

Jersey Shore Arts Center



The Jersey Shore Arts Center in Ocean Grove.

Their Mission

Since first opening its doors in 2000, the Jersey Shore Arts Center (JSAC) in Ocean Grove has positively impacted the community by providing affordable arts-related programs, events, professional opportunities, and work and performance spaces for artists and arts-related teachers.

With all types of art, and a place where everyone is welcome, the JSAC is an important hub at the Shore for artistic engagement and experiences. "We are both a historical organization and an arts organization," says Executive Director Nichole Nappi. "The Ocean Grove Historic Preservation Society maintains the building and is the parent organization of the JSAC."

The Society's mission is two-fold: to save and restore the beautiful and historic building known as the old Neptune High School and to operate the JSAC in support of local artists and art educators. "We're not just a performance venue space or rehearsal or studio space, we are a community space," says Nappi. "We cater to the entire spectrum of artists, from the up-and-coming dancer to the person working in their basement painting. We encounter all sorts of artistic levels and experiences."

125 Year History

Built in 1896, Neptune High School opened in 1897 with Lida

Doren serving as New Jersey's first female principal and superintendent. The edifice was celebrated as an "Architectural Splendor" at the 1906 World's Fair. The building was used as a high school until a new school building opened in September 1960, and it continued serving the school district in various ways until it was vacated in the 1980s. Unfortunately, the building's condition deteriorated as a result of years of neglect.

Retired telephone executive Herbert Herbst (1926-2017) moved to Ocean Grove with his wife in 1991, and his dedication to the community led him to creating the Ocean Grove Historic Preservation Society in 1995 and facilitating the purchase of the building in 1997. Herbst's bold quest was to not only save the badly damaged building but to transform it into

a future home for the cultural arts at the Jersey Shore. Thus the Jersey Shore Arts Center was born.

The structure's restoration was completed in phases and included major structural, electrical, and plumbing work. In 2000, the first floor opened with newly renovated classrooms, restrooms, lobby, office space, and a 450-seat theater. Over the years, the building's other areas were restored, with the third-floor rehabilitation completed in 2014. Herbst remained at the helm of the JSAC until his death in 2017.

Under the guidelines for historic preservation in Ocean Grove, building improvements and restoration must adhere to specific rules to retain its status as a historic site. "We are still improving our signage and still in the process of getting our building accessibility project up and running," says Nappi. "After that, we hope to add air conditioning to the Palaia Theater." Adding air conditioning would allow the JSAC to host events in the Palaia Theater year-round as opposed to the current schedule of September through June. "That's one of our major goals, then we will be able to go an entire season without going dark in the summer months," she says.

While the pandemic negatively affected every industry, the arts industry was one of the hardest hit. Nappi said that the JSAC's survival was in part due to pivoting and continuing programming on some sort of level over the past two years. "It was scary. I knew once we got to



A worker paints the moulding in the Palaia Theater during its restoration.

week three, this was something that would take months or years to crawl out of,” she explains. “We lost our dance school and yoga residents, but we created rehearsal, arts education, and ballroom dance space during COVID. We also received several grants such as the SBA’s Shattered Venue Operations Grant, New Jersey Arts Relief Fund, and NJEDA Grants that have helped keep us going.”

A Building for All Facets of the Arts

In addition to programming, the JSAC offers several rooms available to commercial, nonprofit and school groups, and performers for rentals with affordable rates. Weekly, monthly, and yearly studio space is also available to artists and art-based businesses. All revenue from rentals support the JSAC’s mission. Nappi says, “If there’s a teacher who needs studio space to have a tutor session, or a painting session, the JSAC can provide that space.”

The Palaia Theater is the JSAC’s centerpiece with 450 all-original historical seats, a restored balcony, stage, and grand piano. Behind the scenes, a large dressing and stage area is available for both theatrical and musical events. Modern amenities include sound and lighting systems, a professional movie projector, and Wi-Fi. Balcony and special prestige seating are also available.

The 1940s Room can accommodate up to forty to fifty guests and can be added on to events booked at the Palaia Theater—as a volunteer area or VIP space. It can also be booked for stand-alone events such as rehearsals and formal/informal meetings.

The Main Lobby features wide open spaces for parties, artist receptions, craft and speaking events, and more. It boasts a large grand staircase, hardwood flooring, stunning architectural elements, seasonal decor, and works by local artists. It has five entryways including two from the parking areas.

With its 1,500 square-feet, **The Ballroom** offers plenty of space and has ample natural and evening lighting, mirrored walls, barres, and storage areas for gear and footwear

during rental usage.

The JSAC’s third floor features three areas available to rent: **The Café Space, The Kitchen Space, and The Herbst Theater.**

The Cafe Space offers central heat and air conditioning, catering and sound system capabilities, a capacity from forty to fifty-five guests (depending upon table and seating configurations), elevator access from the main lobby, Wi-Fi, and a portable movie screen. The Café is an ideal spot for parties, dinner theater, meetings, and intimate music and speaker events.



The 450-seat Palaia Theater today.

The Kitchen Space is perfect for cooking catered events or food demonstrations and has refrigeration and freezer capabilities, professional appliances, a coffee gallery, and ice machines. It has been inspected as satisfactory by the health department, and renters must provide proof of insurance as well as certification of ServSafe. Dishes, utensils, and dining service are also available.

The Herbst Theater, the JSAC’s newest theater space, is also located on the third floor. Named after founder Herbert Herbst, this “Black Box” space boasts seating for up to fifty-five guests, dressing rooms, private bathrooms, box office and stage prep space, a portable movie screen, a sound and lighting system, and central air conditioning and heating. Start-up theater companies as well as musicians, writers, and speaking groups will find The Herbst Theater to be an ideal place for their next event.

Supporting the JSAC

Nappi explains that there’s a number of ways the Jersey Shore community can support the JSAC.

“We do accept monetary donations, but are always looking for ‘in-kind’ donations of water and soda for our events, candy for our trick-or-trunk event, fruit and bagels for our 5K races, office supplies, and even donations of toilet paper and paper towels. We have three floors of bathrooms to maintain, and supplies can get costly,” Nappi says.

Volunteers are needed to help with both JSAC operations and special events such as their yearly 5K fundraiser. “We need sixty to sixty-five volunteers in September with our race that runs through Ocean Grove and Bradley Beach,” Nappi says. “It’s like a big wedding that happens every year and takes a year to plan.” Other events include movie nights, performances and classes, a fashion show luncheon, and coming in May 2022, programming and events to honor Women’s Empowerment Month.

While individual and corporate tax-deductible donations (one-time or recurring) are always accepted, other ways to support the JSAC include holding or sponsoring an event at the facility, designating them on AmazonSmile (search Ocean Grove Historic Preservation Society), or purchasing something from their Amazon Wish List, which can be found on their website.

The community can make the biggest impact, however, by talking about and attending events at the JSAC. “Come to our events,” Nappi urges. “We’re right here at the Jersey Shore, centrally located by Asbury Park and right on Main Street with plenty of free parking. You don’t have to go to New York City for quality arts and cultural education and events. The JSAC is right here, affordable, and in a building rich with stories and history.”

—Jill Ocone

The Jersey Shore Arts Center is located at 66 Main Street in Ocean Grove. For more information or to learn more about donating, volunteering, rentals, and updated programming and event schedules, visit www.jerseyshoreartscenter.org or call (732) 502-0050.