

The Power of One: A Report on Starkville Community Theatre

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Starkville Community Theatre (SCT) is an organization formed because one person had a dream. That one person inspired many others to join her in turning her dream into a reality. Jan Zeppelin moved to Starkville in the early 1970s and missed having a community theatre. She felt the need to exercise creativity and knew there had to be others in the community yearning to do the same. In early 1978 Zeppelin met with the Chamber of Commerce Director, Emily Jones, about forming a community theatre/acting guild for Starkville. The Chamber of Commerce Director and its Board agreed. Shortly after that meeting Zeppelin began placing advertisements in the Starkville Daily News announcing the first meeting of Starkville Community Theatre (SCT). The first meeting was held at the Chamber of Commerce office and approximately fifty people came. It was there the Starkville Community Theatre was born!

In its infancy SCT was a traveling theatre and performed wherever they could find space. They used facilities throughout the Starkville area. The group's first performance was held in what is now the Ramada Inn building. They did many of their initial performances in the building that formerly housed Fred's Dollar Store on South Lafayette Street. Other performances were done in the Sullivan's Office supply building, the Greensboro Center and at Mississippi State University's School of Veterinary Medicine Auditorium. SCT would place ads in the paper announcing casting and would immediately begin asking for costumes and props. They got the community involved in their productions. It was because of the community's support and donations that the SCT flourished. During these first years of operations the group gained momentum and began gaining notoriety as a reputable theatre capable of fabulous performances.

As SCT grew it became more difficult to find a place to perform and use for four to six weeks at a time to build sets, practice, and hold its performances. The group had gained a small

but loyal audience. It was time for SCT to find a more permanent location. In the early 1980's Starkville Community Theatre took an old, vacant school building, now called the Greensboro Center, and with a little work turned it into a theatre as well as a community center. The group held their plays there during the mid-1980s. The group was active in lobbying for the passage of a bond in 1985 that was critical to the success of renovating the building. Once the bond was passed rent grew too pricey and scheduling conflicts too abundant. The placement of permanent offices in the building was the breaking point in SCT's agreement with the school district. After almost eighteen years of traveling performances, and proving itself as a respectable acting group, SCT decided to purchase a more permanent home. After many unsuccessful bids on other buildings in town, SCT purchased the Katz building at 108 East Main Street in 1995, a building purposefully in the heart of Starkville. When they first occupied the building they were the only building downtown that was open at night. Soon after the purchase was completed loyal SCT volunteers began remodeling the building. They installed seats, built a stage, and literally transformed the retail shop into a small but wonderful 89 seat theatre. Just four year later, in 1999, the volunteers renovated the second floor of their building to better utilize the space. They created usable storage, a kitchenette, and a costume shop.

Starkville Community Theatre has grown from a group struggling to survive to a thriving organization with a promising future. SCT currently stages four productions per year, one children's production, and a fund-raising musical. Theatre season-ticket sales have grown from just over a 100 in the late 1980s to just over 620 in 2006. Season-ticket sales have grown 21% in the last calendar year alone. What started as a single showing of each performance of each production has grown to nine performances of each production. In 2005, the cast presented fourteen performances of the musical *Smoke on the Mountain* due to the popularity of their

musicals. If you ask any long-term volunteer what has caused this growth they will tell you two things: first, a dedicated group of volunteers and second grant money that has been provided by Mississippi Arts Commission (MAC).

In 2003 the theatre was literally bursting at its seams. The board of directors decided it was time to renovate their existing space to allow for more storage, a dressing room, a green room and usable set design space. A couple of volunteers, namely Clyde and Marsha Williams, wrote a grant proposal for a "Building for Arts" grant from MAC. They were awarded a 60/40 matching grant in the amount of \$59,120. SCT volunteers worked hard to raise the matching funds, \$40,000, to fulfill the grant requirements. That fall SCT broke ground! The newly renovated theatre is providing the group much needed space. Since the initial MAC grant theatre volunteers have written two additional "Building for Arts" grant proposals and have won both. In 2004 they received \$13,500 and in 2005 they received \$25,000. Both of these grants are structured in the 60/40 matching grant style. All said the theatre has received a \$175,000 face lift over the past three years. The volunteers have not allowed funding this growth to pose any problems. They are dedicated to doing whatever necessary to grow the theatre.

In addition to the building grants SCT has received, they also receive program grants from MAC. In 1998 they started a children's theatre and acting program. Each summer they have a month long emphasis for children and have really grown the program the last seven years. In 2001 they received \$7,500 in grant money for this program. Each year following SCT received a lesser amount because the children's program is becoming more self-sufficient. This year MAC awarded SCT a \$1,500 grant.

One person had a vision and worked hard to inspire others to join her in making her dream a reality. Today that dream lives on in with each curtain call at the theatre. Great

communities achieve many successes because of the power of one. One person gathered volunteers around her to form Starkville Community Theatre. One person realized grant opportunities were available for the theatre and gathered volunteers to help write proposals. One actor can be the star of the play. One volunteer can make a huge difference in the success of Starkville Community Theatre. SCT continues to rely on volunteers. If you can breathe you can be a volunteer! They need set designers, construction crews, box office workers, ushers, actors, and most importantly an audience. The Starkville Community Theatre really is an organization that epitomizes the power of one! One person can make a difference in a community and Jan Zeppelin's influence in getting SCT started has done just that.

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