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Discover 361

Hallettsville downtown square main attraction

By Kathryn Cargo | kcargo@vicad.com Sep 29, 2018 Updated Oct 1, 2018



Mieko Mahi, 60, executive director at the Hallettsville Hallet Oak Gallery, poses inside the gallery.

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HALLETTSVILLE — Art lovers can learn techniques and view local, new and established artists' work in a historic building in downtown Hallettsville.

Mieko Mahi opened [Hallett Oak Gallery](#) in 2015, which became a nonprofit in 2016. Visitors can take or teach art classes, see artwork and attend live music and cultural events at the gallery.

Mahi said helping others through art is a passion of hers.

“We became a nonprofit after realizing we could do more with the community and the schools by being (one),” she said. “It’s always been a dream of mine. It wasn’t planned for it to happen now. I never thought I would run an art gallery.”

The gallery is in the historic Kahn and Stanzel Building at 115 N. Main St., which is more than 120 years old. The structure was built in 1890 and housed a retail hardware and furniture business owned by Joseph Kahn and Joseph Stanzel.

In 1999, Betty Edwards, of Houston, who owns the building, began restoring the structure. In 2012, she finished restoration. Each doorway still has a cast iron threshold stamped “Kahn & Stanzel.”

“It took so long because there were 10,000 bats living in the walls and birds,” Mahi said. “She didn’t want any bats harmed, so we had to wait for them to migrate. Dr. Edwards — it’s because of her” the gallery exists.

Edwards donated \$25,000 toward Hallett Oak Gallery when Mahi opened the business three years ago, Mahi said. She also sponsors the gallery’s Christkindlmarkt, which features free live German and Czech music the four Saturdays before Christmas.

“It’s free because she pays for it. She pays top-notch musicians to come,” Mahi said.

Mahi leases the building and subleases art studio space to artists who want to teach art, music or dance. She charges based on how many people attend the class so the artists can afford it.

The gallery is free and open to the public every day except for Sunday, and everyone who works at the venue is a volunteer, Mahi said.

The gallery is part of Hallett Oak Foundation, which has outreach programs for the community. The events have a fee and include a music night, an art and architecture conference and a painting event.

The foundation also has free cultural events, including a first day of spring celebration, chalk art with music, a Juneteenth showcase of a black artist, a Halloween party with a haunted tunnel and Christkindlmarkt.

"I've always wanted to do something to help young people and seniors," Mahi said. "I wanted to inspire people with the art, and now I am."

Downtown Hallettsville also offers other businesses for the public to visit.

[Cole Theatre](#)

[Cole Theatre](#) first opened in 1926 as a silent theater and had a piano player as the soundtrack. More than 90 years later, the theater now plays top big screen movies.

The theater moved to its current location at 207 E. 2nd St. in 1929 from the other side of the downtown Hallettsville square. The theater has a traditional slope floor instead of the regular staged seating. Although the theater is historical, it has digital monitors and is known for its sound system, said owner Richard Orsak, of Victoria.

Orsak's family bought the theater in 1992. His dad was a projectionist as a young boy and always wanted to own a theater, Orsak said. When theaters went digital, many of them left small towns, he said.

"It's something (residents) really appreciate," Orsak said. "We brought something back to Hallettsville for people to do. Especially a lot of the older folks that were there when it was operating and it closed down — they realized that they really missed it. When someone came in and redid it, the appreciation is there."

[Sweet Chic Boutique](#)

Janelle Bludau always wanted to open a Starbucks in Hallettsville. While [Sweet Chic Boutique](#) isn't a Starbucks, it is a boutique with a coffee shop.

Janelle Bludau, 29, of Houston; her sister, Christine Hill, 31, of Hallettsville; and their mom, Debi Bludau, 54, of Hallettsville, opened the boutique in November 2016. The shop has women's clothing sized from small to 3X as well as children's and men's clothing.

The sisters and mom love clothes and enjoy shopping at boutiques. After Hill was laid off from her office job in September 2016, the three women decided to take a shot at starting a business.

“We loved this,” Hill said. “We’ve always looked at this building and thought it would be awesome to have something there because we like the balcony at the top.”

The family get their coffee beans from Victoria Coffee Roasters.

“We love the town, we love the square and we wanted to bring some life and something different to Hallettsville,” Debi Bludau said.

Lavaca County Courthouse

The [Lavaca County Courthouse](#) was built in 1899 and rededicated in September 2010 after being historically restored.

The restoration project included cleaning the outside stone, replacing rotten wood, painting, plumbing and electrical work for a total of \$6.2 million. The courthouse interior looks as it did in 1899.

The Hallettsville Festival of Lights has lit up the courthouse with hundreds of thousands of lights for more than 20 years during the winter holidays.

The festival has been celebrated at the courthouse since 1996. The holiday festival has attracted more than 4,000 people in recent years, which is about double the population of Hallettsville.

Kathryn Cargo reports on business and agriculture for the Victoria Advocate. She may be reached at kcargo@vicad.com or 361-580-6328. Follow her on twitter @kathryncargo.

More Information

Hallet Oak Gallery

Hours: 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Friday-Saturday

Location: 115 N. Main St., Hallettsville

Contact: 361-217-7030

More information: halletoakgallery.com

Kathryn Cargo

Reporter

Kathryn Cargo covers business and agriculture in the Crossroads. She enjoys reporting on industry trends and getting her shoes dirty out in the field.