

An optimism generator

An electrical system upgrade lacks the romance of a watercolor or the texture of a sculpture.

But for the folks at Alchemy, it is as essential to art as a muse.

Careyann Weinberg, president and co-founder of Alchemy, said the group's recent successful Kickstarter campaign will buy new wiring and other nuts and bolts that will support artists.

"We are going to upgrade electrical to accommodate our wood shop in the back," Weinberg said, so artists can use a machine called a CNC router. "It will cut whatever you program. It's a massive, awesome machine. But we can't use it right now" because Alchemy's building on Granby Street in Norfolk doesn't have enough juice.

Kickstarter money will also help build studio space and a dark room.

The Pushers, a nine-year-old sketch comedy group, actually had a muse: The Muse writing center in Ghent, which for the past three years provided space for improv classes.

Pushers co-founder Sean Devereaux said a perfect storm led him and his collaborators to look for a site on Granby Street near Alchemy. They needed additional class space. They longed for their own stage and theater, after years of borrowing space from other venues. And last spring's Better Block project in the growing Arts District opened their eyes to the possibility of a site on Granby Street.

Two students in The Pushers classes provided money to pay rent and utilities for the first year of their residence in a former jewelry store. For the rest, The Pushers also turned to Kickstarter.

"Your generous donations will help us buy lights, chairs, a stage and the hundreds of other little things needed to make a theater come alive," the group wrote on the site.

The campaign to raise \$20,000 runs through Friday. As of Tuesday morning, donations from 171 backers stood at \$15,606, a little less than \$5,000 shy of the goal. The Pushers don't get a cent unless they reach the goal. (Check out kickstarter.com, and search for Push Comedy Theater.)

Crowd funding efforts like Kickstarter feel right for the kind of grassroots campaign Weinberg, Devereaux and others have launched for the blocks of Granby just north of Brambleton Avenue. It gives members of a community a chance to give money directly to the arts and artists they want to support.

"I feel like there's a want and a need to come together and support something," Weinberg said, "to see the area take off and go further."

She's not talking about just those three blocks, either. She envisions the Arts District as a hub of creativity for all of Norfolk, all of Hampton Roads. A place that creates energy for our region, adds to its appeal for residents and businesses, becomes a magnet for and producer of ideas. An optimism generator.

Norfolk's government has shown support by smoothing processes, examining regulations and generally

allowing artists to try to do their thing to get the Arts District off the ground.

But any effort to create something from nothing - and there was precious little in those blocks of Granby Street before Better Block and Alchemy - takes money.

Norfolk needs beauty. Like hanging a picture on a blank wall in a new house, art makes a place home. A community of artists needs community support.

"It's a hard thing to wrap your head around," Weinberg said. "It's necessary to keep things progressing. To keep things inspired. To have the younger generation stick around."

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