

A new place for connecting in Galesburg

by Peter Schwartzman, a founding member, The Center

2/28/08

Eight months in the making, The Center opens its doors this week for the first time. Centrally-located in downtown Galesburg (123 S. Cherry St. — across from the public library), The Center provides a space for members of the Galesburg and surrounding community to gather, connect, and learn from one another. There is a tremendous amount of wisdom, vitality and spirit in our community. Yet, many people are disconnected from one another by artificial barriers and fixed patterns of behavior. This disconnection leads some to feel apathetic, isolated, and powerless. In order for Galesburg to flourish and prosper in the coming years, it is very important that its members reconnect and seek mutually supportive solutions to our pressing concerns. The Center hopes to foster new connections and provide opportunities for productive engagement among Galesburg's various communities and individuals.

There are many existing institutions and organizations (both governmental as well as private) that provide critical services to our community. The Center has no intentions to replace these institutions or their functions. Rather, The Center hopes to support these institutions and establish new opportunities for people to share ideas and collaborate on worthwhile projects. Here are a few ways that current members of The Center have thought this connection and collaboration might happen: (1) watching films about topics relevant to cities and towns like ours and talking about their implications for local issues; (2) offering local kids activities that are educational and confidence-boosting; (3) providing resources to one another (through trading, sharing, charity, creating local currencies & free stores); (4) playing games and establishing new friendships; (5) sharing local/personal histories; (6) enjoying local artists' offerings; (7) tapping into local knowledge in areas that can support sustainability, health, and well-being; and, (8) directing visitors and other members to local agencies, institutions, and organizations that offer assistance and guidance. These are just some of the ways The Center hopes to be used. Other ideas are expected to come from community members (such as you).

The Center is an organic enterprise, growing and reconstituting itself all the time. The main tenet of The Center is: Connection through Volunteerism, Community Building and Empowerment. Connecting is how species survive and prosper. Humans are no different. When times are tough, it is the whole that protects the weak. We need to strengthen our networks of support. The Center has no paid staff, and very little budget to speak of. Thus, it is imperative for its activities and services to come by way of volunteers. This may sound idealistic but, if the first eight months are any indication, volunteers will make The Center a vital and energizing facility. As more and more people organize and come to The Center's functions (all of which are being organized by volunteers), a new community spirit will undoubtedly be formed. Evolving out of this spirit will be new collaborations and associations, both indications that community building is occurring. In the end, by working together and developing new connections, people will be empowered to solve their own problems and/or fulfill their needs by using the resources available to them reliably and effectively.

In the above ways, The Center offers a different model from many found today. It believes in the power of individuals working together to value each other's wisdom and spirit and as a means to generate solutions to existing problems. It expresses this belief in its open door policy and its lack of religious, economic, political, ethnic, or social affiliation. It relies on human confidence, ingenuity, spirit, persistence, humility, and a sense of purpose. In this way, it doesn't depend on fundraising (though, donations are always welcome) or a paid staff. In the end, The Center depends on you and others like you for its strength, character, and vision. The Center will become what you make of it. Come out to one of its functions and see for yourself what The Center can offer you and what you can offer it.

How do you become a member of The Center? This is about as easy as it comes. Just show up! There are no membership fees/dues or other required expenses. Since last summer, volunteers from various communities of Galesburg and surrounding areas have convened weekly to make The Center a location fit for gatherings and activities supported by community members — which means YOU. Central to its mission, The Center's future depends on the involvement of the community. Thus far, around fifty members of the community have volunteered at/for The Center in a variety of ways — busting out plaster, painting walls, building scaffolding, passing out invitations, building a website, planning and organizing activities, baking cookies, taking minutes, etc. It has been a wonderful experience to see so many people express their hope and respect for the community in these ways.

While we don't have regular hours yet, we do have several things going on. The Center's members convene twice a week (Sunday and Wednesday) to discuss and plans its future. Everyone in the community is welcome at these gatherings. Beyond interactive meetings, The Center will be having several exciting kick-off events in the next few weeks (see insert). We are hoping folks will attend these events as well as spread the word about them. Future events are in the works and The Center always needs people to join and participate. If you want to get involved in The Center, please contact us by email: connect@thecenteringalesburg.org, or mail: 123 S. Cherry St., Galesburg, IL 61401. We also use our mail slot at the front door to receive feedback and offers of volunteerism from the community. The Center's website (www.thecenteringalesburg.org) also contains its latest information and happenings.

Come get connected and acquainted with new neighbors. Bring your friends. Let's be part of something special. Let's make Galesburg the best place in the world to live.