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The Gasworks gives a home for children and music to flourish in Hamilton

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King George students celebrate the end of the first season of An Instrument for Every Child.



Carl Joosse, chair of the Voortman Foundation, and Astrid Hepner,

founder of An Instrument for Every Child, in the entertainment area of The Gasworks.



Astrid Hepner, founder of An Instrument for Every Child, has recently relocated the program's headquarters off her dining-room table and into an office in The Gasworks building on Park Street North.

The stately 164-year building started out producing coal gas to light up the streets of downtown Hamilton.

Now, due to the generosity of the Voortman bakery clan, it is producing music for the benefit of inner-city children.

Back in 1850, the stately two-storey structure was called The Hamilton Gas Light Co. Now it's simply called The Gasworks and it is home to a charitable organization called An Instrument for Every Child (AIFEC).

The Gasworks was called One Community Church until about six months ago when the congregation moved to a more suburban location in Burlington.

Music was important to the church, so it left behind a building with high-quality acoustics, a performance stage and a listening room that can fit 100 people cabaret style. Local music scene-sters will know it as the place where the Arkells performed a surprise show in August with Boris Brodt and the National Academy Orchestra.

It's a perfect spot for An Instrument for Every Child. AIFEC's goal is simple but ambitious — to provide a musical instrument and instruction to every elementary school child who wants to play one but can't afford to.

"This is really a dream come true," says AIFEC founding president Astrid Hepner, a German-born saxophone-playing jazz lover, who moved here nine years ago from New York City with her Hamilton-born husband, Darcy.

When Hepner, 49, a former A&R rep for New York's prestigious Blue Note Records label, arrived in Hamilton, she was immediately impressed by the breadth and depth of the city's music scene. She envisioned AIFEC as a way of harnessing those talents for the good of the community.

Hepner began raising funds and convincing local schools that such a program could work. In 2009, Hepner received permission to launch the program in the old King George elementary school on Gage Avenue North, with one instructor bringing instruments once a week into Grade 1. That pilot project proved a success. In 2010, AIFEC was able to put on a year-end concert at the school.

The program now has some 300 instruments at its disposal, a dozen paid instructors teaching 60 weekly lessons in six inner-city schools (Holy Name of Jesus, Dr. J. Edgar Davey, Memorial, Prince of Wales, Cathy Wever and Hess Street School), and an annual budget of almost \$250,000. It hopes to expand to 10 schools by next September.

At the start, Hepner received help in the form of a \$125,000 grant from founding sponsor Paul Lloyd, president of Hamilton-based security firm PasWord Protection.

Many other notable groups pitched in, including the Trillium Foundation, Incite Foundation, the Turkstra Foundation, Arcelor Mittal Dofasco, the Hamilton Philharmonic, OK& D Marketing, Orchestra, Larry and Marnie Paikin, and The Hamilton Spectator.

But the program lacked a home base.

Hepner was running AIFEC from the dining room table of her west Mountain home, juggling meetings and school visits with her other duties as mother to an 11-year-old daughter and instructor at Mohawk College. (She's since left Mohawk to devote herself full-time to AIFEC.)

Then along came a shaggy-haired benefactor by the name of Carl Joesse, a member of the Voortman family, founders of Ancaster-based Oak Run Farm Bakery (muffin provider for Egg McMuffins) and a director of the John and Ellie Voortman Charitable Foundation.

Since the Voortman family sold Oak Run in 2008, Joesse has spent much of his time in charitable work for children — besides running an Alberta trucking firm and an aviation business on Vancouver Island.

He is a director of Hamilton's Living Rock Ministries, which provides shelter and support for disadvantaged and homeless youth, as well as a board member with the The Mel Jr. & Marty Zajac Foundation, which runs a ranch for children with chronic or life-threatening conditions.

Joesse was looking to expand his charitable reach to inner-city children when he learned the old gas-light building at 141 Park St. N., near Mulberry, was up for sale. The Voortman foundation purchased it for \$599,000 cash.

"The goal was to make a difference and impact children in the north end community and to do it through other existing charitable organizations," says Joesse, 48.

"I researched who was doing good work for the community and when I came across An Instrument For Every Child, I realized that the biggest splash I could make in children's

lives was through music, and that's what An Instrument for Every Child was already doing. So I approached Astrid."

Hepner and Joosse were introduced by Trevor Titian, a local recording engineer/producer who had done volunteer work for Living Rock.

"Trevor set up the meeting," Hepner says. "That was the start of it. We had to feel each other out. Sometimes situations can seem too good to be true. But so far, it's been this ongoing 'wow' effect in terms of the possibilities we have here. Our values are the same. It's very nice how it all aligns."

Titian now operates a studio on the second-floor of The Gasworks that can be used to advance AIFEC and Living Rock programs as well as provide a place for local musicians to record. Both AIFEC and Titian are rent-free tenants.

Once settled into The Gasworks, Hepner wants to bus children into the building to complement the work AIFEC is doing in the classrooms, as well as creating new partnerships with other inner-city children's groups such as City Kidz.

"We can pull parents in, too," Hepner says. "We want more parent involvement. They are so proud to see their children perform."

Joosse is encouraging the charities to engage in "social enterprise," so that they can help earn their own revenue. Living Rock, for example, sold drinks and concessions at The Gasworks to Arkells concert-goers.

While fundraising through donors continues to be a major part of her job — she recently discovered that the Juno-affiliated MusicCounts fund will announce a \$20,000 contribution when the Junos come to Hamilton in March — Hepner also wants to raise funds through music.

In AIFEC's case, social enterprise means putting on a top-of-the-line concert series.

That begins Thursday night, with a concert by Italian drummer/composer Andrea Marcelli, who has worked all over the world with jazz luminaries such as Wayne Shorter and Mike Stern.

The series continues Oct. 30 with Kind of Blue Revisited, featuring the music of Miles Davis's jazz masterpiece, performed by an all-star local band including Hepner's husband Darcy.

On Nov. 13, Toronto jazz/gospel singer Sherie Marshall will perform standards from the Great American Songbook with her trio. All proceeds from the series go to AIFEC.

The Gasworks is a comfortable room for concerts and Hepner has decorated it with a series of portraits of local and internationally known musicians taken by top-flight New York photographer Jimmy Katz.

"In the spring, we'll have another series," says Hepner.

"We'll try to get international names here. In the end we are musicians. I've started playing sax again, which is fun. You don't want to lose who you are. We want to give back to the community, as musicians, because that's what we do."

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Jazz at the Gasworks

Thursday, Oct. 9: Drummer Andrea Marcelli, with Kim Ratcliffe (guitar), Roberto Occhipinti (bass) and Darcy Hepner (saxophone).

Thursday, Oct. 30: Kind of Blue Revisited, featuring the music of Miles Davis.

Thursday, Nov. 13: Toronto jazz/gospel vocalist Sherie Marshall and her trio performing songs from the Great American Songbook.

Where: The Gasworks, 141 Park St. N.

Time: All shows at 8 p.m.

Tickets: \$25 general admission and \$15 for students, available at aninstrumentforeverychild.org or at the venue.