

Cornelius News

Justin Dionne: Accustomed to the leading role in public theatre

By [Newsroom](#) · July 7, 2017 · [Post a comment](#)

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By Dave Yochum. Justin Dionne has been cast in the role of a lifetime. At age 32, he is the new executive director of the Cornelius Arts Center. The multimillion-dollar facility will be built in the center of town, just to the west of the Police Station.

He's played this part before: Dionne was the managing artistic director of Lee Street Theatre in Salisbury. He led a successful \$1.5 million capital campaign to renovate a historic warehouse into a performing arts center that helped transform a run-down section of the historic city.

He helped launch the theater in a living room back in 2008 in his home town.

Cornelius already feels like home, he says, less than three weeks into his new job. <http://corneliustoday.com/wp/arts-center-lands-100k-courtesy-bradford-legislature>

“People are welcoming us...it feels like home already. What an exciting time to be in North Mecklenburg. I’m honored to come aboard, it’s a key step. Cornelius is a vibrant and growing town, everyone here becomes fast friends and they care about the community,” he says.

He and his wife Rachel—and their Basset Hound named Charlotte plus two cats, The Mistress Fae Kittae and Voodoo Magic—have moved into The Junction at Antiquity Apartments, where they can see the site of the future arts center from their balcony.

One of Dionne’s goals is to make the arts center concept resonate with “all our town, east and west.”

“Art knows no boundaries. We have the opportunity to make this an incredible facility. The art will serve young and old inside and outside of our town,” he says. Indeed, town officials see the arts center as an economic development catalyst that will bring people from all over the region to the center of town. Envisioned are not just galleries, studios and performances, but street festivals that will rejuvenate a town center that only 20 years ago was dominated by an unsightly textile mill.

The new arts center will cost millions of dollars to build; the town already has bond monies set aside and approved by voters to the tune of \$4 million. The 1.85 acre arts center site, which includes parts of the original cotton gin, was purchased by the town for just under \$1.5 million.

NC Rep. John Bradford in late June helped secure \$100,000 in state funding for the new arts center, which will be a non-profit overseen by its own board of directors. The official relationship will have the town own the property and lease it to the arts center’s governing body.

Bradford, on the steps of Town Hall, said arts center performances will help bring people together, forging community-wide bonds. [Story June 28: <http://corneliustoday.com/wp/arts-center-lands-100k-courtesy-bradford-legislature>]

A dozen firms from around the country, including New York City, have responded to requests for proposals to design the building. The proposals are expected to be reviewed in July and an architect selected in August.

It will have flex-use theater space, galleries and studios. Dionne, as programmer in chief, will look for local, regional and even national talent for performances. They could be plays from North Carolina writers, one-person performances, readings, music.

Dionne, whose first regular job at age 15 was a dishwasher at Western Steer in Salisbury, is a performer himself. His favorite role as an actor is split between Lt. Daniel Kaffee in local productions of “A Few Good Men” and Jamie Wellerstein in “The Last Five Years.”

He sang with his parents, Lynn and Chuck Dionne, who performed in their church in Salisbury. After graduating from Catawba College he spent a few months working for Stageworks Theatre based out of Charlotte touring theatre and teaching kids writing skills using theatre.

“Touring wasn’t quite the thing for me,” he says. Dionne, a cyclist and weight-lifter, went on to work for an HVAC company for a summer and eventually became a legal assistant and server before

moving to New York City, and ultimately finding his way back to Salisbury and the formation of the Lee Street Theater.

When he left Lee Street he was producing a 10-show season of theatre/cabaret performances that each usually had a six-night run; five to seven concerts; two or three interactive theatre experiences off-site; and various productions such as "Voices From the Margin," a partnership with The Covenant Community and Human Relations Council of Salisbury that presented works on everything from multi-media pieces that were a launching pad for community-wide discussions on racism, education and homelessness.

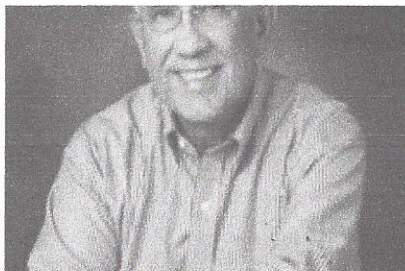
Community leaders have already taken note. Denis Bilodeau, a member of the arts center board, said this: "I am very impressed with his energy and drive to meet the diverse population that surrounds the Art Center location. He clearly wants to deliver programs and performances that will resonate with all."

Take your seats, the show is about to begin.

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