Society seeks to shed new light on Abbeville landmark

Judy Bastien
jbastian@theadvertiser.com

From 1931 to 1989, Frank’s Theatre brought entertainment to the citizens of Abbeville. Today, the historic movie theater in downtown Abbeville has fallen into disrepair. Years of rain pouring through holes in the roof have caused damage to the seats, walls and even some parts of the structure of the building.

But the Allumé Society has stepped forward to give the old landmark a new lease on life. The plan is to provide a venue for live theater in the building that once seated about 900 moviegoers.

The nonprofit organization is in the process of purchasing the building from its current owner, Robert de Grauw. They’ve also begun holding volunteer work days inside the theater, holding fundraisers and applying for grants.

The Allumé Society’s president, Onezime Mouton, sees the project as a way to help revitalize Abbeville’s downtown area.

“People realize Abbeville has great potential, but there’s not a whole lot being done. I started talking to these people. Everyone wanted to do something, as well,” said Mouton, an assistant professor of architecture at UL and an Abbeville native who has returned home after living in Houston.

“In Houston, I noticed how nonprofit organizations are playing a big part in the development of the city. We started kicking around the idea and formally organized into a nonprofit organization.”

The city of Abbeville had originally come up with the idea, said Roslyn White who, with her mother, Ariene White, heads up the fundraising committee of the Allumé Society; but the city council ultimately decided against it. That’s when the nonprofit group turned its attention on the theater.

“We said, ‘If we’re not going to do this, let’s disband,’ Mouton said. “It was a huge moment, a huge challenge. Are we really up for this?”

The group has already raised $100,000 capital outlay grant. The group is also trying to redirect funds from a federal Save the American Treasures grant that had been awarded to the city toward the renovation project.

“We also received through the UL School of Architecture a grant from the state to do the initial schematic design and building documentation,” Mouton said. “We’re working with a group of students, measuring the building, getting an advance visualization of what it will look like.”

Partnerships are being forged with other organizations, such as the Acadíana Arts Council. The group is also working closely with the city. And then, there’s the work.

Volunteers have gutted the interior of the theater, tearing out all the damaged components, Roslyn White said. “We gutted it to the shell, with the exception of the balcony area, which is still in good enough shape that it doesn’t need to be removed.”

The interior was in such bad condition, with debris everywhere, that it looked hopeless, at first. That was reflected inadvertently in the ironic double-entendre of the group’s name.

“The word for allumé in French means ‘to light.’”

“Legend has it that at one point in time, there were gas lanterns (in Abbeville). The persons who went around were allumeurs, relighting the lamps,” Mouton said.

He learned from French visitors the word is also slang for something less complimentary “It also means pie in the sky.”