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Cumming Arts Center's new exhibit celebrates Forsyth County's history

BY ALEX GREEN
Forsyth County News staff

The Cumming Arts Center has opened a new exhibit that celebrates various places that carry special meaning to Forsyth County residents.

Spaces & Places opened Aug. 12 in partnership with the Historical Society of Cumming and Forsyth County, a nonprofit dedicated to preserving the cultural heritage of the area. While the exhibit is not limited to places important to the history of Forsyth County, the focus of the show is concentrated on this community's past.

A window into the past

Before starting their creations, many artists visited the Historical Society headquarters for inspiration. Located inside the old Cumming Public Schoolhouse, it is home to about 35,000 books containing information relevant to the area, including historic family files, information on Cherokee and Black history, military information, historic photographs and more.

"In most of the older aerial pictures, you can always find the church and know where you are, get the lay of the land," said Jimmy McConnell about First Baptist Church.

Keepers of history

McConnell and his wife, Martha, serve as co-presidents of the Historical Society. They both have deep ties to Forsyth County. Martha taught first grade at the historic Cumming Public Schoolhouse, which is now home to Tami's School Street Playhouse and Tami's Backstage Restaurant. The couple lives in Ducktown, right across from where Jimmy was raised.

Some families who have been in Forsyth County for generations visit the headquarters simply to see what the Historical Society has to offer, while others use the space as a chance to stroll down memory lane.

"I had a couple of ladies in one day, and one says, 'I used to live in that house where the Dairy Queen is,'" said Martha McConnell. "One lady said her family farm was where Walmart and Home Depot are now, and another was born near Northside Hospital before it was a hospital. There are so many memories here of places that used to be other places."

A county transformed

Forsyth County was founded in 1832 and remained a rural farming community for most of its history. Many of the historic buildings that made up downtown Cumming no longer exist.

"They were remodeled with asbestos," said Martha McConnell. "Later on, they were used as offices when the county started growing, but the workers started getting sick, and we eventually realized what the problem was."

The building that currently houses the Cumming Arts Center was one of the few downtown buildings that managed to survive. Built around 1905, it was first known as the Brannon Hotel. Once considered a luxurious home for several teachers, the house eventually fell into disrepair and was later purchased by the City of Cumming. The house was renovated, and its historic heritage was preserved.

"If anybody is dedicated enough to want to save something, it's a labor of love," said Cumming Arts Center board member Alison Sims.

Honoring old and new

The Spaces & Places exhibit is meant to honor the history of Forsyth County as well as the growing and diverse community it has become through visual, personal storytelling.

Exhibit organizers said they are excited to see many of the old downtown buildings represented through various artworks, but they also hope to learn more about what newer residents find special about the area amidst rapid growth.

"It's a joy to talk to new people about where they came from and why they're here," said Martha McConnell.

"We want to keep the history alive and inspire people," said Sims. "If I hadn't known about the Arts Center, I never would have learned so much about the history or about Forsyth County in general. It's easy to just live your life going to and from work."

The Cumming Arts Center is located at 111 Pilgrim Mill Road. For more information about the Spaces & Places exhibit or the Cumming Arts Center, visit cummingartscenter.com.

The Historical Society of Cumming and Forsyth County is located at 101 School Street. For more information, visit historicalforsyth.com/hscfc.

Cumming Arts Center 'Spaces & Places'

When: Aug. 12 - Oct. 17, 11 a.m. - 3 p.m. Wednesday - Saturday
Where: 111 Pilgrim Mill Road.



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Alison Sims (center) has worked closely with Jimmy and Martha McConnell to make this event possible.



The Cumming Arts Center features local artists in a historic downtown Cumming building.

