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New leader takes the helm at arts center

By LORI GABLE - 10/28/2016

The Nazareth College Arts Center has a new leader. Rita Mannelli has been named executive director following a national search.

She replaces Susan Lusignan, who stepped down in January to take a newly created position as director of marketing and engagement at the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester.

The Nazareth College Arts Center serves as a performing arts venue for the campus as well as the community. It is also the home venue for performances of the Rochester City Ballet and Garth Fagan Dance.

Mannelli comes to Rochester from DePaul University in Chicago where she was director of marketing and communications for the School of Music since 2006. She has a background in nonprofit performing arts. Mannelli holds a master of arts in public relations and advertising from DePaul and a bachelor of arts degree in speech communication from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

She has served as a grant evaluator for the Missouri Arts Council, was a member of the DePaul Women's Network and is a member of Friends of the Arts in Brighton.

Her husband, Christopher Mannelli, was named executive director of Geva Theatre Center in January.

The couple met when they were working together in St. Louis at the Metro Theatre Co. where Rita served as marketing director and Christopher was the music director.

"It was my job at DePaul that brought us to Chicago and now it's my turn to follow him," Rita Mannelli said, noting how happy she is to have the family together in Rochester after living apart for months while she finalized her position at DePaul and readied the home for sale.

The couple has a 6-year-old son and a 3-year-old daughter. They now live in Brighton.

The Nazareth College Arts Center employs a staff of four full time: a marketing and publicity manager, box office manager, budget and facilities manager, and a technical director. There is an assistant technical director who works 10 months a year and a part-time staff manning positions on the production crew, in the box office and working as house managers.

As the leader of the arts center, Mannelli has the main role of steering the creative vision, while managing the financial and legal responsibilities associated with hiring performers.

Having been in her new position for one week, Mannelli said she is still in listening mode, trying to garner feedback from students, faculty, patrons and donors as she sets out to work on the programming for next season.

"It's about listening, about connecting with the community," Mannelli said. "What does it love about what we're doing and what should we be doing differently?"

She joins the team as the arts center marks its 50th anniversary. Mannelli led the centennial celebration of DePaul and looks forward to helping Nazareth draw a deeper connection to the community through celebrating this major milestone.

"It starts with the fall 2017 season, and we are just at the beginning stages of planning that season to highlight what Nazareth has meant to the community," Mannelli said. "It's exciting. It's an opportunity for celebration and for inviting people who remember when this first opened, and they came here as kids and now they can bring their grandkids. It's a way of welcoming everyone."

The advisory committee to oversee the 50th anniversary celebration has just been seated, President Daan Braveman said. It includes a cross-section of representatives of the local arts community and is co-chaired by Karen Gallina and Nan Hildebrandt. Honorary chairman is Emmy award-winning composer and alum Jack Allocco, known for his work on the daytime drama, "The Young and the Restless."

A cornerstone of the anniversary celebration will be the opening of a \$15 million music hall, Braveman said. It is slated to be a 550-seat theater with a stage large enough to hold the full orchestra and choral group.

"It will have the best acoustics in the region," Braveman said. "It will make an impact on the college, which will be wonderful for the music program here and also great for the community music program."

The quiet fundraising is underway, he said, with the public phase expected to begin in January. Construction is expected to begin in March with the goal of opening in March 2018. SWBR Architecture, Engineering & Landscape Architecture P.C. has been hired for the project.

The new music hall will be connected to Wilmot Hall with a patio between the two buildings and an all-glass lobby.

"It makes me think of a small version of Lincoln Center," Braveman said.

The investment in the arts center is a good one, he said, noting the music program is the second-largest major on campus.

The experience Mannelli brings, he added, through her work in midsize theater and a broad range in programming will elevate the arts center during a time it enters a new spotlight.

"The Nazareth Arts Center is the premier midsize theater in the region. Rita has experience in children's theater, and for many children here, their first exposure to the arts is Nazareth," Braveman said.

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