

Vernonia Community Theater Profiles Part 2: Mark Brown and Kinnell Steward are Building Community

The Vernonia Community Theater (VCT) was formed in 2010 with the intention of bringing the performing arts to Vernonia. The group and their productions involve both youth and adults and provide a creative outlet for members of the Vernonia community to express their artistic talents. In this series of profiles over the next few months leading up to the VCT's third production in the spring of 2012, Vernonia's Voice will visit with several key members that make up the VCT.

The formation of the Vernonia Community Theater (VCT) was not just the idea of the two people profiled here. The idea for a community theater came from a group of people; Mark Brown and Kinnell Steward just turned out to be the two key people with the motivation and inspiration to bring it to life. And now the VCT is producing exactly the kind of results and consequences that were hoped for when the original idea was formulated.

Brown and Steward, both members of the Vernonia Community Church, were instrumental in the formation of the VCT. In April of 2010 the two organized a meeting, asking members of the community to come share their talents and ideas for bringing a Community Theater/Performing Arts Center to Vernonia. "We all have something we can contribute to make it happen!," stated the email. Steward and Brown, by inviting the community to come together to form a theater group, were building on a plan they helped develop the previous year.

Both Brown and Steward were part of an evening program in 2009, held at their church that featured exercises in "Asset Mapping" designed to explore

opportunities to build community within Vernonia. That evening eventually led to the idea for a community theater. "That's what Asset Mapping does," says Brown. "It gets people excited about what they already have."

Asset Mapping is a tool that is used to identify local resources and ideas and leverage them so a community can move forward by widening its circle of participants. Asset Mapping can encourage collaboration by empowering and motivating citizens to create solutions that focus on existing strengths.

"As we worked through the exercises in groups, we came back together with different ideas," explains Brown, "but when we stepped back and looked at it later, the idea of a community theater sort of came to the surface."

Steward and Brown took it upon themselves to move the idea forward and sent out the email asking for people interested in graphic design, lighting and stage set construction, drama, music and singing, directing, sewing, sound, writing plays, costuming, and teaching. That first meeting and all the local talent it uncovered eventually led to the formation of the VCT and their first production of "Robin Hood" and then last December's "Expose": Holiday Celebrities Tell All."

Which is just how the Asset Mapping exercises were designed to work.

Brown and Steward wanted to point out that the upcoming VCT production will be one of the final events to take place on the Washington Grade School stage. "This will be somewhat historic for this community," says Brown.

That production, "Vaudeville's My Home" is a semi-musical comedy set in 1920's. Auditions for both adult and youth aged thirteen and up will be

held January 24 and 25 at 7:00 PM in the Washington Grade School Gym.

Steward, who grew up in a small town like Vernonia, has additional motivation for creating and working with the VCT. Steward says she participated in speech and drama while in high school and currently has a high school aged son "I loved it!," she says. "We have limited drama opportunities at our school. And this [the VCT] opens the door for that."

Brown, who works for the Vernonia School District in the Maintenance Department and has a daughter who is a senior this year, has a lot of contact with students and school programs. "I played sports when I was in high school but I see a whole group of kids in our schools, who, if they aren't playing sports, are set aside and left out of the equation," says Brown. "With the opportunities for art and music and drama that the VCT can provide, it can really grab that group of kids and says 'Here's something for you if you want to be involved in it, whether it's on stage, backstage or side stage—there is something for everybody to do. It's one of those things where everyone can get involved on some level and feel like they have contributed.'"

In the past, students from the Graphic Design program at the high school have created the posters for the VCT productions. There is always a need to design, create and build sets. And Steward who loves to sew, says there is always a need for help with costumes. "We don't always need help creating costumes from scratch," she says. "We might just need some help with minor alterations."

Both Brown and Steward see the VCT as a way of connecting the school and the community. "They're already so closely linked together," says Brown.

"It's been really marvelous to see the people drawn out from the community and see them get connected."

Steward especially enjoys the idea of seeing people come together around a common interest to accomplish something. "You may not do anything any other time of the year together, but you have a common theme," she says. "And when the curtain opens and you see the audience and you hear them laugh when you expect them to laugh, that makes it all worthwhile."

Brown also appreciates the way the VCT brings people together and builds lasting relationships. "We have a chance to see both kids and parents gain skills and build confidence, and then you see the different relationships that develop between all the people that come in and out of these productions—those don't go away," says Brown. "This kind of community interaction is the poster child, for me, for collaboration."

Brown notes that the idea of collaboration on a play production extends to the school community. "Kids who might just have known of each other before have now worked together and spent time with each other," he says. "Now when they see each other on campus they know each other better so they understand and respect each other more."

"They may not hang out together," adds Steward, "but it has opened a door."

And that is exactly what an Asset Mapping exercise is supposed to do—creating opportunities to bring people within a community together by identifying their strengths and helping develop new ideas.

Which is exactly what has happened with the VCT.

Made in Vernonia Moves to New Location

Made in Vernonia started as an experiment. Kathy Larsen, an active member of the Vernonia community, opened a tiny shop on Madison, taking over the waiting room of New Day Massage to display and sell the work of local artists and craftspeople. Heather Lewis donated the space for the trial run and no one knew that the little business would become so popular so quickly.

Vernonia's artists and crafters began delivering their unique creations to the shop and the residents of Vernonia and neighboring towns (including Portland) began stocking up for the holidays with one-of-a-kind purchases. The interest and support of the Vernonia community in particular led to a decision to expand

and move to the corner of Bridge and Jefferson. The move will enable Larsen to expand her inventory, offer classes and develop a resource center for residents interested in exploring their creativity.

Larsen has always been interested in providing local talent with a means of bringing their products to market and has been involved in organizing such events as First Friday and the Vernonia Open Air Market. Made in Vernonia will enable crafters and artists to display their work all year and give visitors access to hand-crafted products beyond the summer months. An added benefit of accessing local talent is that hard-earned dollars are spent growing our local economy and supporting our community.

Made in Vernonia will open in Mid-January in its new location and will offer a wide variety of practical and fanciful products, from jewelry and knit socks to fishing flies and fine art. Crafters and artists are invited to stop by and discuss the marketing of their wares from single treasures to substantial inventories. Visitors and shoppers are encouraged to check out the new location and evolving goods including items for the whole family. Special requests are happily accepted and Larsen hopes to connect local crafters and artists to residents who are looking for something special or unique.

Thank you, Vernonia, for supporting arts in your community!

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