

NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH WILMETTE



BRIAN CASSELLA/TRIBUNE PHOTOS

An area once known as No Man's Land — a triangle of unincorporated property where Wilmette ends and Kenilworth begins — now is dubbed Plaza del Lago and hosts a day spa and a bike shop, among other retailers. Originally, the area was developed as one of the first shopping centers in the country designed for automobile use.

Wilmette? You bet

By LAUREN VIERA | Tribune reporter

"It's not like other North Shore suburbs." So say the folks who have ties to the village of Wilmette, nestled among Evanston, Skokie, Kenilworth and Glenview like a favorite sibling, always the center of attention.

Nobody wants to believe that his or her hometown or place of work is a cookie-cutter replica of its neighbors. But the folks who claim Wilmette is unique may just have something. Between its history as a pioneering plot of prairie and its 21st century community

activism (the Wilmette Theatre is on its way to becoming entirely community supported), the village of 27,500 does more than look good on paper.

We're taking a closer look at Wilmette in our continuing Neighborhood Watch series.

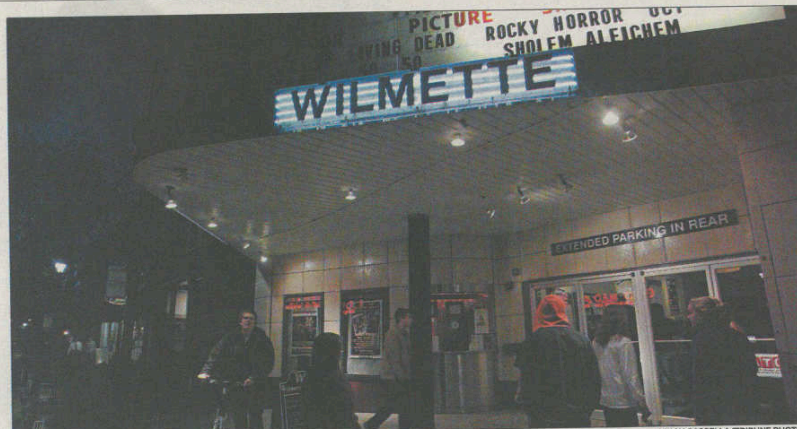
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Community beckons with arts, culture atypical for North Shore



Wilmette is home to the scenic Langdon Beach.

COVER STORY



BRIAN CASSELLA/TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Wilmette Theatre has a rotation of two to three weekly live shows interspersed with daily film screenings. It recently gained nonprofit status.

'Not like other towns'

Arts, culture thrive in open-minded North Shore village

By LAUREN VIERA
Tribune reporter

Ask a dozen outsiders what they know about Wilmette's arts and culture scene, and chances are they'll arrive at the same reply: the Wilmette Theatre. Founded in 1921 on the village's main drag and renovated and restored in the past

handful of years under new ownership, the theater represents what might set Wilmette apart from its neighbors on the North Shore: a burgeoning (yes, burgeoning) arts and culture scene.

According to Wilmette Theatre owner/director and 22-year resident Carole Dibo, the community's culture thrives thanks to an open-mindedness she hasn't seen elsewhere.

"There's a willingness to take a risk and try something different," Dibo said of Wilmette's residents. "When you have the '03-something-year-old (opera crowd) coming to see 'Co-ed Prison Sluts,' you know you're doing something right."

There's no evidence to prove that such a diverse offering of entertainment in neighboring Skokie or Glenview wouldn't be similarly embraced. But for Dibo and others who are tilling creative ground in Wilmette, which sits amid some of the wealthiest suburbs of Chicago, it's also important that the community is affluent enough to support that creativity.

That much is apparent in the Wilmette Historical Museum, housed in the former Gross Point Village Hall building on Ridge Road, dating to 1896. The story of how the museum came to inhabit that building is a testament in itself. Picked first by thousands of signatures and eventually a million-dollar capital campaign, the museum and its affiliated historical society produce several rotating exhibitions annually in addition to housing an immaculately displayed collection of local lore.

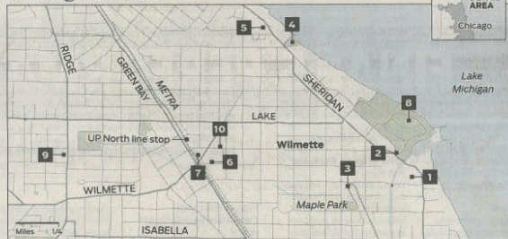
That much of Wilmette's reputation — the money, the celebration of heritage — isn't news. "It would be difficult to spin this as a changing community," said Joe Hinkel, 62, president of the Wilmette Historical Society and a 28-year resident of the village. "Wilmette was built for comfortable people." He named two obvious neighboring friends with money — Evanston's Northwestern University and Wilmette's New Trier High School — both of which have been historically supportive of the arts. A third, Hinkel said, is perhaps less obvious to nonresidents: the Wilmette Park District.

For weeks on end during the warmer months, Wilmette's Gillson Park is host to live music and theater performances in its grand amphitheater, Wallace Bowl, all gratis. It's hardly exclusive to symphonies in the park, either, and Dibo's words resonate: "There's risk-taking involved, even in public programming. Last summer, a tribute to ABBA opened up Wallace Bowl's 'Starlight Theatre' series, and a Sinatra swing night helped wrap up the end of the season in August. In between came everything from Jamaican



The Wilmette Historical Museum, top, and its historical society produce several rotating exhibitions annually. Pamela Sue Fox, above right, leads a tap class at Studio North Academy of the Performing Arts. The Baha'i Temple of Faith, above left, is the main tourist attraction in the area. The temple was built entirely by its pupils, without fundraising or public funds.

Visiting Wilmette



- 1 Baha'i House of Worship
100 Linden Ave., 847-853-2300, bahaius.com
- 2 Bicentennial Ash Plaque
(Tree fell down in storm this summer)
700 Michigan Ave.
- 3 CTA Purple Line: Linden
340 Linden Ave.
- 4 Langdon Beach/Langdon Park
1398 Sheridan Road
- 5 Plaza del Lago
1200 Wilmette Ave., 847-251-0362, plazadelago.com
- 6 Studio North Academy of the Performing Arts
131 Greenleaf, 847-251-7827, studionorthacademy.com
- 7 Village Hall
1200 Wilmette Ave., 847-251-2700, wilmette.com
- 8 Wallace Bowl, Gillson Park
609 Ridge Road, 847-853-7656, 847-256-9656
- 9 Wilmette Historical Museum
609 Ridge Road, 847-853-7656, wilmettehistory.org
- 10 Wilmette Theatre
1122 Central Ave., 847-251-7424, wilmettetheatre.com

calypso tributes to a production of the Broadway musical "Carousel." This, down the street from the otherworldly Baha'i House of Worship — one of only seven in the world.

That massive, ornate, white, wedding-cake-like structure was built entirely by its pupils, without benefit of village funds or fundraising. It meant construction took 50 years to complete, Hinkel explained.

"The whole building was built from contributions from the Baha'ians," Hinkel said. "They didn't accept any debt." Nestled in

Wilmette's residential streets slowly bending toward Lake Michigan, the temple sits quietly (and massively) across the street from residential houses, almost as if in conversation. During World War II, pilots used it as a land marker. Hinkel recalled seeing it via passenger jet during his last plane ride home.

"It's just a wonderful spot, and I think most people in Wilmette are quite proud and happy to have it here," Hinkel said. "The practicality is that they don't get 2,000 people for their services. They tend to be smaller gatherings and

public functions. (The temple) is known as a tourist spot more than anything else."

Other than the temple, tourist attractions in Wilmette are next to nil. Unless you count No Man's Land.

Once upon a time, No Man's Land was the name for the triangle of unincorporated property where Wilmette ends and Kenilworth begins, wedged up against the lake across from Langdon Beach. During Prohibition, the area was developed to house one of the first shopping centers in the country designed for automobile

use. Opened in 1928 as Spanish Court, the plaza rose as an entertainment hub with its grand Teatro del Lago, hosting films as well as live bands.

According to Hinkel, who's researched the area extensively, it was quite the place to have a Saturday night date.

Eighty years later, the shopping center, now dubbed Plaza del Lago, hosts a day spa and a bike shop, among other retailers. Crate & Barrel's first chain store was there until last spring when it ended a 43-year lease.

All that's left of No Man's Land is a titular pizza parlor.

"We do everything we can to pass down the history," said Joe Moss, property owner and president of Moss Realty, which has owned the plaza since 1960. Born the year after Spanish Court was built, Moss has written a book on its history, and carries on its entertainment tradition by hosting concerts during the warm months and holiday festivities when it's cold. His son owns No Man's Land Plaza & Grill. But these days, if you want to go dancing in Wilmette, you're better off taking lessons.

The place to take them is Studio North Academy of the Performing Arts, which opened last summer on Greenleaf Avenue. Its schedule is packed from morning preschool ballet to afternoon hip-hop and evening rhythm tap classes, taught by a team of instructors led by owner Pamela Sue Fox. For Fox, a 36-year resident of the North Shore, Wilmette provided opportunity a lack of a local performance studio but the affluence to support one.

"This particular community is so supportive and embracing of the arts," Fox said, adding that she shopped around before settling on opening her studio in Wilmette. "We've only been open a couple of months, and I've had adults come in and say, 'I really want to support you, can I take voice lessons?' I don't think there's enough of an arts community here... but I do think our presence here is going to help change that."

For Dibo and the Wilmette Theatre, which recently gained nonprofit status and will relaunch as a community-owned organization Wednesday, Wilmette's arts community is still defining itself. Dibo recalled that four years ago, when she launched the theater's related actors center studio, there were seven participants. This term, there are 274.

"It became clear that the community had spoken," Dibo said of the exponential enrollment, adding that the community's allegiance to and involvement with the theater was part of the rationale for changing to nonprofit status. North Shore Community Bank is the primary sponsor, and programming will remain consistent with the theater's current rotation of two to three weekly live shows interspersed with daily film screenings.

"I think Wilmette has a reputation as just another North Shore town, when in fact it is a lot of levels and layers and colors," Dibo said. "What surprises me about it is the open-mindedness of the community up here. We have drag-queen shows, and all the PTA moms come. We're not like other towns."

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