

# Rob Steele

## *Putting community in Community Arts Center*

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**R**ob Steele has met some of the biggest stars in entertainment. He's been backstage for the major acts that have graced the stage of the Community Arts Center.

But for Steele, the greatest part of his job is seeing someone experience the arts center for the first time.

"The happiest day for me and everyone associated with this place is when you can go to a show and not recognize anyone. That's great because we know we're reaching a new audience," Steele said.

That brief moment of amazement as a new patron enters the theater is what Steele was brought to Williamsport to achieve eight years ago. Dealing with a perception that the CAC, which opened in 1993, was a "haven for the wealthy," the facility's board of directors wanted someone who not only could change the attitude toward it but create an inviting atmosphere.

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Rob Steele, executive director of the  
Community Arts Center.

MARK NANCE/Sun-Gazette

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# Putting community back in Community Arts Center

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As Dr. William Martin, board chairman, explained, Steele's mandate was to "put the community in the Community Arts Center."

Steele did not do that by locking himself away in his office, but by immersing himself in the community and talking with anyone and everyone.

"That first nine months, I went to all the little towns and just talked to people, (to) see people, and (to) meet people, in the schools, and just try to get a feel for who's out there and what they'd like to see. And so many of them had not been here," Steele said.

Steele wasn't only looking at what acts residents would like to see, but what local acts and organizations could be served by the CAC. When he took over as executive director, the arts center had about a dozen community partners. The list since has grown to more than 300 partners.

Dave Brumbaugh, executive director of the Uptown Music Collective, remembers when Steele asked if he was interested in having his students play at the CAC. He said he was "floored" by the offer.

"Rob is a can-do guy. I come with an idea and (Steele) says, yeah we can do this and this and this," Brumbaugh said. "He's really breathed new life into the downtown just with the work he's done with the arts center."

Steele said if he can move things around to accommodate a community group that wants to use the arts center, he will. When asked why it's so important for him to have something for everyone in the community, his response is simple: "Because it's supposed to be for everybody."

"We consciously made decisions to be inclusive and to make partnerships and to work with everyone in the community, and to find something for

everyone. Our programming now, when I go out to put together a season, I look at the different genres, I look at the people who live in the community," he said.

He said, for instance, some people thought he was "crazy" for booking "Deer Camp: The Musical," but he explained that it's a big draw for the area.

Janet Harris, executive director of the Williamsport Symphony Orchestra, said that Steele's work to provide something for everyone makes a great value for the community.

"The CAC provides such a wide variety of performances that there is something for everyone," she said. "It also provides a stage for the development of musical talent for children and youth in our region."

Steele explained that the arts center is more than a stage and chairs. It's a community home where patrons can meet and enjoy a show together.

"We focus on all our guests

and try to make everyone feel comfortable, so that when they come here, they feel like it's their community-gathering place. It's a place where they can come and feel comfortable and welcome and see people they know and visit with them. We work hard on that to slow people down, too, so they don't just buy a ticket and march with their blinders on to the show and march out," Steele said. "We want them to say, 'Oh gosh, there's John, I haven't talked to him since last Thanksgiving,' and pop over and say, 'Hi.'"

Celebrating its 20th-year anniversary, the CAC continues to be a focal point in the community as evidenced by the local support.

"It's a point of pride," Steele said. "This place is beautiful. It doesn't matter whether it's Bill Cosby or Willie Nelson or Jerry Seinfeld, when they come here and walk across the stage, they stop and say, 'Wow. It's gor-

geous.'"

And for those who have worked with him, they can't deny the hand that Steele's had in making the transition from the earlier "elitist stigma" to the community haven it currently is.

"Rob is freakin' awesome. I love that guy. I can't over-emphasize how amazingly positive that guy is. He's so important to us," Brumbaugh said.

"It's just been a wonderful experience working with him," Harris said. "Everything goes very smoothly."

For Martin, who calls Steele a dear friend, he knew within 10 minutes that Steele was the man to make the transition — a tip that Martin received from his late wife at the airport when picking up Steele there.

"People were starting to file in and she pointed to this guy and said, 'That's your guy and you're going to love him,'" Martin said. "She was absolutely spot on."