

## **VBC History**

### *WHY VON BRAUN?*

The name Von Braun originated from the German engineer, Wernher Von Braun. Von Braun is known for being one of the most important weapons specialists to work on rocketry and jet propulsion in the United States. In 1945, after signing a contract with the U.S. Army, Von Braun was brought to Huntsville, Alabama from Germany. While in Huntsville Von Braun took on elite roles. His first was as the technical director of the U.S. Army Ordnance Guided Missile Project. Soon after Von Braun officially moved to Huntsville and became a U.S. citizen. He continued his work as the technical director but went on to hold the titles Director of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Marshall Space Flight Center and Vice President at the aerospace company Fairchild Industries, Inc. He even founded the National Space Institute. Von Braun is also responsible for several satellites and rockets you may be familiar with such as Explorer I, Saturn IB, Saturn V and Saturn I, which is the rocket that was used for the Apollo 8 moon orbit in 1969. The U.S. Space program played such a huge role in Huntsville that Huntsville became known as the "rocket city." Due to the efforts of Von Braun and the success he made of Huntsville it only seemed appropriate we be named the Von Braun Center.

### **OPENING DAY & ICONIC PERFORMANCES**

Tickets for opening weekend attractions went on sale February 24, 1975. Opening day was highlighted by the Beaux Arts Ball sponsored by the Arts Council on March 14. March 15 was the premier performance of "Galileo Galilei" conducted by Dr. Marx Pales which had been commissioned by the Huntsville Symphony Association for the grand opening of the Concert Hall. Notable Huntsvillians that performed that night were Ken Turvey, Albert Lane, Lady Shivers Tucker and Mike Sheehy.

Rounding out the first month of operation were Holiday on Ice, Huntsville Little Theatre's "Barefoot in the Park" and Johnny Cash. Also appearing the first year of operation were Truman Capote, Linda Ronstad, Merle Haggard and Van Cliburn. The iconic Elvis Presley appeared May 30 through June 1 for an unprecedented five performances. It was the first time Elvis had played that many consecutive performances in a venue outside of Las Vegas. The Arena's first rock show featured the Electric Light Orchestra with Sugarloaf and Jo Jo Gunne. Other rock groups appearing that year were the Doobie Brothers, the Jackson Five, Jimmy Buffett, the Allman Brothers and Jethro Tull. Country fans also enjoyed such acts as Dolly Parton, Loretta Lynn, Charlie Pride and Chet Atkins. In its first six months of operation, the Civic Center drew over a half million attendees. Later that year Fantasy Playhouse, a local theatre, began its 1975-76 season with a production of "Puss 'N Boots" in the new VBC Playhouse. Other locally bred performances included Community Chorus with "Brigadoon" and Broadway Theatre League with "Gene Kelly's Salute to Broadway," starring Ken Berry and Mimi Hines.

Iconic artists continue to perform here and is why people return to the Von Braun center time and time again. Recent performers include Harry Connick Jr, Miranda Lambert, Rascal Flatts, Jason Aldean, Weird Al Yankovic, Willie Nelson, The Beach Boys, Little Big Town, Elton John, Kid Rock and much much more!

## 40th ANNIVERSARY



In 2015 the Von Braun Center celebrated their 40th anniversary. In light of the celebration the VBC hosted the Von Braun Music Run & Open House. It took place on March 21st, 2015 at 9am and had over 2,500 people in attendance. The 5K included live music and entertainment throughout the route. Once participants reached the finish line they were able to enjoy a live band and other family friendly activities at the Von Braun Center in similar fashion to other great family friendly events the VBC hosts. It was at this event when Mayor Tommy Battle proclaimed March 2015 as Von Braun Center month in honor of the 40th anniversary.

## CHANGES AND RENOVATIONS

The demand for space in the Civic Center quickly overwhelmed supply. To meet the demand in late 1980 additional exhibition and meeting room space was added with the addition of the West Exhibit Hall. Under the direction of Chef Tommy Armstrong, the center became “the” place to hold banquets. A much larger and more modern kitchen was added shortly thereafter. During the Tupperware Convention the civic center’s catering staff fed one thousand people a splendid prime rib dinner.

The ever-increasing popularity of the Center for banquets, conferences and receptions necessitated yet another expansion. The new North Hall was to be a stylish, well-appointed place of public assembly. Highlighted by oak trim and 18 chandeliers, the North Hall opened with fanfare in 1987. Due to budgetary constraints, the landscaping of the North Hall was done by the Civic Center staff. The final touches were completed only moments before guests arrived.

The demand for space escalated, and larger exhibitions and tradeshow gradually outgrew the available space. For instance to accommodate the Intergraph Graphic Users Group, meals were first served in a large tent which quickly became inadequate. Food service then moved to a makeshift dining hall created in the Monroe Street parking garage. During the typical five-day conference, over twelve thousand lunches alone were served. The logistics of food service in the City parking garage brought home the need for larger convention space. With the opening the South Hall, the Center could now accommodate these conventions as well as draw others of national significance. The new South Hall opened in January 1997, ahead of schedule and under budget, and was to have been inaugurated by the American Bowling Congress, a six-month event drawing bowlers from all across America. However, the early completion date enabled the Boat show to open first. To establish the center as a regional site for convention trade, the name was changed from Von Braun Civic Center to Von Braun Center.

Originally constructed in 1975, renovations were completed in 2010 transforming the VBC’s Arena into a dynamic modern venue. A \$5 million donation from Bill Propst helped make renovations to the VBC Arena possible. The renovation changed the facade of the Arena to a modern glass frontage overlooking Big Spring Park and expanded the lobby adding more pre-function space and a pub. The project added over 1,000 seats to concert setups, VIP suites, and additional restrooms. The Arena was renamed the Propst Arena in honor of this considerable donation made by Huntsville businessman Bill Propst. Propst is well known in Huntsville for the success of Propst Drugstores and his entrepreneurial ventures in the marketing and manufacturing of generic pharmaceuticals.

Thanks to a generous \$3 million donation from the Linda and Mark Smith Family Foundation the VBC Concert Hall underwent a major renovation completed in 2010. The gift given by the family of late prominent businessman, Mark C. Smith brought the Concert Hall up to date with the 21st century Propst Arena.

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE VBC**

Time and time again talented Huntsville citizens have stepped forward to share their expertise in leadership roles of great responsibility. They serve for no personal gain and motivated by a sense of community service and the desire to enhance the quality of life in the Huntsville community. The airport, public library, Huntsville Hospital and the botanical gardens are results of this kind of leadership and The Von Braun Center is no exception.

In the early 1960's certain members of the community felt that Huntsville could do better than the meager arts facilities available at the time. Martha Rambo affiliated with the Symphony, Elvira Glover of the Art League, Martha Hamm with Community Chorus, Dexter Nilsson of Little Theatre and others began to voice the need for housing and performance space for the arts. City Attorney Charles Younger and Councilman Joe Peters embraced the cause. Charles Younger got the idea to fund the arts by way of a liquor tax. Huntstivillians traveled to Winston-Salem to observe, and Art Hanes, a member of the Hanes family of Winston-Salem where a successful Arts Council had been created, was invited to Huntsville to advise. As a result the Arts Council was born.

The Public Building Authority was able to make the old West Huntsville School available for an Arts Center. However, Arts Council members were careful to refer to it as the "temporary" Arts Center in fear of opposition to the proposed building project.

Today it is hard to imagine the city of Huntsville without the VBC but only a few decades ago to enjoy your favorite entertainment you had to travel to various venues around Madison County. Local theatre productions were presented in the auditorium of the old West Clinton School at the corner of Church and Clinton Street. Broadway Theatre League and the Huntsville Symphony Orchestra played at the Huntsville High School Auditorium. For rock and country music, one could enjoy the ambiance of the Madison County Coliseum which could only seat approximately 2,000 people. For elegant banquets the Russell Erskine Hotel and the Dunnavant's Mall (now Medical Mall) were often the premier choices.

The want for a cultural center continued to increase and finally gained momentum in 1965 when The Public Building Authority, under the direction of Nathan Porter, contracted with Booz-Allen-Hamilton to make plans for a civic arts center. The original concept was for a large and small theatre along with an exhibition space and an art museum. In 1969 the Civic Center Advisory Board (CCAB) was chartered by the Huntsville City Council. Their mission was to advise the council on all aspects concerning the design, financing, construction and operation of a new facility to be called the Huntsville Civic Center. They were further charged with developing a master plan that included an auditorium that would seat 10,000. The council confirmed the belief that a large arena would be necessary to support the other facilities. One of the final recommendations of the CCAB was that a permanent Civic Center Board be established to oversee all aspects of the new facility. Original plans allowed for the building to be built in five increments but The Board insisted on all or none, as they deemed any negotiation for incremental development would jeopardize the overall project. As the building neared completion, famous

Huntsville artist Ed Monroe offered to donate a portrait of Wernher Von Braun to the center. Dr. and Mrs. Von Braun were visibly moved at his stunning work.

**THANK YOU**

The arts in Huntsville has never faced easy times. Its success in Huntsville is due primarily to the efforts of individuals who have inspired, challenged and motivated all of us to contribute our time and devotion to this great endeavor. The arts have not flourished because of the Von Braun Center; rather the VBC has succeeded and will continue to succeed because of those who firmly believe in the importance of the arts. Thank you for continuing to support the arts and Von Braun Center.