

# A Hive of Creativity in the Suburbs

At a former paper mill in Norwood, artistic expression is flourishing between plywood walls. BY JAMES SULLIVAN

**S**ay “Norwood” to most Massachusetts residents, and the first thing that comes to mind is the Route 1 Automile. It’s the home of Boch family car dealerships — and those old ads in which the late Ernie Boch Sr. beseeched new customers to “Come on down!”

But a short drive off the Automile, behind a nondescript self-storage facility in a cluster of factory buildings that have stood mostly vacant for years, an influx of painters, interior designers, photographers, and other creative types is giving people another reason to come on down to Norwood. They’re bringing this quintessential suburb its own cultural hub.

The allure of the new Norwood Space Center, built on an old industrial campus, is implied in its name: Space. Vast warehouses full of it. Now the once-sleepy site is being filled mostly by tenants in creative fields — they’re officially known as “members,” in keeping with the bohemian vibe — who have been eager to customize their raw boxes of space.

David DePree, the point person for the development group that bought the 18-acre parcel and its empty buildings in 2016, describes the Space Center as “a hive of creative commerce.”

“Our game is adaptive reuse,” says DePree, who has lived on the South Shore for decades. The project was inspired, in part, by his own desire for access to culture and things to do that didn’t require a drive into Boston.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



The campus comprises 12 buildings, totaling 300,000 square feet, or more than six football fields. For as long as Norwoodites can remember, it was headquarters for the Bird Corporation, a historic family business that was founded as a paper mill and more recently manufactured shingles and vinyl siding. Bird went out of business just after marking its 200th anniversary.



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their guests sip beer, chat amiably, and scribble their names onto paper strips they stuff into a glass jar. After dinner, Javed Rezayee, who founded StorySlam! in 2016, asks the 10 people in attendance to stand up and pair off, and proceeds to lead them through “Milk the Cow,” “Caterpillars into Butterflies,” and other vocal and movement exercises that serve as both icebreakers and warm-ups for the hour of storytelling that follows. When they’re finished, he pulls a name out of the jar, and that person has six minutes to tell a story, no notes allowed. Some stories, like Nichols’s, are mesmerizing and succinct, others meander, but everyone offers encouraging notes after sharing. Just as readers have book groups and writers have writing groups, StorySlam! offers storytellers a chance to socialize and workshop.

That StorySlam! exists, let alone has more than 100 members on Facebook, shows that interest in humankind’s oldest art form is still growing. Last year The Moth, the New York literary group behind the popular Public Radio Exchange-distributed program and podcast, turned 20. It is now producing more than 500 live events a year, including three a month in the Boston area. Boston-based Massmouth turns 10 this year and runs monthly slams at Boston’s Trident Booksellers and Cambridge’s Club Passim. In a given month, fans could pay \$5 to \$12 to catch Fugitive Stories in Arlington, West Acton, or Framingham; visit Story Space Open Tell-

lonso Nichols looks sly as he recounts the time he and his twin brother were playing *Indiana Jones*, using belts as whips. A buckle whacked one of Alonso’s front teeth, breaking it in half. At dinner that night, he tried to hide it from his mother. “I stuff a piece of meat, and then some mashed potato inside the hole in my teeth. But the jig is up. She knows.” Nichols’s tale of brotherly mischief charms his audience members who, as it happens, are sitting in his living room in Medford.

Nichols and his wife, Grace Talusan, are hosting a gathering of the live storytelling club StorySlam! Its monthly meetings rotate through different members’ homes, with the host serving food and guests bringing drinks. Nichols, chief photographer at Tufts University, and Talusan, a writer, serve chicken adobo while

From left: Melissa Ferrick, Alexis Kubana, and Szifra Birke perform at the WGBH Stories from the Stage series.

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sary, in the late 1990s.

Each workspace is different. There are 300-square-foot studios with plywood walls and open-air ceilings, walk-in storefronts with garage doors that open onto a central parking lot, and a former factory stockroom. The smallest spaces rent for as little as \$500 a month, offering a more affordable alternative to Boston real estate prices.

When DePree and his partners took over the defunct facility, the idea was to offer workspace to entrepreneurs at various levels of commitment, from month-to-month arrangements to 20-year leases. Any business is welcome — not just self-owned or creative ones — although those types have been especially interested in the space. The developers have been working their way through the renovations, building by building; after the latest was completed in January, it opened at full capacity.

Adjacent to the standalone storage facility is a wide-open warehouse space that stands at the gateway to the L-shaped Space Center complex. A huge empty room outfitted with a Bose PA system and a digital mixing board, it's ready to be rented for live music, indoor festivals, and other events.

So far, the developers have tested the waters with a handful of gatherings, including a periodic art fair and vintage flea called the Curio Market. Last spring, the Space Center hosted an open house in conjunction with ArtWeek Boston, with performances by Norwood's School of Rock and a panel discussion on Fred Holland Day, an eccentric Norwood publisher who was an early advocate for photography as an art form.

In October, Boston music veteran Chuck White (who started the virtual Boston Rock and Roll Museum) brought his road odyssey, the Route 1 Project, to the Space Center. The extravaganza included bands, food trucks, and artifacts on display from Rick Kosow's Sneaker Museum and David Bieber's massive rock 'n' roll collection.

One of the Space Center's first permanent tenants was Percival Brewing Company, a craft brewer founded in Dorchester. Its owners opened a taproom in Norwood last fall and have since expanded into the coffee roasting business. They also showcase a rotating gallery featuring regional artists.

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A DJ plays music in the pavilion at the Norwood Space Center.

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Another anchor is the David Bieber Archives, the memorabilia collection of the former creative services director for WBCN, WFNX, and the *Boston Phoenix*. Though Bieber's huge collection is not currently open to the public, he envisions a "retrievable resource" of rock 'n' roll, sort of like a research library for scholars of pop culture. Bieber's archive includes an estimated 40,000 vinyl albums and thousands of soundboard tapes and videocassettes, as well as promotional items, posters, complete runs of counterculture newspapers, and much more.

Though some choice items from Bieber's lifelong obsession form a rock 'n' roll museum of sorts at The Verb Hotel in Boston, for years all but a fraction of his collection sat untouched and unsorted, covered in shrink-wrap on more than 200 pallets in a warehouse in Avon. More than a dozen tractor-trailers were filled during the relocation.

The move was long overdue, says Bieber: "I've been so concentrated on saving things without acclimating them into my life, without enjoying them."

Eventually, he expects to curate an exhibition for Space Center visitors like the one in the lobby at The Verb.

For fellow tenants, the endless adaptability of the space makes for a lively work environment.

The buildings themselves have a certain heavy metal chic. Tenant Tracy Parkinson, who grew up in Norwood, had an office for years in a loft building in Boston for Nest + Company, her interior design business.

"I didn't think I could find a space like that in the suburbs," she says.

She was tired of commuting, but didn't know where else to go. She'd drive by the old Bird campus in her hometown and think it was a shame that the place had gone dark.

When Parkinson learned that units in Building 6 were available, she snapped one up. Now she works in a studio office, with painters and other artists as next-door neighbors. She loves the time-tested features of the complex — loading docks, spiral staircases, exposed brick and stone.

"The industrial details are so great," she says. "I didn't want a drop ceiling and a shag carpet."

Thus far, happenings at the Space Center have been modest. Percival Brewing Company runs a Thursday night comedy series called Foolery at the Brewery. In late February, local artist and musician Dave Tree hosted a group art show featuring a dub reggae dance party.

But the community is dreaming big. Tree, who grew up in neighboring Westwood, recently painted a mural high on the wall inside the taproom. It's a replica of the Hollywood sign, but it reads "NORWOOD."

Drinking a Pabst Blue Ribbon in the bowels of the Bieber archives on a recent Friday afternoon, Tree enthuses about the prospects for the Space Center. It's not Hollywood, but it's not quite your father's Norwood, either.

"I was born to bring culture to the suburbs," he says. ■

*James Sullivan is a frequent contributor to the Globe. Send comments to [magazine@globe.com](mailto:magazine@globe.com). Follow us on Twitter @BostonGlobeMag.*



Life inside the Norwood Space Center, clockwise from upper left: Artist Duncan Reid in his studio; interior designer Tracy Parkinson at the Nest + Company office space; owner Felipe Oliveira pours draft beer for customers at Percival Brewing Company; artist and musician Dave Tree in front of a mural he painted at the brewery; David Bieber with his rock 'n' roll memorabilia collection.

