

## SPECIALREPORT

# Cultivating and nurturing creativity

*The Forbes Center sets the stage for the arts to soar at JMU*

BY GEORGE SPARKS

Each spring, hundreds of Madison College alumni who graduated from the 1930s to the 1960s travel back to campus to celebrate Bluestone Reunion Weekend. In their formal invitation, these alums are asked to bring back Madison memorabilia to share for a display in the Leeolou Alumni Center.

Their Madison treasures tell a significant story.

The “Bluestone” era women and men bring back ticket stubs from favorite concerts, programs from the best theatrical performances, dried corsages from senior dances, song sheets from Glee Club shows, photos of themselves dressed up for their favorite musical performances and lyric sheets from their senior class song.

The performing arts have always been at the center of the Madison Experience.

For decades, Spring Commencement ceremonies featured the student Glee Club. Music and theatrical performances were a part of Founders Day, May Day, campus celebrations and special events welcoming campus guests.

Now, the performing arts at JMU have a magnificent home that matches the commitment shown by students and professors for 100 years.

## Now is the time for the arts to soar at JMU

In 2005, President Linwood H. Rose announced JMU’s “Decade of the Arts.” Five years later, we have built a \$90.5 million Forbes Center for the Performing Arts. His powerful statement was followed by a true commitment.

The Forbes Center opened its doors on June 4, 2010, to dedicate the center and to recognize major donors. The two buildings that comprise the Forbes Center are the first part of a strategic initiative to build a world-class stage for the arts at JMU. The center includes the Dorothy Thomasson Estes Center for Theatre and Dance and the Shirley Hanson Roberts Center for Music Performance. The next infrastructure investment in the arts is a planned renovation to double the space in Duke Hall. This will provide more space for the School of Art and Art History. When Duke Hall is completed, JMU will be among the elite universities in the United States with state-of-the-art arts facilities.

As the premier destination for arts in the Shenandoah Valley, the Forbes Center gives the university a unique opportunity to



(Left): Donors, patrons and alumni tour the Forbes Center for the Performing Arts prior to its opening on June 4. (Below, l-r): Patrice Jegou (soprano), Cristina Pato (piano) and Phil Vassar ('85) (songwriter) teach masterclasses in the new classroom spaces in the Forbes Center.



strengthen its relationships with local businesses, enhance the cultural life of the community, and support economic growth and social interaction in the region. Located near Harrisonburg’s Arts and Cultural District, the Forbes Center is in a prime position to transform how university and community members engage in the arts.

When conceptualizing and planning the Forbes Center for the Performing Arts, university administrators and faculty members focused on four key concepts: curriculum, creativity, community and commerce.

## SPECIALREPORT

**The arts curriculum**

The Forbes Center boldly affirms JMU's longstanding commitment to the arts as an essential component of a liberal arts curriculum. During the institution's first year, faculty members embraced the arts. Lida P. Cleveland established the Glee Club in 1909–10, and students presented their first major concert on Arbor Day 1910.

During the last several decades, JMU's theater, dance and music students have pushed the envelope of possibility in less-than-ideal performance venues. Performance is an integral part of the arts curriculum. In fact, performances serve as capstone events in an artist's academic life. Their performances represent and reflect hundreds of hours of research, planning, critical analysis and practice. They are one of the most important tests during performing artists' academic careers.

And now we have state-of-the-art facilities for both practice and performance that allow artists to push the envelope even further in both quality and complexity in their art. Our professors, directors and choreographers have the latest lighting and sound technology, and our conductors and musicians work in almost perfect acoustical conditions.

**Sparkling and nurturing creativity**

"Human creativity is the ultimate economic resource," and "the industries of the 21st century will depend increasingly on the generation of knowledge through creativity and innovation," says Richard Florida in his 2003 book *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Many other current prognosticators, who look at long-term economic trends, say that the coin of the realm for the 21st century will be creativity.

While creative thinking is not the exclusive provenance of the arts, there is probably no place on a university campus where it is more prominent and important than the visual and performing arts. Those of us in the arts have a responsibility to nurture and facilitate creativity throughout campus. We also need to engage every student on campus in the arts to strengthen JMU's identity as a top liberal arts institution. That identity has won JMU many accolades in national reviews of higher education. It is this identity, along with an attendant core mission, that allows institutions like JMU to provide holistic educational opportunities. This kind of education tran-



A scene from *Metamorphoses*, a fall 2010 production in the Forbes Center.

sends changes in economies and job markets, prepares students for a lifetime of intellectual flexibility and includes the arts as an integral part of a well-rounded curriculum.

**The arts and community**

Community is especially important to performing arts. What is a performance without an audience? It's really more like a dress rehearsal. The audience actually helps complete the young artist's educational process by providing feedback, applause, attendance and ticket purchases. Performers' educational experiences are enhanced by vigorous audience participation. Seasoned professionals and artists in training would agree that there's nothing like playing to a sold-out house!

Professors and administrators in the Forbes Center also focus on community by inviting guest artists to perform on campus. We built an "Encore Series" of performances that serves a wide demographic, covers a broad range of tastes and crosses multiple curricula. Guest artists performing this year have included: Phil Vassar ('85) of songwriting and country music fame; Denyce Graves, the international-operatic star soprano; and the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, famous for cutting-edge artistic productions that illustrate and explain science.

All Forbes Center guest artists will connect with students at JMU through lectures and master classes. They will also connect with our community through pre- and post-performance talks, meet-and-greets and amazing performances. Audiences will see and hear artists under stellar acoustical conditions — with great technical capabilities — in a place where every seat is a great one.

Another community that the Forbes Center has embraced is donors and patrons. The center established the largest community of donors for a single project in the history of JMU. The center as a whole, as well as the buildings that comprise it, are named after JMU graduates and donors: Bruce and Lois Cardarella Forbes ('64), Shirley Hanson Roberts ('56), and Dorothy Thomasson Estes ('45). Donors have also named numerous rooms, lobbies and practice rooms. Now that the building is paid for, all of the new funds will go to scholarships in the performing arts. We are also in the process of naming seats in the major venues, where again, the funds benefit scholarships. The real, long-term importance of donors' contributions is the significance of their connections with the university. Forbes Center donors have helped build a culture of giving among the JMU community.

**The arts and commerce**

Patron and donor outreach is just one kind of outreach supporting the Forbes Center. We are also developing relationships with hotels, restaurants and other arts organizations to establish Harrisonburg as a destination for the arts. This benefits both JMU and the local community. The Forbes Center has the potential to be a powerful economic driver in the Shenandoah Valley. It can help to strengthen the overall economy of the valley while helping attract high-paying industries to the region.

The Forbes Center is patron friendly and offers educational and entertainment opportunities for all who visit. Grab a friend or family member and make your way to the center for concerts, plays, musicals and dance performances. Be part of the curriculum, creativity and community, and watch the arts soar at JMU.

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\* Read more about the Forbes Center on Page 31 and at [www.jmu.edu/JMUarts](http://www.jmu.edu/JMUarts).

**About the Author** George Sparks is dean of the College of Visual and Performing Arts, which includes the School of Art and Art History, School of Music, School of Theatre and Dance, the Institute for Visual Studies, and the Madison Art Collection. A professional conductor and clarinet player, his artistic roots are musical, but Sparks considers himself an advocate for all arts. "I also enjoy the professionalism and collegiality of the JMU faculty," he says.