photo by Kristian Walker Photography

ABOVE: Designed to take full advantage of the rolling, wide but shallow lot, the house exterior has low-maintenance vinyl siding and a country style front porch from which Lindsey and Mark can watch their grandchildren at play. Photo by Zolton Cohen

RIGHT: With its family mementos and a desk designed for the space, this private work area adjacent to the kitchen and across from the pantry is one of Lindsey's favorite places in the house. Photo by Kristian Walker Photography



wide. There were also some topography items that we had to deal with which wound up allowing daylight windows in the lower level. Having built a house before, Mark and Lindsey understood the process. They were very understanding and nice to work with."

Lindsey says, "Bob Straatsma, the contractor, and his framer, Jeff Guarisco, made the building process fun and were really good about helping us find what we wanted. It is much more complicated these days because of all the options available in flooring, appliances and countertops; it can be a bit overwhelming. So I knew I needed the help of a professional with those choices."

Corrie Kirshman, of Kirshman and Associates, Kitchen and Bath Design Studio, helped the couple cut through the clutter of all the selections that are inherent in putting a new home together. Kirshman says, "Lindsey and Mark are very family oriented, and the whole house wasn't about how they can impress; it was more about 'how can we live here easily with our family around us?' It's part of our business to get to know people and help them through the process. We tried to make the project easier for them so they didn't feel totally overwhelmed. Lindsey and Mark were a pleasure to work with and were very appreciative of the many people who helped make this home uniquely theirs."

Lindsey says, "Because I worked with Corrie and her husband Bill in our last house, I trusted them and knew they were the designers that I wanted to work with. Bill was very helpful with the initial planning of some of the rooms that needed fine-tuning; we feel fortunate for his input because this was his last project before he retired."

With an eye toward fashion and function, Lindsey, Corrie Kirshman and Erin Stiemsma collaborated in the design of the cabinetry for the home. Lindsey says that one of her favorite ideas was her desk area off the kitchen. "There was a space across from the pantry where they were able to design a desk. It's my own private area tucked away from the hustle and bustle of the kitchen."

An additional function, suggested by Kirshman and Stiemsma, was to incorporate refrigerator drawers close to the poolside entry so the kids, when they were using the pool, could independently get their own snacks and beverages without tracking through the kitchen. They also designed and situated a recycling center nearby for the disposal of cans and water bottles. One of the kitchen's many unique fashion and focus features is an angled stainless steel hood topped with custom painted wood moldings to create a fresh, transitional, 21st century cottage look.

The large kitchen island countertop is marble. Lindsey says, "That was Corrie's idea and I just love it. Marble is porous, unlike granite, so I have to keep an eye on it for stains, but I haven't had a problem, and this is a busy kitchen." Kirshman says, "More and more people are going to marble because it has a subtle appearance, and the new sealers make it easier to maintain; it takes just a few minutes to put the sealer on, let it set for 20 minutes and then wipe it off. Because of its porosity, it is recommended that marble be sealed regularly."

Lindsey says, "Although many people think wallpaper is an outdated product, I wanted to use it in some of the bathrooms and the desk area. Corrie helped me find some very fashion-forward designs that add a distinctive element to those rooms."

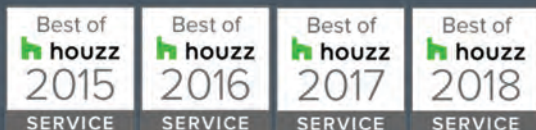


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Situated right off the kitchen, the brightly-lit dining area with its hickory floor can hold a lot of hungry guests or family members. Photo by Zolton Cohen



A fierce guardian stands watch on the practical porcelain tile floor in the mudroom. Photo by Zolton Cohen



A stainless steel range hood with wood accents, integrated into a patterned tile backsplash behind the cooktop, adds visual interest to the kitchen. Photo by Kristian Walker Photography

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In the master bedroom, a tray ceiling gives volume to the space while the gas-log fireplace provides both ambiance and extra heat in the winter. Photo by Zolton Cohen



A bench seating area in the master bathroom between two vanities is a convenient place to lay out clothing while getting dressed, or to sit while putting on shoes. Photo by Kristian Walker Photography



From the top of the gable almost to the floor, screening on the poolside porch lets breezes flow through yet keeps out evening's biting insects. Photo by Zolton Cohen

Lindsey beams when she talks about how she and Mark have their adult children living in the area. One daughter lives right next door with her husband and children. There is a pathway from the play area of that house to the pool at Lindsey and Mark's. Lindsey says, "The grandkids are here a lot. They raid my pantry and I love it when they come over for ice cream. In the summer, they're in the pool all of the time. I often have the family over for dinner, and I babysit for the grandkids three days a week. It keeps me active and busy; I think I'd be bored without it!"

After a busy day, Lindsey and Mark enjoy sitting on their front porch, relaxing and watching the children at play. Lindsey says, "We love our home. It is exactly how we had imagined it, thanks to all the gifted craftsman who helped bring our vision to life."



Designed to complement the style of the house, the pool room accommodates the pump, heater, a changing area, and off-season storage of pool tools and accessories. Photo by Zolton Cohen



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