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Entrance to the Chalfonte Ryan Giannini Park in Torch Lake Township.

Elk Rapids Cinema at the Chalfonte Theatre

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Local residents and visitors see the Elk Rapids Cinema as a beloved movie theater on River Street, but Aaron Timlin, president of the Chalfonte Foundation, and new owners of the cinema, has a different vision. Timlin and the Foundation will operate as the Elk Rapids Cinema at the Chalfonte Theatre. While movies have always been a big part of his life, Timlin wants the theatre building to become a cultural center for Elk Rapids that will include the cinema, a wine tasting room, local FM radio station, a PuppetART studio and the new headquarters for the Foundation.

All are special to Timlin, a man of many passions. He includes family, Detroit, the art world, the Foundation, and his Elk Rapids connection to his passion list. Born in Detroit, raised in Farwell, Michigan near Clare, Timlin has lived life on the farm, in Detroit, and Elk Rapids. The Elk Rapids connection was the result of Timlin's lifetime relationship with Father Jim Meyer, the founder of the Chalfonte Foundation, former chaplain of Children's Hospital of Michigan in Detroit

and high school friend to Timlin's father, a noted sculpture artist and staff member at the College of Creative Studies. Father Meyer discovered Elk Rapids when his parents retired here and purchased a home on Ottawa street in 1977. With their passing in the mid-1980s, Father Meyer took over the property and eventually made it an important asset for the Foundation when it was formed in 2000 as a 501(c)(3) public charity. Now known locally as the Chalfonte House, the Foundation has used the house over the years as a retreat for families and children from the Detroit area. Father Meyer named the Foundation and properties after the street he grew up on in Detroit.

After its formation, the Foundation added 20 acres of land in Torch Lake Township, now known as the Chalfonte Ryan Giannini Park. An entrance and signs for the property can be found off Barnes Road adjacent to the A-Ga-Ming Golf Resort. Ryan Giannini was a 20 year old who died suddenly in 2002. He became an organ donor who gave three people a second chance of a full life. Following gifts from local charities that had raised money in Ryan's name, Father Meyer named the park in Ryan's honor. On the property there are cabins in the woods that were rescued by Father Meyer from being torn down in Elk Rapids years ago and moved to the property. The



Aaron Timlin, president of the Chalfonte Foundation and new owner of the Elk Rapids Cinema.

park is now home to Earthly Wilds Farm, a producer and seller of organic vegetables at local farm markets. It plays a role in the Foundation retreat program and its efforts to introduce northern Michigan life to their visitors.

Timlin has already moved forward with part of his vision for the Chalfonte Theatre Building. In addition to the cinema operating daily, the Foundation announced that a Chateau Chantal Winery tasting room has been approved by the state and the village for the building. Service will start in 2024 for the tasting room. Timlin hopes someday to add an outdoor patio service area for wine service on 20 feet of property owned by the Foundation on the west side of the theatre building.

A recent federal FCC licensing approval for a low power community FM radio station will be announced in the near future. This FM station will be the second piece to the Foundation vision and plan for the Chalfonte Theatre. The group is clearing space for the FM station control room in the upstairs level of the building. The FCC has granted the Foundation the use of the 99.7 frequency for the station. Call letters for the station have not been finalized and much will be needed before the station is operational. The FCC requires that the station be operational in three years from the date of their license approval.

While rearranging the cinema building and going through Joe Yuchasz's old files, Timlin stumbled on a number of Yuchasz "kismet" connections that he found fascinating. The FM station plans are one of those connections. Before Yuchasz bought the building, he had submitted for his own FM radio license. Those files



The Chalfonte House in Elk Rapids. Photos by Mark Alpine

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Elk Rapids Cinema at the Chalfonte Theatre, the new headquarters of the Chalfonte Foundation. Photo by Mark Alpine

exist and indicated that Yuchasz made the decision to buy the cinema after he was turned down for the FM license. Both Yuchasz and Father Meyer had large vinyl record collections. Thanks to the donation of those collections to the Foundation, they will be merged to create a sizable turntable music resource for the FM Station.

A second kismet moment was the catalyst for the January 31 Foundation introduction of the “Joe Yuchasz Piano Scholarship.” Timlin learned from his family that Yuchasz provided piano lessons to many in the Elk Rapids and Bellaire communities over the years. They knew of two pianos in the building used for those lessons. The surprise came when they found a third piano tucked under the cinema stage area. In honor of Joe and with monetary support from the Father Jim Meyer Endowment Fund, the Foundation awarded two music scholarships on March 12 of this year. Jane Larsen, a 9-year-old, 3rd grade student at Mill Creek Elementary, and Louis Tulpa, an 11-year-old, 5th grade student at Lakeland Elementary, were awarded scholarships that will cover the cost of piano lessons and provide an opportunity for a fall public recital at the Chalfonte Theatre Building. “Joe Yuchasz’s love for the arts, his dedication to the Elk Rapids community, and his passion for education were truly exceptional.” Timlin stated in the press release announcing the scholarship program. “This scholarship is a tribute to his enduring impact and a commitment to nurturing the

artistic talents of future generations.”

Foundation scholarships are also planned in the hopes of developing interns for the PuppetART theatre project. Timlin hopes to develop three puppeteers in Elk Rapids and three in Detroit. With the help of the scholarship money, they would be able to develop their skills and learn from both settings. Timlin, himself an experienced puppeteer, believes that most of the Foundation shows can be done with two puppeteers. Larger shows would require more, and he intends to develop the talent to make that happen.

Planning for the future of the foundation is difficult enough. Operating a cinema every day with first-run, indie and art house films is an impossible task without a great deal of support. For that support, Timlin leans on his life partner Marianne Burrows. As general manager of the cinema, Burrows has brought a new spark with an increased social media presence and unique events like the recent Doggie Movie Day. Burrows and son have moved full time to Elk Rapids from Detroit to be a part of the Chalfonte Theatre story in Elk Rapids. In addition to managing the cinema, Burrows is an NNA Certified Notary signing agent and licensed real estate agent at Century 21 Northland in Elk Rapids.

Like all non-profits, visions and plans are one thing. Raising the funds to bring a vision to reality for a foundation that operates at two ends of the state can be a long and bumpy road. Building and roof improvements for the theatre building, continuing, and expanding Foundation operations and programs in Detroit and Elk Rapids will take time and money. That means a successful Foundation grant and local fundraising program. According to Timlin, the Foundation has funds in reserve to successfully operate their programs in both Detroit and Elk Rapids. Timlin admits that some funding has dried up after the passing of Father Meyer in 2021 at the age of 86. He is working to reopen those doors and establish new funding for future projects.

Timlin and the Foundation are committed to a successful cinema operation. “Things are changing with the film industry,” Timlin said. “Streaming services are making life for small town theaters challenging. There is something magic about the Cinema. I want to maintain that but keep up with the current technology, including streaming services.” Timlin sees a day where the radio shows, piano music and puppeteers play a part in the cinema experience. With the cinema operating well, the tasting room deal done, 99.7 on your FM dial a near reality, and community support through scholarships in place, the Foundation is moving forward on their community plans. Timlin sees a bright future for the Foundation and the Elk Rapids Cinema at the Chalfonte Theatre Building in Elk Rapids.