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FACES

Theater owner exults in community spirit

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BY MONICA VON DOBENECK
Of Our Palmyra Bureau

ANNVILLE - Skip Hicks, owner of the Allen Theatre, 36 E. Main St., used a bad experience to explain why he likes Lebanon County so much.

He was preparing for a showing of the movie "Contact," when he discovered the film was damaged, covered in white spots.

So while the audience waited for the 7:30 show, he called a musician friend from Lebanon Valley College to come over and play his violin until a new copy arrived.

After his friend exhausted his repertoire, Hicks began to show cartoons.

Eventually, Hicks decided to show the damaged film anyway, but in his haste inserted it upside down. By then it was 9:15. He apologized for the fourth or fifth time that night and returned everyone's money.

On the way out, one woman told him, "Don't worry. We had a good time. We got to hear live classical music AND watch cartoons. I've never had an experience like that in a movie theater."

According to Hicks, "that's representative of the kind of audiences we get, and the kind of people in Lebanon County. What I like is the community pride, the spirit of people from all walks of life."

When WITF-TV aired "Our Town, Annvile" recently as part of its "Our Town" series, it received the greatest number of pledges ever, according to Hicks.

Hicks was born on the north side of Lebanon. He lives in Hershey now, but spends most of his time in the Allen Theatre and MJ's Coffeehouse, since his businesses are a "24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week" operation, he said. His wife, Martha, and daughter, Stephanie, work with him.

In the process he meets lots of people. He tries to introduce every showing of every movie personally, welcoming audiences to the theater and telling them of other local happenings. The personal touch is one of the reasons the single-screen theater has succeeded.

Hicks taught at the Milton Hershey School until a lottery win by his mother, Mary Jane, gave the family the money to open the theater in 1995. Hicks also has a background in acting, and he spent a season at the Totem Pole Playhouse and a summer studying acting in New York City before deciding there was too much competition.

Owning the movie theater is "the culmination of my interests," he said. "I'm the luckiest guy in the world."

Lebanon County is great because there's a lot going on for a quiet, rural county, he said.

"Often we think we need to go to larger metropolitan areas to catch cultural events," he said. "But we have so much right here in Lebanon County. Even Lebanon Valley College across the street, musically, artistically, it's the best. The Arnold Art Gallery is one of the best-kept secrets around.

"Then there's Mount Gretna -- Gretna Music and some of the finest theater. I love Mount Gretna."

But if you crave some big-city life, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington D.C. and New York City are within an easy day trip, he said.

Hicks said Lebanon County is becoming more diverse, with people from different backgrounds, cultures and opinions.

"Some changes are excellent," he said. "New people coming in create diversity, excitement."

Lebanon County also has the beautiful farms of Schaefferstown and historical sites like Union Canal and the Stoy House.

"I thrive on New York City, but it's always great to come back to the calmness and quietness of central Pennsylvania," he said.

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