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THE LOCALLY OWNED VOICE OF THE CAPITAL REGION

THURSDAY, MARCH 2, 2006

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ALBANY

Eviction deadline is near for artist tenants

Brighter Choice school to occupy old warehouse

BY ELI FANNING
Gazette Reporter

A converted warehouse in the West Hill neighborhood that became home to a small community of artists over the last 20 years will be a thing of the past soon as an eviction deadline nears.

The tenants of the studios, lofts and offices at 116 N. Lake Ave. must move out by May 1, when the Brighter Choice Foundation takes over the building and can evict remaining tenants. The foundation expects to begin renovations in May and hopes to open a new facility for the Brighter Choice Charter School for Boys in 2007.

"It's kind of become an arts building. And we all know each other, we kind of look out for each other and have helped each other. We are realizing how precious that is," said Liz Vigoda, who runs a pottery studio and classroom in the building.

In the mid-1980s, photographer David Brickman, singer and teacher Ruth Pelham and Vigoda began renting work space from then-owner Clifford Ruhl.

Today the three-story brick building near Central Avenue houses at least two photography studios, two pottery work spaces, a painting studio and an electronic music center.

"What's really lost to the city and the neighborhood is a concentration of the artists and the businesses here," Pelham said.

There is no city-owned space for artists' studios, and Brickman said the displacement of the North Lake Avenue artists highlights the need for publicly funded studio space in Albany and surrounding cities.

Artist Gina Occhiogrosso, who is also the gallery director of the Arts Center of the Capital Region, said publicly funded studio space has been a long-time dream of many local artists. Many like those displaced from North Lake are desperate for affordable space.

Ruhl kept rent low and seemed proud of the building's artist tenants, Vigoda said. The low rent and huge space allowed Vigoda to offer pottery-making classes in addition to selling her own work.

The Brighter Choice Foundation offered a few months of free rent to the tenants and extended the eviction date by a month, Brickman said. Despite that help, the move is something Pelham is dreading after having used 16,000 square feet as an office and storage space for the nonprofit Music Mobile.

"It has just slowed our day-to-day business; we are all in crisis here," Pelham said of the upcoming deadline.

Pelham has spent 29 years traveling around the Capital Region in her colorful Music Mobile van to deliver performances in places ranging from school districts to nursing homes. Pelham plays guitar and sings and sings to teach cooperation and promote self-esteem with in her performances and workshops.

"I remember thinking I wasn't going to stay that long because it was too far up — it was 56 steps up. But it turned into 19 years," Pelham said.

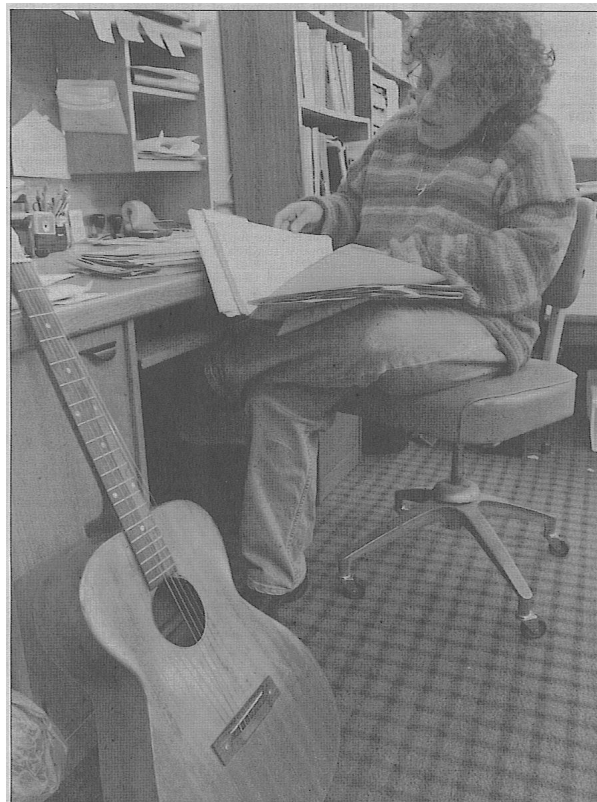
Vigoda said she plans hook up with another pottery studio in Delmar. Pelham is still looking for new office space and wants to stay in Albany.

Reach Gazette reporter Eli Fanning at 432-4391 or efanning@dailygazette.net.



HANS PENNINK/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

This building at 116 Lake Ave. in Albany is being sold and will be converted into a Brighter Choice Foundation school.



PETER R. BARBER/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

Ruth Pelham of the Music Mobile goes through files at her office at 116 N. Lake Ave. in Albany on Wednesday. She is among the tenants who will have to leave the former warehouse facility.