

Cleveland’s Broadway neighborhood now home to Darl Center for the Arts

By ANDREA C. TURNER

Entrepreneur, philanthropist, LGBTQ+ activist and art aficionado, Darl D. Schaaff has led an impressive life in his young 75 years. I met him inadvertently at the Cleveland Play House gala; he was decked out in a long black cape intricately decorated with gold accents, so he caught my attention.

Schaaff, a native of Findlay, Ohio, re-located to the Cleveland area from Alaska in October 2022, after his decades-long successful corporate event-planning business went under — due to the inability to gather because of Covid. Why Cleveland? Back in 2014, while working in Germany, he was tasked with conducting a site search here for the Gay Games, and awarded it to our fine city that year.

He bought the former Broadway Free Library, a decagon (10-sided) building at 5437 Broadway Avenue – only one of 10 like it in the country. In 1904, it was the first Andrew Carnegie library built in the city of Cleveland and donated to its residents. After closing to the public in 1987, it had been



Barbara Bachtell, Executive Director of Broadway School of Music & The Arts, and Darl Schaaff, owner of The Darl Center for the Arts are helping to revitalize Cleveland’s Broadway and Slavic Village neighborhoods

in disrepair, with a collapsing roof. Schaaff claims workers removed 120 cubic yards of garbage from the interior before renovations could begin in 2023.

Now, the building has found new life as the Darl Center for the Arts. It continues to

undergo changes to meet its plans for the future, including developing an alternative space to explore, create and present original works of art. The goal is to encourage and promote artists, and provide community space to share their experiences.

The Broadway historic district was once the largest business district in Cleveland, outside of downtown. Many of its original buildings still stand.

The walnut wood of the grand staircase is original, as is the sign in the first-floor bar area. The phrase, “On:Bookes:For:To:Rede:I:Me:Delyte” from Geoffrey Chaucer’s, “The Legend of Good Women” is carved in it. The first floor is equipped with a commercial kitchen, in which caterers can prepare food for special events. So far, the Cleveland Foundation has hosted a private event here, with likely more to come. An adjacent parking lot fits 50 cars.

Schaaff’s background is one that could be made into a multi-chapter memoir. He grew up studying ballet in Florida and studied briefly with ballet legend Robert Joffrey. After an injury, he took up martial arts and eventually

became a black belt winning multiple world-wide competitions. A picture of him shaking then President Bill Clinton’s hand hangs on the wall. He used his expertise to create a video series for LGBTQ+ individuals in the 1980s on how to protect themselves from physical violence. As an Executive Director, he led an Arts Festival in Alaska, brought young people with learning disabilities to perform at The Kennedy Center for Performing Arts in DC, met actress Elizabeth Taylor, and hung out with Andy Warhol. He also worked in Paris for 15 years.

A tour of the museum would not be complete without Schaaff’s personal stories behind each piece of art. Some were gifts, some he made, others were from events he planned across the globe or collected from his travels. One of the events he’s most proud of is the 50th Anniversary of the Statehood of Alaska in 2009, when he served as Executive Producer for a concert at a former WWII airplane hangar turned sound stage. It featured country music family the Judds and was viewed by 11 million people through subscription TV.

Schaaff’s life’s collection features intricately carved furniture from Asia, costumes from the Peking Opera, traditional African art, modern art paintings recently exhibited at Cleveland’s MOCA, a replica of the arch in Alaska for the Iditarod dog races in Anchorage, and much more.

The chrome steel tree featured in the building’s rotunda was constructed of materials leftover from a friend’s nightclub— stripper poles and kick rails. His corporate client, BP, commissioned it for an event signifying their success with the Alaskan gas pipelines. Schaaff was pleased he was able to hire a welder by trade to construct it, who happened to be transgender.

His life partner of many years in Seattle, Rick Leman who died after contracting AIDS, was a talented artist himself. A section of the museum’s collection features his work.

The library’s former children’s room features colorful costumes collected from theatrical performances, as well as robotic puppetry, glass-blown art, and a neon 1969 sign in honor of the Stonewall Riots which served as a catalyst for the gay rights movement in the United States. It also includes a 10-foot papier-mâché fish. Several school groups have toured the space, and the kids, unsurprisingly, were in awe.

Downstairs, the renovated ballroom boasts a long cocktail bar, full stage with acoustic sound system, dance floor, raised seating area, and renovated restrooms. Currently, he rents the space to a swing dance group that gathers regularly to dance with a live band. In 2025, he’s planning an Art Quilts & Fiber Art show.

To contact Schaaff about space rental or for private group tours, email darl@darlcollection.com.

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100 Women Strong OHIO

100 Women Strong OHIO celebrated six years strong by granting monetary gifts to six deserving charities serving women and children throughout Northeast Ohio. As a beautiful evening unfolded, more than 100 Women Strong OHIO members and their guests listened to presentations by six charities, each of which has been the recipient of grant money during the giving circle’s bi-annual giving events. From human trafficking victims (RAHAB) to special needs kids (Empower Sports) to women in substance abuse recovery (Edna House) to homeless families (Family Promise) to the homeless on the streets (Akron Snow Angels) to kids graduating out of foster care (Chair-ity), the impact of these grants has been substantial and far-reaching. Not one of these charities knew that they would be receiving additional grant money before the announcement was made with much fanfare as is deserving of an event like this. The additional grant money was made possible through a generous donation by Ken Ganley Subaru which designated 100 Women Strong OHIO as the car dealership’s charity of choice during the annual Subaru Share the Love® event.