

Bank building finding new life as community art gallery

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Shary Skiles | Publisher

ArtBank McCook



McCOOK, Neb. – A former bank building located in the heart of McCook, which was later transformed into business office space, is beginning its third stage of life as an art gallery with a scheduled grand opening on Sat. Oct. 14.

In April 1975, First National Bank of McCook celebrated the grand opening of the building with a pancake feed in the parking garage and a giveaway of a live calf. Located at 108 West D Street, the building featured three levels of construction, including a parking garage, and took about a year to build. The interior featured glassed offices off the expansive lobby, a second-level balcony, a vault on the main level, and three drive-in facilities on the south side.

After its life as a bank came to an end in 2016, the building was transformed into 17,000 square feet of office space and was home to a Nebraska state agency. The balcony was covered. When the agency moved out, the building remained empty for about the next four years.

The building was listed for sale in July 2020. Chad Graff and Joann Falkenburg saw the enormous potential the landmark building possessed, so they purchased it in November of 2021. The space has been experiencing a transformation over the past year and will soon enter its third stage of life as ArtBank McCook.

The high ceilings, expansive walls, large windows on the south, and contemporary feel make the building a perfect place to engage, admire and even produce works of art. The beautiful views and light from the south windows will allow the art to meld with the Southwest Nebraska landscape. “It’s not a lot different from what my vision would be if I were to build a contemporary art space from the ground up,” Graff said of the building.

Graff has been working with a former MHS classmate, Ron Nelson to transform the building. From polishing the concrete floors to opening walls and ceilings to create a contemporary industrial atmosphere, Graff considers “space creation” as a form of art.



A space in ArtBank McCook will be devoted to creating art. The inaugural classes for youth at ArtBank McCook happened this past summer. Pictured, from left, are art students Maria Rodriguez, Christelle Barber, Liana Barber, and Kerene Barber.

Graff, whose father, Pete Graff, was president of McCook National Bank now known as MNB Bank, grew up in McCook and always knew the building as home to a bank. He wanted to keep both “bank” and “McCook” in the name of the newly renovated space. “If you can help build the community’s identity through the use of a name, I think you should,” Graff said.

While the space is being transformed in many ways, a lot of the building’s identity as a bank remains. The teller area and drive-through in the southeast corner of the main lobby will remain in place, as will the bank’s vault that houses the safe deposit boxes in the northeast corner of the lobby. Graff’s vision for the drive-through area is to create an outdoor event and sculpture space. The pneumatic tubes in the drive-through area continue to work, and Graff has tested their functionality for delivering drinks to visitors outside.

As with any art venue, the main attraction will be the art. ArtBank McCook will house a permanent collection of art, but will also bring in exhibits from other venues, as well as loan out collections.

A major gift of art came from master oil painter and Creighton University professor John Thein. Thein spent 22 years of his life painting a series of images based on the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre when an Army regiment opened fire and killed hundreds of Native Americans on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.

Thein wanted to keep the whole body of work together, and after a visit to McCook during the Buffalo Commons Storytelling and Music Festival, he agreed to allow ArtBank McCook to be the conservator of his work. The images are massive and numerous. Thein passed away in May 2023.

Another space in the gallery will be dedicated to the work of Shonto Begay. Begay is a Dine' (Navajo) painter, illustrator, author, and educator whose art captures the striking beauties of a Navajo upbringing and the realities of modern reservation life.

Lucas Kotschwar, a 2007 graduate of McCook High School who farms his family's land outside of Culbertson, will be another featured artist. His work explores relationships between the body and material forms, identity, and issues stemming from the human experience.

Perhaps because of his past life as an educator, Graff has also dedicated space in the gallery for art classes for youth. In the 1990s, Graff was teaching on a Navajo reservation and was inspired by how arts and crafts were part of the Navajo culture, where the youth grew up learning to weave and paint from their parents and grandparents. He was moved by the way art can connect people. The inaugural classes for youth at ArtBank McCook happened this past summer.



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Graff has been building relationships with artists over the past three decades, and he says filling the space is the “easy part” of the project. “I’m really inspired by how supportive people are in the art world when they find out about a project like this in McCook. They want to be supportive of it. They want to send artists here. They want to send art here. Or they want to find out about the artists here. And so, to me, it just creates a really nice opportunity for exchange,” Graff said. He said artists and art enthusiasts are intrigued about the possibility of a great art experience in a place you wouldn’t necessarily expect it.

That sense of place has led Graff and Falkenburg to transfer ownership of the property to a nonprofit organization, the 6th Floor Project. Graff’s love of his hometown, its people and its landscape, and his desire to inspire future generations with the power of art as a form of communication, has guided his vision to have the gallery become a place of pride for the entire community.

6th Floor Project is a non-profit, 501(c)(3) organization based in McCook and founded in 2022. Donations are tax-deductible and may be made to: 6th Floor Project, 402 Norris Avenue, Suite 600, McCook, Nebraska 69001.



The 17,000-square-foot building located at 108 West D Street is being transformed into an art gallery to be known as ArtBank McCook, a nod to its former purpose as a bank in the community. Developer Chad Graff told the Gazette that he was pleased to see that the balcony structure remained intact after it had been drywalled to create a separate office space.