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Lorraine Mills: A hub for creative activities - by Donald Grebien

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Newport has its beaches and mansions lining Bellevue Ave. Providence has its Trinity Rep, PPAC, and Providence Mall. Pawtucket has over 70 mills. Our mills are more than brick and mortar. These buildings are economic hubs, filled with creativity.

Over 30 years ago, a number of individuals, including Morris and Phyllis Nathanson of Blackstone Studios, successfully led efforts to bring artists and small design companies to Pawtucket mills to occupy artist studios and live-work spaces. Their efforts would later have a major impact on mill reuse throughout the state.

Since that time, the city has aggressively focused on repurposing our textile, paper and jewelry mill buildings for live/work space and for small businesses with great success. Local developers have embraced our rich history, the launching pad for America's Industrial Revolution, and they continue to transform our mills into a hub of economic activity once again.

Let's take a look at one sprawling mill that was brought to life by new uses, sparked by Pawtucket's creative revolution.

Built in 1868, The Lorraine Mills, once manufacturing textiles, has found a new use. One hundred and fifty years later, the 325,000 s/f mill now houses 140 small businesses, including sculptors, artists and artisans, silk screeners, graphic, interior, website and fashion designers, and light manufacturers, employing more than 200 people. Soon, the mill will also become home to 170 loft live/work residences.

When stopping by The Lorraine Mills at 560 Mineral Springs Ave., you can now enjoy the 560 Experience. Visit the studio and gallery of Sculptor Donald Gerola, to view his massive paintings and see his sculpture pieces, some requiring cranes to move. Catch a show at the acclaimed Mixed Magic Theatre, in one of its two indoor performance spaces or at its amphitheater. Enjoy improv

comedy at the Wage House and ongoing art exhibits featuring local artists displayed at the Pawtucket Arts Collaborative Gallery. Then, stop by Crooked Current Brewery or White Dog Distillery for a drink.

The owner of Lorraine Mills, Jonathan Savage, who has also redeveloped three other former mills in the city, is in the process of restoring and planning to open the Miss Lorraine Diner, an onsite 1940 Pullman diner, for his hundreds of tenants and residents to enjoy traditional diner food.

As a result of The Lorraine Mills and other mills catering to artists, Pawtucket has become a very vibrant arts community. Pawtucket truly is Rhode Island's creative community.

For more details about artist studios and lofts available for lease or purchase, contact commerce director Jeanne Boyle at jboyle@pawtucketri.com.

Donald Grebien is mayor of the City of Pawtucket.

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