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Private arts school in Eagle welcomes students back to new facility

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BY KATY MOELLER

Chas Baines couldn't sleep Sunday night. He was too keyed up about going to school on Monday.

"I love school," said the ninth-grader, whose class schedule this year includes advanced acting, individual vocal performance and jazz combo (he plays saxophone). The 14-year-old aspiring actor is a student at Eagle's ArtsWest School for the Performing and Visual Arts, which welcomed students Monday to a new school building on Idaho 44 in west Eagle.

"It's really exciting," said ArtsWest Principal Elaine Klein, an energetic 69-year-old educator who came out of retirement to help get the school off the ground.

"I had all this knowledge of education," said Klein, a longtime believer in incorporating the arts across the curriculum.

"I'd learned so much about what works and what doesn't."

ArtsWest's new two-story, 16,000-square-foot, Old World-style main building features large windows, high ceilings, gold walls and large granite classroom tables.

Behind the main building, an 11,000-square-foot building is under construction. The smaller building, which will be finished in a couple of weeks, will house more than a dozen thick-walled practice rooms, the cafeteria and a dance studio.

Students who attend ArtsWest pay \$9,800 in tuition annually, though some receive partial or full scholarships. This fall, 92 students from all over the Valley are enrolled in grades six to 12.

The school opened in trailers last fall. Construction on the campus was fast and furious over the summer. ArtsWest co-founder Ken Cenell worked with a trio of carpenters to finish the interior, logging 16-hour days for much of the summer.

"It didn't matter what time of the day or night, you'd find Ken here," said Dr. Tom Ahlquist, an ER physician and partner in the Gardner Ahlquist Development company.

"I've never seen a guy work that hard."

Gardner Ahlquist Development bankrolled the \$3.2 million construction project.

The school campus is the anchor of Gardner Ahlquist's 22-acre, \$22 million Eagle Island Crossing development, which will add 16 new business and office buildings along Idaho 44 at completion.

Ahlquist got involved in the school project after getting to know Ken and Mary Cenell, who created the popular Rivendell Music Academy, now ArtsWest Youth Conservatory. The after-school academy offers private lessons to hundreds of students.

Ahlquist's son, Thomas, took piano lessons at Rivendell, then found his true passion in jazz guitar. He's been attending ArtsWest since it opened last fall.

"It's been strange to see him like school so much - everything about it," Ahlquist said.

"There's a level of kindness here that's not common."

Baines, the ninth-grade thespian, said ArtsWest is a warm place where students aren't in cliques.

"We're one big family," Baines said.

Darian Gonzales, an ArtsWest junior who enjoys drawing and studying graphic design, said she was tormented at a previous school because she has blue hair and likes to wear fishnet stockings.

Things were different when she started school at ArtsWest last fall.

"I was accepted immediately," said the 16-year-old, a singer who last year picked up bass guitar and played in a garage band.

ArtsWest has one teacher for every 12 students in its academic classes. The school employs the student-centered Harkness Method.

Principal Klein said ArtsWest has rigid minimum performance requirements.

"All students have to get a C or better, or they have to do it over," Klein said. "They have to do it until they get it right."

ArtsWest has been provisionally accredited by the Northwest Association of Accredited Schools, Klein said.