

**For more information contact:**

Allie Magee / [allie@stlshakes.org](mailto:allie@stlshakes.org) / 314-775-7412

Aaron Williams / [4thevillestl@gmail.com](mailto:4thevillestl@gmail.com) / 816-721-6282

**ALUMNI, NEIGHBORHOOD GROUPS AND ARTS COMMUNITY  
RALLY TO RESCUE  
SUMNER HIGH SCHOOL  
FROM CLOSURE**

**BOARD OF EDUCATION VOTES UNANIMOUSLY  
TO KEEP HISTORIC VILLE INSTITUTION OPEN  
AND ADOPT NEW THEME OF ARTS & ACTIVISM**

**LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS TO PROVIDE ENRICHMENT PROGRAMS  
FOR ALL SUMNER STUDENTS STARTING IN THE FALL**

**St. Louis, MO** (March 9, 2021) -- **4theVille** (Aaron Williams, Chairman) and the **St. Louis Shakespeare Festival** (Tom Ridgely, Producing Artistic Director) announced tonight that a group of alumni, neighborhood organizers and local arts institutions were entering into an innovative partnership with the **Saint Louis Public Schools** (Dr. Kelvin R. Adams, Superintendent) to offer rigorous new arts and activism pathways for students at **Sumner High School** (est. 1875) beginning in August 2021. The first African American high school west of the Mississippi - that nurtured **Chuck Berry, Tina Turner, Arthur Ashe** and countless others - had been recommended for closure as part of the district's consolidation plan. Tonight the Board of Education voted unanimously (7-0) to adopt the group's recovery proposal and keep Sumner open.

"Sumner is one of the most important historic institutions in the State of Missouri. Its legacy transcends any neighborhood, school district, or municipality. Its vitality depends greatly on how we as a region decide to come together and nurture the institution," said Aaron Williams upon submitting the proposal. "In 1907, the Colored Citizens of St. Louis made it clear that the institution of Sumner High School should be the standard bearer of how we prepare our next generation. Our effort is a continuation of that spirit. This opportunity has the potential to welcome a new standard for our education system."

In addition to 4theVille and the Shakespeare Festival, the proposal was drafted and submitted by three alumni groups led by **Ms. Jacqueline Vanderford** (Class of '63), **Michael Blackshear** (Class of '77) and **Dr. Robert L. Salter** (Class of '68), respectively.

"Our school song's first line says it all: *Sons and daughters all are we of the school we love so dear*" said Jacqueline Vanderford, Sumner Alumni Association. "The 'Jewel of the Ville' still stands for over 110 years in its third location. It is imperative that the Sumner story is never ceased or silenced. Now, there is a bright spot for continuing the 145 year journey of carrying the torch for future generations."

The group's proposal describes its vision as one of "rigorous and engaging training in the Arts & Activism informed by a foundational understanding of St. Louis Black History centered around The Ville and Sumner High School." Their mission is to ensure Sumner grows into "a vibrant school, firmly embedded in - and serving - The Ville, while also attracting talented students from all over the region looking to study with professional practitioners." They see Sumner fostering "the next generation of trailblazing cultural leaders and community activists."

"No other high school in the country has done more to shape American arts and culture than Sumner," said Shakespeare Festival producing artistic director **Tom Ridgely** in a statement. "When you think about the collective impact - not just of megastars like Chuck and Tina, but actor/activists like Dick Gregory and Robert Guillaume, opera trailblazers like Grace Bumbry and Robert McFerrin, plus so many major figures in jazz - it's simply staggering. As the most significant arts institution in St. Louis, it was imperative that the arts community invest all we could in ensuring its recovery and resurgence. Today's Sumner students deserve no less."

The initial pathways will include Drama (offered by the **Shakespeare Festival** and **The Black Rep**), Visual Arts (offered by **Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis** and **Craft Alliance**), Music (offered by **Opera Theatre of Saint Louis**) and Dance (offered by **La Voûte** and **Ballet 314**). In addition, **COCA** will be offering its industry-leading arts integration professional development workshops to all Sumner teachers and partner teaching artists over the course of the 2021-22 school year.

The group has also formed an advisory board comprised of alumni, Ville residents, and leaders in the arts, education and community development fields to oversee the plan and ensure its success. They will evaluate progress against key outcomes outlined in the plan including an increase in the number of elective courses and pathways offered at the school, the teacher recruitment and retention rate, increased enrollment and the designation of the building as a National Landmark.

"Regionally, we have so much coming together to do to center our children. Seeing four different proposals come together to form one really struck me – not to mention seeing so many of our regional arts organizations come to the table," said Advisory Board Member **Nicole Hudson** of the plan and whose father is an alum (Class of '62). "I am hopeful that the success of this radical collaboration can prove what is possible when we center the kids and their community, and see it as a broadly shared responsibility. I am hopeful it can inspire us all to ask what happens if we can do that district-wide?"

To read the full plan, visit [www.stlshakes.org/sumner-recovery](http://www.stlshakes.org/sumner-recovery).

## **PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS**

**4theVille** is a community-based tourism and arts organization created by multi-generational Ville residents and volunteers to restore pride in the legacy of The Ville, a historic African American community in the heart of St. Louis, Missouri, and inspire reinvigorated community ownership.

The **St. Louis Shakespeare Festival** strives to foster community and joy across the St. Louis region through the Shakespearean tradition of art for all. Since 2001, the Festival has grown from producing a single production of Shakespeare in the Park to a year-round season of impactful programming in exciting and accessible venues throughout the bi-state area. Artistic and education programs reach over 50,000 patrons and students each season and have served over one million since 2001. In 2020, the *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Bloomberg News* featured the Festival's stand-out virtual and in-person programs.

Founded in February of 2019, **Ballet 314** is a nonprofit professional ballet company dedicated to celebrating local talent in the St. Louis region. Led by artistic directors Rachel Bodi and Robert Poe and creatively powered by dancers who have chosen St. Louis as their home, Ballet 314 was founded with a heart to serve the community. We aspire to provide encouragement and partnership with local organizations and to be a bridge for the arts in St. Louis.

Founded in 1976 by Producing Director Ron Himes, **The Black Rep** is one of the largest, not-for-profit professional African-American theatre companies in the nation and the largest African-American performing arts organization in Missouri. Its mission: To provide platforms for theatre, dance, and other creative expressions from the African-American perspective that heighten the social and cultural awareness of its audiences.

The **Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis** works to enrich lives and inspire curiosity, creativity, and learning through experiences with contemporary art. Focused on a dynamic array of changing exhibitions, the Museum reflects and contributes to the global cultural landscape while engaging thousands of visitors through a wide array of public programs. CAM nurtures the creative minds of our city's youth through free, in-depth art education, making a long-lasting impact on the community. We are a site for discovery, a welcoming space, free and open to all.

**COCA** uses the power of the arts and education to build a vibrant St. Louis that is creative, connected and inclusive. A national leader in innovative arts education, COCA provides meaningful arts experiences in our own studios, gallery and theatres, as well as in schools, community centers and corporate settings around St. Louis. The fourth largest multidisciplinary community arts center in the country, we annually serve more than 50,000 people of all ages, backgrounds, and ability levels—from enthusiastic amateurs to emerging professionals—all taught by a faculty of more than 250 distinguished teaching artists. Through dance, vocal music, theatre, art and design, and beyond, we nurture the artistic and creative potential in our students—and our community.

**Craft Alliance** is a non-profit art center dedicated to empowering and enriching communities through craft. From its new location in the Delmar Maker District in St. Louis, Missouri, Craft Alliance offers exhibitions, education classes for all skill levels, community programs, artist residencies and a gallery shop. Craft Alliance is funded in part by the Arts and Education Council; the Regional Arts Commission;

the Missouri Arts Council, a state agency; and the generous support of its members. For more information, call 314.725.1177 or visit [www.craftalliance.org](http://www.craftalliance.org).

**Opera Theatre of Saint Louis** produces a spring festival featuring casts of the opera world's most exciting singers accompanied by members of the Grammy Award-winning St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. Each season, OTSL presents four inventive new productions in English during the months of May and June. In addition to presenting innovative interpretations of classics, OTSL is also committed to premiering new and relevant operas by prominent composers; since its inaugural season in 1976, 28 operas have received their world premieres at Opera Theatre. The company's competitive young artist programs foster the next generation of emerging American singers; these programs have been a springboard for countless artists to launch international careers.

Founded in 2019 by Artistic Director, Brandon Fink **La Voûte** has become St. Louis' newest hub for the performing arts and offers a variety of opportunities for local artists to flourish.