



# Arts across Wisconsin

Even during a drought of public funding, Wisconsin's rural communities are quietly remaking themselves as vibrant places to live, work, and play.

BY ANNE KATZ

"In terms of American democracy, the arts are for everyone. They are not reserved for the wealthy or for the well-endowed museum, or for the subsidized theater. As America emerges into a different understanding of her strength, it becomes clear that her strength is in the people, and that it lies in the places where people live. The people, if shown the way, can create art in and of themselves ... opportunities must exist in places they have never existed before."

Robert Gard, 1910-1992

Detail from a mural titled *A is for...*, by Connie and Tim Friesen, artists based in Mountain, Wisc., who involve communities around the state in their various projects.

Photo courtesy of Connie and Tim Friesen

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**I** TRAVEL A LOT IN MY JOB AS DIRECTOR of a statewide arts service and advocacy organization, so I have a pretty good perspective on the economic, educational, and civic changes happening across Wisconsin.

The pressures on Wisconsin are intense, particularly in the small towns and rural areas that define Wisconsin. Traditional ways are making room for the new as these communities wrestle with the fragile balance between the past and the future.

Our state's economy is shifting from traditional agriculture and manufacturing to the "creative" and high-tech economies; our population is aging as we look for ways to stop the brain drain and keep our young people in the state; land-use pressures are fierce; and global influences, good and bad, are evident on our people and on our society as a whole.

These changes are having dramatic effects on the variety and scope of arts activity taking place in small towns and rural areas. In the past 30 years, arts programs, projects, and facilities have exploded beyond the limits of the metropolitan and suburban areas of Wisconsin to become a statewide cause for pride. Wisconsin's small towns are

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seeing a surge in the numbers of new and revitalized arts organizations, renovated arts facilities, and other artistic programs and activities. Individual artists are flocking to small towns and rural areas; the many reasons include living and studio space at small-town prices, as well as an ability to find, and really get to know, like-minded people in a certain community.

By making the arts a more integral part of the community, these small

towns and rural areas hope to be rewarded with a more diverse arts scene, richer artistic offerings, an increased number of arts organizations, and artists who want to stay in the community and raise their children. An increased focus on the arts can result in more interesting and varied landscapes and built environments, improved educational outcomes for children, livelier towns and neighborhoods, and sustainable economic growth.

These positive changes are happening, although they have been tempered by reality in this new millennium. The recent state budget crises have meant reduced Wisconsin Arts Board funding for community projects and programs, although the cuts have not been as drastic as they could have been in these difficult times, thanks to outstanding grassroots advocacy and lobbying by arts supporters. Cuts on the state level, combined with diminishing city and county support, mean less public financial support overall for arts facilities, arts education, and community engagement and outreach programs. In addition, the downturn and slow recovery of the economy has meant a general reduction in corporate, foundation, and individual support of the arts.



Ashland's St. Esprit Revelry is an art parade organized by David Genzler and many volunteers.

Photo by Amy Kalmon

However, people in Wisconsin are nothing if not resilient and are facing these changes with enthusiasm and courage. Wisconsin has had a proud tradition of grassroots arts involvement from its earliest days as a state. Our progressive mindset and the Wisconsin Idea connected civic involvement, public education, access to the newest ideas, and fulfillment of creative potential for all of the state's citizens.

The UW-Extension's Office of Community Arts Development, led by Robert Gard, professor, folklorist, and author, laid a lot of groundwork in the middle part of the 20th century. The first artist-in-residence programs in the country were established by the College of Agriculture at the University of Wisconsin, bringing renowned artists such as John Steuart Curry and Aaron Bohrod here to inspire—and to gain inspiration from—the people of the state. Bob Gard, known to the arts world as the “father of community development,” had a mission to help rural people find ways to express themselves, and tirelessly traveled the state to make this vision come alive. Gard and others involved in civic affairs believed that the arts played an integral role in making a community whole, and urged arts groups to work with athletic groups like football teams, churches, ethnic organizations, day care centers, senior centers, and other groups in the service of a healthy, whole community.

That philosophy continues and has been strengthened in the present day. The arts have always been close to the hearts of the people of Wisconsin. As our world changes rapidly around us, these people are finding ways to acknowledge and use the arts as vital components in education, business attraction and retention plans, and tourism opportunities.

In his influential 2002 book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Prof. Richard Florida of Carnegie-Mellon University writes that creativity and innovation will be the fundamental skills needed for success and growth as our country moves toward a “creative economy.” The presence of arts and cultural opportunities, he writes, make a community

more attractive to the educated, creative workforce that communities need to flourish.

Business, political, and education leaders across the country see a growing link between a quality, diverse arts environment and a thriving economy. John Naisbitt, author of the books *Megatrends* and *Megatrends 2000*, says, “A vibrant arts community is critical when corporations decide where to locate and when people decide where to work.”

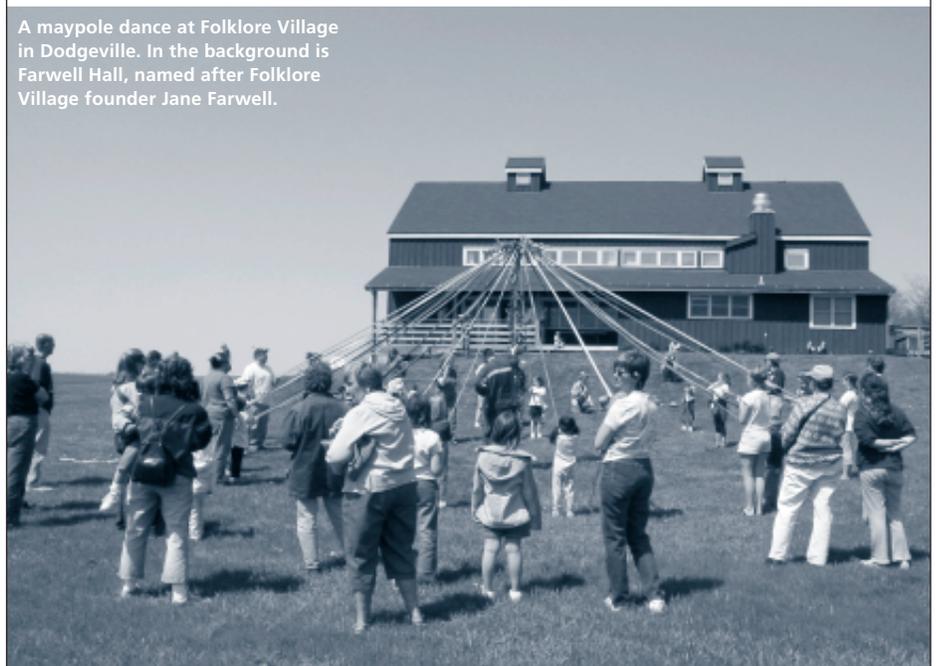
These ideas and trends are as relevant in a small town as they are in the

big city. The arts taking place in a small town are no different than those in a larger community, although there are technical and artistic differences between the metropolitan arts organization and the small-town volunteer community group. The passion that produces the artwork is the same and deserves the same level of respect.

In Wisconsin's small communities, the arts are more personal. Many of the people involved don't consider themselves artists or arts administrators, or think that they are “in the arts.” Those



Artists Tim and Connie Friesen pose before a mural in the making (“A is for...”)



A maypole dance at Folklore Village in Dodgeville. In the background is Farwell Hall, named after Folklore Village founder Jane Farwell.

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are terms that big-city people use. The rural folks are making things happen with their neighbors, producing community projects such as theatrical productions or festivals or school murals.

A recent economic impact survey of the arts by Americans for the Arts and the Wisconsin Arts Board showed that the state's nonprofit arts industry generates \$289.8 million in economic activity every year, including \$38 million in local and state tax revenues. The survey also found that Wisconsin's nonprofit arts industry supports nearly 9,500 full-time equivalent jobs.

(It pays to note here that the previous economic impact survey of Wisconsin's arts industry, released in April 1996, recognized the state's nonprofit arts organizations' \$112.9 million in expenditures, which supported more than 5,506 full-time jobs in the state.)

Nearly 100 Wisconsin cities, towns, and rural communities have recently completed or are currently in the midst of building or renovating arts and cultural facilities, representing more than

\$500 million in private investment and demonstrating state citizens' support for the arts. At least half of these facilities are attached to schools, most of them in the state's rural areas, making them educational and social centers used by the entire community.

Examples abound. There is the Opera House in Stoughton. This theater, built in 1901, was painstakingly restored to its former glory through a massive volunteer effort and was reopened to great fanfare on the 100th anniversary of its original opening. The River City Arts Project in Marinette has established a public art program as a major component in the city's downtown riverfront revitalization efforts. The Chippewa Valley Cultural Association in Chippewa Falls raised more than \$1 million locally, in an all-volunteer effort, to turn the former Catholic high school into the Heyde Center for the Arts. The Heyde Center, situated on a bluff overlooking the downtown, provides a stunning, accessible home for numerous local performers and visual artists and for com-

munity arts education and outreach programs.

I love to attend a summer evening outdoor performance at the Lucius Woods Performing Arts Center in Solon Springs, a town of 500 just outside Superior. Mary Giesen, a local resident, who with her husband, Frank, has been a driving force behind the establishment and success of the center, says, "Many small towns in Wisconsin have limited access to the arts. Lucius Woods Performing Arts Center offers Solon Springs and the Superior area much-needed arts stimulation and entertainment. The added benefits are bonding of the local population, and economic development as an outreach to nontraditional audiences."

An old barn has been born again as the St. Croix ArtBarn in Osceola, on the far western edge of the state. Folklore Village Farm in Dodgeville makes the folk arts of Wisconsin and other places come alive. The Sandstrom School of the Arts on Madeline Island is an old farmhouse slowly being remade into a vibrant center used primarily by the 150 community members who live on the island year-round.

Cultural tourism, an expanding focus of Wisconsin's second-largest industry, is playing a major role in the growth of the arts on the rural landscape. Nationally, 65 percent of U.S. adult travelers (92.7 million) included a cultural, arts, heritage, or historic activity while on a trip of 50 miles or more, one-way. Visiting historic sites and museums, seeing live theater, and visiting art galleries are exciting activities for a growing number of travelers in small towns as well as in cities.

The Fall Art Tour in southwestern Wisconsin and the Dunn County Artists Tour in northwestern Wisconsin are two



The pride of Chippewa Falls: Area residents raised more than \$1 million locally to build the stunning Heyde Center for the Arts.



excellent examples of tourism that uses the arts to their best advantage. These events were begun by area artists who decided to take their destinies into their own hands, wanting to make their living as artists in their own communities and knowing that people hunger for that personal connection between artist and art devotee.

These artists and artisans, many with national reputations, open their studios for a weekend each year, allowing visitors a unique, behind-the-scenes view into how their work is created. Both tours draw thousands of visitors from across the Midwest, who, in addition to observing the artists and artisans at work, purchase artwork, stay at local hotels and inns, and eat in local restaurants.

Spring Green, a place where grassroots creativity and artistic expression have long flourished, was one of five Wisconsin communities involved in Robert Gard's "Arts and the Small Community" project in the mid-1960s. Spring Green has in recent years revigorated its arts scene, with the newly formed Spring Green Area Arts Coalition, a revitalized Taliesen, and the American Players Theatre as attributes. The Arts Coalition hosted the eighth Midwest Rural Arts Forum in October 2003, bringing nearly 100 arts activists to the community for a weekend of celebration of the arts in the rural Upper Midwest.

Arts education is a force for change in rural areas, playing a major role in the effort to develop creative thinkers, attract business, and keep young people in a community. The new arts centers being built around the state are providing students and community members more arts and educational opportunities than ever before.

The Wisconsin Rapids Performing Arts Center at Lincoln High School and the Verona Performing Arts Center are just two of the high school auditoriums that are transforming arts educational opportunities for small communities. These centers feature state-of-the-art technical capabilities, and each serves as the entire community's performing arts center for students and for productions from outside the community.

Visual artists Connie and Tim Friesen of Mountain work with students in the rural Suring School District and around the state to integrate the arts into education. They specialize in collaborative murals involving entire school districts and communities; their artists-in-residence programs usually end with students parading their artwork around the school and through town.

Connie Friesen notes, "As community artists who have worked within small rural communities, we have experienced firsthand the power of the arts. We see entire communities galvanized and united through the arts in a way that was formerly reserved for football games at the local school—such as community mural projects, school and community theater, art shows by student and local artists. These have a powerful impact not only on our cultural life but on our economy as well."

Her husband Tim adds, "This presence needs to be fed and encouraged within schools and towns so that this transforming power puts the 'unity' back into community."

Says Pat Guttenberg, director of the Council for the Performing Arts in Jefferson, which presents a season of local and touring artists in 15 rural communities in Jefferson County, "There is simply less access to quality artistic per-

formances in small towns. By presenting as many as 30 professional and amateur events each year for the past 27 years, we have brought the arts to people living in our rural area.

"We especially focus on young people, involving them and allowing them to experience live music, theater, and dance," she continues. "Over the years the council has provided culturally diverse experiences ranging from African dancing to Ecuadorian panpipes—and given children opportunities to be pirates, seagulls, and even mushrooms! We have enriched their lives and given them a lasting appreciation of the arts."

The Pecatonica Educational Charitable Foundation, based in the neighboring communities of Blanchardville and Hollandale in southwestern Wisconsin, oversees Grandview, the home of "outsider" artist Nick Engelbert, who created idiosyncratic statues and sculptures on the grounds of his farm from the 1930s through the 1950s.

Engelbert's passion to create art was not always appreciated by his neighbors in Hollandale during his lifetime, and after he died in 1962, it took another 20 or so years until the community finally began to take notice of his artwork as treasures for the community. The Kohler Foundation, which has a strong interest in "naïve" art and has funded the restora-



Students involved in a puppet construction workshop at the Northern Lakes Center for the Arts.

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The small town of Amery (pop. 3,000) has designated a poet laureate. “You can have life in a community, but to have life abundantly, you need the arts,” says mayor Harvey Stower.

tion of several such sites in Wisconsin, purchased Grandview and began cataloging Engelbert’s works and restoring the house and grounds. Many of the crumbling statues were restored, others were recreated using original pieces, and a few were taken to the John Michael Kohler Art Center in Sheboygan. The house was restored as a museum with exhibits on the ground floor.

The PEC Foundation has established rural educational programs for the children of the school district. Foundation president Rick Rolfsmeyer says, “The arts are as critical to the quality of life in rural areas as they are in cities. But those of us in rural locales have fewer resources to begin with, so cuts in arts and arts-education funding are felt very profoundly.

“The PEC Foundation tries to develop programs in the arts that complement what schools can provide, as well as provide an array of arts-related courses

for adults and children who are not in our public schools,” Rolfsmeyer continues. “We do that by using a resource that is obvious but often overlooked: our community.”

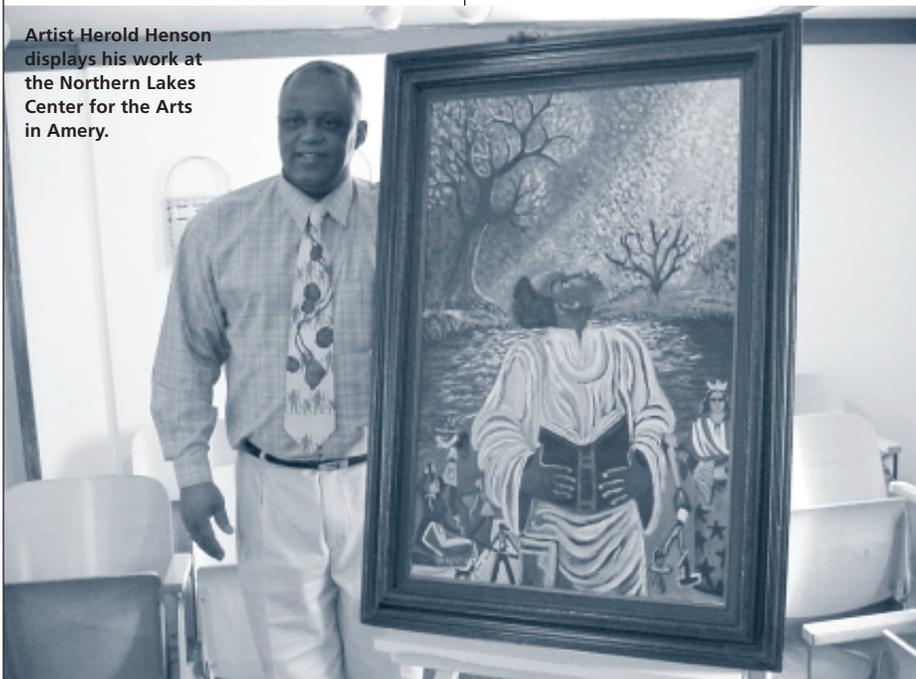
The arts in rural areas often touch on issues very close to home. The Northern Lakes Center for the Arts in Amery, a winner of the Governor’s Award in the Arts, is a participant in “Animating Democracy.” This is a project of the Americans for the Arts’ Institute for Community Development and the Arts that fosters artistic activity to encourage civic dialogue on important contemporary issues. As part of the project, the Northern Lakes Center commissioned and produced a series of arts activities to frame community dialogues about issues of water use and pollution related to growth and development, use of farm chemicals, and recreational use of local rivers and lakes.

The city of Amery recently designated Northern Lakes Center founder and director LaMoine MacLaughlin as poet laureate of the city. Why would a town as small as Amery, population 3,000, have such a position? Harvey Stower, Amery’s mayor, a former state legislator and a dedicated arts activist, says, “Designating a poet laureate for our small community has been very important. Our plan and hope for Amery is to maintain the vital spirit of our community in the face of tremendous change. We can achieve this when our residents are directly involved in artistic endeavors—in music, in drama, in the visual arts. You can have life in a community, but to have life abundantly, you need the arts.”

This joyful attitude sums up the passion that inhabits the people who make theater, music, dance, or visual art happen in their small communities. They don’t have to travel far distances to larger communities to be part of the arts. Their performances, exhibits, art classes, and festivals may offer different kinds of artistic experiences than those in the big city, but these experiences are authentic, personal, and relevant to the communities involved.

Without these people and the experiences they create, our small towns would not be the special places we have always appreciated in Wisconsin. The challenge before them is to keep those experiences authentic in the face of great odds. ✿

Artist Herold Henson displays his work at the Northern Lakes Center for the Arts in Amery.



Anne Katz is executive director of the Wisconsin Assembly for Local Arts, a statewide arts service and advocacy organization. More information at [www.wisconsinarts.org](http://www.wisconsinarts.org)