

The Mello Center

Word getting around about Watsonville's performing arts jewel

By STEVE PALOPOLI
STAFF WRITER

The word is getting around about the Henry Mello Center. Praise for the Center's acoustics and the recent acquisition of a Steinway Grand Piano have led to a steady increase in demand for the center since its opening in February.

And its growing success has left those involved with the Mello Center feeling ambitious. As more artists seek out the 800-seat music facility for their performances, so are the Center's administrators seeking an unprecedented scope of performers.

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Pamela Mason, who books performances for the Mello Center.

But while the auditorium has been employed by a number of local musicians, dance troupes, and theater groups, it is also beginning to attract the attention of artists from outside the area as well. The U.S. Marine Band performance, which drew an audience

from all over Santa Cruz and Santa Clara counties, was so popular tickets had to be drawn from a lottery. UC Arts and Lectures held its "Selected Shorts" performance at the Mello Center Nov. 14, which featured film actress Bonnie Bedalia and Broadway and television actress Christina Pickles. Tandy Beal's Santa Clara Valley Nut-

cracker will be held there Dec. 12-18. Sista Monica's concert tomorrow will be the first popular music performance at the center.

Ed Pio is manager of the Watsonville Band, which sponsored the Marine Band's appearance, and also served as temporary manager of the Mello Center through August. Pio thinks the center's acclaimed acoustics and growing reputation will soon make it a premiere music facility throughout Santa Cruz County and the Monterey Bay.

"I think it will quickly become a regional center," said Pio, who says the Mello auditorium is acoustically comparable to Salinas' Sherwood Hall. "Other than that, (the Mello Center)'s the place for 800 seats," he said.

Mason said the Center will un-
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doubtedly allow Watsonville to draw an unprecedented number of musicians. "There's any number of national and international artists that, as we become more connected, we can really take advantage of their being in the neighborhood," said Mason. But she said that as the Mello Center becomes better known as a music facility, she also wants to attract artists from a variety of disciplines.

"I think that stage is a glorious stage for dance," she said. "With a little bit more enhancement in our lighting system and our rigging and draping, it's going to be an excellent hall for theater as well."

Bud Kretschmer is on the Mello Center Board of Directors, and is a life member of the Cabrillo Music Festival and SCC Symphony. Kretschmer, who donated the Mello Center's Steinway, believes that as its reputation spreads, the facility will gradually be sought out by many artists and producers who regularly draw large audiences in the Bay Area and along the Central Coast.

"The initial feeling is that the hall is a little bit small for them," said Kretschmer, who believes that attitude will change as events like the Cabrillo Distinguished Artist Series take place at the Mello Center more regularly.

For her part, Mason feels the center can host artists from a number of different musical styles. While certain factors, like the center's regulations banning alcohol and its large capacity, set the center apart from many of the area's nightclubs, she said rock, blues, jazz and other popular music acts may also become part of the facil-

ity's clientele. Blues/gospel singer Sista Monica was a breakthrough in this regard, being the first popular music performer to be booked at the Mello Center.

"I think we could do any kind of music in there," said Mason. "We need some jazz in there, we need to do some rap music, we need to do a lot of stuff."

In the long run, one can't help but think the Mello may generate some competition for other local venues, including the much larger Santa Cruz Civic, which seats almost 2,000 people. But Mason thinks the Mello is "a different animal," with a different economic base than the Civic.

"You can keep your ticket prices a little less, and you can make it available in ways you might not if you've got a bigger hall that absolutely has to sell tickets — where you can't have hundreds of empty seats," she said. Among Mason's priorities are local community groups, to whom she wants the center to remain available.

However, the Mello Center is still evolving technically, and administrators are currently seeking funds for additional lighting, sound, and stage equipment. Mason hopes that as the facility is fine-tuned, its reputation will continue to grow, especially at a local level.

"I think it's important," she said, "that the community understand they do genuinely have an absolutely beautiful hall."