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Flemington DIY non-profit community arts space celebrates fifth anniversary

By **KERRI O'MALLEY**
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Flemington DIY, the non-profit community arts space at 90 Main Street in downtown Flemington, is celebrating its fifth anniversary this year.

The anniversary marks another important milestone for community arts space with an open-door policy and fairy-tale origin story, even as it continues to face uncertainty in the wake of downtown development plans.

"When we first opened in May 2014, the Flemington Business Improvement District (BID) that let us use the space stressed that this would be temporary," said Jeff Hersch, the 28-year-old volunteer director and founder of DIY. "I never thought that this would be as big or as important as it is now."

For Flemington DIY, operating without knowing what tomorrow will bring isn't new; for the resilient community space and its army of volunteers, it's business as usual.

"It's certainly grown from kind of a wild idea five years ago in an empty borough-owned building into a real asset for our community," said Flemington Mayor Betsy Driver.

What began as a "wild idea" between the



Photo by Kerri O'Malley

Jeff Hersch is one of the founders of the non-profit Flemington DIY community art space.

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For videos and more photos from Flemington DIY, please see pages 20-21 and visit **HunterdonReview.com**.

now-defunct Flemington BID and young Flemington residents who wanted a place to host punk shows has turned into a unique, inclusive space that appeals to all ages. DIY's programming runs the gamut from, yes, punk shows to art classes for people with disabilities to bluegrass jam sessions for seniors, a popular jazz series, gallery shows, a screenprinting club, and so much more.

"I think DIY has allowed the energy that's here in Flemington to flourish," said George Eckelmann of Delaware Township, a Flemington DIY board member, builder, local landlord, and co-owner of the Stangl Factory, among other things. "Flemington, like lots of places, is filled with talented people with great ideas and, often, no good outlet for all of that energy. We're fortunate that we had this core of people with the talent, energy, and time to get DIY going, and my hope is that it

PLEASE SEE **DIY**, PAGE 20

INSIDE

Crossword	16
Editorial	4
Home Sales	18
Police News	8, 10

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FROM PAGE 1

can continue to grow.”

Origin Story

As much as it has grown, when you look back to the beginning, it all started with a punk show.

“I’ve been playing in bands since I was 14,” said Hersch, who now lives in Highland Park but grew up in Flemington, attending Hunterdon Central High School. “I lived in a house right down the street from here with a bunch of people. I like to say it was Flemington’s only punk house. We were doing shows in the basement, and that’s where our whole crew hung out.”

But the house shows, and energy behind them, grew bigger than the basement.

“Jeff approached me about five or six years ago about doing a punk show at the Stangl Factory,” Ecklemann said, describing how he first met the DIY founders. “Apparently he couldn’t find any place to put on a punk show in Flemington.”

Ecklemann agreed to let Hersch host the show at the Factory, an event that he calls “a terrific experience.”

“It was like a punk rock flea market and a concert,” Hersch said of the show, “As I was putting up flyers around town for it, I came across the Flemington Business Improvement District office. I saw that they had a bunch of concert flyers in the window, so I just popped in there and gave them one of our flyers.”

Hersch said the flyer immediately sparked interest and, in that same conversation, he was asked if he would be interested in doing some kind of pop-up gallery or venue in Flemington.

Hersch worked with friends to draw up a proposal and, after a series of meetings with the BID, where they discussed an abandoned bank on Main Street that the borough owned but was sitting vacant.

“They basically turned over the keys to us,” Hersch said. “It was pretty risky on their part, looking back.”

After Hersch and friends got the BID’s blessing and that set of keys, they sought help from volunteers online to clean up the bank and prep the space for a grand opening art show and concert.

“A bunch of people showed up,” Hersch said, “including some people who are still involved today.” The group of volunteers pulled off a successful first show in May 2014, laying the foundation for the 100 center volunteer, passion-driven operation DIY has become.

Challenges

For a time, DIY operated without a lease or any formal agreement with the borough.



Photo by Kerri O'Malley

Flemington DIY, the non-profit community arts space at 90 Main Street in downtown Flemington, is celebrating its five-year anniversary this year.

That all changed when Flemington Borough painted a blue line between the yellow traffic lines on Main Street as a symbol of solidarity with the police, at the bequest of the mayor and borough council at the time, in October 2016. Flemington DIY put a Black Lives Matter sign in the window, “kind of unofficially in response,” said Hersch.

“Within an hour, the council members were calling me saying they were getting complaints and demanding that we take it down, or they were going to shut us down,” he said.

Instead of just taking the sign down, DIY organized a panel discussion about the blue line, the sign, the messages behind each, and the implications for the borough.

The controversy put DIY back on the Borough Council’s radar and, after a council meeting where many members of the public expressed support for DIY, the council and DIY put together a formal lease agreement. DIY now rents 90 Main Street for \$1 a month. DIY also agreed to terms such as sharing their schedule with the town at least a week in advance and not posting any signage except those announcing upcoming events.

“It’s good to have a formal agreement with the town and be taken a little more seriously,” Hersch said. “Before that, nothing was on paper.”

“The lease protects them, too,” Mayor Driver adds. “Without a lease, anything could happen.”

Impending Move, Fundraising Needs

Unfortunately, the lease does not protect DIY from the Courthouse Square redevelop-

ment project. The building at 90 Main Street, along with a number of other properties in downtown Flemington, are under contract to be sold to the redevelopers.

“Should that sale go through in December of 2019, they will need to find a new home,” Mayor Driver said. “As we look at relocating the police department (adjacent to DIY), who will also be getting evicted because of the sale, I am keeping DIY in mind as to how we can also accommodate them.”

People have been saying that DIY has at least another year here, but that’s gone on for four years, Hersch said, noting that there have been talks of redeveloping the town for close to ten years now.

“We’re trying to raise as much money as we can now, so when the time comes, we can find a new space and have a smooth transition,” Hersch said, but it’s not easy. “The places we’re looking at are like \$2-3,000 a month, and we’re not really bringing that in right now.”

Flemington DIY’s fundraising comes from a number of sources, from benefit concerts to a 20 percent cut from most events hosted at the space to Giving Tuesday campaigns and, now, grants. Hersch said DIY has applied for and received many small grants last year, many from the Flemington Community Partnership (FCP), an organization that began in the summer of 2016, after the BID disbanded.

“DIY is one of our strongest cultural resources, not just in Flemington, but in the region,” said Ann Meredith, executive director of the FCP. “It’s a community gathering space, and it’s a draw for people from throughout the region.”

Through its grant program, the FCP has helped DIY improve its facade, run its jazz series, start its printmaking program, and more. In 2019, DIY and the FCP will expand their partnership through a grant that will have DIY setting up mobile print shops at eight Flemington events. DIY’s print team will also be making “Love Flemington” prints for the FCP. DIY also recently received a small but meaningful \$750 grant from the Chancy Memorial Foundation to support its bi-monthly Kick StART art classes for people of all ages with disabilities or special needs. Tristan Armstrong, a Flemington resident who started volunteering for DIY when she was just 15 years old, helped start and now helps run the program. Like many things at DIY, it began when someone from the community came to DIY with a need for space and a new idea.

Growing

“People need to know that you can do anything,” Hersch said. “A lot of programs and classes start with people emailing us just saying, ‘Hey, I have this idea. Can we use your space?’ That’s basically how almost everything was started here. I tell people we’re a ‘yes’ organization. We usually say yes, if you’re willing to do your part.”

Thanks to that mentality, DIY is entering 2019 with a growing list of shows and programs, from meditation and tai chi to music and comedy performances, and, of course, print club on Monday nights, run by Armstrong and Brett Barto. DIY’s jazz series is also back, with monthly shows running now through May 18. There’s even more on the horizon for DIY, like a photography club and adult art classes.

“It has evolved from a bunch of punk kids to a real community space, which I think is a lot different than a lot of other spaces across the country,” Hersch said, adding that he hopes people from Flemington and the surrounding areas will continue to come to DIY with their ideas, enthusiasm, and support. “More people that share our vision – that’s the only way to move forward.”

As Flemington DIY turns five, it’s seeking to fundraise, spread the word, and plan for its future in Flemington. And the future looks good to them.

“I feel very optimistic that they will continue to thrive wherever they are,” said Meredith. “They have a lot of support because they are a true treasure in our community, and a lot of people and organizations like the FCP are behind them all the way. As they celebrate their fifth year, we’re excited to see them continue to grow and innovate and continuously add more programs.”

For more information, including upcoming events and opportunities to donate, visit flemingtondiy.org.



Photos by Kerri O'Malley

Top left: Zach Henry, center, and the band Halogens perform at Flemington DIY. **Top right:** Tristan Armstrong, left, and Hannah Gilliland get into the act at Flemington DIY. **Bottom left:** Brett Barto prepares to silk-screen some t-shirts at Flemington DIY. **Bottom right:** Barto gets involved in the silk-screening process at Flemingion DIY.

