

Save Me a Seat



KAPAC's Liza Caldwell, David Tyson and Bob Plymale are leading efforts to refurbish the Keith-Albee's seats.

Fundraising campaign gives the public a chance to purchase a piece of the Keith-Albee.

By Dawn Nolan
Photos by Rick Lee

Next year, Huntington's beloved Keith-Albee will turn 90.

"The Keith-Albee is the centerpiece of our downtown and always has been," says David Tyson, co-president of the Keith Albee Performing Arts Center (KAPAC) Foundation. "It's the only remaining Thomas Lamb-designed atmospheric theatre in the world."

"It's in pretty good shape for a theatre of its age, and that's a true testament to the Hyman family," adds Robert "Bob" Plymale, KAPAC co-president.

Yet, as with any structure that old, ongoing preservation work must be done to keep the Keith-Albee not only an attractive sight and functioning performance and event venue, but also a National Historic Landmark.

"The main thing that everyone has to remember is that this is their theatre. We have a responsibility to restore it to the way it was," says Liza Caldwell, who chairs KAPAC's Building Committee.

Since KAPAC took over the Keith-Albee's operations in 2006, various renovation projects — all funded through public funding and private donations — have been completed, some of which include: returning the lobby and theatre to its original configuration, repairing the marquee sign, replacing the roof, upgrading the

HVAC system, adding a handicap-accessible restroom on the orchestra level and installing a new pulley apparatus for stage productions.

"We first wanted to get the theatre back to its original size," Plymale explains. "It was a major effort to knock down walls in the lobby in preparation for the *We Are Marshall* premiere."

"Though many people wanted to see cosmetic issues taken care of immediately, we decided it was best to focus on the outside and the building's infrastructure," Tyson adds.

KAPAC's latest endeavor is the "Take a Seat Under the Stars" campaign, which launched in December. Marshall Artists Series graduate assistant Shaleena Ross came up with the name, and local advertising agency Bulldog

Creative is leading promotional efforts.

"The idea is to restore the seats, as close as possible, to the original ones," Tyson says. "If you look at the balcony seats, they are similar in color and design to what the new seats will be. The new seats will be beautiful and comfortable, not to mention compliant to National Register standards."

Before the seats can be replaced, however, all of the fabric must be bought.

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centerpiece of our downtown
and always has been."
- David Tyson*



A special "We Are Marshall" Memorial Designation — with name-plates honoring the 75 players, coaches and community members that were killed in the 1970 plane crash — will be located in the balcony. An anonymous donor gave the initial \$20,000 back in December for the section, which features already allocated seats for Gene Morehouse, "The Voice of the Herd," and offensive lineman Bob Patterson, of Louisburg, North Carolina.

To start the restoration process, Caldwell consulted with Andrew Myers

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The Keith-Albee Theatre is the only remaining Thomas Lamb-designed atmospheric theatre in the world. KAPAC's ongoing restoration efforts will help ensure this Huntington treasure will remain for years to come.

and A.J. Stovitz of Andrew Myers Interior Design, to determine the patterns and colors used on the seats as well as identifying manufacturers. Darren Diamond, of Diamond Furniture Restoration in Russell, Kentucky, is handling the production of the new seats.

"A year before we had done a massive clean of the basement, and sorted the seats out into parts," Caldwell recalls. "We found one in the corner that was completely broken up, and Darren took it back to his shop and stripped it down to find out what it looked like originally."

Once Diamond works his magic, each new seat will be installed back in its exact original position so as not to interfere with the theatre's cooling system.

"This is going to be a difficult process," Caldwell says. "We have to time the removal of the chairs correctly. Each chair will be handled individually. Darren will take

a few dozen at a time, and those will be replaced with temporary chairs until the new ones are ready."

One seat, donated to KAPAC by the late Mike Perry, has already been fully restored. Housed in the lobby of the Keith, it is being used as a model of the work to come.

"The upholstery on the new seats will be fire retardant and stain resistant," Caldwell says. "It will look identical, but it will last longer and hold up better. You really won't be able to tell the difference from the original."

"When we finish this theatre's restoration, it's my vision that, as soon as you step under the marquee, you'll be transported back to when the theatre was originally open, and inside it'll be like it was in 1929."

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-Liza Caldwell

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DAWN NOLAN is managing editor of the *Huntington Quarterly*.