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\$17 million Heartwood artist center officially opens with ceremony attended by governor

By Allie Robinson



The sounds of live banjo music and songs with titles like "Whiskey for Breakfast" might be old hat to folks in the region, but that down-home familiarity and mountain culture is something

officials at Heartwood want to share with the rest of the nation.

The \$17 million facility was officially opened Saturday afternoon, after a week of festivities introducing people to the center, which aspires to be the artisan gateway to Southwest Virginia.

“What you’re doing here today to provide this gateway for arts, in this joint vision, [you’re] showing the greatness of this region,” said Gov. Bob McDonnell, who came for the ribbon-cutting after spending some time at the Remote Area Medical Clinic in Wise, Va. “This is going to be now the place people look at as the epicenter [for regional tourism]. We realize that Virginia does not end at Roanoke – it goes to the Cumberland Gap.”

State Sen. William Wampler Jr., R-Bristol, is the chairman of the Heartland board, and said the mission of the center is to help identify and define authentic regional art, and then connect people to it.

He said the artists whose work is for sale in the center represent artists across the region, and the hope is the center will be able to offer an interactive system by which a visitor could swipe a barcode on a piece of art and then learn about the person who crafted it.

“What is ... important is driving the visitor’s experience to Southwest Virginia,” he said. “And being able to push those who want to learn more about Southwest Virginia.”

State Delegate Joe Johnson, D-Abingdon, said Heartwood is just one in a line of things Abingdon has to be proud of – including headquartering KVAT, the parent company of Food City, as well as being home to the Barter Theatre.

“Probably less than 40 years ago, this was a tobacco field,” he said. “Look what we have today. It means so much to Southwest Virginia.”

U.S. Sen. Mark Warner, D-Alexandria, was instrumental in the planning stages of the center when he was governor. He couldn’t be attend the ceremony Saturday, explained his staffer Andrew Lumpkin, because of debt talks in Washington, D.C.

But Warner did send a letter in which he expressed his congratulations for the completion of the center.

“Today, with the completion and opening of Heartwood, you could say this vision [of the Crooked Road and Round the Mountain initiatives] has been realized,” he wrote.

Other dignitaries who couldn’t attend included U.S. Rep. Morgan Griffith, R-9th, and Sen. Jim Webb, D-Falls Church, who both sent staff members to express their congratulations.

"Heartwood is a remarkable monument for people in Southwest Virginia," Griffith shared via letter. "As you know, the term 'heartwood' represents the deepest part of the tree – the core. Southwest Virginia has much to offer."

Del. Terry Kilgore, R-Gate City, introduced McDonnell and also talked about the hard work it took for the 19 counties and four cities involved to bring Heartwood to realization.

The center started as a "nugget of an idea," which grew and will now be an asset to the region, said Earl Gohl, federal co-chairman for the Appalachian Regional Commission.

"This is one of those 'whoa' places," he said. "You walk into it and say, 'Whoa.'"

Bill Shelton, director of the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, has seen the project grow from an idea into a facility.

"For me, the arts are wonderful and it's special to see that part develop," he said. "But ... this could help rekindle that broader awareness within the region. ... This focuses on what is positive within the region and is a testament to what people can accomplish when they work together."

Local leaders also talked on the importance of the center to the area.

"Might I say, I am lost for words," said Dulcie Mumpower, chairwoman of the Washington County, Va., Board of Supervisors. "This is just absolutely awesome. What an asset to have."

She said the county and town are proud to have been a part of pulling the idea and the facility together.

"Heartwood is not about Abingdon, it's not even about selling crafts," said Abingdon Mayor Ed Morgan. "It's about telling our story to the world."

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