

Back from the brink

Widland honored for helping save Stamford's Palace Theatre

This is the first of two parts on award winners Michael Widland and Moira K. Lyons.

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When Stamford's Palace Theatre hit hard times at the start of the recession in 2008, Michael Widland decided to lend his expertise to save the venue.

A partner with the Stamford-based law firm Shipman & Goodwin L.L.P., Widland advised that it file for protection from creditors under the U.S. Bankruptcy Code.

Four years later he was honored by The Stamford Center for the Arts for his daring move with an Arts Ovation Award.

During his acceptance speech, Widland joked, "Although I'm delighted to share the warm glow of this evening and listen to all the nice things that people have been saying, I can never imagine that so much praise could be given to a guy who put the SCA through bankruptcy... and managed to get Jerry Springer and Maury Povich ... to work in Stamford, all in the name of the arts."

Moira K. Lyons, former speaker of the House for the state legislature, was also honored with an Arts Ovation Award for her dedication to the SCA and the greater community. The awards were presented by Gov. Dannel P. Malloy March 30 during a benefit gala that featured a performance by Liza Minnelli, who received the 3rd Annual Arts Legacy Award from U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal.

Widland's efforts to help SCA began with his initial involvement on the board

nearly 20 years ago, but he earned attention when he voluntarily stepped in as board chair of SCA at a time that was financially challenging for the nation, for the livelihood of arts, and specifically, for the 1,575-seat Palace Theatre, which was built in 1927 in classic European style.

During his ceremony speech, Malloy applauded Widland's bankruptcy recommendation that later allowed SCA to become a "money-making entity."



WIDLAND

"And we certainly would not be looking forward to a great future for this theater, for this organization, without Michael's great guidance."

Since filing for bankruptcy, the SCA has enjoyed "three solid years," SCA's Executive Director Elissa Getto said. She attributed this in part to Widland's financial decision-making and also to his push to "encourage us to be a partner with the community, not just put on shows ... but really participate," she said. "We are serving the arts, culture and community, but because of the size of (The Palace), we are one of those major contributing factors to downtown Stamford and it's important to

bring economic drive to town."

Getto said the Arts Ovation Award is given to people who are not only committed to SCA, but also extend their charitable efforts to the greater community in other ways.

Widland, a resident of Weston, has been involved in numerous nonprofit organizations on the local level, including serving as former director of the Greater Norwalk Chamber of Commerce, a Trustee of Connecticut Legal Services, a Trustee of the Mill River Park Collaborative, and as present vice chairman of the Board of Trustees for the Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk. Yet Widland echoed Getto's sentiments about the growing prominence of SCA.

"For those people who live or work here, SCA offers an opportunity to improve the quality of life by bringing arts education and entertainment to Stamford, and this creates an atmosphere where it's a better and healthier place for us to work."

Widland added, "This organization is important to cultural well-being and part of the cityscape and will continue to be."

When he found out he'd been selected as a recipient, "My initial reaction was to tell the person that she was crazy and demand a recount!" But in all seriousness, Widland said, "It's always a pleasant and nice feeling to be recognized by peers and appreciated by others. That's always a good feeling."

He added that he'll stay on board as chairman "for at least another year" and expressed gratitude for being a member of a law firm that actively supports important local causes.