

A look behind the curtain at Northlight Theatre, which seeks \$2 million from City Council

Theater stresses community involvement, local impact as it requests ARPA funds

by [Gay Riseborough](#)

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Northlight Theatre will go before Evanston's City Council on April 11 to ask for \$2 million of the \$43 million Evanston will receive from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).

Northlight has bold plans to build a state-of-the-art, 300-seat theater and complex in Evanston at 1012-16 Church St., just west of the Metra tracks – a project expected to total \$26 million.



So far, \$11 million has been raised. If the theater group is successful in its presentation to the council asking for \$2 million, it will be almost halfway to its goal.

Northlight's request has already been approved by the city's Economic Development Committee, which includes six council members.

An economic impact study by Hunden Strategic Partners, performed in 2015 and updated in 2019, estimated that in the first five years of the new theater complex's operation, Northlight patrons would generate \$56 million in new spending in Evanston and more than \$450,000 in city tax revenues.

Northlight has a strong Evanston provenance. It started in Evanston in 1974 as the Evanston Theater Company, and went through several name changes and homes, including the briefly decommissioned Kingsley School on Green Bay Road as well as the former Coronet Theater on Chicago Avenue.

A three-year nomadic phase ended when it found space at the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts on Skokie Boulevard, where Northlight is the resident company.

In Skokie, audience numbers have averaged 50,000 yearly. But Northlight expects to increase those numbers in Evanston given the location's easy access to the CTA and Metra.

Northlight is a 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization. To maintain that status, an organization must provide service to the community.

“The staff at Northlight is very invested in its community engagement programs,” said Christina Lepri, a writer and director formerly on staff at Mudlark Theater and now Northlight’s Director of Education & Community Engagement.

“Northlight has always offered a subsidized matinee program for Evanston and Skokie children in the middle schools and high school,” Lepri said. “At the matinee performances, the kids stay afterwards to engage in conversation with the actors and others involved in the production. I am the most excited about connecting professional artists with young people who are future theater-makers and -goers.”

Northlight’s Evanston community partnerships engage hundreds of individuals, from youth to senior citizens. Ruben Carrazana, an actor and new Community Engagement Manager, referenced several partnership programs, each tailored to the needs of the individuals involved and led by experienced teaching artists. “We are open for new partners to all our programs,” Carrazana said.

Among the partnership programs:

- **Arts for Everyone** is a free ticket initiative. Carranzana oversees the distribution of more than 2,000 free tickets per season by reaching out to Northlight’s community partners

and allotting tickets to each group. This benefit will be more accessible with good public transportation to the new location. A new accessibility initiative provides open-captioning performances and assisted-listening devices.

- At the YMCA, YWCA, Levy Senior Center and the Evanston and Skokie public libraries, Northlight gives **writing workshops**. Some began on a virtual basis during the pandemic. Participants are given writing prompts and exercises, often creating personal memoirs or short scenes with characters, dialogue and stage directions. The work is shared and discussed. Last year a booklet was printed from the resulting work.
- At Family Focus, the group Grandparents Raising Grandchildren offers support for each other. Youth Development Program Manager JoAnn Avery and Beth Jacobs, a clinical psychologist and author working with Northlight, have helped take the **grandparents writing group** to the “next level,” including a culminating in-person performance for friends and families.
- Northlight gave **workshops in conflict resolution** at the Youth Job Center, at Church Street and Oak Avenue, which trains young people for work readiness. Older teens are given role-playing scenarios in which they learn to deal with work-related authority figures and customer conflict. Even the staff of 20 at the Youth Job Center requested a workshop.
- Another popular Northlight offering is **Build a Play**, an after-school program and in-school residency in the elementary schools and at Youth & Opportunity United at 1911 Church St., across from the high school. At the Y.O.U. program, 12 to

17 students get extra help and support after school and have more “agency” than they get at school. They learn to use body, voice and imagination. “We use theater skills to teach life skills,” Lepri said.

- The **Northlight Youth Council** is a special group of 10 North Shore teens interested in pursuing theater as a career. They apply for membership online and join after a Zoom interview. They meet twice a month for an inside look into the world of professional theater, attend performances at Northlight and other theaters, do community service work and participate in the planning of audience-building events.
- Evanston Scholars is a new partner organization with Northlight. The goal of this group is to see more students start and finish college. The group works with students who are first-generation college entrants, those from low-income families and students of color. Through **theater games and ensemble-building exercises for scholars**, students identify their values and needs so they can better communicate them during the college interview and application process.

“A location in Evanston could serve to deepen all these community relationships and expand Northlight’s impact,” said Kim Hoopingarner, Director of Advancement at Northlight. She added, “Even though the theater will be in downtown Evanston, we have impact throughout the community and in every ward – our participants come from all over Evanston.”

“Northlight also wants to be a public square – to host other programs besides plays. TED talks, community meetings and film fests would be just a few example.” she said.

Although the theater won’t have its own parking lot, valet parking service will be provided and public parking is available just a few minute’s walk away.

Northlight is eager to “break down barriers for access to theater – barriers which may be financial, transportational, or even preconceived notions about theater in general. In the past, not all theaters have been welcoming,” said Hoopingarner. “When located in Evanston, Evanston kids will grow up going to theater and theater will be part of the fabric of all their lives. We’ll be right down the street from the high school.”

“This will be their hometown theater,” said Eric Witherspoon, retiring Superintendent of Evanston Township High School District 202, and Northlight’s newest board member.

Amy Morton, restaurateur of Found and The Barn, said, “Evanston is the gateway to the North Shore – between the city and Wisconsin. When Northlight comes back, there will be new restaurants, new jobs.”

Witherspoon and Morton spoke at a Northlight event at S.P.A.C.E. on March 29. Attendees included board members, donors, friends and the media.

Evanston Mayor Daniel Biss concluded: “The arts make our lives rich and full. The creative arts are a tool for self-expression, for understanding each other and ourselves, for bridging our differences. This move must happen. Bring Northlight home!”

Northlight hopes to break ground in the summer of 2023 and be ready to open in the fall 2024.



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