Painting the Town

LINDEN CREATES COLORFUL ART, RESTORES HISTORIC HOTEL TO DRAW NEW VISITORS

Michael and Kathy Dumont own the refurbished Commodore Hotel, a shining example of downtown Linden's revitalization efforts. The community has also launched a new arts and historic district that features public art, murals, galleries and shops.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY **BRIAN McCORD**

Faced with a dismal 27 percent unemployment rate in January 2009, the small town of Linden desperately needed to find a way to revive the local economy, bring about positive economic changes and restore community pride. Local leaders working on the problem decided to take a novel approach in attempt to resolve its economic woes. Their solution: cover the town in vibrant artwork.

REVIVING LINDEN WITH ART

Art became an integral part of the revitalization of Linden. Today, it's virtually everywhere you look. Bright, colorful murals replace faded facades on buildings, and lively images cover trash cans along streets throughout the town. Perry County residents hope the establishment of this new, thriving arts district will attract tourists, spur economic development and reinvigorate their community.

VisionPerry, a summer youth art program, engaged local young people to create these vivid works of art. Working with 11 professional artists over the course of eight weeks in 2009, 20 program participants created a diverse mixture of public art including paintings, pottery, glass mosaics, assemblage and environmental sculptures. All this hard work resulted in the new Linden Arts & Historic District, a magnet for visitors and residents alike.

RESTORING A PIECE OF HISTORY

However, Linden's attractions go beyond artwork. With the support of Mayor Jim Azbill, VisionPerry Director Michael Dumont and his wife, Kathy, decided to purchase the dilapidated Staley Hotel in 2007. Their mission: to restore the old downtown building to its former glory.

"Even though the Staley had not been operated in 20 years, I fell in love with the architecture of the hotel," says Dumont, a former real estate developer. "We knew it could be a signature building in the area and an asset to the community.

Renamed in honor of the county's namesake, Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry, the beautifully restored Commodore Hotel Linden is now a historic downtown centerpiece. A grand fireplace, high ceilings and crown moldings opulently adorn the hotel lobby, while large windows and exposed brick walls elegantly decorate the guest rooms.

"Preserving a piece of Americana built during simpler times was a real goal," Dumont says. "During restoration, we attempted to retain the original character of the building while adding 21st-century amenities."

One such amenity, the hotel restaurant, the Dumonts transformed into a casual, artsy eatery offering a selection of hand-cut meats, fresh baked breads, desserts and local produce.

HANDCRAFTED GIFTS

No visit to Linden would be complete without a stop at the Buffalo River Artisans Co-Operative (BRAC) gallery. A venue for local artists and craftspeople to display their wares, the BRAC gallery carries many unique items such as hand-woven rugs, pottery, paintings and much more.

"Our customers can feel confident when they make a purchase here," says BRAC member Teresa Yoder. "They know who made their item and have a chance to speak to the artist, in most cases. Your special gift or personal item can be even more unique when you, the customer, are involved from the beginning to the end of the process." FB

Festival in Bloom

Visit Linden during the city's annual Blooming Arts Festival, slated for March 23-24. Visit tnhomeandfarm.com/linden for more details. To learn more about the hotel or to make a reservation, call (931) 589-3224 or visit www.commodorehotellinden.com.