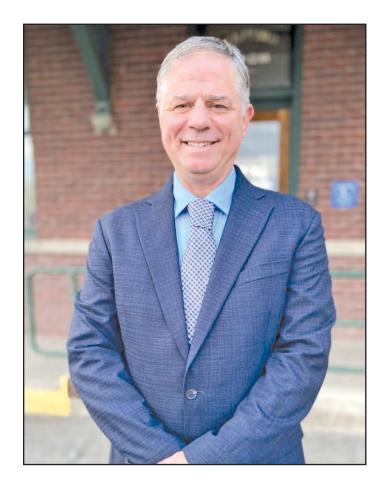
VOLUME 2 2022 AN EVENING SUN PUBLICATION

IN YOUR OWN WORDS



Brian J. Doliver, **City of Norwich Mayor**

Norwich Family YMCA stays strong throughout COVID-19 pandemic

By Sarah Genter Sun Staff Writer

NORWICH - For 160 years, the Norwich Family YMCA has been an integral part of the Norwich community. "The Y," as it is colloquially known, prides itself on "putting Christian principles into practice through programs that develop the spirit, mind and body for all."

Norwich Family YMCA Executive Director and CEO Jamey Mullen said this mission stands true today, and that the YMCA "continues to be a community-based organization that is available to all [and] accepting of all."

The organization offers several programs to the community, at their facility located at 68 North Broad Street in Norwich. The building houses a swimming pool, fitness center, three gyms, racquetball courts, the "Kids' Gym," and more.



A kids' basketball tournament at the Norwich YMCA. The Y offers programs at their facility located at 68 North Broad Street in Norwich. The building houses a swimming pool, fitness center, three gyms, racquetball courts, the "Kids' Gym," and more. (Photo by Tyler Murphy)

vide amazing fitness equipity, located on George Crumb State Committee of the YMCA ment and fitness classes to Road in Plymouth, is also one received a formal request for meet the diverse health and of the programs offered by the information on bringing a Norwich Family YMCA to area wellness needs of our commu-YMCA to the City of Norwich. nity." youth. "The first organizational The Y Camp, a children's The Norwich branch of the meeting was held on November summer day camp at the YMCA was first established **Continued on Page 10** YMCA's Camp Thompson facil- in 1862, after the New York

FEBRUARY 7, 2022

The city of Norwich has had numerous challenges through the years. 2021 was no different. This past year, several downtown businesses struggled due to the pandemic. Storefronts struggled to stay open, whether it be state mandates, healthy employees, or issues with getting products and supplies.

While we are no different than other communities, our challenges are up to us to find resolve. We saw stores close that were downtown fixtures, and yet, I see others in our community finding new opportunities for businesses that can and will be sustainable.

During my time as Alderman of Ward II on the City's Common Council, I helped to keep taxes low and invest in our city's infrastructure. As Mayor, I intend to continue the work that lies ahead. In collaboration with the council, downtown business and not for profits we will strive to encourage economic vitality. I am excited that the city is the recipient of the Downtown Revitalization Initiative grant or DRI which is a \$10 million grant from NYS. This grant will do so much to improve our downtown and is in short, a game changer. It is my belief that this will encourage other investments outside of the DRI.

The local talent of Norwich will be the cornerstone of future success.

Many city residents have taken on projects in years past, not only for profit but for the better of the community.

Another success in the city is that of the completion of the Museum District. The improvements made will help to boost the local economy. The visions of yesterday are being realized today. This was possible as a result of many organizations working together, each doing its part, to make this possible. My administration will continue to collaborate in this fashion.

"We continue to be a leader in childcare programming, sports programming and swim lessons for area youth," said Mullen. "We continue to pro-

Preserving Chenango County's history for a new generation



4-H youth toured the Chenango County Historical Society Museum in January of 2022 for the first time since the start of the pandemic. (Photo by Zachary Meseck)

By Zachary Meseck Sun Contributor

NORWICH The **Chenango County Historical** Society has taken steps over the past year to invest in virtual accessibility to its exhibits, promote in-person safety, and invest in the preservation of the county's history.

According to Chenango County Historical Society **Executive Director Jessica** Moquin, over the last two years, it became necessary for the Chenango County Historical Society - like most museums - to develop creative ways to reach their audience.

Moquin said the historical society's mission is to lead and support the advancement of research, education, and enjoyment of Chenango County history. She said their vision is to be a cultural center offering unique immersive experiences through community engagement both

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Norwich Family YMCA stays strong throughout COVID-19 pandemic –

Continued from Page 9

24 of that year with officers elected. When the YMCA first began in Norwich, information documented states that one major accomplishment of the organization was the board's project of collecting books for soldiers," Mullen explained. "It was noted that during the early years of the YMCA, funding for the operation was through donations, gifts, and fundraising activities."

Over the next several decades, the agency saw several location changes, growth, and above all else, a positive impact on the community. In 2002, the Norwich Family YMCA relocated to their current facility, and has made several improvements since that time.

"Since the current facility opened in 2002, the YMCA has continued to invest in its new home by constructing two new parking lots for its membership," said Mullen. "Also during this time period, many mechanical improvements and additional site work has been completed in conjunction with the Norwich Streetscape Project."

But, the past two years may have been the largest change of all. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Norwich Family YMCA has grappled with several challenges, such as staffing shortages, a loss in membership, and a reduction in programming.

Challenges caused by COVID-19

The pandemic imposed temporary shutdowns on many

local businesses and organizations, and unfortunately, the YMCA was one of them. According to Mullen, the facility had to close for five and a half months in 2020. After reopening, their occupancy was limited by New York State to just 33 percent for a total of ten months over the course of 2020 and 2021.

In addition to the state-mandated closure, the Y also had to change the way they operate to accommodate new regulations and keep their patrons safe.

"Everything changed," said Sports Director Tom Revoir. "In my 25 years of working at the Norwich Family YMCA, this last year and a half has been the most difficult time I have ever had with scheduling and having to cut programs."

He said sports at the Y were hit hard by the pandemic. The mandated closure meant all sports programs were put on hold, and even with their return participation has severely dropped.

"Looking down the lines of participation, COVID affected all of my sports programs pretty immensely," said Revoir. "I'm used to having t-ball and baseball. When we were able to go outdoors, I used to have anywhere between 100 and 130 kids involved in that program ... It was cut in half pretty much."

"Instead of having my normal of 40 kids per session, in the little four and five year old outdoor soccer program, I had 16 total," he added.

Compounding that issue is the reduced space available at

the facility. To comply with COVID safety guidelines, the YMCA moved equipment and programs around to keep visitors at a safe distance from each other. As a result, Revoir has seen scheduling conflicts and a lack of space needed to hold the same number of programs as he used to.

"The fitness center spread out, and we're utilizing Gym Court Three for all the aerobics classes. Well, that eliminates Gym Court Three as a space for practice. It's gone. So now I'm down to two courts, and for indoor soccer I can only use the synthetic court which is the middle court," he explained.

"I've changed the rules of the game, and I'm limiting the number of participants per age group. I've never limited anything, and now I'm limiting it to 64 participants per age group within the Y, because I don't think I'm going to have enough open time on one court for teams to practice." Memberships at the facility also decreased as a result of the pandemic. Between early 2020 and the end of 2021, membership at the YMCA declined about 42 percent, dipping from 3,800 members to 2,200.

"Our membership dropped, and then we're starting to build back up, but we're not at those numbers we were at before COVID," said Revoir. "For this upcoming year, I slashed my budgets in half. And if I get the higher numbers, wonderful, you know what I mean? But I slashed those numbers in half on purpose, because ... we're not at even that 75 percent threshold yet of people coming back. And you can't blame them, you really can't."

The Norwich Family YMCA was impacted by staffing shortages as well, something that's been seen across several area businesses and organizations.

Before the pandemic, the YMCA employed 140 workers, seven of which were full time, and also had 400 volunteers. By the end of 2021, the agency was down to a staff of 84 people, including eight full time employees, and just 125 volunteers.

"It wasn't anything to see 100 kids in the YMCA after school, pre-COVID. Now that we're in COVID; 25. Yeah, it's not a lot," said Revoir. "You've got enough to play a full court basketball game. You may have ten kids playing, and then a handful of kids just kind of running around here and there and in the racquetball courts. You can count them very easily. They're just not there."

Working through tough times

Throughout the past year, staff at the Norwich Family YMCA did everything they could to continue meeting the challenges presented on a daily basis.

"During 2021, we continued to operate in a reactionary mode due to the pandemic," Mullen said. "Some of our vacant positions were not filled right away, and staff on payroll stepped up, providing extra support on behalf of the YMCA."

"We continue to look for certified lifeguards to work in our swimming pool. Janitorial staff and childcare staff are areas of employment that we continue to look for employees," he added.

The reduction in membership and participation continued to be a challenge as well, largely in part to the reinstatement of COVID guidelines and restrictions.

"I thought things were really looking up prior to basketball season starting this year, as they went lax on the masks and we weren't having to wear the mask, and if you were vaccinated you didn't have to wear the mask," said Revoir. "And then whammo, we're back into a mask mandate, it doesn't matter if you're vaccinated or not. And so when that happens, there's a lot of participants that just choose not to sign up for these things."

"And what can you say? There's nothing I can do, and I'm not faulting anybody for that. It's just the way it is, unfortunately."

Despite these challenges, the YMCA was still able to make some progress throughout the year, such as developments to the facility, and the hiring of some additional staff members.

"In 2021 we started a project to replace our dehumidi-Continued on Page 11



Norwich Family YMCA members enjoy a friendly game of pickleball in the YMCA gym. (Photo by
Sarah Genter)the facility. To comply with
COVID safety guidelines, the
widelines, the
Memberships at the facility
also decreased as a result of the
Memberships at the facility
By the end of 2021, the agency
widelines are safe for 24 page.

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fication system for the YMCA swimming pool," Mullen said. "Changes in staff saw the hiring of Kelly Reppert as our Youth Development Director, Tucker Norton as our Aquatics Director, Katie Voss as our Preschool Director, and Cindy Koenig as our Membership Manager."

Mullen added that the Y was also able to continue providing essential services to the Norwich community, such as childcare programs. They also implemented more cleaning measures, HEPA filters, and sanitizing machines to their facility, in order to address continued COVID concerns.

An inspiring display of community support and collaboration was also prevalent at the Norwich Family YMCA in 2021, as several organizations partnered with them to provide services and support to the community.

The Cardiac Rehabilitation Program from Chenango Memorial Hospital worked with the Y, and Helping Hands, a charitable organization that provides needed items to individuals and families in the area, continued their monthly giveaway nights.

"Thank god we have people like Lorri Race who organize events like that once a month, because I don't know what this community or what this area would've done without it, you know? They've serviced a lot of people and helped so many people through this bad time," Revoir said.

Even the cancellation of the cherished Gus Macker basketball tournament had a silver lining, according to Revoir.

"When the pandemic first hit in 2020, we couldn't have Gus Macker. We didn't have it in 2021, either. But we had secured several sponsors for the 2020 Macker, and they actually sent their money in," he explained. "All the sponsors that did send their money in, when I reached out to them and said that we were going to send the money back to them, they said no, keep it. Please keep it and put it toward something that you're going to need."

He added that those funds were used to support ongoing programs, such as the YMCA's childcare services.

"It really was a great thing for us, and especially during that period of time," Revoir said. "When the Y was closed for the general public, we were still open for childcare. So that money was able to help, and help sustain it."

One of the YMCA programs even rang in an anniversary this year, and Mullen said it saw the highest level of participation since its inception.

"Our 50th anniversary of summer camp at our Camp Thompson facility saw the largest number of children participating, as children and families were wanting their kids to get outside in a safe and secure setting," he said.

2021 may not have been easy, and there are still many hurdles to overcome, but the Norwich Family YMCA made it through. Revoir said some things are better off than they were, and the organization is looking toward the future.

"Basketball this year, we're

better than we were in the past, we're definitely better. Better than I thought we were going to be, but my numbers in basketball are still low," he said. "But we're open, and we're staying open and we're fighting the good fight."

"We want to be open, we want to be there for the kids, and that's our number one thing," he added. "We want to be there for the kids and the families, and provide a safe place."

Staying strong

Despite the numerous challenges presented in the past two years, the Norwich Family YMCA has stayed strong in the face of adversity. Mullen credits this strength to the several allies the Y has in the community.

"We are stronger today due in part to a stronger working relationship with community partners, both in the for profit, not for profit, and government sectors," he said. "Collectively we have to all work together to support each other so that we all can support our community."

"Benefits of being in this community are plentiful. We had amazing support through financial donations, both individually and corporately, [and] the United Way has been a true community leader," he added.

According to Revoir, a lot of the organization's new growth was borne from the pandemic itself. He said fielding the challenges brought on by COVID have improved their resiliency, and will better prepare YMCA staff for any future struggles.

"There's always different

challenges you have every year, but it's definitely challenged me in the scheduling and in the time management," Revoir explained. "I think the YMCA as a whole, it's challenged us, and I think we have risen to that level that we needed to rise to. So yes, I do believe that the YMCA as an organization is probably stronger now than we ever were."

"You can get complacent, and then when something terrible happens you're not sure how to handle it. And I think that our organization handled it pretty well, and continued to handle it really well."

Staff and volunteers at the YMCA have already adapted to the changes in operations, and continue to "dedicate time to a variety of their passions," according to Mullen. This includes coaching, volunteering with Helping Hands, and volunteering at the Y. Many YMCA employees have even taken on extra roles and responsibilities to keep programs running smoothly.

"The volunteers that I do have in my program are absolutely spectacular and I can't thank them enough. I really wish I could do more for them, because they are awesome," Revoir said. "I've got high school volunteers, and all my coaches, they're all volunteers. Some of my coaches are stepping forward and reffing the games after they've already coached the game and all that. So my hats are off to all of them."

Through funding provided by endowments, and the consistent efforts of the Board of Directors and Board of Trustees, the YMCA was able to bounce back after reopening to the public, and were able to stay open over the past year.

"I tell Jamey [Mullen] all the time, I say, thank god that the Norwich Family YMCA has done so well with our endowments. Because if we didn't have that, I don't think the Norwich Family YMCA would still be open. I really don't," said Revoir. "We've had great people that are on our Board of Trustees and have monitored the monies over the years, and a great Board of Directors."

"They've all done a great job, and that's the reason why we're still open and other YMCAs across New York State are not," he added.

The Y kept their strength during the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and were even able to grow and become stronger than ever. Community support, the ability to adapt, and the dedication of their employees kept them going, and are allowing them to continue to grow and improve.

"With everything that's bad I always say, something good comes out of everything. And I do believe that some good things have happened for the Y since we've had COVID," said Revoir. "It's been a struggle, but I think there's a lot of good and there's a lot of positives."

Moving forward

After the challenges of 2020 and 2021, the Norwich Family YMCA is looking forward to positive changes and improvements for 2022.

According to Mullen, developments on the YMCA swimming pool's dehumidification upgrade will continue,

and the agency will look for further input from the community.

"The YMCA is working on a new strategic plan that will gather member and community input while assessing community needs, to see if our organization can assist our community more, while enhancing our program and facility offerings with our community," he said.

The agency also hopes to see the return of the Gus Macker basketball tournament, reviving the popular community event after a two year long hiatus.

"We are hoping for the return of Gus Macker in Norwich in 2022. We hope to celebrate our 25th anniversary after a two year postponement," Mullen said.

COVID-19 challenges certainly aren't over, but the Norwich Family YMCA has the resources, staff, and supporters in place to see a successful year. Revoir reminded area residents that although COVID restrictions and guidelines may be frustrating, they are ultimately one of the adaptations that must be made to keep going.

"People may not like what's going on with the rules that we are following, but we're following them to keep our doors open to support our families, and our children, and adults that utilize our facility," he said. "Just remember we're there for you, we really are. We're there for everyone."

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Preserving Chenango County's history for a new generation

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on their campus and beyond.

First established in 1939, the Chenango County Historical Society (CCHS) received a charter in 1956. Ward School No. 2 (originally built in 1896) was acquired in 1958 with renovations beginning immediately.

Since reopening as a museum in 1962, Ward School No. 2 has been the home of CCHS. The campus has expanded greatly since then, with the acquisition of the one-room Ross (Preston), Schoolhouse Loomis Barn (Tyner), a maple sugar house, and the Chenango Canal building, home to the packet boat model the "Lillie."

"While our primary focus is always on accomplishing our mission, the health of our community remains our highest priority," said Moquin. "So finding new ways to share the unique cultural heritage of Chenango County in the safest ways possible became our goal."

"As with many organizations, we continue to improve our online presence and develop more virtual events. We focused on engaging with our community both virtually and through programming held primarily in outdoor spaces."

Hosting Creative Events **During The Pandemic**

One of the historical society's events despite the ongo-

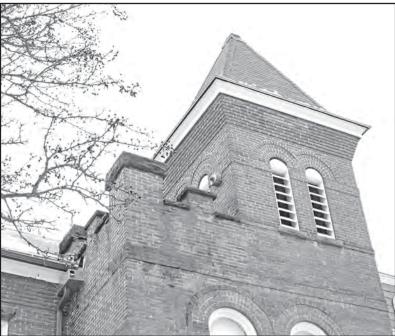
ing pandemic focused on commemorating Women's History Month.

"We launched a virtual exhibit highlighting the accomplishments of 21 women, one from each of the towns in Chenango County," Moquin said.

exhibit named, The Chenango of "Women County" launched March 1 and can be viewed at: https:// chenangohistorical.org/education/women-of-chenango-county/.

"For June's 'Path Through History' celebration, we unveiled the 'David Maydole: An 'Adz' Eye for Innovation' exhibition located both inside and outside of the James S. Flanagan Research Center, and the next day we launched a complimentary virtual exhibit available at: https://chenangohistorical. org/education/david-maydole-hammer-factory/," said Moquin. "Our August 26 celebration of Women's Equality Day was held outside under the David & Carol Miller Pavilion. It included brief vignettes on three noteworthy local women politicians who were pioneers of their time, followed by live theater which brought to life the remarkable story of 'Belva Ann Lockwood: A Woman Before Her Time."

"In the spirit of creative endeavors celebrated during the annual ColorScape festival, we hosted a series of programs featuring local



The Chenango County Historical Society's museum is located in the City of Norwich's Ward School Number 2 building at 45 Rexford Street, and has required ongoing upkeep and maintenance. (Submitted photo)

weekend of September."

Another event that utilized the outdoors as a way of keeping people safe from the pandemic while also teaching about the area's history included the 'Historic Architecture in Norwich, the Seat of Chenango County' walking tours took place throughout the city.

Moquin said the programs were led by Architectural Historian Bryan McCracken, who specializes in the preservation of American structures – particularly buildings in and around Chenango County.

She said one tour focused on community buildings, and the other highlighted historically significant residential

structures during the second structures. She added that the walking tours were unique opportunities for engagement with everyday exhibits.

> "This collaboration allowed us to supplement the offerings of ColorScape, extending the festival throughout the city of Norwich by highlighting artistic endeavors which transcend generations and disciplines," said Moquin. "During this holiday season, we are again hosting the second-annual virtual Parade of Trees.'

> "Additionally, we launched an innovative new partnership with United Health Services Chenango Memorial Hospital, curating exhibitions related to the unique heritage of Chenango

County for Senior Living residents to enjoy."

The historical society's first installation featured historical images from The Norwich Pharmacal Company. The second display included pieces originally drawn by Danny McCarey, known locally for his cartoons and caricature drawings, and the third exhibit features images from its collection of glass slides that were originally taken as photographs by the Morton family of Oxford.

Moquin said while this project was initially intended to be a short-term program designed to lessen residents' feelings of isolation due to COVID-19, it has been so well received that they plan to continue this indefinitely.

Staying Responsive To Community Needs

She said staying responsive to the community's needs is what led the organization to focus on health and staying creative with upcoming events.

"Last year at this time, we were navigating the uncertainty of what might happen in the immediate future," she added. "While some uncertainty remains, we have adapted to the constant change around us."

"Now our top challenge is balancing the growth of the organization's capacity with fiscally sound management. Prioritizing organizational needs with capacity resources is always a challenge, regardless of external circumstances."

Moquin said when businesses and organizations took measures to decrease COVID-19 spread, her organization began calling this period "The Great Pause," since pause has a more positive connotation than shutdown.

She said the pause removed distractions, allowing the historical society to embrace the implementation of a new strategic plan approved last year. She added that thanks to the pause, they are successfully managing the transition from being simply a curator of local heritage to serving as a community partner, an educational resource, and a regional destination.

"Chenango County, as a rural area located within the Appalachian region, faces challenges that many similar Appalachian communities do," Moquin added. "It has been noted by the Appalachian **Regional Commission (ARC)** that the population of rural Appalachian counties is older and less diverse, and has been declining in number faster since 2010 than the population of rural counties in the rest of the country."

"With the exception of health insurance coverage, rural Appalachian counties continue to lag behind rural counties in the rest of the **Continued on Page 13**



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country."

According to Moquin, the benefits of being based in this area far outweigh the challenges. She said there is a deep commitment to the community in Chenango County, and that generosity of spirit helps overcome any circumstances the area may face.

She added that this deep commitment and community spirit inspires all of the work they do at the Chenango **County Historical Society.**

Preserving History and Community Partnerships

In 2021, the historical society placed special emphasis on the preservation of its flagship facility, Ward School No. 2, in honor of the building's 125th anniversary. Moquin said a Preservation League of NY grant was received in January, and the funding was used to pay for a Limited Building Condition assessment, which was completed last spring by The Chazen Companies. Since then, a task force has met several times in order to strategize how best to address the issues raised in the subsequent 72-page report.

In addition to focusing on building maintenance, an increased effort towards meeting programming goals has led to a number of partnerships with neighboring educational centers including Colgate University, SUNY Cortland, SUNY Geneseo, SUNY and Oneonta's Cooperstown Graduate Program (CGP).

Part of the goal of partnering with other entities is to help gain and spread awareness for different perspectives.

The newly created "Indigenous Perspectives in Chenango County" initiative is designed to improve representation of diverse perspectives as related to the historical society's mission, and was made possible thanks to The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience.

"The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience awarded us a consultation with Dr. Sally Roesch Wagner to discuss how to better shape our interpretation of local history," said Moquin. "As a result, we committed to developing programs that reflect deeper understandings of Indigenous communities including collection curation, future campus enhancements, and educational programming - so that we are more inclusive and better represent diverse narratives."

"Dr. Wagner recommended that we hire Michelle Schenandoah, of Indigenous Concepts Consulting, to assist us in facilitating additional dialogue and program development that fully engages with local Indigenous communities."

Moquin said thanks to a start-up grant from the Community Foundation for South Central New York,



The historical society's museum is currently open with a number of exhibits highlighting history from around Chenango County. (Photo by Zachary Meseck)

Ms. Schenandoah is helping the historical society to incorporate the principles of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion into our programming. She said as a direct result of this initiative and Ms. Schenandoah introduced them to community Faith Keepers, and they were able to coordinate the return of indigenous remains and funerary artifacts to ancestral lands in 2021.

She added that this initiative will continue to be a focus for several more years as the historical society strives to represent all perspectives of communities within the region.

Community Involvement With only two full-time staff members, much of the historical society's community participation is in collaboration with other organizations.

The organization's network partnership includes the Chenango Arts Council, Chenango County Agricultural Society, Chenango County 4-H, Chenango County Historian's Office, Chenango County Council, Interagency Chenango County NonProfit Connections, Commerce Chenango,

Days, Earlville Opera House, Friends of the Museum District, Greene Historical Society, Guilford Historical Society, Leadership Chenango, Liberty Partnership, New York State Archeology Association (Chenango Chapter), South **Otselic Fishing & Heritage** Association, Smithville Historical Society, the Tri-County Chapter of New York State Women, Inc., and United Health Services/ Chenango Memorial Hospital.

Museum Association, Dairy

Moquin said the histori-Coventry cal society enjoys supporting

community activities such as the Chenango County Fair, Dairy Day, Lt. Warren E. Eaton Airport Day, Night of Lights Holiday Parade, South **Otselic Fishing & Heritage** Day, and Saturdays in the Park with Chobani.

"We strive to instill pride of place while offering new perspectives on diverse narratives," said Moquin. "We have two full-time professional staff - an Executive Director and an Operations Manager - governed by a Board of Trustees of 13-15 members."

"While our focus is Chenango County, we host visitors from Broome, Cortland, Delaware, Madison, Oneida, and Otsego counties. As an educational and tourist destination, we offer multiple cultural enrichment and learning programs for a variety of audiences, including children, teens, seniors, professionals, and families."

Admission to the museum is a free-will donation left up to each visitor's discretion, with approximately 75 percent of its programming offered free of charge. The organization's campus is a welcoming venue for all ages, socio-economic backgrounds, races, religions, and genders.

Anyone interested in learning more about the historical society may visit its facebook page @chenangohist or its website chenangohistorical.org for additional information.



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