

# Atwood

From A1

“The building we’re in now is pretty big so seeing this building, I was like, ‘I don’t know how they made this work but they made it work,’” said Rucker, 18. “I like the fact that I’m turning this into something else. It’s becoming something new.”

Instead of office space, the building will soon be home to a music stage, three bars, a DJ booth, new bathrooms, a balcony with a lounge and seating, and, below the stage, dressing rooms and a green room. Rex-Dean hauled gravel into the building to help level out the basement before new concrete was poured, added blocking for staircase handrails and new subflooring in the balcony. When the project is complete, it will end a \$2 million transformation that will provide another option for a city that continues to crave for live music.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” said Rex-Dean, 24, who had previously worked as a certified nursing assistant. “I’m just blown away.”

## Atwood Music Hall

The Christensen Co., led by Toffer Christensen, co-owner of the nearby Bur Oak, purchased the building in September 2023 to help fill a void in the local music scene.

The Bur Oak has a capacity of just 130, so when bands sell out at the venue, it’s unlikely they will return. The Atwood Music Hall will serve as an alternative for return shows and will have a capacity that ranges from 400 to 700 people, depending on the configuration for a show. The venue will be slightly smaller than the nearby Barrymore Theatre on Atwood Avenue (770 to 1,000 people). The Sylvee, which opened in 2018 on East Washington Avenue, can hold 2,500.

Christensen had hoped to have the hall open by 2023, but an appraisal with unexpected results led to a delay and a rethinking of the financing. After buying the building, which sat empty for nearly six years, work began last year to transform the office space. In an effort to prevent sound from escaping the building, most of the windows have been removed and the spaces filled in, with the exception of those at the front of the building and at the back of the stage.

“You just walk in and



JOHN HART, STATE JOURNAL ARCHIVES

Toffer Christensen is seen in April after purchasing the former Madison Gospel Tabernacle building at 1925 Winnebago St., which came with a lamella roof, made up of simple, single prefabricated standard timber segments as a way to span large spaces without support columns.



Dallas Rucker, 18, right, and Myia Rex-Dean, 24, are both embarking on new careers with the help of Operation Fresh Start’s Build Academy.

it says, ‘Please put music here,’” Christensen told the Wisconsin State Journal in April. “It’s perfect for that. The neighborhood enjoys going out to shows and events, and the space meets that. You just look up at the ceiling and it’s beautiful. The last thing we want is to see this torn down and turned into something like apartments.”

## Built by Tabernacle

The building was constructed by the congregation of the Madison Gospel Tabernacle, an independent, nondenominational evangelistic center near Schenk’s Corners on Madison’s Near East Side. It held its first service in the building in 1932. After the departure of Madison Gospel Tabernacle, the building became Freedom House in 1970, an alternative school connected with the Freedom School movement, but it also was used in the evenings as a concert venue.

In 1980, the building was purchased by Operation Fresh Start, which remodeled the building with several interior divisions and covered the ceiling. Operation Fresh start vacated the building in 2018 and a year later sold it to a buyer with plans for a series of art studios. But when he died, his business part-

ner, Mike Knight, who has an aquaponics farm near Paoli, began looking for a buyer and ultimately found Christensen and group of investors.

The ceiling is one of the show pieces of the facility and is made up of simple, prefabricated standard timber segments as a way to span large spaces. The individual pieces are joined together with bolts and plates to form a rhomboid pattern that became popular between World War I and World War II, especially in Germany, where it was invented, when metal for construction was in short supply and housing demand was strong. Today, there are only a handful of buildings left in the Midwest that feature the unique design.

Steve Gardner, director of the Build Academy, used to have an office just below the ceiling near the



AMBER ARNOLD PHOTOS, STATE JOURNAL

Dallas Rucker, 18, with Operation Fresh Start, shows some of his work at the Atwood Music Hall, standing behind what will eventually be one of three bars in the building, which will hold up to 700 people for a show.



Dallas Rucker, 18, center, and Myia Rex-Dean, 24, gather their toolbelts for more renovations.



Dallas Rucker, 18, has been a part of Operation Fresh Start’s Build Academy for the past three months.

stage on a second floor that has since been removed. He remembers playing volleyball in the middle of the building on the original hardwood floors that will remain for the Atwood Music Hall.

“It’s super exciting for the organization to see our old building repurposed into something new that can keep giving back to the community,” Gardner said. “When we were here it was a nice building

and it did its purpose but it needed work. Seeing it now, opened fully up, is just really neat.”

## Build Academy’s link

Build Academy students range in age from 18 to 24 and begin with three weeks of instruction and personal development classes before heading out into the field where they work under the supervision of

contractors. Students are currently working with Findorff Construction on a parking garage at Epic Systems in Verona and a health clinic in Sun Prairie. They’re also working on installing insulation on a 32-unit apartment building in Madison and on the construction of a two-story single-family home in Sun Prairie.

Build Academy students also played a role in a \$3.3 million project at the Operation Fresh Start offices at 2670 Milwaukee Street. The project, funded through a Wisconsin Workforce Innovation Grant awarded by the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation and the Department of Workforce Development, added more offices, conference rooms, classrooms and construction space, with an open house set for 3 to 5:30 p.m. Jan. 23.

General contractor Thresholds Builds is supervising the work at the Atwood Music Hall.

“The participants are really special in all different ways,” said Jake DeHaven, project coordinator for Thresholds. “It’s fun to be around people getting their first taste of the industry and working on cool projects with them. I have been so impressed on all the different trades their teams are willing to take on. The participants aren’t going to get this diverse of an exposure to our industry almost anywhere else.”

Rucker, who has been with the Build Academy for the past three months, is already doing side jobs for extra income and has been offered other jobs. One of the things that attracted him to OFS was the ability to learn building skills that will last him a lifetime.

“Something that nobody can ever take from you is your own knowledge, so that’s the best thing you can ever have,” Rucker said. “That’s the whole reason I’m here — to find a good career that can sustain myself and my family, once I have one, and do what I gotta do.”

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