

Lehigh News



The vertical dance troupe Bandaloop will dance on the outside of Zoellner's exterior walls as part of Gala 2023 on April 15, 2023. Photo: Contributed

Zoellner Arts Center Celebrates 25 Years

A performance by the New York Philharmonic on Oct. 1 kicks off the anniversary year.

At first glance, [Zoellner Arts Center](#) looks as it did 25 years ago, when it was built with an ambitious mission to unify the creative arts on the Lehigh campus, enhance the role of the arts in education at Lehigh, elevate Lehigh's standing as a research university, and strengthen the cultural life of the Lehigh Valley. But on closer look, there are subtle signs that something momentous is happening.

Outside, near the entrance, new flags boldly announce the arts programs being offered—Zoellner is home to the music and theatre departments, as well as Lehigh University Art Galleries and the Presenting Series. One flag proclaims the impact Zoellner and the arts have had on Lehigh for 25 years. Ground to ceiling window clings display colorful images of this season's diverse performances. A new outdoor monitor teases the upcoming entertainment.

Inside, the Zoellner lobby has a new interactive floor sponsored by Lehigh Valley Reilly Children's Hospital that invites visitors to be creatively playful. Season brochures are available in both Spanish and English. And in Baker Hall, the building's 1,000-seat centerpiece, new house and stage lighting, new carpeting and hundreds of seats reupholstered from light purple to a stunning blue signal exciting things to come. Diamond Theater has new carpeting and seats as well.

And zipping up and down Zoellner's three floors, from office to office and one performance space to another, is its new executive director, Mark Fitzgerald Wilson, who, since arriving at Lehigh in July 2020, has been working to propel Zoellner forward.

Zoellner is celebrating its 25th milestone anniversary and looking, with enthusiasm and confidence, toward many more years of improving lives through the arts.

Wilson and his team have put together an anniversary season that both reflects on the impact Zoellner has had on the academic and surrounding community and provides a window into the future. The new season celebrates the legacy of individuals and families whose vision and generosity helped establish a center for the arts at Lehigh. Five Cornerstone events honor the impact of the Zoellner, Baker, Diamond, Fowler and Ulrich families in turning the dream of Zoellner into a reality.

“It’s a way for us to show our gratitude to the community and to all of those who helped bring Zoellner into existence,” says Wilson. “We’re bringing back some wonderful world class artists, as well as artists who really connect to the community.”

Zoellner was a game changer for Lehigh when it was built in 1997, creating a powerful invitation to students interested in and engaged in the arts, says Robert Flowers, the Herbert J. and Ann L. Siegel Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

“Zoellner transformed the type of institution we are, and it also transformed our relationship with the community,” says Flowers, calling it the “gateway to campus.”

He acknowledged the hard work of many individuals that made Zoellner successful from the start, including its first artistic director Deborah Sackarakis, who retired in August 2019. “We have always had exceptional leadership, and I am very excited about the opportunities for the future.”

“I want to think about stretching out into the campus and into the community. Not let the four walls define us. Our goal is to become accessible to everyone. ”

—MARK FITZGERALD WILSON

The Anniversary Season

The season opener, a performance by the prestigious New York Philharmonic on Oct. 1, will honor the Ulrich family. Ronald J. Ulrich, a 1966 Lehigh grad and successful investment banker, was president of the Lehigh Board of Trustees and a member of the Philharmonic’s Board of Directors when the Philharmonic helped inaugurate Zoellner in 1997. He also led endowment campaigns for both organizations.

The concert represents how Zoellner is building on the past to forge a better future, and it reflects Lehigh’s ongoing efforts to advance its diversity, inclusion and equity goals. The New York Philharmonic returned for its 10th anniversary as well. For this milestone event, the program includes the rediscovered Symphony No. 4 by Florence Price, the first woman of African American descent to receive national recognition as a symphonic composer. The Philharmonic also will conduct a workshop for Lehigh University Philharmonic members that 750 local middle and high school students will observe. This is part of Zoellner’s efforts to reach out beyond its four walls into the community and inspire a new generation of arts lovers.

On Nov. 5, Michael Feinstein will celebrate the 100th birthday of the legendary Judy Garland in a performance dedicated to the Baker Family. The late Dexter Baker ’50, ’57G, former chief executive of Air Products and Chemicals Inc., and his late wife Dorothy, chaired the campaign to raise money to build Zoellner.

The Diamond family will be honored Dec. 17 with a performance by Scott Bradlee's Postmodern Jukebox, which returns with a festive holiday show that mashes up timeless holiday classics and pop hits with vintage doowop, ragtime, Motown and jazz. Claire and her late husband Theodore Diamond '37 '85H endowed the Diamond Theater.

On March 25, the Fowler family will be honored with a performance of *The Lightning Thief* by the Mustard and Cheese Drama Society. W. Beall Fowler '59 and his late wife, Marlene "Linny" Fowler, provided the versatile Black Box Theatre and supported the center's community and outreach programs.



Mark Fitzgerald Wilson, executive director of the Zoellner Arts Center, and his team have put together an anniversary season that both reflects on the impact Zoellner has had on the academic and surrounding community and provides a window into the future. Courtesy: Fig Magazine

And, on April 15, Gala 2023 will honor the Zoellner family legacy with a performance by The Philadelphia Orchestra. The late Robert Zoellner '54, an investment banker, and his wife Victoria deepened their commitment to the university with a \$6 million leadership gift that established the center.

The Gala celebration features Broadway star Brian Stokes Mitchell, upcoming singer Zia Victoria, and vertical dance troupe Bandaloop, which will have dancers celebrating human spirit, nature and community by dancing on the outside walls of Zoellner Arts Center.

It's one of Wilson's goals—to take Zoellner outside, directly to students and the community—so they might become more curious as to what's inside. Last fall, the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company, with hip hop artists Kwikstep and Rokafella, took to the Tamerler Courtyard outside the center to perform a work in progress called "Dragon Cipher," which aims to reflect the solidarity of the Black and Asian communities. Last spring, Pittsburgh's Squonk Opera, whose members manipulate gargantuan puppet hands to tell a spectacular and comic story, also performed outside.

"Zoellner is thought of as a building and everything in that building," says Wilson. "I want to think about stretching out into the campus and into the community. Not let the four walls define us. Our goal is to become accessible to everyone. We want folks to know our doors are open to them."

That goal of stretching out in the campus and community goes beyond taking performances outside the building. It involves increasing collaboration with other academic departments on campus and with nonprofits, schools and businesses throughout the region.

In a new business collaboration, Lehigh Valley Reilly Children's Hospital is sponsoring a Family Series, featuring performers such as The Amazing Max and Lightwire Theater.

"We have to think about, how do we build a pipeline for new audiences?" says Wilson. "The hospital wants to keep the community healthy, and we look at the arts as a way to keep the community healthy. It also allows us to build a pipeline of young children and adults with kids."

Zoellner will collaborate with the Jewish Federation of the Lehigh Valley in February when Wu Fei, a master of the ancient string instrument called the Guzheng, comes to Lehigh for a residency that includes the performance of a work about Eastern European Jews who fled to China during the Holocaust. It's also a collaboration with the Lehigh's Philharmonic and Choir and will include workshops and talks.

Another collaborative and groundbreaking experience will arrive in January 2023, when Zoellner presents "Traveling While Black," a cinematic virtual reality experience—headsets and all— that immerses viewers in the long history of restriction of movement for Black Americans. It includes a film by Easton native and Academy Award winner Roger Ross Williams. The program will continue for three months.

Connecting With Students

When Zoellner was forced to shut down because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it quickly created a virtual Spotlight Series as a way to engage and connect with students. The weekly series featured the artistic talents of Lehigh faculty, students and staff. Wilson, an opera singer, was the first performer. The second was Flowers, a guitarist and songwriter.

During this period, more than 30 performances were distributed via website, social media and emails to more than 50,000-plus supporters of Zoellner and members of the Lehigh community—a notable number as that is how many people the center welcomes through its doors each year.

"Zoellner plays a role in inspiring creative activity. Mark is a connector and has an exceptional talent for engaging students, colleagues and the broader community," says Flowers about Wilson.

Flowers is passionate about Zoellner. A chemistry professor with a love of the arts, he embodies the type of supporter who is attracted to the arts center. While Zoellner has resulted in an increase in the numbers of music and theatre majors, the majority of participants in its programming are majors in other areas including business and engineering students. Flowers says there are more students involved in the arts than ever before.

One of those is grad student Adyn Gallagher '22, who earned an Integrated Degree in Engineering, Arts and Sciences (IDEAS), with concentrations in computer science and sociology.



The Zoellner Arts Center is celebrating its 25th year.

“I knew I wanted to keep playing my instrument in college but I didn’t want to major in it,” says Gallagher, who received a Performing Arts Scholarship for four years and played her French Horn in the Philharmonic and the Wind Ensemble. She was impressed by Zoellner and the fact that it was a space dedicated to the arts.

“It was my kind of place. Between rehearsals and private lessons, it was probably 10 hours a week,” she says. “It was how I made most of my friends.”

Juliana Kilgore ’24, who is majoring in theatre and earth and environmental science, also spends much of her time at the Zoellner Arts Center.

“I am very grateful to be at a university that values the arts just as much as the other departments,” she said. “One of the things that drew me to Lehigh was the opportunity to both double major and have design opportunities as an undergrad. Spaces like the Diamond Theater are important for both promoting the arts and providing the next generation of theatre-makers the opportunity to get involved.”

“What I find great is the fact that the programming is so diverse and multicultural and multi-ethnic—that the arts center really embraced that in terms of presenting those sorts of things to the university and outside communities.”

—MARC FALATO ’87

Paul Salerni, a music professor, director of the Lehigh University Very Modern Ensemble, and the NEH Distinguished Chair in the Humanities, was on the original committee put together by former Lehigh President Peter Likins to create a performing arts center that would make the arts “the soul” of the university. He continues to be in awe of how Zoellner transformed the arts at Lehigh.

“As soon as we opened the building, all of our programs expanded,” he says. “We went from four to eight faculty. We went from a small orchestra to a complete orchestra. We added jazz ensembles. This is one of the conundrums, things expand and they expand beyond what we have room for.”

In the fall season, the music department alone has 13 events on the calendar.

“We have nicely equipped classrooms, we have offices, we have two relatively big rehearsal spaces. And we have access to Baker Hall, one of the great gems, one of the nicest concert venues on the East coast,” says Salerni.

Of course, all of this cannot continue without financial support. Flowers says he has felt that Zoellner “was too much of a best kept secret,” and when he became dean five years ago, he created a successful fundraising and awareness campaign about the arts at Lehigh.

Marc Falato '87 is part of that effort. A two-time Tony winning Broadway producer, Falato is a member of the Zoellner Advisory Council, which meets monthly to brainstorm ideas about engagement, fundraising and more.

He says the biggest challenge the center faces is balancing the academic programming at Zoellner with the need to present commercial events that generate income.

“From an artistic standpoint, it has a long history of providing the type of entertainment that might not be found elsewhere locally,” says Falato. “And that is crucial, because it brings in a broader audience, but also in some ways fulfills the educational mandate of the center being part of a university—and that is, it is educating people about different types of performing arts and cultures they might not have heard of or been previously exposed to. ...

"What I find great is the fact that the programming is so diverse and multicultural and multi-ethnic—that the arts center really embraced that in terms of presenting those sorts of things to the university and outside communities."

Wilson’s goal to shift some programming outside of the four walls and use alternative venues is a giant step towards helping Zoellner continue to flourish, Falato says.

Victoria Zoellner, who was there at the beginning, is excited about the potential for Zoellner to have an even bigger impact. "I think Zoellner Arts Center is very important to the campus and the community because the performing arts and the visual arts are all under one roof. It makes it a destination place for the students as well as the community to go to amazing varied events."

Asked what she hopes for the future, she says: “It’s very simple. Outreach. For a larger percentage of the student body of Lehigh to go to Zoellner Arts Center and to go more than once. To really find it, discover it. And as well for the community of all ages, the younger the better. I like to think of Zoellner Arts Center as one of the most important places on campus.

“When I’m there, seeing all the audience but seeing all the young people, the students, they just come clustering around you. That’s where you want art. You want it to be in their fabric at a young age because then they’ll have it forever. Art is all our stories. We’re remembered by the masterpieces we create over generations and decades, millennia.”

[Ticket and event information can be found here.](#)

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