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A Space for Music, Paintings and a Few Fire Trucks

By **TAMMY LA GORCE**

WEST WINDSOR, N.J.

WHEN the [Princeton Symphony Orchestra's](#) Bravo! wind ensemble put on a show here recently, alarms did not sound. Sirens did not trill. Instead, excerpts from "Peter and the Wolf," by Prokofiev, and "Fantasia 2000," from the Disney film, performed by the ensemble's bassoonist, oboist and clarinetist floated among a rapt audience of about 40 people seated in folding chairs.

The musicians and their audience, however, were well positioned in the unlikely event of an emergency.

Since September, when the [West Windsor Arts Center](#) opened here in a former firehouse after eight years of planning by the [West Windsor Arts Council](#) and township officials including Mayor Shing-Fu Hsueh, it has shared a 7,200-square-foot building with the township's first responders.

Three bays at the front of the historic 1930s-era building are given over to fire engines used by the first responders, and stacks of emergency-readiness supplies sit on the other side of a wall from fine artworks hung in the 52-by-38-foot performance space.

The situation may not be ideal, said Eduardo Garcia, 70, executive director of the nonprofit West Windsor Arts Council, which runs the center, but neither is it a big deal. "We're just sharing the space until they find somewhere else to go," he said. "And we're fortunate to finally be in the building after being an arts center without walls for seven years."

The building underwent a nine-month renovation paid for with \$250,000 raised by a continuing arts council capital campaign. It has a restored pressed-tin ceiling, gleaming wood floors in the performance space, a sound system, lighting, a stage and supplies for a classroom that has already

seen jewelry-making, drawing and other classes and workshops. Scheduled performances include the children's recording artist [Yosi](#) on Feb. 13, the folk artist and songwriter [Spook Handy](#) on Feb. 26 and the classical guitarist and vocalist [Mark Bodino](#) on March 12.

The West Windsor Arts Council was created in 2003 as an outgrowth of a task force that Mayor Hsueh formed in 2002 to study the best use of the firehouse space, which had been vacated by the [Princeton Junction Volunteer Fire Company](#) that same year when it moved to a new building. (Princeton Junction is part of West Windsor.) Since then, the council's 15-member board has organized about 25 free annual events in town, including a summer music series in Nassau Park. The free music events will continue, Mr. Garcia said, in addition to the performances and classes at the center.

Charging for events has been "a transition, something we've had to get used to," he said. So far, they have included an Indian dance concert with the [Nrithyanjali Institute of Dance](#) in October; a one-man show, "Underneath the Lintel," starring Michael Horowitz of Ringoes; and a concert last month by Pat DiNizio of Scotch Plains, the front man of the rock band [the Smithereens](#).

Melanie Clarke, 57, executive director of the Princeton Symphony Orchestra, who attended the Bravo! show, said the building lent itself to the kinds of programming people expected to pay for.

"The sound is great, the stage is great — it's very intimate," Ms. Clarke said. "It felt like a veil was lifted between the audience and the musicians, which is what you want in this type of small setting. What I expect will happen is that organizations like ours will come here to help raise awareness."

In the process, Mr. Garcia expects to raise awareness of the arts throughout West Windsor. But he does not expect to challenge nearby Princeton's reputation as an arts magnet.

"We're not trying to compete, because we can't," Mr. Garcia, who lives in Monroe, said. "But what we can do is complement the arts activities in Princeton and try to find our own special niche."

That niche may end up being as much about filling the social needs of the community as illuminating it artistically.

Though Mr. Garcia said he was "very enthusiastic about the performers we've been able to bring in," he said he also saw the center as "a way for people to come together in this community."

"We're offering free WiFi in the lobby for students to come in and use in the afternoons, and we'll have community dances here much like they had in the '50s and '60s," he added. "We've had people talk to us about having bar mitzvahs here."

“We’ve created a setting that lends itself to that — a space for the community that’s more personal than a hotel ballroom — and we’re happy about it.”