

→ Sidewalks

By Rick Kogan | Photo by Charles Osgood



Singer/producer/activist Jamie O'Reilly performs with Bob Weber on cello and Michael Smith on guitar at Center Portion.

Space to play

As Center Portion settles in, community grows and creativity soars

Performance spaces come in all shapes and sizes and purposes, from the shabby basement blues bar to, well, the Auditorium Theater. This is a city that, in spite of shortsighted politicians and greedy developers, has always managed to find room for its artists, and so, behind a bright yellow door on an otherwise drab strip of Fullerton Avenue near Milwaukee Avenue, we find Sheila Donohue's remarkable and ambitious Center Portion.

First opened in 2000, the not-for-profit operation has only recently begun to have an active schedule.

"After my first child was born earlier that year, my career screeched to a halt," says Donohue who, as a performance poet, won four National Poetry Slam Champion titles. "My poetry reading days at clubs were over. No more staying out until 4 a.m. I decided to bring my poet pals and other performers to me."

But taking care of Sheamus (now 9) and daughter Julia Rose (now 4), as well as running On Track Marketing with her husband/visual artist Gregory Scott, did not until this year allow her to fully ex-

plore the possibilities of her space.

It's three spaces actually, carved from an 1898 building that had been an antique store until Donohue and Scott purchased it in 1994 and lovingly renovated it with recycled and reclaimed materials. (You can get a look at the place and learn about upcoming events at centerportion.com.)

Through the yellow door at 2850 1/2 W. Fullerton Ave., you find yourself in a relatively traditional gallery space, with a wood floor and a full wall of windows.

Behind it is one of the city's smallest and handso-mest theaters, with a 10-foot stage and 31 blue velvet-covered chairs salvaged from the Field Museum. There is a full light board, a projector, a remote-controlled screen and a sound system, the latter rarely employed as the space is intimacy defined.

Outside is a magnificent garden—"Greg's the one with the green thumb," says Donohue—featuring a stone Celtic ring surrounding a fire pit.

So far this year, Center Portion has hosted a wide

and wonderfully eclectic crowd of artists and activists, on topics ranging from global warming to social media workshops; film screenings, poets, singers, musicians. Neighborhood kids were invited to paint the gallery walls with graffiti, and they did.

Last month singer/producer/activist Jamie O'Reilly presented a concert titled "Souvenirs: Cabaret & Curios," as seen in Osgood's photo.

"You know how much I love salons, and this is the perfect space for creating that sort of intimacy and immediacy and even self-discovery," says O'Reilly, who has previously performed at Center Portion.

"What we are doing may appear to be all over the map, but it's not all over the map," Donohue says. "What I am trying to do is create a place that can foster and nurture dialogue, create a sense of community. It seems to be working. After every show, no one leaves. They stay and discuss. They talk with the artists. A conversation has begun; community is formed."

rkogan@tribune.com