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women

AREA HOME AND HEALTHY LIVING MAGAZINE

COMMUNITY
SECTION
INSIDE

CHANGE MAKERS

DEBRA LASH

Rising to the Occasion

Setting a Stage for
FINE ARTS

Building an
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CHANGE MAKERS

Pictured here and on cover: Debra Lash, owner of The Wedding Tree in downtown La Crosse. Photos by Jen Towner Photography and taken at The Court Above Main in downtown La Crosse.





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For this issue of *Coulee Region Women*—in which we continue a celebration of 15 years in print—we decided to try something ambitious. What if, we wondered, we could gather as many “cover women” from over the years as we could for a group photo? We researched contact information and sent emails. We picked a location and then a backup in case of rain (which, it turned out, we needed). We didn’t ask for RSVPs; we just sent our emails and trusted.

We were delighted to have more than 30 women show up at the Weber Center that rainy May day. As the women trickled in, I couldn’t help but feel I was on the red carpet at the Academy Awards. “Oh, look,” we whispered to each other, “so-and-so is here!” What followed felt like a reunion. Despite the women having appeared on separate covers over the span of 15 years, everyone knew someone, and the final minutes completing the photo setup were spent amid a buzz of catching up, news-swapping and memory-sharing. Then our photographer deftly posed all 30-some women—our change makers—so each one could be clearly seen.

It wasn’t all of them, to be sure. Many expressed their regret that they couldn’t appear that day, busy as they were in their own business of making change. Several we were not able to track down, and we honor their contributions with grateful hearts. I felt

a little small among them all, smiling from my spot down in front. But then, I thought, every woman is a change maker, isn’t she? Whether we’re working in the community, teaching others, raising good citizens or speaking out for a community cause, we all are making change, and each effort counts.

In this issue of *Coulee Region Women*, which fittingly also includes our annual Community section, we focus on those women and organizations in our area who are making change in ways big or small. Debra Lash, for example, has not only built a successful business in downtown La Crosse, but has restored a beautiful event space and serves the community through her involvement in Downtown Mainstreet, Inc., Downtown Rotary and Women’s Alliance of La Crosse. Laurie Kessler has not only changed lives through her counseling services at Holmen High School; she is also paving the way for a new community center for the Holmen area. Adult coaches of the REAL Girls program at Northside Elementary are grooming a new generation of change makers, as is Bethany Brent as she recruits a teacher workforce that reflects the diversity of students in the area. Jill Miller is spearheading the new Community Food Forest at the YMCA-La Crosse, and homeowners Bobbi and Ed Walsh, with architect Deb Kees, have created a home that shows us how beautiful a cutting-edge sustainable house can be. Finally, we’ll give you a rare glimpse into Cuba, where change is imminent and the door is open.

The door is open to change in the Coulee Region, too, and our photo on page 39 captures just a few of the women who are ushering it through. As we stood before the camera, smiling for the dozenth time and trying hard not to move, a voice piped up from the group: “Who’s running La Crosse while we’re all here?” someone asked. The resounding laugh that resulted is frozen in time in that photograph.

Betty

coulee region women

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Donna Koopman

MOTHER OF (BLUE) DRAGONS

If you’re looking for something fun and meaningful to do with your friends, family or coworkers this summer, don’t miss the Big Blue Dragon Boat Festival July 15-16 at Copeland Park in La Crosse. This event, put on by the Mayo Clinic Health System, celebrates breast cancer survivors with all proceeds going to the Center for Breast Care programs at Mayo. To get involved, put together a team of 20, then be prepared to get some exercise, have some fun and raise money for a great cause. Or, show your support by coming to Copeland Park to watch as many as 60 teams race on the Black River.

This year’s breast cancer survivor ambassador, Donna Koopman, sums up the sentiment of this fun and competitive celebration perfectly: “I want to be in a boat of all survivors, with all our shapes and sizes and different athletic abilities. But I don’t need to be in a race to feel like I’ve won. To me, we’ve all won just by being in the boat.” To find out more and to register, visit www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/bigbluedragon. Registration is \$800 per team and is open until June 17.



Benjamin Boucvall and Caroline Amos in *Romeo and Juliet*. Great River Shakespeare Festival, 2015. Directed by Doug Scholz-Carlson. Photo by Dan Norman.

AN ODE TO SHAKESPEARE

The creative genius of William Shakespeare is made available to everyone in the Coulee Region at the Great River Shakespeare Festival in Winona. This June marks the 13th annual festival, which begins June 22 and ends July 31 on the Winona State University Campus, 450 Johnson St. Enjoy performances of Shakespeare’s works *As You Like It* and *Julius Caesar*, as well as *Georama*, a new musical by West Hyler, Matt Schatz and Jack Herrick of the Red Clay Ramblers. Rounding out the festival are special events and symposiums offering insight into Shakespeare’s productions, as well as pre-show conversations, musical performances, yard games and food trucks on the Winona State University green prior to each show. There’s something for everyone and culture galore at the Great River Shakespeare Festival. To learn more and plan your visit, go to www.grsf.org.



SERVE YOUR COMMUNITY THROUGH RSVP

If you are 55 years or better and have some extra time on your hands this summer, our community could use your help. The Coulee Region Retired Senior Volunteer Program invites seasoned adults like you to use your experience and skills to make a positive impact in our community. Right now, RSVP is in need of volunteer drivers to help escort people unable to drive to their medical and other personal appointments. Drivers receive mileage and expense reimbursement and can volunteer on a daily, weekly or on-call basis. If you’re interested in this—or the many other volunteer opportunities RSVP has to offer—visit www.rsoplax.org to learn more and to sign up for a summer of giving back!

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Rising to the Occasion

Debra Lash takes her business—and downtown La Crosse—to a new level.

BY KATHLEEN WALLACE

Photos by Jen Towner Photography

Debra Lash just celebrated her 20th year as owner of The Wedding Tree in downtown La Crosse, and she's seen a lot of change in the downtown in those two decades. In 2000, for example, up to 25 percent of the storefronts downtown were vacant, and even Lash considered others' advice to move her business to the mall area. She made a decision to stay because she sensed the potential, the energy and the momentum that could build from honoring the hometown tradition of small businesses.

Now, with a less than 5 percent vacancy rate, the downtown storefronts are considered full, and Lash has become the President of the Board of Directors of Downtown Mainstreet, Inc. She has served on the board since 2007 and became its president in September 2015. The mission of Downtown Mainstreet, Inc. is to promote the economic redevelopment and revitalization of downtown La Crosse. The story of the growth of her business and consideration of her values reveal why Lash is a particularly good board president at this time.

A downtown tradition

Lash bought The Wedding Tree business in 1996 and moved it in 1998 to its current location. The building at 418 Main St. has a rich history, having housed the local YWCA in the early 20th century. Lash has grown her business from a staff of two and now provides employment for 20 people and steady work

for a team of local self-employed seamstresses. While other businesses might try to increase profit by reducing services, The Wedding Tree provides service in every stage of wedding preparation, from selection of bridal wear to altering, storing and pressing of gowns in preparation for the big day. As a result, for many customers, The Wedding Tree has become a family tradition, with former brides bringing back their daughters who are preparing to marry.

Marrying past, present and future

Rather than setting and achieving goals, Lash speaks of having “no end game or stopping point, no goal to stop at.” She also believes in “keeping the best of the past while reinventing and repositioning.”

She has a gift of seeing how the past, present and future relate. The growth of her business has come through paying attention to what customers want and developing a vision of the next step in response. This responsiveness to needs has brought opportunities for growth in her business. While sales were once only conducted on the first floor, she has moved the bridal area to the beautifully renovated second floor. Now the first floor has an expanded formalwear area for men, and Lash is expanding the section for mothers of the brides and grooms. Surrounded by a large selection of new gowns in the second-floor bridal area, brides can sense they are a part of history and tradition, even as they are planning their future.

Courting customers

Once the gymnasium for the YWCA, the third floor of the building has been transformed into a elegant event space: The Court Above Main. This space combines the rich character of historic details with modern amenities and has become a space that “flexes” to meet the needs of a variety of types and sizes of gatherings. With soaring details like chandeliers and large windows overlooking the city, the space is grounded by the original wooden gym floor, its dark brown color adding warmth to the light-filled venue. Available for rental, it has hosted music concerts, dinners, meetings, memorial services and, of course, weddings and receptions.

Lash enjoys being in her office on Saturday mornings. At any time, there may be activity on every level: a groom picking out a tuxedo on the first floor, a bride having a fitting in the basement, another looking at dresses for the first time on the second floor and a wedding beginning on the third

floor. Lash has filled her building with the service her customers want.

Dedicated to downtown

Lash brings this same appreciation for the past and spirit of reinvention to her role with Downtown Mainstreet. “I’m very grateful for her leadership of the board,” says executive director Robin Moses. She appreciates Lash’s generosity with her time and interest. Lash’s gifts for listening and learning serve everyone well; just as she doesn’t conduct her business with preconceived goals, she seeks to draw out participation from the whole board to develop a complete picture and envision what is best for downtown and the mission of Downtown Mainstreet.

Lash works long hours for her business, but she is also generous with her time in service to downtown. It is not unusual for her to have early morning meetings and to follow a workday with evening networking events. Recently, she hosted a meeting of Raising the Bar, at which persons from more than 30 businesses discuss ways they can collaborate in bringing more business downtown. Lash firmly believes that Raising the Bar means encouraging a culture of high-quality service and that this is what will make the difference in downtown businesses thriving.

Moses adds that Lash’s generosity extends beyond her time. “She is someone who has given back to the

community in many ways without expecting recognition.”

Rising to the occasion

Lash loves her work to the extent that, she says, “It doesn’t feel like work.” Even so, she has a rich life outside of The Wedding Tree. She and her husband have raised five children, with one still at home, and they are enjoying their first granddaughter. Lash loves to get outdoors and play golf. She also makes quilts. But she does this with a special purpose that fits right in with her approach to business and to building collaboration: She creates the quilts as gifts for special occasions, incorporating names of new parents into a baby quilt or the date of the event the quilt commemorates. She is a person who pays attention, rises to the occasion and inspires others to do the same. (crw)

As a native of La Crosse, Kathleen Wallace appreciates people like Deb Lash who exercise wise stewardship over their resources and talents to benefit the community.



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GROW OUR OWN

Bethany Brent helps bridge racial and cultural gaps through a more diverse teacher force.

BY LEAH CALL

Contributed photo

“It is not just a job when you are touching people’s lives; it’s much more than that.”

That’s what Chicago native Bethany Brent, Ph.D., says of her role as Multicultural Education Advisor and Recruiter for the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. Having lived in La Crosse for just 18 months, Brent is already making a big impact on campus and in the community.



Bethany Brent, Ph.D.,
UW-La Crosse

“One of my primary responsibilities is to create a long-term program that will support teacher diversity, and I’ve been able to do that with the Grow Our Own Teacher Diversity program,” says Brent, who will launch the initiative this fall along with program co-creator Antoiwana Williams, director of Multicultural Student Services at UW-La Crosse.

In partnership with La Crosse and Winona school districts, Grow Our Own is designed to provide tuition-free teacher training to community members of color, ages 22 to 50. Qualified participants then must teach in the district for a minimum of three years.

Brent notes that community members of color share cultural connections and understand the challenges of minority students. “And in that sense, this particular population is more likely to bridge a racial and cultural gap between the community and the schools.”

Increased teacher diversity benefits Caucasian students, too. “Having teachers of color in the classroom helps dispel some myths and stereotypes that tend to become a dominant narrative about people of color,” adds Brent. “And they are able to talk about sensitive subjects with Caucasian students who may have little exposure to different cultural realities outside of the classroom.”

Everyone wins

In La Crosse, people of color make up less than 5 percent of the

teacher force. The Winona School District has no teachers of color, despite a growing minority student population. Brent commends both districts for working to improve teacher diversity, something she feels will change lives.

The community also benefits by investing in a segment of the population that may feel unappreciated. “Since I’ve been here, there has been some racial strife in the La Crosse community,” notes Brent. “When community members learn that there are organizations, businesses, municipalities who want to see them succeed ... it makes them feel that people want them to be here. And that has a significant impact.”

Touching lives

Brent earned a Ph.D. from UW-Madison, where she studied Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis on multicultural education. She serves on the La Crosse Area Martin Luther King Jr. Committee and the board for The Pump House Regional Arts Center. She is also co-advisor for ALANA, the multicultural student organization supporting Asian, Latina, African and Native American women.

Though she enjoys an occasional good book, Brent spends most of her time around students. “I enjoy working with students because they are socially conscious; they are eager about learning and being change agents in their respective fields.”

The impact she’s making on the future workforce reflects her philosophy on education. “I think it is the responsibility of our generation to successfully educate students in the K-12 classroom. It is our responsibility to ensure that they learn not just academic math and reading skills, but also learn about their own cultural history. It is partly our responsibility to ensure that we guide them, so that they can carry that torch to the (next) generation. We have the power to create the world we want to see, and it starts with education.” **crw**

Westby-based writer Leah Call appreciates Dr. Brent’s commitment to education and increasing teacher diversity.

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A Center That Can Hold

Laurie Kessler builds up kids and community in Holmen.

BY SUSAN T. HESSEL

Contributed photos



An artist's rendering of the proposed Holmen Area Community Center, courtesy of Identity Works, Inc.

Laurie Kessler has found her niche as a high school guidance counselor, but her devotion to kids and community doesn't stop there. Kessler is also spearheading a campaign to build the Holmen Area Community Center, drawing together the young people she serves and the greater community.

"My passion is in helping kids find the skills within them and using those skills to move forward," she says. "Most kids have so many gifts that they don't recognize. I want to help them find their skills and use them to live a happy, successful life." And during her 30-plus years as a Holmen High School guidance counselor, she has helped numerous students see possibilities and hope.

Kids in need

Ten years ago, Kessler was surprised by the prevalence of depression among her high school students. That realization came after she met with students following the deaths of two classmates—one from suicide and the other by a drunken driver.

School officials wanted to learn more, and they invited students suffering from depression or knowing someone who was to a special discussion session during homeroom one day. Maybe, officials thought, 20 students would show up. Instead, nearly 300 young people came.

"And that was when we only had 800 kids," Kessler says of the

school that now has nearly 1,200 students.

Kessler has worked diligently to address their needs. For example, she runs a grief group at the school, open to any student who has had lost a parent or sibling. "It's been quite a privilege to meet with them," she says. "They support each other when they go through trauma, providing comfort to each other."

Building on experience

Clearly, the needs of young people are more complicated today than when Kessler started her career. It's a reason she has collaborated with others to get a youth center in the Holmen area. The need for a safe, supportive recreational space is especially acute after school, before parents get home. Onalaska and La Crosse have the YMCA and Boys & Girls Clubs, but Holmen, one of the fastest-growing cities in the state, had nothing.

Kessler and others from the school's parents' committee created the Holmen Area Partnership for Youth, which was committed to building a youth center. For four years, Holmen Lutheran Church provided its lower level as a gathering place two nights a week with programming from the Boys & Girls Clubs. Club officials eventually ended the program because the facility could not accommodate the more than 100 students who attended each night.

Kessler toured all sorts of buildings, spoke to groups and talked



Laurie Kessler, right, hands a diploma to 2015 Holmen High School graduate Hannah Powell.

with everyone she could think of about a new location. Dean McHugh, a former student of hers, suggested she speak with his father, Dan McHugh of McHugh Excavation, who agreed to join the effort. Also joining the leadership group was Mary Lin Wershofen, a retired La Crosse elementary school principal living in the Holmen area.

Connecting kids and community

The concept expanded from a youth center to a 22,000-square-foot intergenerational community center with space for families and older people as well as youth. So far, about half of the funds for the center have been raised through an ongoing capital campaign.

Many other volunteers and organizations are working with Holmen to provide services at the building that will be constructed on a site donated by St. Elizabeth Catholic Church, with the help of the Town of Holland Board.

"This will fulfill many needs in the community," Kessler says, not the least of which is an opportunity for youth and older generations to build relationships.

Kessler has experienced these benefits firsthand, having grown up with strong support from her extended family, all of whom live in the Bloomington, Wisconsin, area. "I've always been grateful for that and recognize the importance that places in kids lives," she says. "Many kids don't have that."

In June, Kessler will retire from Holmen High School and will take a coordinator position at Viterbo University's School of Education. Before then, she will have one last opportunity to pose with seniors for their official graduation photos. In most schools, that photo is taken with Board of Education members. But Holmen students asked for their counselors to be in that photo.

"It's a nice tradition," Kessler says. "We do get to know them and are engaged with them."

And Kessler, who remains deeply committed to the young people of Holmen and its community center, is living proof of that. **(crw)**

Susan T. Hessel is a personal historian and writer who loves to write stories about those who work to build stronger communities.

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A Personal Touch

Touch of Class celebrates 40 years of client and community care.

BY ANASTASIA MERCER

Contributed photos

Kim Pretasky, owner of Touch of Class at 312 Main St. in downtown La Crosse, says the more she knows about clients, the more her “trips to market” result in specific selections for patrons who frequent her business.

She wants them to talk about favorite colors and styles, as well as the kind of gifts they want to purchase for others, so she can be on the lookout when she shops the trends in New York, Chicago and Las Vegas.

The more you know about a person, the more you get a pulse on what they might want to buy. And Pretasky’s staff, who understand her vision and are critical to her success, will even call clients to let them know when she has acquired something they might like.

Caring for community

Touch of Class got its start in 1976 with Pretasky’s mother, Linda Goodwin, and her aunt, Betsy Goodnough. It celebrates its 40th anniversary this year; Pretasky has owned it since 2000.

Crucial to its longevity is constant evolution, the relationships developed and involvement in community events like Artspire, which Pretasky enjoys because it brings generations together to celebrate all types of art. She also

supports fundraisers like Go Red to help prevent heart disease and stroke, and Steppin’ Out in Pink for breast cancer prevention.

“That’s just part of being a small-business owner,” she says. “You need to care what happens in your community.”

Pretasky says some business owners fear competition from suburban shopping malls, but she evolved her business in order to thrive. People crave unique items with local flair, and she offers that by adding fine jewelers like Gurhan who offer heirloom pieces and by featuring enough gifts and home accessories to include a bridal registry.

“A healthy downtown is good for everyone,” she says, “It’s the heartbeat of your town. It’s the personality of your town.”

Always something new

Pretasky especially loves shopping for clothes to sell in the store, and they’re beautifully displayed against the wood molding she found hidden when she bought the building and moved there in 2003. Trips begin with longtime vendors, but she also visits new ones to include fresh items in the mix.

“There’s always a gamble every season,” she

says. “People do like to see new things.”

Window displays change weekly to keep people interested and to help them see how outfits will look. Even if you can’t embrace a new color or let go of a previous trend, Pretasky’s stylists will help you stay fashionable. Bargain shoppers are directed to the second-floor balcony, where items are priced for clearance.

“If you love your skinny jeans, wear them,” she says. “We can help fashion them to keep you current and liking the way you look.”

Getting to know customers remains a priority for Pretasky, who keeps in close contact through a newsletter, webpage, Facebook page and Shopgirl Obsessions blog. She says ongoing friendships develop over time, and she often serves multiple generations. An Internet presence is key to shopping today, as customers check out the web page, www.touchofclasslacrosse.com, before visiting. Orders can also be made there.

“You can still shop local and shop online,” she adds. **(crw)**

Anastasia Penchi is a longtime Coulee Region writer and graduate of UW-La Crosse. She lives in Genoa with her family.

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Lynn Sturm and her husband, Brad, help raise awareness of Type 1 diabetes at the JDRF winter gala.

TYPE 1 TO TYPE NONE

**Lynn Sturm is on the front lines
in the battle against Type 1
diabetes.**

BY ELIZABETH D. LIPPMAN
Contributed photos

As a former RN in Gundersen Health System's pediatric neonatal intensive care unit, Lynn Sturm knows how quickly Type 1 diabetes (T1D) can change a life—and a family. She has cared for patients newly diagnosed, some only 3 months old, as well as those whose typically well-managed blood sugar numbers surged to life-threatening levels. She will never forget, she says, seeing a child die from Type 1 diabetes. But Sturm encountered the disease in yet another way when she, about 10 years ago and in her late 40s, received her own T1D diagnosis, latent autoimmune diabetes of the adult.

What is T1D?

T1D, formerly known as juvenile diabetes, is most often recognized in children and young adults, and there is no known cure. Unlike the more common Type 2 diabetes, in which the body becomes resistant to insulin, T1D occurs when the pancreas produces little or no insulin. This prevents glucose, a sugar, from entering cells and producing energy. Though scientists do not fully understand the cause, genetics may play a role, and exposure to environmental factors such as certain viruses could be a trigger.

Warning signs include sudden weight loss, extreme thirst, frequent urination, drowsiness or lethargy, increased appetite, vision changes, sugar

in urine, fruity odor on breath, heavy or labored breathing or even stupor or unconsciousness. They can occur suddenly, and they can mimic the flu. Long-term effects can include heart and blood vessel disease, neuropathy, kidney damage and shortened life.

Not just for kids

Before her T1D diagnosis, Sturm struggled to manage what she thought was Type 2 diabetes, despite her best efforts to eat healthy foods, exercise and take her medication. Finally, blood work revealed the presence of antibodies that indicated Type 1. "This was actually a relief for me," she says, "as it helped me understand that I had not failed to control my Type 2 diabetes but that it was not something I could control, and I needed to start insulin."

"If Type 1 diabetes is controlled, potential long-term complications are greatly reduced, and people can live a long, healthy life," says Merri Jo Guggenbuehl, a diabetes educator at Mayo Clinic Health System.

A new normal

Despite advances in treatment, and especially with her new diagnosis, Sturm understands—like so many others confronting T1D—that managing it is anything but easy. "Type 1 diabetes needs to



Merri Jo Guggenbuehl, diabetes educator, Mayo Clinic Health System

be managed all day, every day,” Sturm says. “Checking blood sugar levels many times throughout the day and night, counting carbohydrate intake of whatever food is eaten and adjusting insulin doses become a daily way of life for a person with Type 1 diabetes.”

And common factors such as stress, hormonal changes, periods of growth, physical activity, medication, illness, infection and fatigue can make blood sugar levels even more difficult to control.

This can be particularly challenging for children, a reality that continues to motivate Sturm. Now retired from

nursing, she is focusing her passion for helping those affected by T1D on raising awareness and funding in the region.

“I will always remember watching a 3-year-old that was at a friend’s home playing with the family pet and getting her insulin pump tubing wrapped around both her and the pet. It was at that moment that I knew we needed to find a cure for the children who are tied to their insulin pumps,” she says, “to free them of this burden that children, or anyone for that matter, should not have to endure.”

The quest for a cure

Of the more than 25 million Americans with diabetes, an estimated 5 to 10 percent have T1D, with many diagnosed between the ages of 4 and 7, and 10 and 14.

“There is nothing a person can do to prevent Type 1 diabetes, and it is not related to lifestyle,” Sturm affirms.

Sturm serves as a co-chair of the La Crosse area Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation (JDRF). She helps organize an annual walk and winter gala as well as a national bike ride that brings more than 400 riders from across the nation to the La Crosse area. She is also intent upon increasing efforts for mentoring and support for families dealing with T1D. JDRF supports ongoing efforts to find a cure for T1D by having raised more than \$1.5 billion since its founding in 1970, with more than 80 percent of funds raised going directly to research.

“It was JDRF-funded research that led to the insulin pump that so many people with Type 1 diabetes wear today,” Sturm says. “The two most promising and timely medical advances are the artificial pancreas, coming to market in 2017, and even more promising, recent successes and results from cell encapsulation—which could be the cure!”

The artificial pancreas system, Sturm says, will react to rising blood sugar levels by combining monitoring technology with the insulin pump to provide the right amount of insulin at the right time. Cell encapsulation is where new beta cells are created and wrapped in a permeable, protective barrier and then implanted in the body. The new beta cells release insulin when needed, while the barrier protects them from being destroyed by the autoimmune attack.

“We are so thankful for this overwhelming support and want the community to know that these efforts are making a difference,” Sturm says. “We will reach our goal of turning Type 1 into Type NONE.” *(crw)*

Elizabeth Lippman is a freelance writer and editor in Winona, Minnesota.



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REAL GIRLS RUN

Northside Elementary girls gather to learn life skills and healthy habits.

BY BETTY CHRISTIANSEN
Contributed photos

On an April afternoon, a roomful of fourth-grade girls gathers at Northside Elementary in La Crosse, running gear on and ears open to Regan Mueller, who is reading them a story about the young Afghan heroine Malala Yousafzai. They have been meeting since early March under the leadership of Mueller, Northside Elementary teacher Jasmine Valentine, Coulee Montessori teacher Sara Jorgensen and Root Down Yoga Studio owner Mandy Roush. With the guidance of these “coaches,” the girls have explored topics such as friendship, compassion and the power of story; they have learned yoga and self-defense; and they have trained for their first 5K run.

A community of girls

Mueller, a North Side mother of four with a big heart for all children, came up with the idea for REAL Girls—REAL meaning



From left, REAL Girls coaches Jasmine Valentine, Mandy Roush, Regan Mueller and Sara Jorgensen.

Raising & Empowering Authentic Leaders—knowing the challenges all girls face in terms of positive thinking and healthy lifestyles. Over the course of 10 weeks, 32 fourth-grade girls gathered twice a week with their coaches to learn about positive habits and to begin training for the 5K event in the Festival Foods Grandad Half Marathon on May 7. A mix of Northside Elementary and Coulee Montessori

students, the girls bonded as they pushed themselves through the aches and pains of running and the beliefs of their own limitations.

“We have formed a community of girls that are supportive of each other, physically and emotionally,” says Valentine. “These young ladies have been vulnerable to each other. Every single time, one of them stepped up and helped another out. That is what this program is about.”

“When we first began this journey, the girls were bursting with a giddy, excited energy,” adds Jorgensen. “As we’ve come into our final week of practice, (that energy) is now focused and backed by a driving force of determination.” This determination has impressed not only the coaches but also the girls themselves.

“When we run the 5K, I know it will be tiring, but I will push myself and others so they can do their best too,” says one girl. “We encourage and help each other,” says another. “I remember a time my friend had trouble, and we cheered her on.”



Girls collaborate on a writing project at a REAL Girls gathering.

“We learn important things about ourselves,” says another REAL Girl. “It teaches us to push our limits.”

Roush has witnessed this firsthand. “Our minds are powerful in telling us what we can and can’t do,” she says, “and I think we’ve really helped these girls realize their own potential and doubt their doubts.”

“It means everything”

In addition to running, the camaraderie and reliability the group offers have made a big impression on the participants. “I love REAL Girls because you can really express yourself and meet new friends,” says one girl. Another discovered that “whenever I go there after school, all of my stress disappears.” And many participants simply say: “It means everything to me.”

REAL Girls shows no signs of slowing down. “We’re expanding to third through fifth grades next year,” says Mueller of the group that, like the girls themselves, just can’t be stopped. “There’s kind of a magic to this and a momentum,” she adds. “I can see this going on, and I can see other schools doing this.” 

Betty Christiansen is editor of Coulee Region Women, and she found it a joy to spend an afternoon with REAL Girls.

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Student shows like Joseph & the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat light up the stage at the Heider Center.

Setting the Stage

Fine arts thrive at the Marie Heider Center in West Salem.

BY MARTHA KEEFFE
Contributed photos

Where I grew up, going to the theater meant going to the movies. Or it meant a field trip to the city to attend a professional production of Shakespeare with your classmates, most of whom were more interested in getting out of town than in getting something out of *Macbeth*. For others, the gymnasium served as the theater, where rows of folding chairs faced a stage that doubled as additional practice space for the wrestling team. Therefore, instead of enjoying an air of sophistication, the gym-theater combination smelled faintly of athletic gear and sweat. Visibility to the stage was contingent upon avoiding tall people—especially those with big hair—and if you found that you weren't particularly interested in the show, you were guaranteed to be entertained by watching one of the student actors trying to unwind himself from within the folds of the bulky velvet curtains that flanked the set.

But despite the flaws, the show went on.

To people who are committed to sharing their passion for the theater and the fine arts, simply making do is not an option. Instead, providing a venue that captures the overall theatrical experience for the cast, crew and audience is imperative.

A home for the arts

In West Salem, the Marie Heider Center for the Arts is a product of that level of enthusiasm. Begun as dream to build a fine arts center that would increase local interest in the arts, a core group of community members from the West Salem area, known as Forward West Salem, dedicated their time to promoting the need for such a space.

At the same time, West Salem native Marie Heider, a lifetime educator volunteer in the school system, created a charitable trust that, according to the Heider Center website, gave authority to the West Salem School District to use 100 percent of the trust "to construct an auditorium or, alternatively, to provide furnishings or other accessories for said auditorium."

Thanks to Heider's generosity and high regard for the arts, the 650-person-capacity Heider Center became a reality and opened in March 2004, not just as a benefit to the community, but as an integral part of the West Salem School District's theater and fine arts programs. Built as an addition to the 40-year-old high school,

the Heider Center is actually owned and operated by the West Salem School District, which utilizes the facility 11 months out of the year.

A top-notch facility

Amy Hanson, Director of Vocal Music and Drama at West Salem High School, particularly appreciates the attention that was given to creating a top-notch facility. Technical details such as an up-to-date sound and lighting equipment and the ability to fly (or hoist) backdrops and set props in and out of the main stage area give the production crew the flexibility to execute smooth scene transitions and ambitious special effects. In addition, an orchestra pit, dance studio and sound shell provide enhanced performance and rehearsal space, which serves to showcase the talents of the performers.

K-12 performances, the school district makes good use of this exchange, often calling on Heerts, who Hanson says “graciously gives of his time and talents to run lights and sound for many of these school events.” Two theater courses are offered to high school students, and Heerts mentors students who show an aptitude for the technical aspects of putting on a show. “Some of these kids have gone on to make a career of lighting and audio design, and it’s rewarding to know that the hands-on experience they received here inspired them enough to give it a go,” says Heerts.

A varied playbill

Additionally, Heerts is responsible for booking 10 to 12 touring shows per year, four of which serve educational purposes. “Once a year I attend the Midwest Arts Conference, where I network with hundreds of artists

areas outside the Coulee Region and even Canada. “I think people are surprised to find quality programming in a standout theater that’s budget friendly,” says Heerts, and admits that he shares a passion with ticket buyers for tribute bands. “I’m a sucker for them,” he says. “Neil Diamond, John Denver ... The Nelson Twins. They all seem to sell out.”

“The greatest gift”

And when you have a sold-out show, it’s nice to offer your audience a place that’s comfortable and inviting. “The community used to sit on folding chairs, and during the summer musicals, barn fans were used to keep the audience cool,” says Hanson, recalling the subpar accommodations 12 years ago. “This facility is truly one of the greatest gifts given to the students and community of West Salem.”



Left: The Salem Singers show choir takes the stage at the Heider Center. Right: Behind-the-scenes technical details ensure smooth operation of shows and give students experience working on a production crew.

“Our fine arts programs as a whole have grown tremendously by the addition of this beautiful facility,” says Hanson, who in her 16 years of teaching in West Salem has seen the theater offerings increase from three major performances per year to a year-round lineup of plays, musicals and camps. “Our students get to perform in a state-of-the-art facility that other students can only dream of,” she says.

In addition, a partnership was created between the Heider Board and the school district, which allows the Heider Board to use the facility rent-free in exchange for the technical assistance of the Art Center Director, Dan Heerts. Among a diverse schedule of

and management and basically shop for the shows that I think have broad community appeal,” says Heerts. “I also search for educational programming, like the musical drama *Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad*, that ties into subjects the area schools are touching on.” From there, Heerts narrows his choices to approximately 30 to 40 shows, which he and the Programming Committee whittle down to eight main stage features and four children’s programs. Historically, sales have shown that musicals, a cappella groups and shows that contain nostalgic value are popular genres among season ticket holders, not only attracting local audiences but bringing in guests from

In addition to theater, the fine arts include the handiwork of artists who interpret the world through their paintings, drawings and sculptures. At the Heider Center, The Gallery was designed to display juried artwork from local, regional and student artists, painters and sculptors. For further information on shows and artists, visit www.heidercenter.org. 

Martha Keffe lives and writes in La Crosse. As a supporter of the arts, she encourages everyone to take in a performance at the Heider Center. Though you probably won’t witness anyone getting caught in the curtains, you’re guaranteed a great seat to a great show!

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Sustainably Beautiful

Bobbi and Ed Walsh's La Crescent home sets an example for beautiful, eco-friendly design.

BY JULIE NELSON

Photos by Megan McCluskey, Atypik Studio

Sometimes when you live in a big city, say, a suburb of Chicago, and then you move to the Coulee Region, you appreciate its natural beauty just a little bit more than you would if you had grown up here. That's the case with Bobbi and Ed Walsh.

Bobbi grew up in Iowa and ended up with her husband in Wheaton, Illinois. After years of visiting old high school friends who had settled in the La Crescent area, the Walshes decided they would retire in this neck of the woods. Twenty years ago, they purchased property in a coulee not too far from Pine Creek Golf Course. As time went on and retirement became closer, the Walshes realized two things: They wanted to be able to enjoy the natural beauty of their property while they were inside their house, and they wanted any construction they did to have as little impact on the environment as possible.

Beauty from the outside in

Today, Bobbi is sitting in her kitchen, looking out three walls of windows. The kitchen is an open area with high ceilings that encompasses the dining room, living room and all those windows, creating the feeling of being outdoors when you are in. If the weather

is nice, Bobbi opens the windows—which look like sliding glass doors but actually fold up accordion style—pulls the screens and enjoys the gentle breeze. “This is the first summer we are able to have the windows open,” says Bobbi, “when we moved in last summer, there was still so much dust from the construction we had to keep them closed.”

Bobbi and Ed had lots of time to plan their retirement home, which turned out to have multiple benefits. For starters, they realized they didn't need a guest bedroom for each of their adult children and their families, which means their house now is a lot smaller (and easier to take care of) than the one they first imagined. They also thought more about a design that will allow them to live there for years to come. Wide walkways and doorways can allow for walkers or wheelchairs, open showers have nothing that needs to be stepped over and the essential living space is all on the main floor.

Sustainability behind the scenes

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of their living arrangement, though, is all that went on behind the scenes. The wood for the house,



The airy interior of Bobbi Walsh's home invites the outdoors in. Bobbi (top center) and her husband designed their dream home with maximum energy efficiency in mind.

the flooring and most of the cabinets comes from the trees on their 347-acre property. The Walshes hired a horse logger, which does less damage to the land than big equipment, to bring the trees in. The trees were rough-milled on site and then taken to an Amish establishment in Grainger, where they were kiln-dried for a year and finally milled for use. When Bobbi wanted maple for their flooring, they traded their abundance of black walnut with someone a bit farther north who had plenty of maple.

Using sustainable practices while building and creating an eco-friendly final product was enormously important to Ed and Bobbi. They used local contractors, architects and suppliers as much as possible. They registered with the Minnesota GreenStar program and built their home with triple-paned windows, low-flow toilets, geothermal heating, nontoxic and odorless paints, LED lighting, extra insulation and a solar panel that generates more power than they can use. Bobbi says that while some of these items are more expensive at the outset, they are an investment in the future. Even the crushed asphalt in the gravel driveway helps retain the sun's heat and helps the snow melt more quickly. Every modification they made helps

reduce their energy costs, makes minimal impact on the environment and/or has the potential to benefit their health.

"We just feel that with climate change, we keep losing part of our environment," says Bobbi. "Certainly this area has resources that need protecting. We wanted to build something as an example. This home is not ugly; an energy-efficient home doesn't have to be a house with no windows." She says that when the Minnesota GreenStar inspectors came, they awarded the home the gold level and said theirs was the tightest home the inspectors had ever tested. Bobbi adds that the house includes an air exchanger, so they are assured of getting fresh air into the house.

Thinking green

Bobbi admits she and Ed didn't have all these great ideas themselves. They first got thinking about aging in their home and sustainability when their youngest son, who lives in California, became an architect. The son, Michael, also introduced the idea of the open spaces in the house that take advantage of the views. Builders Marty and Tony Kirchner suggested a few tweaks as well, including a storage space in the basement that has become an ideal spot for the grandkids to

test out their scooters.

When construction got under way, they all quickly discovered it was too difficult to work with an architect in California. So they brought on local architect Debra Kees, who Bobbi says had a good eye and solid understanding of sustainable building practices.

Now Bobbi has her "dream" kitchen, lots of room for visiting grandchildren to play in and a comfortable, modern home that still has sinks, cupboards and other fixtures that are reminiscent of the farmhouse that was originally on the site. She says one of her favorite features of the house is the "smart" component that allows her to turn off all the lights in the house at once, from her bedroom, using her phone.

While the house has lots of great features that make everyday living a joy, the Walshes say the best part is the home's sustainability. "I think we owe it to each other and to the future to make as little impact as possible," says Bobbi. "We don't want to lose what we have." *(crw)*

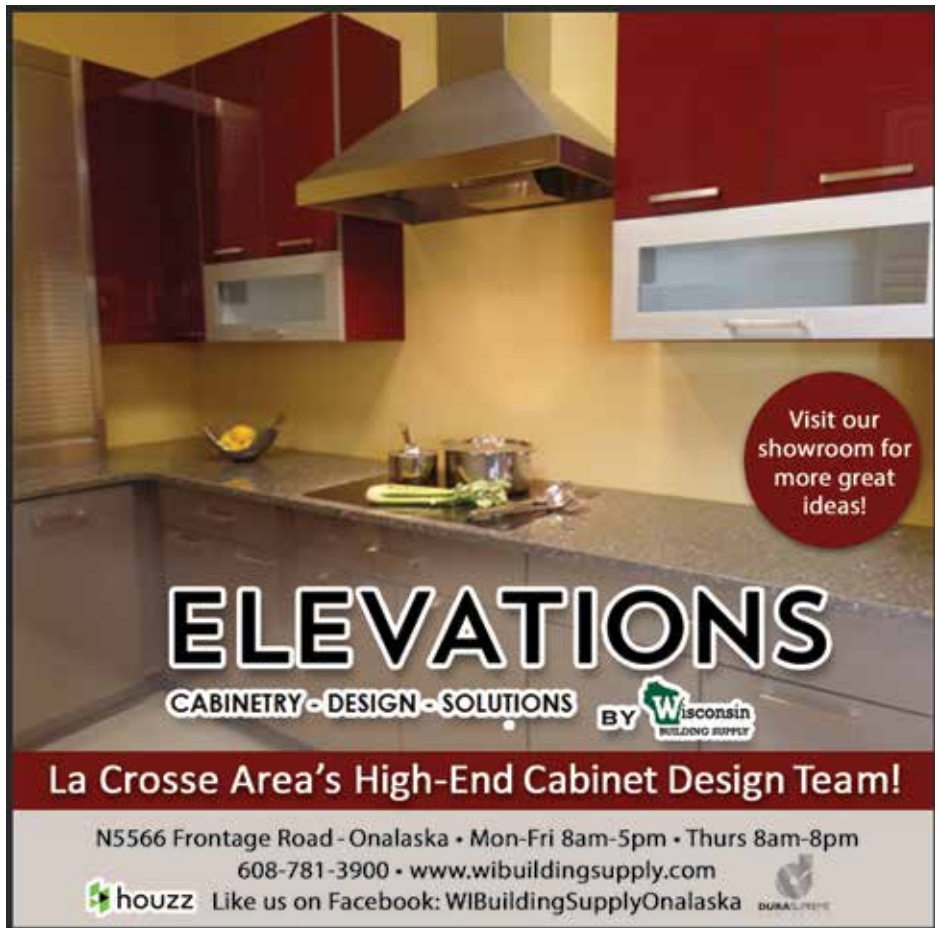
Even though Julie Nelson has done a lot of bicycling around La Crescent, she was not interested in tackling the gravel roads and driveway that lead to the Walsh home.



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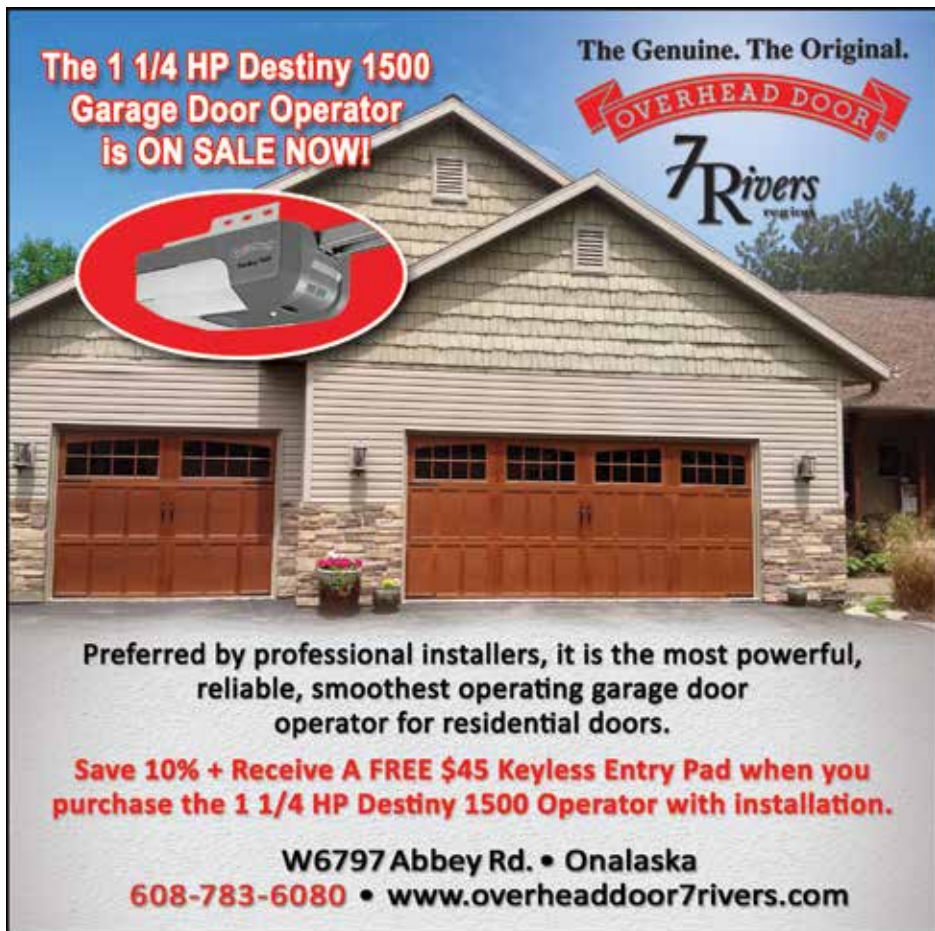
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A Garden ON STERIODS

The Community Food Forest brings a new concept to La Crosse.

BY JULIE NELSON

Contributed photos



Left: A snowy March day marked the groundbreaking of the Community Food Forest. Right: An artist's rendering of the completed forest.

Alleviating hunger—sure, that's one goal of the new food forest being built behind the La Crosse YMCA, but Jill Miller says it's really “alleviating hunger, plus, plus, plus, plus.”

Miller is the Pioneering Healthier Communities Coordinator at the YMCA, and she is bringing together a variety of different groups and people in the community interested in the concept of food forests.



Jill Miller, Pioneering Healthier Communities Coordinator, YMCA-La Crosse

Foraging the forest

A food forest is a cross between a good, old-fashioned garden and the type of naturally occurring plant growth in a wooded area. Most plants growing are edible, but unlike foods commonly grown in a garden, these plants include more perennials and are designed to be self-sustaining; that is, barring a huge drought or glut of rain, they will take care of themselves.

A food forest could consume several acres, or it could be as small as a 3-by-3-foot space in your backyard. The Community Food Forest at the YMCA will use 8,000 square

feet on the west side of the YMCA. First to be planted will be fungi and groundcover plants such as wild strawberry and creeping thyme. Next come vines such as peas, squash and cucumbers and an herbaceous layer of dill, chives and asparagus. The project finishes with shrubs (blackberry, raspberry), small trees (apples, cherries, plums) and a canopy layer of trees such as oak, hickory and chestnut.

Opening this summer, the food forest is designed to benefit the community in a variety of ways. The food produced will be used to help reduce hunger, but it will also be used in cooking classes for people with serious health problems and for anyone interested in healthy eating.

The growing techniques will serve as a model for those who like the idea of being more self-sufficient and knowing where their food comes from. The food forest will be a living example of what's possible, and the community partners involved will offer a number of classes on how to do it yourself—on a big or very small scale.

A community space

Because being in nature can have a calming effect on people, some have expressed interest in using the food forest for its therapeutic value.



Left: Jill Miller digs in at the groundbreaking of the Community Food Forest at the YMCA-La Crosse in March. Right: Now, landscaping is well under way for an attractive, inviting garden.

As a space filled with plants along a busy street, the Community Food Forest will help clean the air and can be instrumental in helping to revitalize La Crosse's neighborhoods. The walking trails through the forest will encourage neighbors to go out for a stroll and can facilitate conversation and general neighborliness.

Every piece of the forest is being designed so that it can be easily mimicked, says Miller. Cancer centers might create a similar area for the therapeutic aspects, neighborhood associations could use the concept as a way to strengthen neighborhoods and individuals could learn to grow more of their own food at home without being overwhelmed by the process.

Groundbreaking for the Community Food Forest at the YMCA took place this spring, and a company called Coulee Region Ecoscapes has been hired to do the planting. Though it will be a couple of years before the canopy trees are established, the smaller plants will be in full bloom this summer.

Miller says the new food forest is bringing out so many potential partners from the community that they are keeping the program as fluid as possible. She says the YMCA's website, www.laxymca.org, will be the go-to place for information about volunteer opportunities and food- and garden-related classes. You can enjoy the (literal) fruits of the food forest with the recipes below. **(crw)**

ECHINACEA TEA

Coulee Region Ecoscapes

- 4 parts dried (or fresh) echinacea parts: leaves, flowers, roots
- 1 part lemongrass
- 1 part spearmint leaves (or to taste)
- Boiling water to fill 1 cup or mug
- Honey to taste

Mix herbs and brew at the first sign of cold or flu, using one tablespoon per tea ball or reusable tea bag. Pour boiling water over tea bag into cup and let steep for a minute or two. Add honey to taste.

ARONIA AND CHERRY SYRUP

Hillview Urban Agriculture Center

- 1 cup aronia berries
- 1 cup tart cherries (or blueberries)
- Sugar, maple syrup or honey to taste

Combine aronia berries and cherries in a saucepan and cook down while stirring over medium heat. Add sweetener to taste. Enjoy over cream cheese and crepes.



ARONIA BERRY PUREE

Coulee Region Ecoscapes

- 3½ cups aronia berry puree (see below)
- 1½ cups water
- 2 T lemon juice
- 1 package pectin
- 4 cups sugar

To puree the berries, put them into a blender or food processor. Process until you have a fairly homogeneous mixture, but leave some larger pieces.

Combine the pectin with ½ cup of the sugar. Heat the pureed aronia berries, water, lemon juice and pectin-sugar mixture until it reaches a full rolling boil.

Add the rest of the sugar and bring it back to a full rolling boil. Boil for two minutes, and then pack into clean jars.

Process the jars in a boiling water bath for 10 minutes. (For instructions, see UW-Extension publication B2909, *Making Jams, Jellies & Fruit Preserves*, downloadable from learningstore.uwex.edu.) Cool on your counter.

GARLICKY FIDDLEHEAD FERNS

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- ½ pound of fiddlehead ferns
- 3 garlic cloves, peeled and finely minced
- 2 T (or more) fresh herbs (basil, parsley, thyme, lovage)

Combination of olive oil and butter or ghee, olive oil and lard, or your choice of oil/fat

Salt and pepper to taste

Wash the fiddleheads. Remove any fuzz found in the “curl” of the fiddlehead (easily done by running a finger through the curl or simply rinsing with plenty of water). Let dry (you can use a salad spinner).

In a large skillet, heat the oil/fat until hot and add the fiddleheads and garlic cloves. Cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until the fiddleheads are soft with just a hint of crispness left to them. Their flavor is not as good when undercooked.

In the last minute or two, add the herbs, salt and pepper to taste, and serve while hot.

Julie Nelson likes the idea of walking through the food forest and picking an apple—though it does make her think of a certain scene in The Wizard of Oz. She is the public relations coordinator for The Salvation Army.



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Whatever the process or sweetness level you prefer, this summer, remember rosé!

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Photo by Jordana Snyder Photography.
Photo taken at the Weber Center for the Performing Arts.

CUBA'S DOOR TO THE FUTURE

An American tourist finds the welcome mat
out at a historic moment.

BY SUSAN C. SCHUYLER

Photos by Susan C. Schuyler



A classic American car serves as a taxi in Cienfuegos.

Cuba is among the world's few remaining frontiers, and I—like thousands of Americans rushing to explore it—wanted to see it before we ruin it.

“For better or worse, Cuba’s isolation has resulted in a unique Cuban character, which is largely what many Americans want to experience before Cuba becomes like any other Caribbean country,” says Amanda Mattingly in her recent *World Policy Journal* article.

After 50 years of political and economic isolation, the island has flung open its door to welcome change, and I was eager to cross its threshold.

Land of contrast

On the surface, I saw a decaying amalgam of Cuba’s checkered past, trapped in a tropical time capsule that holds reminders of the nation’s many benefactors: Spanish Colonial architecture from Spain’s 18th-century occupation in Havana’s old city; classic American cars from Cuba’s time as Miami’s playground in the 1950s; fading images of revolutionary heroes and slogans marking the 1959 revolution on its molting walls; and austere, monolithic structures inspired by the Soviets in the 1970s loom around its city’s central squares.

In contrast, there was also a brand-new feeling of hope and excitement among the Cubans I met that brightened the crumbling façades. For me, the “open door” metaphor is literal. Cubans meet, laugh and play in their doorways—outside, doors open, for all to see.

Getting there

As one of nearly 400 American passengers aboard the 1,200-passenger *Celestial Crystal*, a Canadian ship, I paid \$95 to the People to People (P2P) Partnership fund for a required confirmation letter, plus an additional \$400 P2P-excursion fee to the cruise line for what the letter called a “full schedule of educational exchange activities.” These cumbersome requirements are thanks to the U.S.

trade embargo against Cuba, which the U.S. Department of the Treasury instituted on July 8, 1963, according to the March 16, 2016, *Federal Register*.

The original regulations required that American tourists could visit Cuba only under 12 authorized categories. P2P travel, which falls under the educational category, allows Americans to visit Cuba only when accompanied by an authorized tour operator who offers the full schedule of activities, according to the Treasury Department’s website.

During our seven-day cruise to four Cuban ports, the schedule was indeed full. The P2P schedule included lectures on Cuban history, art and culture; classes to learn Cuban dance, language and cooking; and guided tours in each port city. Our tour operators were two professors from the University of Havana, and our tour guides had completed the Cuban government’s required training program.

Tours by the numbers

Our guides’ tours often were orchestrated to include government-approved monuments and museums, with frequent references to Cuba’s communist heroes, Fidel Castro, Ernesto “Che” Guevara and José Martí. Free time to explore on our own was brief and infrequent.

Instead, we scurried to follow the numbered lollipop signs the guides waved above their heads as they herded us through throngs of tourists swarming the streets until we were counted and safely stowed in tour buses once again.

Soon, American tourists will have a different experience. Just after President Barack Obama’s historic announcement of negotiations to restore diplomatic relations between the two nations on December 14, 2015, the embargo regulations eased tourism restrictions in March of this year. Americans may now travel to



Clockwise from left: Kids peek through a classroom doorway in Havana. Patrons gather at El Palatino, a popular bar along the city square in Cienfuegos. You can hear music on every corner in Havana. The fading image of communist hero Ernesto "Che" Guevara remains on a Havana wall. A fishing village nestles on the coast near Cienfuegos.

Cuba as individuals, although they still must prove engagement in educational programs.

Hope springs eternal

Even the possibility that the embargo might eventually be lifted gives Cubans hope. Despite the damage the U.S. embargo has wrought to their economy, Cubans are optimistic about change. In a March 2015 Pew Research Center survey published in *The Washington Post*, 64 percent of Cubans said normalizing relations with the United States would change Cuba's economic system.

Large "welcome" posters featuring the likenesses of Obama and Cuba's president, Raúl Castro, were still evident when I arrived in Havana, just days after Obama's March 2016 visit—the first visit by a U.S. president since 1928.

When Cubans I met realized that I spoke Spanish fluently, they enthusiastically shared impressions of Obama's visit and openly discussed Cuba's economic and political flaws. A man sitting with his family at a popular bar, El Palatino in Cienfuegos, was critical of Castro, but said in Spanish, "Obama is Cuba's savior."

According to retired Cuban diplomat Carlos Alzugaray, quoted in the *World Policy Journal* article mentioned earlier, "If Obama could be president in Cuba, he would be elected to succeed Raúl."

Other heroes, old and new

Although American author Ernest Hemingway left Cuba in 1960, a year before he died, he is immortal in Cubans' hearts. The Cuban government wouldn't approve a visit to Finca Vigía, the writer's home near Havana from 1939 to 1960. However, my bicycle-taxi driver paused to tell stories at several of Hemingway's favorite Havana haunts during my one-hour tour. Each stop had large walls covered with photos of "Papa," as Cubans call him.

A soon-to-be released film about Hemingway in Cuba, *Papa*,

was the first American production to be shot on the island since the embargo began, according to *The Guardian*.

Another historic first in Cuba passed as I sailed to Cuba on March 25. The Rolling Stones performed a free concert for 100,000 Cubans in Havana, the island's first concert by an international rock band. According to CNN, leader Mick Jagger told the crowd in Spanish, "The times are changing."

Driving tourism

In Havana, we flagged down a 1959 black-and-white Chevy Impala, one of the many classic American jalopies that serve as shared taxis. Although the cars have become a Cuban cliché, depicted on everything from postcards to shot glasses, they are evidence of Cuban's pride and ingenuity.

As we cruised beneath the stars down the Malecón, Havana's seaside main drag, I noticed that our driver was sitting behind the wheel in a lawn chair without legs, which suspended him above the sagging seat. He explained that replacement parts were difficult to come by, which required unique innovations like his. Also, he said he was proud that Americans are visiting Cuba and asked if more would arrive.

They will—Cuba is a hot destination for Americans. According to official figures in a May 2015 article in *The Guardian*, from 2014 to 2015 there was a stunning 36 percent increase in American visitors.

That number will likely increase given the advent this spring of Carnival's cruises from Miami to Havana and American Airline's plans to begin commercial flights soon, according to *Kiplinger's Personal Finance*.

When they arrive, the door will be open and the light will be on. (crw)

Susan C. Schuyler is a freelance writer and retired UW-La Crosse instructor who hopes to visit Cuba again soon.



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"I have the unique viewpoint of being both a customer and a banker. I can relate to my customers and the situations in which they find themselves," Sarah said.

Knowing All the Possibilities Leads to Success

Sarah says her experience allows her to play devil's advocate for men and women looking to acquire or start a business.

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The vibrant Pearl Street in downtown La Crosse thrives with the support of Downtown Mainstreet, Inc.

The **Heart** of the City

Supportive downtown organizations allow cities to flourish.

BY JESSIE FOSS
Contributed photos

From the gift shop on the corner to the ice cream shop down the street, the downtown areas of America's cities and towns have always been a cornerstone of urban life. It is no different for the three area cities of La Crosse, Viroqua and Winona. All three have active downtown districts that remain the heart of the cities. They all also have organizations that promote and keep pushing these cities forward while still holding on to each one's unique roots.

Investing in downtown

Downtown La Crosse is just steps from the Mississippi River and is one of the largest historic districts in the state. It features nearly 300 buildings that house more than 400 businesses including plentiful entertainment, museums, dining and shopping.

Robin Moses, Executive Director at Downtown Mainstreet, Inc., says downtown La Crosse is experiencing a renaissance right now because of an incredible amount of investment coming into the area. In the past two years, more than 30 new businesses have opened their doors, and countless other businesses have been renovating and expanding.

"We're going to see about \$200 million in private investments

going into downtown over the next few years," Moses says. "When we add up all of that, it's creating a situation where the larger businesses are putting money back in, and that creates confidence. Confidence leads to smaller businesses investing in their buildings."

A strong downtown features three types of businesses: independent (non-chain) restaurants, retail shops and services, Moses says. "If someone wanted to live downtown, they could get everything they needed."

Residential opportunities in downtown La Crosse are something that Downtown Mainstreet, Inc., has been working on improving, Moses says. Currently, new apartments are being built, and neighborhoods bordering downtown are being improved.

"As we strengthen our downtown, there's an increased interest in people living downtown and in adjacent neighborhoods," Moses says.

While residents are critical to a robust downtown, tourists and visitors coming in for short stays are also important. In the near future, downtown La Crosse will be home to nine to 10 hotels.

"Those visitors are looking for restaurants and charming retail shops," Moses says. The fact that new hotels are needed, she says, "paints a really good picture for the future."



Left: Winona Main Street Program is committed to the downtown area being the heart of the community and region: a vibrant hub of commerce, arts and culture, recreation and residential life. Right: Small businesses in downtown Viroqua, like Bluedog Cycles, benefit from the support of Viroqua Chamber Main Street.

More information on downtown La Crosse and Downtown Mainstreet, Inc., can be found at www.lacrossedowntown.com.

Healthy downtown, healthy community

Located on the banks of the Mississippi River and surrounded by bluffs, Winona was once a home to lumber barons and paddle wheelers. While these people may be gone, their mark remains in the historic downtown district through the elaborate cornices and grand stained-glass windows they incorporated into their stately homes.

The city is home to just more than 27,000 people and also features three higher-education institutions, many large businesses and a thriving downtown.

David Bittner, Program Coordinator of the Winona Main Street Program, says the health and vitality of a city's downtown area is telling of the entire city.

"Downtown Winona has always been the heart of our community. It is important for multiple reasons, but the most prominent of those is that it is what visitors use to gauge the health of the entire community. If downtown is doing well, they will want to come back," he says. "Additionally, professionals who are considering a move to Winona may also use downtown to gauge the health of the community."

Winona Main Street Program is a partnership between the city and the Winona Area Chamber of Commerce. The program is committed to the downtown area being the heart of the community and region: a vibrant hub of commerce, arts and culture, recreation and residential life.

Since 2013, downtown Winona has had a net gain of seven new businesses, more than \$5.2 million has been reinvested in downtown property and business owners, and more than 8,000 people have attended Main Street events, Bittner says.

More recently, Winona has become home to many arts organizations that have brought festivals such as Mid West Music Fest, Frozen River Film Festival, Great River Shakespeare Festival and

Minnesota Beethoven Festival to the city. Bittner says these festivals, along with local artists and artisans, bring a unique feel to Winona.

More information on Winona and its Main Street Program can be found at www.winonachamber.com.

Relationships are key

Known for its locally grown, organic food and agricultural history, Viroqua lies in the heart of what is known as the Driftless Region. This rural community is home to just fewer than 5,000 people and a downtown that is listed on the State and National Register of Historic Places. Its downtown businesses range from dining options to art galleries to bike shops.

Nora Roughen-Schmidt, Executive Director of Viroqua Chamber Main Street, says right now only one storefront is vacant in downtown Viroqua, and much of that is due to relationships that are built in the city.

"A thriving downtown with shopping, dining and entertainment is an important element for any community," she says. "Downtown revitalization and our member agencies and relationships have helped to develop, maintain and grow the downtown in Viroqua."

What really sets Viroqua apart from other small communities in Wisconsin, Roughen-Schmidt says, is that the unique community is full of eclectic people and personalities.

"We all share a love for the beauty that is the Driftless region, for the privilege of raising our families here and for the access to local food grown in our community," she says. "Our town is very fortunate to have amazing health care, education and recreation options."

Viroqua is featured on the Viroqua Chamber Main Street website, found at www.viroqua-wisconsin.com/chamber-mainstreet. 

Jessie Foss is a freelance writer who lives just north of downtown La Crosse. She enjoys many of the shops and restaurants the city's downtown area has to offer.

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LANDMARKS OF LA CROSSE

The La Crosse City Vision Foundation helps keep the city beautiful and safe.

BY JUDITH MUNSON
Contributed photos



Icons such as Riverside Park's children statues and Main Street's clock add character and beauty to downtown La Crosse, thanks to La Crosse City Vision Foundation.

Imagine downtown La Crosse without its iconic clock at the end of Main Street or the wistful statues of two young children and their pup greeting steamboats of a bygone era at the levee in Riverside Park. With their charm and a nod to the city's history, these landmarks enhance the experience of resident and visitor alike. But without the La Crosse City Vision Foundation, they might be missing from the downtown's riverfront altogether.

The City Vision Foundation, Inc., is a 501(c)3 nonprofit formed in 1994 to support Downtown Mainstreet, Inc., and its goal of keeping central downtown a thriving business district. City Vision accomplishes this by beautifying the downtown area. The Main Street clock was installed in 2004, and the bronze statues of the children, created by local artist Michael Martino, followed in 2006. The organization's first order of business, however, was to decorate the downtown at Christmas.

Enhancing safety and beauty

The foundation began a fund drive in 1997 to establish an endowment by selling bricks for the Memorial Plaza in Riverside Park.

This effort has helped fund the downtown Christmas decorating and other foundation projects ever since. Its latest project was completed just this spring, and it took the City Vision mission in a new direction—enhancing the safety of downtown by installing security cameras at downtown businesses through the Safe Cam project.

Pat Houlihan, retired from serving as an attorney for the City of La Crosse for 30 years and currently practicing law with Lawyers at Work, has served on the foundation's board of directors for almost 10 years. "We have been a driving force to revitalizing downtown by focusing on how to artistically beautify it," begins Houlihan. "The Safe Cam project has broadened our mission from beautification of the downtown and Riverside Park and Plaza to addressing safety concerns, so the downtown remains a place people want to come to and enjoy."

The City Vision Foundation was motivated to establish the Safe Cam project following the murder of father and son Paul and A. J. Petras at their family-owned downtown photo shop in broad daylight four years ago. The foundation set a goal of raising \$475,000 in order to install 41 cameras in the downtown that would be accessible to the

COMMUNITY



The bricks at the Main Street clock's base illustrate the support of citizens and organizations.

La Crosse Police Department 24/7.

Eleanor St. John, City Vision Foundation Board Member since 2009 and former downtown business owner, explains why these cameras are important to improving safety downtown: "When that terrible crime occurred, it took weeks for the police to piece together footage from several surveillance sources," she says. "It was a much more time-consuming process than it needed to be. These cameras feature the most cutting-edge technology and will save law enforcement critical time in identifying people."

The mere presence of these cameras is expected to serve as a deterrent to crime. Even before installation was complete, they helped solve one. "During the testing phase, one of these cameras was credited with solving a hit-and-run incident," says St. John.

Community investment

St. John praises the community for its swift response to City Vision's fundraising campaign. "It was so gratifying, so touching to see how much support this effort generated," she says. "The Ho-Chunk Nation was our first and largest contributor, and for that we are very grateful."

This project is also earning La Crosse the interest of cities across the Midwest, she says. "We have had several inquiries about how our Safe Cams were funded and how well they are serving the community. We are one of the first communities in this part of the country to take safety to this level."

Always planning new ways to beautify the downtown and make it a memorable place to visit, the City Vision Foundation is considering a number of new projects. Houlihan says one idea under consideration is constructing a Veterans Memorial downtown. "Many communities our size have something to honor local vets by name," he says. "We might partner with the VFW to bring a Veterans Memorial to Riverside Park."

All of City Vision's work is funded by private donations. To learn more about how to support the foundation, go to www.lacrossecityvisionfoundation.org. *(crw)*

Judith Munson is a freelance journalist and memoir writer living in western Wisconsin.

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We are fortunate, in the Coulee Region, to be rich with humming, thriving towns. Whether you live in or near La Crosse, Onalaska, West Salem or Holmen, you're in a place where community members are engaged, amenities abound and business is booming. This is apparent especially in the downtown areas of these communities, all attractive, supportive places where businesses are growing and services are easy to find. Downtown areas are the heart of a community.

What makes a town thrive? In many cases, there's a supportive organization at work, composed of boards and business owners who believe in investing in and building up a downtown area. Organizations like La Crosse's Downtown Mainstreet and City Vision Foundation, Winona Main Street Program and Viroqua Chamber Main Street are such examples. Each group plays an important role in supporting business owners, promoting all its city center has to offer and ensuring its city is a safe and beautiful place, attractive to residents and visitors alike. You can learn more about them all in our stories in this special Community section of *Coulee Region Women*.

Naturally, no town would fare well without the support and pride and commitment of its own residents, and we at *Coulee Region Women* wish to acknowledge you, our readers and devoted community members, for doing all you do to help your community thrive. We seek to celebrate those "change makers"—and make no mistake, you too are a change maker—by telling their stories and, in doing so, fulfill our own mission of connecting you to your community. 



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COMMUNITY CALENDAR

ONGOING EVENTS

American Association of University Women (AAUW) 2nd Sat. of each month (Sept.-May), 9:30 a.m., aauwlacrosse@hotmail.com, aauw-wi.org.

Business Over Breakfast La Crosse Area Chamber of Commerce, 4th Wed. every month, 7:30-8:45 a.m. Preregister 608-784-4807, lacrossechamber.com.

Children's Museum of La Crosse weekly programming: **Save-On-Sundays** \$1 off admission every Sun., noon to 5 p.m.

Mt. LeKid Climbing Wall open every Sat. 11 a.m.-4 p.m. and Sun. 12-4 p.m.

Wee Move for ages 1-7 with adult, every Fri., 10:30 a.m.

Little Learners for ages 1-7 with adult, every Thurs., 10:30 a.m.

Coulee Region Professional Women (CRPW) 4th Tues. of each month, Pogreba Restaurant, 5:30 p.m. Linda O'Connell, linda@take5productions.net.

La Crosse Area Chamber of Commerce monthly breakfast meeting. 2nd Mon. of each month, 7 a.m., Radisson. Admission is \$5 and includes breakfast. lacrossechamber.com.

La Crosse Toastmasters Club 2nd and 4th Tuesday of each month, 7 p.m., Gundersen Health System Urgent Care Bldg., Basement, 1830 S. Ave., La Crosse.

League of Women Voters 2nd Tues. of each month, noon, Radisson Hotel, Nancy Hill, 608-782-1753, nfhill@centurytel.net.

NAMI Family Support Group 2nd Mon. of each month, 6:30 p.m., South Side Neighborhood Center, 1300 S. 6th St., La Crosse.

Onalaska Area Business Association 2nd Tues. of each month, noon-1 p.m., La Crosse Country Club, oaba.info.

Onalaska Hilltopper Rotary every Wed. noon-1 p.m., La Crosse Country Club, Onalaska.

Onalaska Rotary every Mon. at 6 p.m., lower level of Blue Moon, Onalaska.

Onalaska Toastmasters Club 1st and 3rd Mon. of each month, noon-1 p.m., Globe University, Onalaska.

Viroqua Toastmasters Club 2nd and 4th Thurs. of each month, 7-8:30 p.m., Vernon Memorial Hospital, Taylor Conf. Rm., Lower Level, Viroqua.

Women in Networking and Support (WINS) 2nd Wed. of each month, Fayze's, noon-1 p.m., Shari Hopkins, 608-784-3904, shopkins@couleebank.net.

Women of Worth (WOW) last Wed. of each month, Shenanigans, noon. Debbie Lee, 608-317-5023, deb@ais-cw.com

Women's Alliance of La Crosse (WAL) 2nd Thurs. of each month, noon, The Waterfront Restaurant, Kasey Heikel 608-519-8080 kasey.heichel.dc@gmail.com OR Amy Stodola 608-788-2668 amy.stodola@edwardjones.com

CALENDAR EVENTS

June 3-5, Spotlight Shows—Summer is Here Gifts & Craft Show, Valley View Mall, myvalleyview.com.

June 8, La Crosse Concert Band, 7:30 p.m., Riverside Park.

June 9, YWCA Taste of the Coulee Region, 5:30-8 p.m., Court Above Main Banquet Hall, www.ywcalax.org.

June 9, Celtic Woman, 7:30 p.m., La Crosse Center, lacrossecenter.com.

June 10, Night Out at the Museum, 5:30-8 p.m., Children's Museum of La Crosse, pre-registration required, www.funmuseum.org.

June 10-11, Artspire Festival, 5 p.m., downtown La Crosse, www.thepumphouse.org/artspire.

June 10-19, *Bridge to Terabithia*, 7 p.m. Fri. & Sat., 2 p.m. Sat. & Sun., La Crosse Community Theatre, www.lacrossecommunitytheatre.org.

June 12, Mayo Best Baby Shower, noon-3 p.m., Children's Museum of La Crosse, www.funmuseum.org.

June 15, La Crosse Concert Band, 7:30 p.m., Riverside Park.

June 17, Freaky Friday: May the Force be With You, 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m., Children's Museum of La Crosse, pre-registration required, www.funmuseum.org.

June 18-19, Midsummer Festival, Norskedalen Nature & Heritage Center, Coon Valley, www.norskedalen.org.

June 19, YMCA Got Energy Triathlon, 7 a.m., Swarthout Park, West Salem, www.laxymca.org.

June 22, La Crosse Concert Band, 7:30 p.m., Riverside Park.

June 22-July 31, Great River Shakespeare Festival, Winona State University, www.grsf.org.

June 25, Winona Dixieland Jazz Festival, 7 p.m., Winona State University.

June 25-July 17, Minnesota Beethoven Festival, Winona State University, www.mnbeethovenfestival.org.

June 29, Kids from Wisconsin 2016, 7 p.m., Weber Center for the Performing Arts, www.webercenterfortheperformingarts.org.

July 1-4, Riverfest, Riverside Park, La Crosse, www.riverfestlacrosse.com.

July 2, Firecracker 4 Run Series, 8-11 a.m., Riverside Park, www.funmuseum.org.

July 4, Fireworks, 10 p.m., Riverside Park.

July 6, La Crosse Concert Band, 7:30 p.m., Riverside Park.

July 8, Freaky Friday: Game of Life, 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m., Children's Museum of La Crosse, pre-registration required, www.funmuseum.org.

July 10, Art Fair & Wine Tasting, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Norskedalen Nature & Heritage Center, Coon Valley, www.norskedalen.org.

July 13, La Crosse Concert Band, 7:30 p.m., Riverside Park.

July 15-16, Big Blue Dragon Boat Festival, Copeland Park, La Crosse, www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/bigbluedragon.

July 16, Rail Fair, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Copeland Park, Rose and Clinton Streets, La Crosse, 608-781-9383.

July 16, Freedom Fest, 11 a.m.-11 p.m., UW-La Crosse Veterans Memorial Sports Complex, www.freedomfestlacrosse.com.

July 20, La Crosse Concert Band, 7:30 p.m., Riverside Park.

July 22-25, Summer Sidewalk Sales, Valley View Mall, www.myvalleyview.com.

July 27, La Crosse Concert Band, 7:30 p.m., Riverside Park.

July 28-30, Summer Days Sidewalk Sale, Downtown La Crosse, www.lacrossedowntown.com.

July 29, Freaky Friday: Our Shark Tank, Children's Museum of La Crosse, 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m., pre-registration required, www.funmuseum.org.

July 29-31, Houston Hoedown, Houston, Minnesota, www.houstonhoedown.com.

July 30-31, AAUW Art Fair on the Green, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Sat., 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Sun., UW-La Crosse Campus.



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