Peace Center celebrates

Gladys Knight headlines Friday gala

By Ann Hicks
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The Peace Center for the Performing Arts is marking its 20th anniversary this year with a Friday night gala that not only features Motown diva Gladys Knight, but also tips the hat to the performing arts center's founders and supporters.

Without their dream, generosity and moxie, hits like Broadway's "Wicked," currently on stage, and mega-entertainer Sheryl Crow, still to come, would not be today's reality.

The performing arts center, which opened to the public in November 1990, started as a seed of an idea five years earlier when Greenville lawyer David Freeman was part of a group studying the feasibility of a downtown concert hall for the Greenville Symphony Orchestra.

Downtown's Main Street didn't offer much at the time, Freeman recalls. The city had no centralized arts and entertainment district, and the GSO performed miles away at McAlister Auditorium on the Furman University campus.

When Freeman broached the idea for a performing arts center to Betty Peace Stall and Fred Walker, it began to take shape through their weekly discussions.

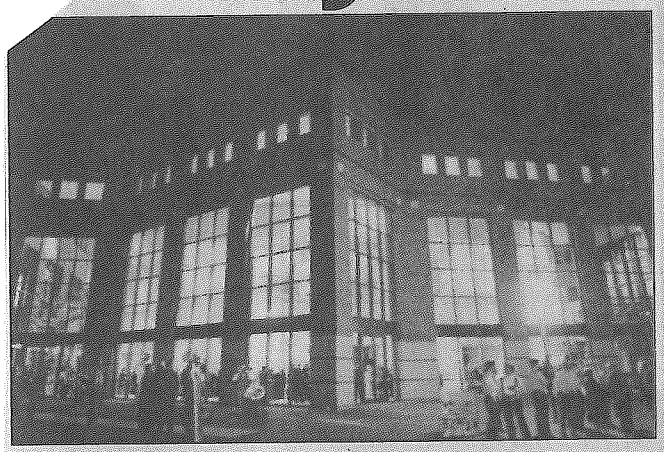
Stall calls Freeman the "founding father" of the Main Street institution, which draws thousands to downtown each year with its 2,100-seat concert hall and more intimate 400-seat Gunter Theatre. It was Freeman, the Peace family's lawyer, who suggested

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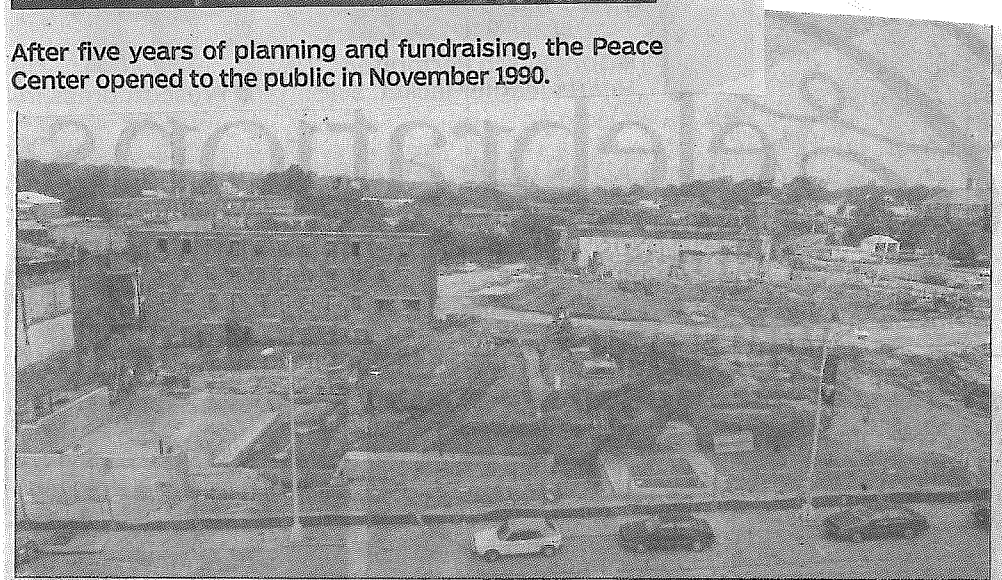
YOU CAN GO

- What: Gladys Knight
- When: 7:30 p.m. Friday
- Where: Peace Concert Hall
- Tickets: $45-$75
- Information: 864-467-3000

20 years



After five years of planning and fundraising, the Peace Center opened to the public in November 1990.



Before the Peace Center opened, South Main Street held little appeal. The performing arts center now anchors a thriving area of downtown.

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to Stall the family underwrite the cost of building a performing arts venue.

The family agreed to shape the initial idea into brick and mortar with a $10 million gift to the Greenville community, Stall says. "The family's three branches announced their intention at the annual meeting of the Community Foundation," a public charity that helps donors respond to community needs.

Dorothy Hipp Gunter also contributed $3 million to the theater that bears her name.

As the ambitious project rolled along, it gained wide community support, which was critical in helping to meet the eventual $40 million price tag. "We had to go into a fundraising mode," Stall says.

The Peace Center's opening gala was held in November 1990.

And, to make sure the center could continue to operate on its own, its founders mounted a second fundraiser for an endowment.

In 2003, the venue won the Elizabeth O'Neill Verner Award — the state's highest official award for the arts — in recognition of its leadership in presenting and promoting the arts. Its support extends to its resident companies, including the Greenville Symphony Orchestra, the South Carolina Children's Theatre, two ballet companies and the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities.

The Peace Center also operates an outreach program that brings thousands of students, teachers and parents to selected performances at the Peace Center and sends guest artists into schools to teach master classes.

In the current season, artists who have graced the concert hall stage include violinist Itzhak Perlman, guitarist Sharon Isbin, jazz/pop trumpeter Chris Botti, bluegrass hero Ricky Skaggs, rock greats the Doobie Brothers and more.

Venue president Megan Riegel says the Peace Center has operated in the black for each of the past 15 years. Over the past five years, approximately 70 percent of giving has come from individuals, 26 percent from corporations/foundations and 4 percent from other sources.

Riegel calls the Peace Center "a gift to the community that will keep on giving for many generations to come."