

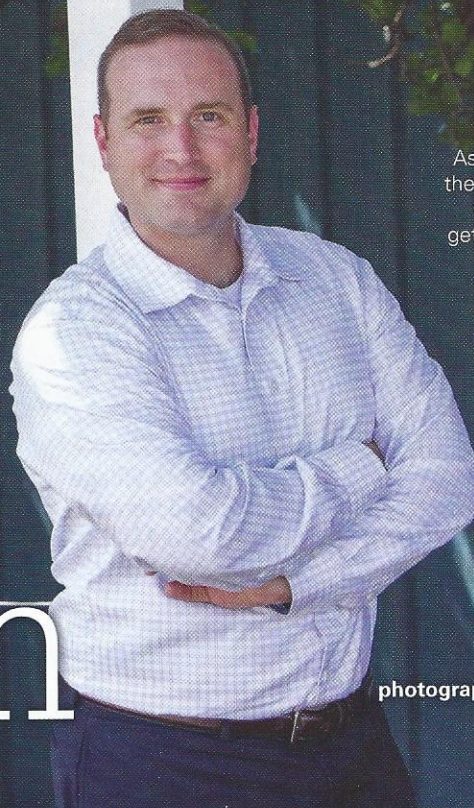
future home of the
**NEW CORNELIUS
 ARTS CENTER**

www.corneliusarts.org

Artistic Direction

Justin Dionne
 spearheads a new
 creative hub for the
 Lake Norman region

As executive director of the future Cornelius Arts Center, Justin Dionne gets to play the role of a lifetime.



by Sam Boykin

photography by Brant Waldeck

Salisbury native Justin Dionne was first bitten by the performing arts bug while playing trumpet in *Return to the Forbidden Planet*, a rock 'n' roll version of *The Tempest* set in outer space.

"I loved the lights and the crowd and all that, but what really grabbed me was that I felt like I was part of a cool club," he remembers. "It was a true community, and I loved it."

That high school experience set Dionne on a career path that culminated recently into being named the executive director of the Cornelius Arts Center, a new multifaceted facility that's poised to become the cultural hub for the Lake Norman region.

A natural progression

Dionne, 32, is head fundraiser, cheerleader and creative force behind the project, which started in 2013 when voters approved a \$4 million bond referendum to create a new town arts center. The facility received another boost in June when North Carolina Rep. John Bradford, a Cornelius resident, announced he had secured \$100,000 from the state to help launch the Cornelius Arts Center.

"This is a great start, but we still have a lot of fundraising to do," says Dionne.

The center will be located on a 1.85-acre parcel on Catawba Avenue next to Potts Barber Shop that includes a century-old cotton gin, which

will be incorporated into the facility. Cornelius owns the land and will lease the yet-to-be-built venue to the Cornelius Art Center, which will operate as an independent nonprofit. While still in the planning stages, the center is expected to have a flexible theater space designed to host plays, live music and dance performances. There are also plans for a ceramics center, art studios and galleries.

When local officials started the search for someone to take charge of the Cornelius Arts Center earlier this year, Dionne was at Florida State University with his wife, Rachel, pursuing a master's degree in theater management. He landed in Florida following a four-year stint as managing artistic

director at Lee Street Theatre, an award-winning venue in Salisbury that he helped create and build from the ground up.

It was all a natural progression for Dionne, whose parents both played guitar and sang at area churches when he was growing up. Eventually Dionne and his siblings — he's the oldest of four — started performing with their parents, and Dionne discovered he had a real passion and talent for music. He took up the guitar and trumpet, played in his middle and high school band, and eventually started performing at Piedmont Players Theatre in Salisbury, where he was part of the previously mentioned *Return to the Forbidden Planet* musical.

A good start

Dionne went to Catawba College in Salisbury and studied theater arts. During the summers, he performed in various summer stock productions, including *Horn in the West*, a popular outdoor drama in Boone.

"It didn't pay great, and I rented this tiny apartment with bunkbeds, but it was still a great experience," he recalls. Dionne quit college for a while to pursue acting full time, but he quickly realized that meant constantly moving and working from gig to gig. "The lifestyle just wasn't for me," he says. "I wanted to be part of a community and be with family and friends."

After he graduated from college, Dionne continued to seek out new adventures. He moved briefly to New York and then Chicago, where he pursued acting gigs and gained valuable experience in the

technical side of the business, including stage production and light design. He also had stints working as an HVAC technician, legal assistant and carpenter.

Eventually, he moved back home to Salisbury, and in 2010 landed the job of technical director at Piedmont Players Theatre, where he first got his start. About a year later he was promoted to marketing director and became increasingly immersed in the local scene — directing a few plays and serving on the board of Lee Street Theatre, which at the time was a fledgling Salisbury group that rented space for its performances.

It was during this time that he and a friend, Bill Greene, hatched the idea of expanding Lee Street Theatre into a viable organization that could offer other companies a performance venue. The duo put together a proposal, and

in 2012, with Dionne working as managing artistic director, launched a \$1.5 million capital campaign to transform an old warehouse in downtown Salisbury into a performing arts space.

The Lee Street Theatre & Performing Arts Center opened in November 2013 and soon emerged as a pioneering leader in the revitalization of the Railwalk Arts District in downtown Salisbury.

More than art

Four years later, looking for the next adventure, Dionne and Rachel headed to Tallahassee, where Dionne started pursuing a master's degree at Florida State University. But shortly before they left, he did some consulting work for the Cornelius Arts Center and immediately recognized the nascent project as a unique and promising opportunity.

"While in Florida, I kept tabs

"I wanted to be part of a community and be with family and friends," says Justin Dionne.

on the center," he says. "When I found out they were searching for an executive director, I threw my hat in the ring."

Dionne landed the job following a grueling two-month interview process and officially started June 4. He and Rachel settled in Antiquity just across Highway 115 from the Cornelius Arts Center site. He says one of the best perks about his new job is the area's sense of community, which he believes will be greatly enhanced by the new arts center.

"This is about more than just art," he says. "We are establishing a regional anchor that will help spur growth and make this area more attractive. This is a planning process that started years ago, and it's really exciting to see that original vision coming to fruition." ■

DEBRA MOSS

LAKE NORMAN

704-905-8718



Want this Dream View?

You'll find it at 21005 Island Forest

\$630,000



178 Beaten Path \$740,000

Easy entertaining in this full brick waterfront beauty with finished basement, Bonus and Private Trex Dock, 3 Bdrm, 3.5 Bath over 3000 sf. Tons of natural light! Kitchen with Granite and stainless! Stamp-concrete pathways, Fenced yard. Basement with full bar and bath.

TheLakeNormanHome.com

SOUTHERN HOMES
of THE CAROLINAS

dmossonlake@gmail.com