



BEFORE THEY WERE VILLAGERS | D5
Capt. Susan Walters served in the U.S. Navy and started an equine nonprofit in Tennessee.

6 a.m. 9 a.m. 12 p.m. 3 p.m. 6 p.m. 9 p.m.
64° 72° 86° 93° 87° 80°

AVANI MAHARAJ ON NATURE | D1
Lake and Sumter counties have issued a burn ban until further notice due to lack of rainfall.



IN SPORTS | B1

Shedeur Sanders' tumble to the fifth round will go down in NFL draft lore, but the new Browns quarterback is still in control of how the story plays out.



IN LOCAL | D1

Members of The Villages Butterfly Garden Club celebrated Earth Day at its annual mulching day at the Fred Funk Butterfly Garden.

Club members and volunteers came out on Tuesday and mulched the nearly 12,000 square feet of flowerbeds at the garden, getting it in shape for spring and the upcoming Butterfly Fest.

The Sharon: 10 Years Of Elevating the Arts



George Horsford | Daily Sun

The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center has been host to a variety of entertainment acts for nearly a decade.

IN WORLD NEWS | A20

THE MIGHTY AND THE MEEK GATHER TO SAY FAREWELL TO POPE FRANCIS

World leaders and rank-and-file Catholic faithful bade farewell to Pope Francis in a funeral on Saturday. Some 250,000 people crowded St. Peter's Square and 150,000 more lined the motorcade route through Rome.

IN NATIONAL NEWS

TRUMP REDECORATES WHITE HOUSE WITH NEW ART, FLAGPOLE

The president recently added new portraits and golden accents to the Oval Office, as well as planned a flagpole. **A14**

IN WORLD NEWS

MASSIVE EXPLOSION, FIRE AT IRANIAN PORT KILLS 8, INJURES 750

A massive explosion linked to an ingredient used to make missile propellant rocked the Shahid Rajaei port on Saturday. **A3**

ONLY IN THE VILLAGES

By James Dinan

The fourth Saturday in April is World Tai Chi and Qigong Day and local tai chi practitioners gathered in Lake Sumter Landing Market Square on Saturday morning for two hours of demonstrations and presentations on the martial art and exercise, turning the square into a gathering place to have fun and learn something new.

Please See **TAI CHI, A9**

COMEDY ACTS



Bill Mitchell | Daily Sun

Comedian Jay Leno tells a joke during a 2019 performance at The Sharon.

STAGE PRODUCTIONS



Daily Sun file photo

The Moscow Ballet's Great Russian Nutcracker is put on at The Sharon in 2016.

LIVE CONCERTS



Daily Sun file photo

Jo Dee Messina performs "Heads Carolina, Tails California" at The Sharon in 2016.

ORCHESTRAS



Daily Sun file photo

The Villages Philharmonic Orchestra puts on a concert at The Sharon in 2023.

By TAYLOR STRICKLAND
Daily Sun Senior Writer

The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center turns 10 this year, and Significant Productions, the theater production company that stewards The Sharon and The Studio Theatre Tierra del Sol, commemorated the occasion Saturday with an inaugural fundraising gala full of dazzling entertainment, delectable dining and a vibrant celebration of the arts.

As SigPro celebrates The Sharon's future, we take a look back into the theater's past, chronicling its growth from humble beginnings to the major Central Florida performing arts center it is today.

Before it was The Sharon, the building that is now home to one of Central Florida's premiere theaters was called Church on the Square.

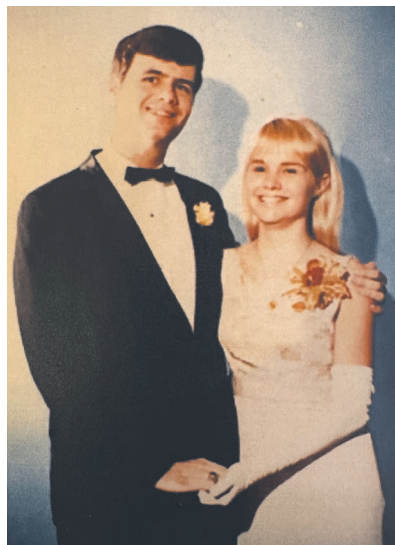
Please See **SHARON, A5**

INSIDE TODAY'S DAILY SUN



SHOW OFF YOUR PROM DATE

Ahead of The Villages Prom, an evening of special dining and dancing on May 16 and May 17 at Lake Sumter Landing (details on Page C10), The Daily Sun wants to relive the memories of this unforgettable high school night. Submit your photos and stories from your high school prom to us at thevillagesdailysun.com/contests to be featured in an upcoming edition of the newspaper. We look forward to sharing this special photo album!



Don and Deb Deignan

"EOCH Senior Prom in May 1968 at the Robert Treat Hotel in Newark, New Jersey! We will be celebrating our 53rd wedding anniversary this June!"



Sandy Borowsky and Norman Mandleberg

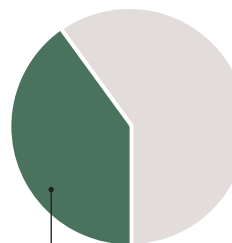
"We were high school friends and remained friends throughout our lifetime until Norman passed away last year."



Make it a Great Day!

Weather	D2
Recreation Listings	D8-9
Recipes	E1
Puzzles	E5-6
Horoscopes	E7
TV Tonight	E8
Advice	E10

BY THE NUMBERS



41%

Roughly 4 in 10 U.S. adults say they're online almost constantly, according to a survey by Pew Research Center. Forty-three percent say they use the internet several times a day, and 5% say they use it about once a day. Overall, nine-in-ten U.S. adults now say they go online every day.

from the front page

SHARON

Continued from A1

Opening in 1997, it was a place where people gathered to worship or get married. However, it also was where some of The Sharon's longest recurring acts and shows made their debuts, starting with The Villages Philharmonic Orchestra.

"When I first came here, it was only Main Street, the square — and Church on the Square," said maestro Pasquale Valerio, co-founder and conductor of the VPO.

Valerio founded the VPO alongside the late Oscar Felio, who often is referred to as "the father of music in The Villages."

When Valerio has a free moment, he sits inside The Sharon's historic Lobby Lounge, which originally was Church on the Square, and reminisces about how much the building, the VPO and the community have evolved over the years.

"I was music minister from 2005 until Church on the Square closed to become a performing arts center, so there is a special connection, like an umbilical cord, between me and the church, between me and The Villages and the beautiful community," Valerio said.

Audrey and Sheldon Guss, volunteer ushers and residents of Del Webb Spruce Creek Golf & Country Club, have lived in the area for 20 years and remember how the place that eventually would be known as The Sharon was an epicenter of arts and entertainment in The Villages.

"They used to have little concerts and there were some people who would have piano concerts in there on Sunday nights," Audrey said. "I think at that time it was \$6 to get in."

In addition to the VPO, other popular Villages performers were introduced to the community through Church on the Square, such as maestro Bill Doherty of the Central Florida Lyric Opera, "America's Got Talent" finalist Fernando Varela, pastor Norman Lee Schaffer of The Garden Worship Center and vocalist Marcella Richardson.

Behind the Name

The Sharon is named in honor of the matriarch of the Morse family, the late Sharon L. Morse, first wife of Villages developer the late Gary Morse.

Sharon was a singer and an avid patron of the arts.



Sophia Lucente | Daily Sun

Members of The Villages Philharmonic Orchestra play in the last classical concert of the season on April 8 at The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center.

Before coming to The Villages, she and Gary founded a small dinner theater called Brownwood near Torch Lake, Michigan. There, cocktail waitresses known as Honeybees provided diners with free entertainment in the form of singing and dancing.

"It was so fun," said Richardson, who was a Honeybee under the guidance of Rebecca Morse, The Sharon's former house manager and mother of Whitney Morse, The Sharon's artistic director. "It was like a whole variety show with costumes and feather boas."

Sharon and Gary carried on their patronage of the arts in The Villages, where they nurtured the nascent entertainment scene growing at Spanish Springs Town Square and Church on the Square.

After Sharon died in 1999 and Gary passed away in 2014, their children — Mark Morse, Tracy Morse and Jennifer

Morse Parr — carried on the idea of building a large performing arts center.

"The entertainment in The Villages is deeply rooted in both Mom and Dad's sense of the dramatic," Mark said before The Sharon's grand opening. "They have always been really good hosts, and entertainment has always been a part of that. Dad was all about the show and Mom was the show."

Nearly 1,000 well-shod guests attended The Sharon's grand opening April 29, 2015, when they and members of the Morse family toasted Sharon's memory and celebrated the beginning of a new era for arts and entertainment in Central Florida.

Shortly thereafter, the patrons gathered in the theater for the first show of The Sharon's inaugural season, featuring a performance by Broadway star Patti LuPone. The rest of the opening season

included touring musicals, big band music, concerts from visiting international orchestras and performances by Grammy Award-winning artists.

Whitney Morse, granddaughter of The Sharon's namesake, moved back to The Villages after years in the Chicago and New York theater business to take on the role of artistic director at the new performing arts center. She compared the opening of The Sharon to having a new baby.

"We spent months putting everything together, arranging artists, lining up the appropriate staff and putting together the opening gala," Whitney said. "Once I zipped up that gown and headed to the actual performance, it felt like we had gone through quite a trial together but now we had something beautiful and uniquely ours."

A Groundbreaking Theater

Today, The Sharon is a state-of-the-art performing arts center with a grand staircase, lobby and seating capacity of 1,022.

Literally built around the 12,846-square-foot Church on the Square, the theater maintains the feel of the Spanish-style house of worship with three massive murals, 14 fully restored stained-glass windows and towering ornamental organ pipes.

As explained in The Sharon's "Behind the Curtain Tour," led by director of operations Jon Cronin, many of the faces of the apostles depicted in the murals resemble famous musicians, such as a young Michael Jackson and the Beatles.

The theater also has other notable construction features, like its 18-musician orchestra pit. It is built on an elevator platform, allowing the pit to be raised to floor level and adding an extra 26 seats or, if raised to its highest position, extending the front of the stage.

Perhaps the most interesting part of The Sharon is its flying system.

A fly system, or theatrical rigging system, is a network of pulleys, counterweights and related devices within a theater that enables the stage crew to safely hoist curtains, lights, scenery and sometimes people into the air.

Manufactured by Electronic Theatre Controls, The Sharon's fly system is the world's first fully automated flying system that can be operated by a single person via a touchscreen located to the left of the stage. The system logs

information such as distance traveled, time of operation and the amount of weight carried, Cronin said.

Another notable part of The Sharon's construction is the "box-in-a-box" design that, as Cronin explains, keeps noise from leaking into the theater. This allows The Villages' nightly entertainment to take place at the same time as a Tony Award-winning Broadway musical, like the recent touring production of "Hadestown," without interrupting the show.

Weathering COVID-19

In stark contrast to the fanfare of the theater's grand opening, its fifth anniversary in April 2020 was marred by empty seats and an empty stage because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nevertheless, as the saying goes, "the show must go on" and The Sharon's dedicated staff came up with creative ways to ensure patrons could continue to enjoy world-class entertainment despite the pandemic's looming gloom.

Since most touring acts canceled their shows at the start of the pandemic, staff streamed free workshops, virtual readings of plays, "Don't Tell Nonnie," behind-the-scenes chats, theater trivia and VPO concerts.

"We really started rolling out digital programs during that time — downloadable through QR codes — and we still use them to this day," said Erika Nelson, marketing account manager for The Sharon and The Studio. "We do printed programs again now too, so we have both."

Please See NEXT PAGE

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from the front page

Continued from PREVIOUS PAGE

When in-person shows began to resume, the staff hosted socially distanced shows in the Lobby Lounge and reduced seating capacity in the main theater to 200, with occupied seats spaced out throughout the audience.

For a brief time, The Studio Theatre Tierra del Sol found a new home on The Sharon stage, where shows could better adhere to social distancing guidelines than in the intimate black box theater space.

“9 to 5 The Musical,” “Ada and the Engine,” “Spike Heels” and “Pipeline” were among the shows staged at The Sharon. Nelson actually attended the production of “9 to 5 The Musical.”

“I remember the cast wearing clear plastic masks on stage,” she said.

For those interested in learning more, the Behind the Curtain Tour goes more in depth about the history of The Sharon and the Morse family, as well as how the theater operates and is managed today.

To sign up for a tour, go to significantproductions.org/tour-the-sharon or contact the theater staff at significantproductions.org/contact.

Significant Productions

Previously, The Sharon as well as The Studio operated under the aegis of The Villages Entertainment, much like Savannah Center and The Tracy Performing Arts Center.

All of that changed in December 2022, when Whitney Morse and her husband, Jason Goedken, executive director and director of operations at The Sharon and The Studio, founded a not-for-profit theater organization called Significant Productions. It



Sophia Lucente | Daily Sun

Alec Speers, house manager for Significant Productions at The Sharon L. Morse Performing Arts Center, sings in the Significant Talent Lobby Lounge Cabaret show on Aug. 19.

is the culmination of their 15 years of experience in the entertainment and performing arts industry.

“We were one of the only for-profit theaters outside of Broadway,” Morse said. “This model supports us a little better and gives us more flexibility.”

Few theaters make profits off ticket sales alone, Morse said, and The Sharon and The Studio are no different. Becoming a not-for-profit organization gives Significant Productions more funding opportunities as well as the ability to more easily accommodate charitable donations.

Plus, Morse said, the new business model comes with many other benefits, including the ability to better support the generous donations many local residents offer to the theater. In the past, people reached out to donate

pianos and costumes, which always are appreciated, but those donations were not tax deductible as they would be for other theaters.

As a not-for-profit, SigPro can support tax deductible donations, apply for grants and hold fundraising campaigns and galas to support its many creative endeavors. In addition, each ticket sold counts as a monetary donation.

Supporting its staff is also a priority for SigPro.

“Our mission at Significant Productions is to cultivate a diverse, collaborative workplace community while producing high-quality, world-class entertainment that provokes thought and sparks conversation,” Cronin said. “We pride ourselves on cultivating a positive work environment, which you don’t always find in the industry.”

SigPro accepts online donations, which go toward expenses like costumes, sound, props and set designs. To donate online, go to significantproductions.org/donate. For those who prefer to give offline, email donate@significantproductions.org or call 352-668-9502.

Staff

Many of the core team remains the same at The Sharon and The Studio under SigPro’s leadership. However, quite a few new faces have been added over the years.

The Sharon currently employs about 40 full-time staff members, not including part-time staff or members of The Villages Philharmonic Orchestra, and has more than 200 volunteer ushers.

Many of the SigPro staff are talented performers in their own right.

“Patrons often ask us if it’s a requirement to sing well to be able to work at SigPro,” said Alec Speers, house manager for both The Sharon and The Studio. “The answer is no, but creative jobs in theater do tend to attract a diverse array of talented people.”

Patrons can see some of SigPro’s staff on the Lobby Lounge stage at the various cabarets and special events held at The Sharon. The Lobby Lunch and Lobby Lounge Cabaret Series in particular offer unique and engaging performances from in-house artists.

In 2024, the SigPro crew stepped out from behind the curtain and into the lime-light in “Significant Talent,” a musical showcase starring SigPro’s cast and crew. There, music director Gary Powell, associate lighting supervisor Dio Raquel Jr., marketing assistant Jessica “Birdie” Nix, production coordinator Madi Carr, lighting

supervisor Ally Southgate, Mark Kirschenbaum and Speers showed off their significant talents to a packed lobby.

“I personally feel really blessed to work for a company that wants to highlight and showcase our talents not only as employees but as artists,” said Carr, who also starred in her own one-woman cabaret called “Crossing a Bridge.”

In addition to the SigPro staff are The Sharon’s volunteer ushers, who serve as the theater’s backbone as well as the face of the venue. They are the ones who welcome guests at the door, check tickets, guide patrons to their seats and provide words of encouragement during events like “Don’t Tell Nonnie,” which is The Sharon’s open mic night.

The open mic night was created by Whitney Morse and is a longstanding, beloved tradition at The Sharon. Whitney was inspired by Don’t Tell Mama, a piano bar that was one of her favorite haunts when she lived in New York City. For The Villages’ version, “Mama” became “Nonnie,” which was what she and her cousins called their grandmother, Sharon L. Morse, when they were children.

“Don’t Tell Nonnie” is open to all singers. Whitney acts as host and music director Gary Powell provides accompaniment on the piano. Sheet music is provided for those who don’t bring their own. Between numbers and cocktail refills, Whitney and Powell entertain guests with some of their favorite cabaret numbers.

During “Don’t Tell Nonnie,” ushers like Donna Taylor often give nervous newcomers the push they need to brave the big stage. Her main job during “Don’t Tell Nonnie” shows is to go from table to table and coax those who didn’t sign up to sing into giving it a try.

Please See NEXT PAGE

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NOTICE

TAX IMPACT OF VALUE ADJUSTMENT BOARD

Sumter County Tax Year 2024

DR-529
R. 12/09
Rule 12D-16.002
Florida Administrative Code

Members of the Board							
Honorable	Jeffrey Bogue	Board of County Commissioners, District No. 4					
Honorable	Todd Coon	Board of County Commissioners, District No. 3					
Honorable	Sally Moss	School Board, District No. 1					
Citizen Member	John Dematteo	Business owner within the school district					
Citizen Member	Asheley Raybon	Homestead property owner					

The Value Adjustment Board (VAB) meets each year to hear petitions and make decisions relating to property tax assessments, exemptions, classifications, and tax deferrals.

Summary of Year’s Actions						Enter whole numbers only. Do not include commas. Example: for \$1,222,333 enter “1222333”	
Type of Property	Number of Parcels			Reduction in County Taxable Value Due to Board Actions	Shift Taxes Due to Board Actions		
	Exemptions	Assessments*	Both				
	Granted	Requested	Reduced	Requested	Withdrawn or settled		
Residential			7	2	5	\$ 0	\$ 0.00
Commercial			84		84	\$ 0	\$ 0.00
Industrial and miscellaneous			1		1	\$	\$
Agricultural or classified use						\$	\$
High-water recharge						\$	\$
Historic commercial or nonprofit						\$	\$
Business machinery & equipment			26		26	\$	\$
Vacant lots and acreage			2		2	\$	\$
TOTALS			121	2	119	\$ 0	\$ 0.00

All values should be county taxable values. School and other taxing authority values may differ. *Include transfer of assessment difference (portability) requests.

If you have a question about these actions, contact the Chair or the Clerk of the Value Adjustment Board.

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from the front page

Continued from PREVIOUS PAGE

“We have people who arrive with their music and lyrics but are hesitant to sign up,” Taylor said. “I guarantee that if you perform on The Sharon Lobby stage, you will be rewarded with a very happy audience. Our audience is receptive, encouraging and enthusiastic.”

The Stars

In addition to staff and resident performers, The Sharon has hosted a constellation of big-name stars over the years. Some of the biggest acts to perform at The Sharon include Jay Leno, Rick Springfield, Marie Osmond, Loretta Lynn, Howie Mandel, Styx, The Beach Boys, Air Supply, Jerry Lewis, Willie Nelson, Olivia Newton-John, Kenny Rogers, Randy Travis, Scotty McCreery, Jo Dee Messina, Ruben Studdard, Clay Aiken, The Righteous Brothers, Kansas, Frankie Avalon and the Gipsy Kings.

The theater also hosts a range of touring productions from Moscow Ballet’s “Great Russian Nutcracker” to renowned Broadway musicals like Andrew Lloyd Webber’s “CATS” and groups like Omnium Circus or The Peking Acrobats.

Cronin said when it comes to The Sharon, SigPro not only strives to establish a premier theater that meets Villagers’ needs but also serves as a place where residents of surrounding communities can come and enjoy world-class entertainment.

“We’re very aware that we are carrying the torch of basically the oldest means humans have of expressing themselves to each other, which is through some form of art,” he said. “And we think everyone should have access to that experience.”

Jason Goedken echoed the sentiment, emphasizing SigPro’s mission to not only



Above: Air Supply guitarist Graham Russell performs The Lost in Love Experience at The Sharon in 2022.

Daily Sun file photo

At Left: Ruben Studdard, who won the second season of “American Idol,” performs at The Sharon in 2024.

Rachel Govola, Daily Sun

bring world class entertainment to The Villages, but also to expose audiences to shows they are unlikely to see outside of large or experimental performing arts venues.

“We’re definitely doing things that you probably aren’t finding anywhere else around

here,” he said. “You really would have to go to Orlando. Ocala might do something like that and Gainesville, a college town, they’re certainly going to have wild stuff, but Whitney and I have our own passion and weirdness that we bring to the community.”

Looking Ahead

The Sharon’s 2024-25 season is fast drawing to a close, but the theater is expected to announce Season 10 on Mother’s Day, which is done every year in honor of Sharon Morse.

For those who cannot wait until May 11 to find out what selection of shows will be coming to The Sharon, a sneak peek was given at SigPro’s inaugural fundraising gala Saturday and another will be offered at “The Sharon Preview Party,” a brand-new event that allows patrons an in-depth look at some of the shows planned for the upcoming season.

At “The Sharon Preview Party,” audience members will get a first look at videos and details of the shows selected to be in the International Series, the Broadway Series, and the concerts and other events worth a mark in one’s calendar. The event is at 2 p.m. May 14 in The Sharon’s Lobby Lounge.

In addition to announcing the upcoming season, SigPro is hoping to raise enough money to cover the costs of maintenance and improvements to The Sharon.

Some of the improvements already made include digitizing the marquee signage in front of The Sharon, which reduces large-format printing costs as well as the theater’s environmental impact, and certifying six staff members in the hardware inspection and maintenance of the flying system.

“We currently don’t have any line sets down, and ETC has parts available to overnight to us if anything went south,” Cronin said. “But the labor we can now do in-house, which is already allowing us to operate the system more accurately and PM it more often, saving us a bunch of time and money on support calls and vendors.”

Not only did the staff certifications cut back on the cost of housing a certified technician from the manufacturer, Cronin said, but it also sets The Sharon apart as one of the few venues whose staff is certified in such a way.

Another improvement SigPro has been planning for a while is increasing accessibility for the deaf and hard of hearing.

For years, SigPro has provided American Sign Language services for the deaf and hard of hearing and headsets to amplify audio quality for the visually impaired, but now, the organization wants to expand services to include real-time audio descriptions.

Previously, SigPro was considering GalaPro, which is the same technology used at the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts in Orlando. But after learning more about how GalaPro works, Cronin said it was determined that it wouldn’t be as effective for unscripted productions, which is the majority of what they do at The Sharon.

“We’ve been focused on updating our assistive listening systems,” Cronin said. “After listening to feedback from our patrons and investigating different options, we’ve settled on and are hoping to be able to install and offer Auracast by Bluetooth, an industry-driven, modern alternative to traditional radio frequency transmitters and T-coil.”

SigPro is also seeking funding to add the same technology at The Studio as well as closed captioning from GalaPro, which is better suited to the scripted format of plays and musicals staged in the black box theater.

For further updates about The Sharon, go to significantproductions.org or follow the theater’s Facebook page at facebook.com/TheSharonL.

MorsePerformingArtsCenter.

Senior writer Taylor Strickland can be reached at 352-753-1119, ext. 5334, or taylor.strickland@thevillagesmedia.com.



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