

The Gathering Place

Chris Lucia

Parents and younger siblings line the back wall as a band of high-schoolers takes the stage. Axis Salvation opens their set with a cover of Weezer's "Say it Ain't So," and about a dozen of their friends begin dancing in the open area in front of the guitarists. Behind the fans, two children – no older than five or six -- bounce balloons off the other concert attendees the entire set as the teens in the crowd crash into each other playfully, song after song.

This is a typical Saturday night for the Gathering Place at 230 Main St. in downtown Springfield. The church-turned-venue is open to all ages and plays host to a variety of bands. Allowing musical groups and their fans an all-inclusive and safe place to perform and see concerts is the main motivation for the group of four who run the Gathering Place.

"It's a place that's for the kids, by the kids, and about the kids," said sound manager Peter Morse, 26. "If you want to get involved, you can, and there are a handful of people who will immediately point you in the right direction."

Morse works with two booking agents -- Perry Doyle, 20 and Stephen Klabo, 19. Coordinating the events and running the door at all shows is Brandon Loescher, 28.

The Gathering Place was founded by Loescher in June, 2011. He was a member of the Riverside Community Church that meets in the same building. The room where bands play, dimly lit and about the size of a high school classroom, was only being utilized a few times a week by the church.

"I asked the leaders of the church if I could use the room for an all-ages show," said Loescher. "It was so successful and encouraging that I was motivated to keep putting on shows, and the church was more than happy to host."

The shows are not run for a profit, but essentially pay the lease and "allow the church to keep the lights on," said Loescher.

The all-ages venue, one of only a few in the Eugene/Springfield area, offers more to smaller local and touring acts than the other concert halls in town.

"The cover charge is always affordable, and it doesn't cost anything to rent the place out for a night like it would at larger venues like the Wow Hall," said Doyle. "That really makes it a lot easier to put on more shows."

Everyone involved with events at the Gathering Place has a deep history within the local music scene and understands how fortunate they are to have a place to play. Dozens of venues over the years have either closed down or shut their doors to local acts due to a variety of issues dealing mainly with drugs, alcohol or violence.

Hoping to prevent any issues with local law enforcement or the church it shares a space with, the Gathering Place has instituted a strict policy against negative behavior in or around the premises during hosted events. There are rules posted on all show fliers and around the venue clearly stating that there is no tolerance for drinking, fighting or using drugs at shows.

If someone is caught breaking the rules, he or she gets one warning. A second violation gets the offender kicked out of the show without a refund. So far, only one isolated incident occurred, alarming the church members who allowed the shows to happen.

“Someone slipped under our radar and left an empty bottle of alcohol inside of a box in the kitchen,” said Doyle. “Since then we've cracked down tenfold, and the church was gracious enough to give us a second chance.”

Self-regulation and a strong sense of community prevent further incidents from occurring, said the volunteers at the Gathering Place.

“When you come here you make new friends, become a part of something you can make bigger in the local scene and become part of a family,” said Klabo. “This is the best all-ages venue in town because you get to meet some great people and enjoy yourself.”

The Gathering Place is a bright spot in downtown Springfield, where the venue is surrounded by vacant buildings in a part of town that has struggled to support local businesses recently. Conversely, the buzz about the Gathering Place has heightened and the venue has seen positive growth over the year it's been open. The volunteers who work there are looking to expand their imprint on the local music scene.

“One thing I would like to see is a slightly broader offering of genres just to make sure we have sustainable draws for shows,” said Loescher. “But I really can't complain!”

Morse, who books most of the out-of-town bands that come through town, has big plans for the future of the all-ages venue, which he sees as sustainable in the long term.

“I'd like to see us reach out beyond our walls and into the broader community,” said Morse. “I would like to see us become a vital part of the downtown Springfield community. Ideally, this might be through collective volunteer projects.”

Morse envisions the venue and its volunteers organizing a soup kitchen night, cleaning litter off the streets in downtown Springfield and working with local homeless shelters to promote a positive message of community. They have already hosted multiple shows in conjunction with Food For Lane County and donated several boxes of canned food to the local non-profit organization, a process they will continue in the future.

There may be no better place for fans of live music in the area to see do-it-yourself, all-ages shows that are affordable and offer a sense of acceptance and inclusion. The people behind the scenes of the Gathering Place would like to keep it that way.

“I can’t stand the larger venue culture of managers, pre-sales, and strict setup times,” said Morse.
“Give me something that I can walk in to and actually see the effects of my work, and I’ll thrive.”