

# BUILDING Culture

## Lied takes center stage in Lincoln

Editor's note: Today's story is the first in a three-part series examining the history and role of the Lied Center for Performing Arts as a cultural centerpiece for the state of Nebraska.

BY SARAH BAKER  
Senior staff writer

The Lied Center for Performing Arts has a history filled with changes, controversy and a tradition of ever-evolving goals continuously working toward fruition.

Since the Lied Center, 301 N. 12th St., launched its grand-opening season in 1990, that list of goals has morphed the establishment into what it is today: an arts organization dedicated to bringing the best programming possible to the state of Nebraska.

Lied Center Director Charles Bethea, who took over the post on January 6, 1997, said he has worked to renew the original mission

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of the center, but most importantly, to improve it.

“When I was first considered for this position, I learned something,” Bethea said. “I learned that the Lied Center is a unique and powerful arts center, because it is the only one in the state. It is of and for the people of Nebraska.”

Bethea said he had some clear-cut goals when he started at the Lied Center and has tailored those goals to fit in with previous programs enacted before he arrived.

“I want to make the programming accessible and reasonable to all communities and also to expand outreach efforts as much as we can to strengthen the connection with the people of Nebraska,” Bethea said.

Dick Durst, dean of the College of Fine and Performing Arts, agreed with Bethea and said the Lied Center offers a rare opportunity within Nebraska.

“When I go around the state, I am amazed at the number of people who look at the Lied as theirs,” Durst said. “It has a statewide presence. And we can always do a better job investing in the people of Nebraska.”

Although the Lied Center has become something of a staple for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln city campus, the looming building that dominates the corner of 12th and R streets wasn't something that was finished easily, and in fact it garnered much controversy before reaching completion.

### A musical foundation

The center is named in honor of the late Ernst Lied, a 1927 UNL graduate who made a minor fortune as a local Buick dealer before he became a millionaire investor in pre-commercialized Las Vegas property.

His gamble on Vegas paid off. After his death in 1980 at the age of 74, Lied's fortune was transformed into a \$133 million trust fund dedicated to the enrichment of lives of Midlanders.

Ten million dollars of that fund was donated to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the form of a challenge grant through Christina Hixson, the executor of Lied's estate at the Lied Foundation.

In order to qualify for the grant, the university raised \$15 million in additional funds to support maintenance endowments,

according to Gail McNair, director of development at the Lied Center.

The \$15 million came through a \$10 million donation from local businesses and citizens, and the Nebraska Legislature provided the extra \$5 million from state funds. During the construction of the Lied Center, feuding parties debated what it meant for the future of the Nebraska arts and entertainment scene. Some saw it as an unprecedented improvement to Lincoln, while others

believed it was a risky gamble with taxpayers' money.

The practicality of the center and the variety of the acts it proposed to showcase were two widely debated subjects.

Herb Howe, associate to the chancellor and former dean of the College of Fine and Performing Arts, worked with the Lied Center staff during and after its controversial beginnings.

He said the contention stemmed from citizens who were unsure if the city could sustain and afford an organization like the Lied Center.

“The question of funding really came to a head when the Unicameral was asked for the \$5 million,” Howe said. “People had serious doubts whether eastern Nebraska would be able to support a serious performing arts center and really make it into a viable entity.”

There also was concern that the Lied would kill all the other arts organizations in Lincoln.

“The Lied was seen as this 700-pound gorilla that would squash everything else,” he said.

Controversy also abounded on the placement of the center in Lincoln instead of Omaha.

Howe believes the center has overcome many of those initial doubts that were loudly verbalized throughout the community.

Many of the groups that were so worried about being wiped out by the Lied Center have actually been able to

utilize the center to their advantage, he said, citing the Lincoln Symphony Orchestra as an example. Today, the orchestra frequently uses the Lied Center for its performances.

### Technical difficulties

With construction finished, the Lied Center faced problems of a more technical sort, such as an insufficient sound system, uncomfortable seating, air-flow systems that caused both drafts and lack of circulation and areas that were not handicapped accessible. Dan Stratman, technical director for the Lied Center, said most of the problems were solved through minor adjustments.

The problems weren't detected until after completion, because they were things that could be known only with an audience in the auditorium.

“Those problems were minor in every sense,” Stratman said. “When you consider the cost of a building like this, the cost of fixing the problems wasn't outrageous.”

The building's completion ended up costing about \$20 million, Howe said, and it hasn't been only smooth sailing since.

He said the Lied Center ran deficits for several years because it had to support pay for staff before it ever sold a ticket — eventually bottoming out at a \$600,000 deficit.

“Any time you deal with the performing arts, finance is an interesting question,” Howe said. “The cost of putting on acts continues to go up, and fees go up. The community support and the help from the Friends of the Lied has been world class.”

### Taking the Lied

In his first year as director, Bethea said he enjoyed a good financial year because of a concerted team effort, which helped turn around the Lied Center's financial woes.

Bethea is the third person to hold the position of director of the Lied Center, the first two having lasted fewer than 10 years collectively.

The center's first director, Robert Chumbley, began his stint as director with the opening of the facility in 1989. Chumbley remained in Nebraska until 1994, when he took a position at State University in Buffalo, N.Y., as head of the school's new performing arts center.

Chumbley left the university on good terms, and a national search for a new director resulted in the position being awarded to C. Bruce Marquis, who took over as director in October 1994.

Marquis remained in the position until May 1996, when he resigned because his artistic and institutional visions for the Lied Center differed from those of the university, according to a 1996 Daily Nebraskan article.

In an odd turn of events, Marquis ended up re-applying for his former position once the national search for a replacement began, but his change of heart was apparently too little too late, and Bethea, the current director, was awarded the job.

### Concerted efforts

While the Lied Center is entering its 10th anniversary season next year, Bethea is spending time re-evaluating the goals and general mission of Nebraska's leading entertainment venue.

As part of this re-evaluation, Bethea said he, along with other Lied Center employees, worked to tighten the wordy mission statement into something more tangible, eliminating unnecessary complexity.

“We wanted to find the real intent of the people who were at the forefront of creating the center and include all the facets that go with that,” Bethea said. “We wanted to keep that spirit alive in what we did from this point forward.”

This refreshed mission statement calls for the Lied Center “to provide excellence and diversity in the performing arts to the citizens of Nebraska.”

In order to achieve this one broad statement, the mission also includes four smaller sub-goals: to present national and international art that is distinctive and diverse in an accessible environment, to develop and sustain live performance opportunities beyond the Lied Center through outreach programs, to build consistent organization partnerships

and to ensure continuing financial and physical stability.

Bethea said most of the ideas in the mission statement aren't things that come to a final solution, rather they are ongoing, continuous goals such as increased outreach programs and steady ticket sales.

“It's a matter of taking all the things and building on them to refresh the mission,” Bethea said. “We try to use those as a broad guide to everything we do. Everything is ongoing, and everything is a community effort.”

Bethea said the Lied Center, although its main focus is on the present, is constantly looking ahead.

Programming for the 1999-2000 season is already under way, and the Lied Center's administration is planning to broaden some of its more successful programs, such as the popular family series.

“One thing we want to do is extend our programs to communities farther away in Nebraska,” he said. “We want to take some of our artists to communities interested in seeing them. We want to go to those communities — and then beyond that.”

Durst reaffirmed the same broad goals for the future of the Lied Center.

“We want to continue what we have begun now,” he said. “We also hope to make these performances available to people whom, for whatever reason, may not come into the college or the Lied.”

“We will take it to them.”



# UNL's dance program optimistic about future

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new approaches and new styles.

Kane has worked with her students on contact improvisation, teaching them how to create movement off of each other and to dance with their weight off balance.

Holcombe has introduced her students to an inventive style of movement characteristic of modern companies such as Momix and Pilobolus, with which she has performed.

But the two women aren't just bringing change to the classroom. They're working on improving the

image of dance in the entire city.

Since Holcombe and Kane have arrived at UNL, students say serious efforts have been made by both to promote the program in and out of the campus community.

Kane and Holcombe have organized special showings of student works and increased publicity to raise the community's awareness of the program.

The two also have worked with the administration to get the program a new dance floor in the rehearsal space in Mabel Lee Hall, Room 304.

Outside of the program, both

women taught freshmen foundation courses this semester aimed at introducing new students to the arts.

Kane and Holcombe's endeavors have contributed to a positive attitude pervasive among the dance majors, Fusillo said.

“Right now, everything is starting to click,” Holcombe said.

“We're contrasting the change in weather with positive attitudes. Explosions are happening all over the dance department.”

However, those involved with the dance program know it will take time to enact permanent changes.

Holcombe said she could see how deeply her dancers were affected by the year's transitions and speculations.

“I think they have a hard time trusting people,” Holcombe said. “At the same time, I think what they've been through is helping a lot to push them.”

Because the students struggle to trust others, Holcombe would like to see them exercise their own independence.

“I want the students to take more responsibility for themselves,” Holcombe said. “I want the students to feed off of each other.”

Holcombe would also enjoy seeing Orchesis, a student organization for dance majors, come back to life.

Kane said she wants the students to feel more like a family. For her, a sense of community creates a more hospitable environment for artistic creativity.

In order to foster this environment, the program plans to put into effect all-dance-program meetings next semester where all dance majors and faculty would be involved.

“We just have to take one thing at a time,” Kane said. “Sometimes it's a slow process.”