Up Front

Father Ryan Arts Center
McKees Rocks, Pa.

Here’s a hint. Don’t think of McKees Rocks as a distant place, or if you do, don’t mention it to Pat Moran, director of the Father Ryan Arts Center. She’ll tell you flat out, it’s a five-to-six minute bus ride from downtown Pittsburgh. Not far at all and worth the trip.

You can’t miss the Arts Center, a tall yellow brick structure now elegantly dressed in a blue-green glass facade. This Chartiers Avenue building has seen many transformations in the heart of a town that has experienced many downturns. The final blow came in the 1960s with the closing of the Pressed Steel Car Company, a large maker of railroad cars in the Schoenville area of McKees Rocks known as the “Bottoms.”

As the mill closed, Father Don Fisher, an assistant pastor at St. Francis de Sales, and Sister Paulette Honegosky started Focus on Renewal (FOR) to provide food and healthcare to residents who had lost their jobs, using empty buildings as community centers.

The politicians, and especially the mayor, resented the group using abandoned buildings, claiming the town lost tax revenue, even though the buildings weren’t filling the coffers. It’s a bit of sweet irony that the Arts Center is located in the very building where the mayor and council once dug in their heels. The building is named for Father Regis Ryan, the priest who carried on the work begun by Sister Paulette and Father Fisher. Fisher is a fine potter who still teaches classes at the center.

“It’s a miracle that this building is here,” says Pat Moran. “Skeptics said ‘In this community? An arts center? It’ll never happen.’” If not a miracle, it is a story of
people using a pot of gold to benefit the entire community.

In 1994, the Sanders Consent Decree, a settlement that addressed discrimination in public housing throughout Allegheny County, resulted in a large financial payout for the plaintiffs. McKees Rocks was one of seven Allegheny County communities cited in the lawsuit. On behalf of the people of McKees Rocks, Father Ryan applied to the Sanders Task Force and received $800,000. As the steward of the settlement funds, FOR rallied residents to determine how they should be used. Unanimously, the community asked for a place to come together and express ideas, share local traditions, and grow culturally.

When architect John E. Baverso read about Father Ryan, his former high school teacher, and the plans to create an arts center, he worked pro bono designing, planning, and managing the construction of the new center. His partner Sandie Colatrella joined in the effort, and suggested the glorious array of colors, 46 of them, that ripple through the classroom, studios, gallery, café, and theater.

Before the building was completed, Point Park University students, enabled by a federal grant, came to McKees Rocks and through the FOR Community Center introduced children to the arts through dance, theater, and writing classes. The path was made, and when the center opened in October 2008, it had an eager clientele who brought along brothers, sisters, parents, and grandparents. Classes are reasonably priced and open to residents of the entire region. The classrooms and studios are filled with people drumming, dancing, painting, playing instruments, sculpting, and acting.

The future looks good to the Center’s small staff. Public Relations Coordinator Pilar Brown has adopted the town as her own. Pat Moran, born and raised in the Rocks, sees working at the Center as providential: “It’ll take a long time for the town to come back, but this building is a small glimpse of what McKees Rocks is going to be in 20 to 30 years. We have young people who have stepped forward to put their life into the community. We believe that all roads lead to McKees Rocks—we really do!—and we are planted, rooted in the Rocks.”

Among the teachers, Amy DiMichel, a local artist, teaches painting; Andrei Pipkivka and Jerry Jumba, both of whom live in the Rocks, are experts in Eastern European folk music and conduct workshops. Father Fisher has the last word with his pottery.

Program Director Jim Critchfield sees some connections to the past in the future of the Center: “I’ve been reading some about the [Great] Depression, and the arts really came through during the Depression, providing hope for people. Broadway thrived and so did vaudeville. Technicolor was coming into films. It just gives you an idea of how important arts are for the soul. I think it’s similar to what we do here.”

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Bette McDevitt is a freelance writer who has written many feature articles for this magazine, including “Miners Clinics” in this issue.