Opera house takes center stage in Crowley

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A hardware store owner, an elementary school teacher and a state senator. A new sitcom? A strange new reality television show? No, what these people have in common is a fascination with an aging opera house.

The Grand Opera House of the South is located about a mile from Dixie True Value Hardware at 505 Parkerson Ave. in Crowley, will celebrate its 100th birthday in November of this year. It currently is being renovated under the guidance of the Gielen Family—L.J., Chee Chee and their daughter Kim, who is the executive director of the Grand Opera House of the South, formerly known as The Grand.

"When we bought the building, we knew it (the opera house) was up there," said the elder Gielen, "and we wanted to restore it.

She said that it was a dream of her husband's to restore the opera house.

"He had seen it about 15 years ago," she said, "and he'd always said that if it went up for sale, he'd buy it."

That dream came true when the Gielens purchased the opera house in June of 1999. Having been used as storage space since the 1930s, it was in need of serious repair and renovation. The Gielen's daughter became executive director of The Grand in 2000 after leaving her job as a first-grade teacher to assume the responsibilities of a job she knew little about. She took a month-long class on managing not-for-profit organizations and began working on The Grand.

Gielen said that she has come to realize how difficult her job can be.

"It's all been so challenging," said Gielen, "but it's fun. It's been so interesting, and I've met so many people."

Among those many people are a lobbyist, a state senator and a state representative who are assisting the Gielens in finding the funds to aid them in funding the project, the cost of which the younger Gielen estimated to be $2.5-3 million.

On June 13, The Grand Opera House of the South received a $1.15 million grant from the Louisiana state government. A grant that The Grand's executive director said was obtained with the aid of State Sen. Fred Hoyt, D - Abbeville, and State Rep. Gil Pinac, D - Crowley, along with other influential people.

"We (Hoyt and Pinac) were brought in, initially, because Kim and L.J. and Chee Chee were trying to get some assistance from the state to refurbish the opera house," said Hoyt, "so we started the process last October or September, and we were fortunate enough to get what we asked for." He said he felt that the opera house was of "historic value" to Acadia Parish.

The seats are gone now, the staircase was removed decades ago, and a fine layer of dust coats floorboards that were laid before most of Crowley's current citizens were born, but new life has been stirring in the upstairs opera house.

"We want it to be a community effort," stressed Gielen. She said that the opera house has had several volunteer cleanup days during which high school students and other citizens have swept, scraped and cleaned in the non-air conditioned opera house.

"We had some children (who volunteered)," said Gielen. "We had some elderly.

Gielen. She related an incident in which she heard boxes sliding across the floor.

"Her daughter said that she also heard boxes being moved about, and cold spots were felt in the opera house.

The two say they do not know who or what is residing in their house, but it has given them no real trouble.

The younger Gielen said that Gypsy, nonetheless, seemed to like the opera house.

"She'd stay up here all day if she could," said The Grand's executive director with a laugh as she coaxed the dog down a flight of stairs, stairs that eventually will be raved by an elevator to bring up guests and performers.

Gielen said that The Grand would host performances similar to those presented in larger cities.

"We are going to have stellar performances," she said. "It's going to be, mainly, traveling shows very similar to what PAPA (The Performing Arts Society of Acadia) or the Heymann Center does in Lafayette."

The elder Gielen said that the renovation of The Grand Opera House of the South is only 25 percent complete, but that, hopefully, it will be done in the next two years. Her daughter is continuing to raise money by 'selling' seats in the opera house and piano keys.

The seats, which are being made to resemble the original seats that were sold to a Mermentau theater and later lost in a fire, will be adorned with plaques bearing the names of those who purchased seats. A plaque will be engraved with the names of those who purchased piano keys.

According to its executive director, the opera house has raised $100,000 from the community and will need to provide matching funds for the grant, which will be given in portions over a five-year period.

The opera house will host a performance on July 28 in the front of the Dixie Hardware building to raise money for the project.

A gospel group of eight men, The Soolful Heavenly Sounds, will perform at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are available at Dixie Hardware for a donation of $10."