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A legacy of free concerts

Levitt Pavilion SteelStacks to host family-friendly performances in Bethlehem.

January 10, 2011 | By Nicole Radzевич, OF THE MORNING CALL

The fortune of a once-poor Brooklyn boy who made his money selling tailored shirts to the stars has helped transform a landfill, a crime-ridden park and a sleepy downtown into cultural gathering spots where families can gather under the stars to hear free, [high-quality](#) music.

This year, nonprofit Levitt Pavilions can add former steelmaking plant to its list.

The group and its foundation announced Monday it will partner with Bethlehem to bring its brand of entertainment this spring to the SteelStacks arts and cultural campus, just south of the old Bethlehem Steel furnaces.

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The outdoor concert stage this summer will host 30 free performances, ranging from blues and reggae to children's acts and rock, with lawn seating for up to 2,500 people. There are no benches or chairs — just a big lawn where families can bring a blanket and picnic while they take in a show.

The model, which clothier Mortimer Levitt helped fund 37 years ago in Connecticut, has been replicated in five other places from a 1930s-style venue in Pasadena, Calif., to a refurbished shell that bills itself as having hosted Elvis' first professional concert in Memphis, Tenn.

Jim Creedon, president of Friends of Levitt Pavilion SteelStacks, which will run the programs, promised at a news conference Monday that the family-friendly performances will be diverse, but it will be a couple of months until the lineup, which starts July 2, is released.

Levitt pavilions across the country have hosted acts from Grammy winner Asleep at the Wheel, a country/western swing group, to Choo-Choo Soul, an acclaimed children's act featured on Playhouse Disney.

Elizabeth Levitt Hirsch, Levitt's daughter who came to Bethlehem on Monday to celebrate the project, said the pavilions are just as much about the audience as they are the performers.

"This is about spirit," Hirsch said told a group gathered at the performing arts center under construction at SteelStacks. "We are about building community through music."

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As a partner, the foundation will [invest](#) \$1.2 million over five years and grant opportunities are expected. Bethlehem, Northampton County and the Bethlehem Area School District are kicking in some of the real estate taxes generated from the redeveloping Steel site.

The Levitt Pavilion concept started in 1974 when Levitt helped bridge the [funding](#) for a band shell at a landfill that Westport, Conn., donated.

Hirsch said her father's desire to provide free entertainment dated to nearly a century ago to when his father sold butterfly pins on Coney Island. Levitt, who was born in 1907, couldn't afford to go to shows as a child, so he would listen to the music just outside the gates.

Levitt and his wife, Mimi, wanted to open those gates and provide free music when they acquired the wealth to do it. Levitt made his money by [selling](#) "custom-made shirts to celebrities, business executives, political figures and others who didn't have to ask the price," according to his 2005 obituary in The New York Times.

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Levitt sold the business, Custom Shop Shirtmakers, in 1997, and put more [money](#) into his foundation so the Levitt Pavilion model could be replicated. In 2003, the foundation helped fund the Pasadena pavilion and later the stages in Memphis, Tenn., Los Angeles and Arlington, Texas.

Cathy O'Neal, a spokeswoman for the Arlington pavilion, said that since opening in 2008, the stage has helped transform the nightlife in a quiet downtown sandwiched between Dallas and Fort Worth. Before the pavilion, people didn't stay in the downtown after business hours or on weekends; now, 1,500 people descend to that city block every time there is a performance. Restaurants have opened.

In Bethlehem, Levitt Pavilion SteelStacks is part of what is planned to become a cultural an arts destination. Planned to open this spring are ArtsQuest's performing arts center and PBS-39's new studios. The Sands Casino Resort Bethlehem is already operating and there are plans for a National Museum of Industrial History.

Hirsch, standing in the performing arts center under construction, acknowledged foresight that the community leaders have shown. She motioned to the building's close-up view of the blast furnaces, which will be the pavilion's backdrop.

"What an allegory of Phoenix rising from the ashes," said Hirsch, board president of Levitt Pavilions and vice president of the Mortimer Levitt Foundation. "Amazing."

Levitt Pavilion SteelStacks

Place: SteelStacks arts and cultural campus, First Street, Bethlehem

Capacity: lawn seating for up to 2,500

No. performances in 2011: 30

Price: free

First performance: July 2

Source: Friends of Levitt Pavilion SteelStacks

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