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ALERT TOP STORY

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Silver Lining Awards to recognize those who went the extra mile during the pandemic

Gayle Worland | Wisconsin State Journal

May 6, 2022

The COVID-19 pandemic forced everyone to rethink routines and adjust priorities. During next Thursday’s Silver Lining Awards, some 70 individuals and organizations will be recognized for the creative pivots they made.

Created by the Friends of the Madison Arts Commission (FOMAC), the Silver Lining Awards are designed to honor those who “excelled in creative endeavors ... during the pandemic, bringing a silver lining to the community in 2020-21.”

Earlier this year the seven volunteer members of FOMAC combed through nominations in three categories — arts, community and hospitality — and, using an objective rating process, selected 20 winners.



Rodney Alexander, president and co-founder of the Umbrella Transition Program, sits at the kitchen table he uses as his "office" in one of the program's housing units offered to formerly homeless men looking to get back on their feet.

JOHN HART, STATE JOURNAL

Built on past award ceremonies centered on the arts, the Silver Lining Awards were recast to "broaden the reach of the event, and really celebrate all sorts of ways the community came together in creative ways during the pandemic," said FOMAC chair Kia Karlen.

The May 12 celebration at Garver Feed Mill will include music, art, a film screening and the awards ceremony. Winners will take home a statue designed by Madison artist TetraPAKMAN. And all of the nominees will receive copies of the testimonials written by those who nominated them — a powerful tool for nonprofits and grant-seekers who need to show the impact they are having on the community.

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“We really want the event to celebrate everyone who was nominated,” Karlen said. “And despite our best efforts to get the word out for the nomination process, it’s a new event during a chaotic time in people’s lives. So we’re looking at this as an experiment that we hope will be a wonderful experiment and lead to future efforts.”

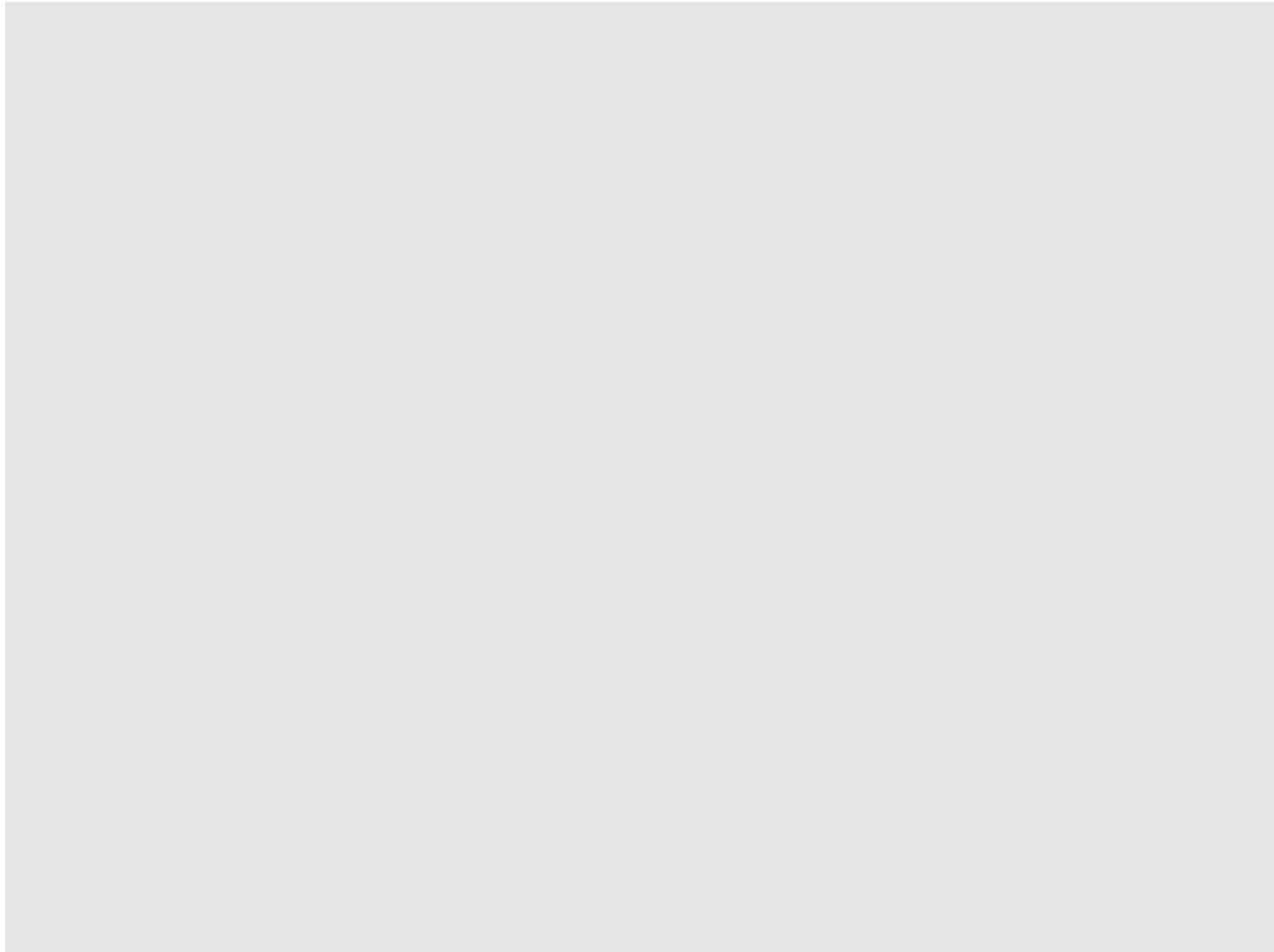
The Wisconsin State Journal chatted with four of the nominees.

Umbrella Transition Program

Rodney Alexander felt that not enough was being done to help homeless men in Madison get back on their feet. But instead of complaining about it, he took action.

Alexander is the co-founder, president and transition counselor of the nonprofit **Umbrella Transition Program**, a comprehensive program designed to give men a safe, comfortable, full-time living space while they sort out their lives so they can return to the workforce and eventually secure permanent housing.

The program (**umbrellatransitionprogram.info**) is a Silver Linings Award community nominee.



Rodney Alexander, president and co-founder of the Umbrella Transition Program, walks through one of the housing units that the program provides for formerly homeless men who want to work to get back on their feet with a job and permanent housing.

JOHN HART, STATE JOURNAL

“We needed to create a space where people can take some time to not have to worry about the financial part. Not have to worry about the living space, and then they can slowly take care of the rest,” he said. “Nobody can fix all of this stuff overnight. It’s not a handout, it’s a way to say, ‘Hey, here’s your opportunity to take advantage and get this stuff in order.’”

Alexander grew up on the west side of Chicago, the second-oldest of 10 children. Life in that neighborhood “was kind of rough,” he said, and the insecurity of life there gave Alexander an empathy for people experiencing the same thing today.

“My parents did do enough to keep me off the street, and I want to pay it forward,” he said, “They raised me to be that kind of person who cared. And not just care, but teach people how to care for themselves. And that’s pretty much the concept of this program. It’s not, ‘Hey, come here and get a free meal.’ It’s, ‘Hey, come here and (we’ll) help you get back (to a stable life).”

For someone who’s homeless, even life’s necessities — finding a meal, getting a shower, making it to a job interview — can present huge obstacles, said Alexander, who earned a degree in psychology from UW-Whitewater, worked as a longtime counselor at Toki Middle School and is a professional mixed-martial arts fighter.

“I feel like if you actually give people this opportunity, to get in a space,” they can make changes, he said. “These people love the fact that they’re doing it on their own, that they can get their lives back in order. A lot of these guys are just like you and me. It was that one missed paycheck that started it all. Some of these guys are working full-time jobs, but they can’t get approved for apartments.”

Starting in the thick of the pandemic, the all-volunteer staff of the Umbrella Transition Program managed to buy two properties on the East Side and partnered with businesses who enthusiastically hire Umbrella Transition participants. Alexander co-founded the program with donations, community grants and his own savings, and runs it with the help of his girlfriend, brother, a trusted friend and his girlfriend’s dad.

Each Umbrella resident gets an in-depth assessment, the first step to matching him with services such as financial counseling, sobriety support or job training.

Demetrius Sampton, for example, was “looking for a little boost” when he found Alexander and the Umbrella program, he said. Sampton had left a “bad relationship” in Milwaukee to seek a fresh start in Madison, then found himself bouncing around homeless shelters. A staff person at The Beacon day center told him about the Umbrella Transition Program.

Sampton was already employed, but just couldn't get ahead — until the Umbrella Transition Program gave him a room for a few months and provided food and toiletries so he could build some savings, he said. Now he has a full-time job as a machinist, is training to be a CNC operator and is renting his own apartment. He still keeps in touch with Alexander.

“There's still a support there for me,” he said.

Most residents at the Umbrella Transition Program stay from three to eight months, Alexander said. The program started with four residents and this year has grown to a capacity of 20.

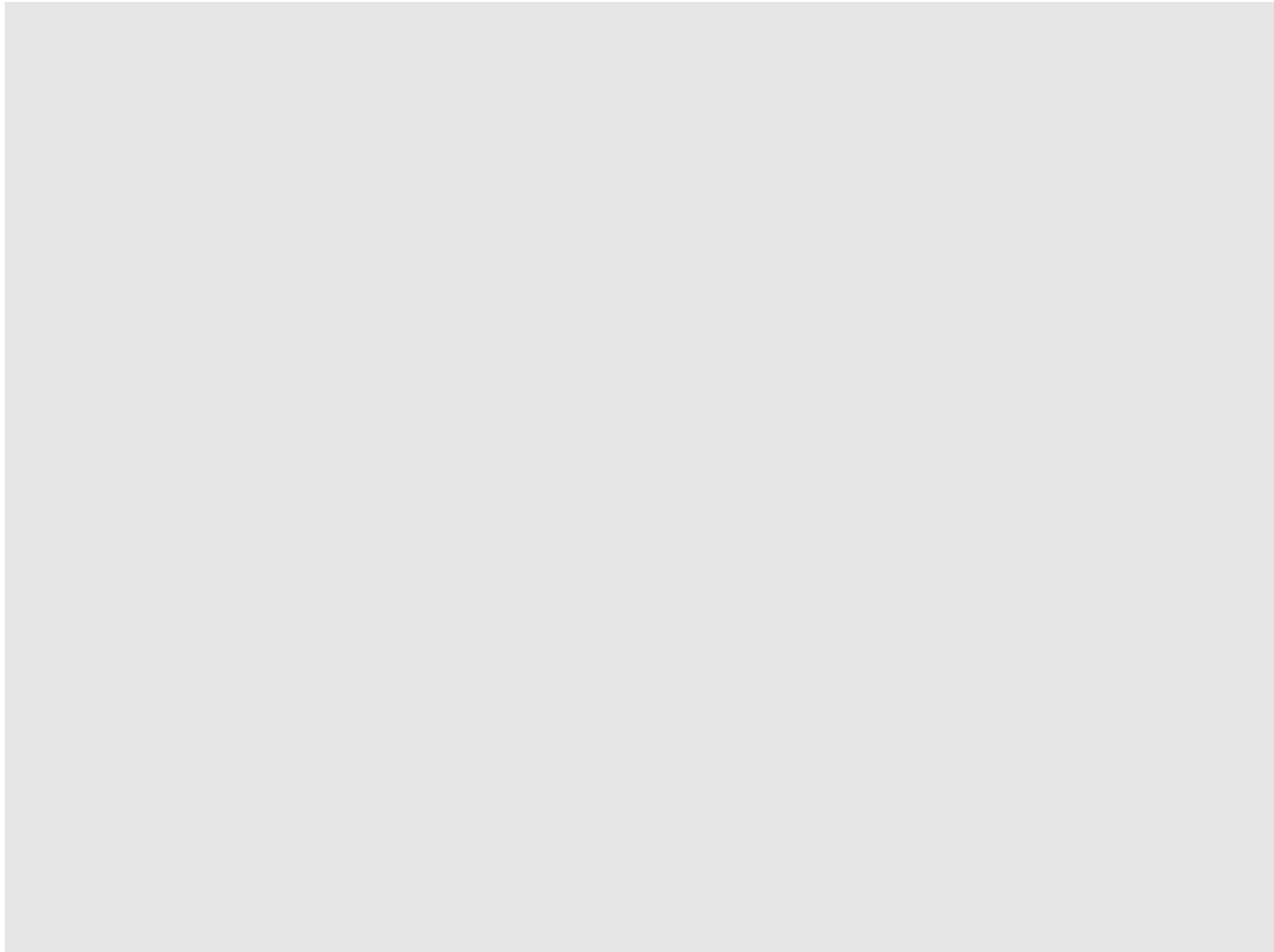
“Last year, while working with only four people at a time, we were able to get 23 people off the street, working their own jobs and into their own places,” he said. Along with those 23, another participant moved to Green Bay, and two more left the program after they could not live by Umbrella Transition's “outrageously long list of rules,” he said.

“We did part ways with those guys,” he said, “but with the message, ‘Hey, you can always come back here when you are ready.’ I believe in giving every single person a chance.”

Celia Klehr, Forward Theater Company

Celia Klehr is company manager for Forward Theater Company, which means her job is basically to make sure things work smoothly “and create a happy working space for everybody,” she said.

But with the pandemic, she also became, out of necessity, something of an expert in infection control — and an arts nominee for a Silver Linings Award.



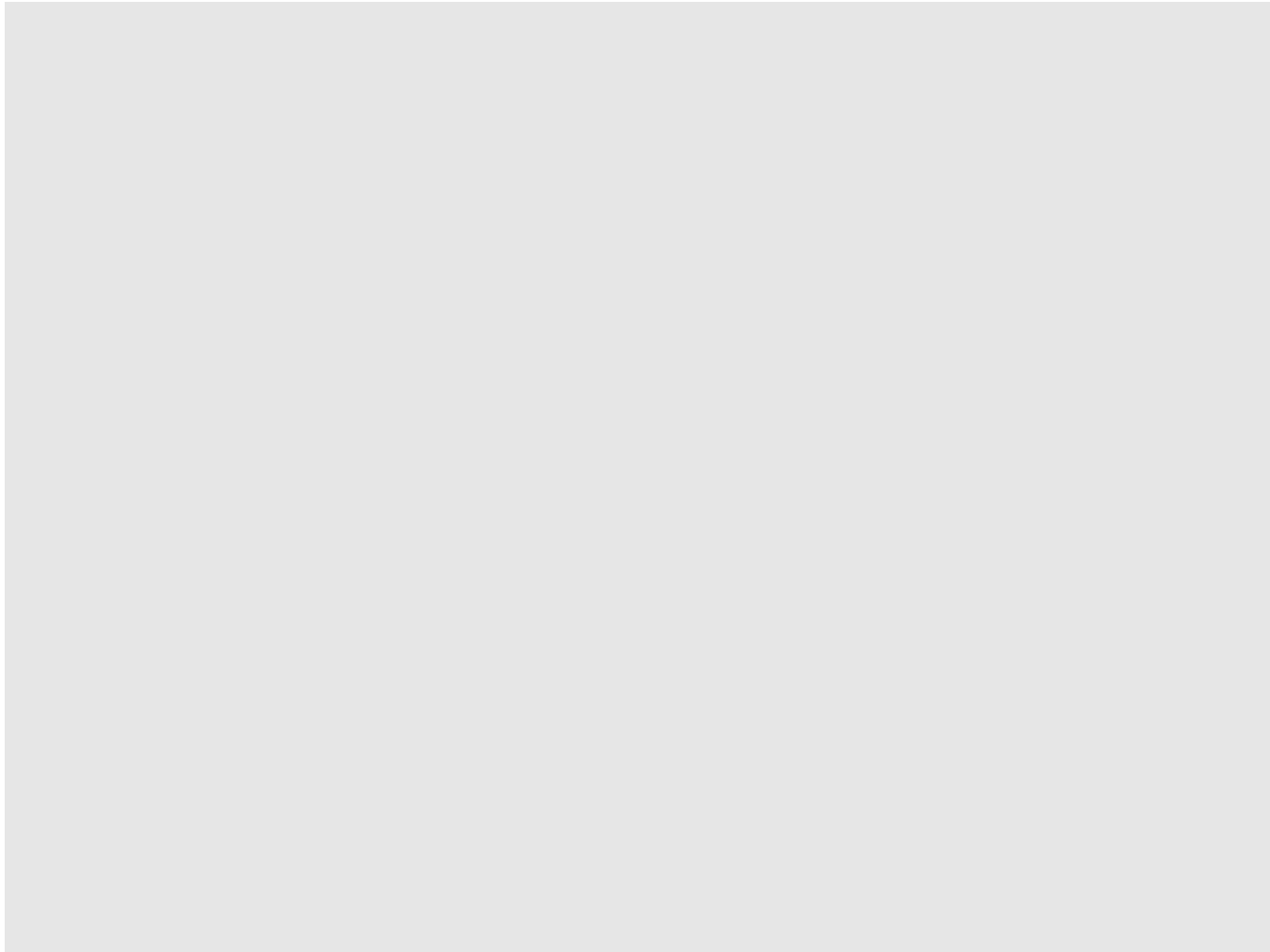
Celia Klehr, company manager for Forward Theater Company, sits with some of the COVID-19 prevention tools she's used to keep actors and crew members safe as the group's "COVID defiance officer."

KAYLA WOLF, STATE JOURNAL

“Celia was one of the key people responsible for the safe return of live theater to Madison during the pandemic,” wrote one of the people who nominated her for a Silver Lining Award.

When COVID-19 hit, theater doors slammed shut and the performing arts world essentially ground to a halt.

“Our actors union, Equity, was trying desperately to figure out what our safety protocols could be to get people back to work,” Klehr said. “They established that a COVID compliance officer needed to be on site with some responsibilities.”



Celia Klehr, the company manager for Forward Theater Company, holds a kit she made as part of her COVID-19 prevention work to keep actors and crew safe.

KAYLA WOLF, STATE JOURNAL

Klehr took the online training for the role, but instead of becoming a “compliance” officer, “we call it the COVID *‘defiance’* officer,” she said.

A founding member of Forward and a longtime member of the former Madison Rep, now Klehr had to oversee surface cleaning, social distancing, mask-wearing, water and food consumption, and much more. When the theater company produced works online, Klehr mailed materials or dropped them off at actors’ doorways to keep up that sense of connection with one another.

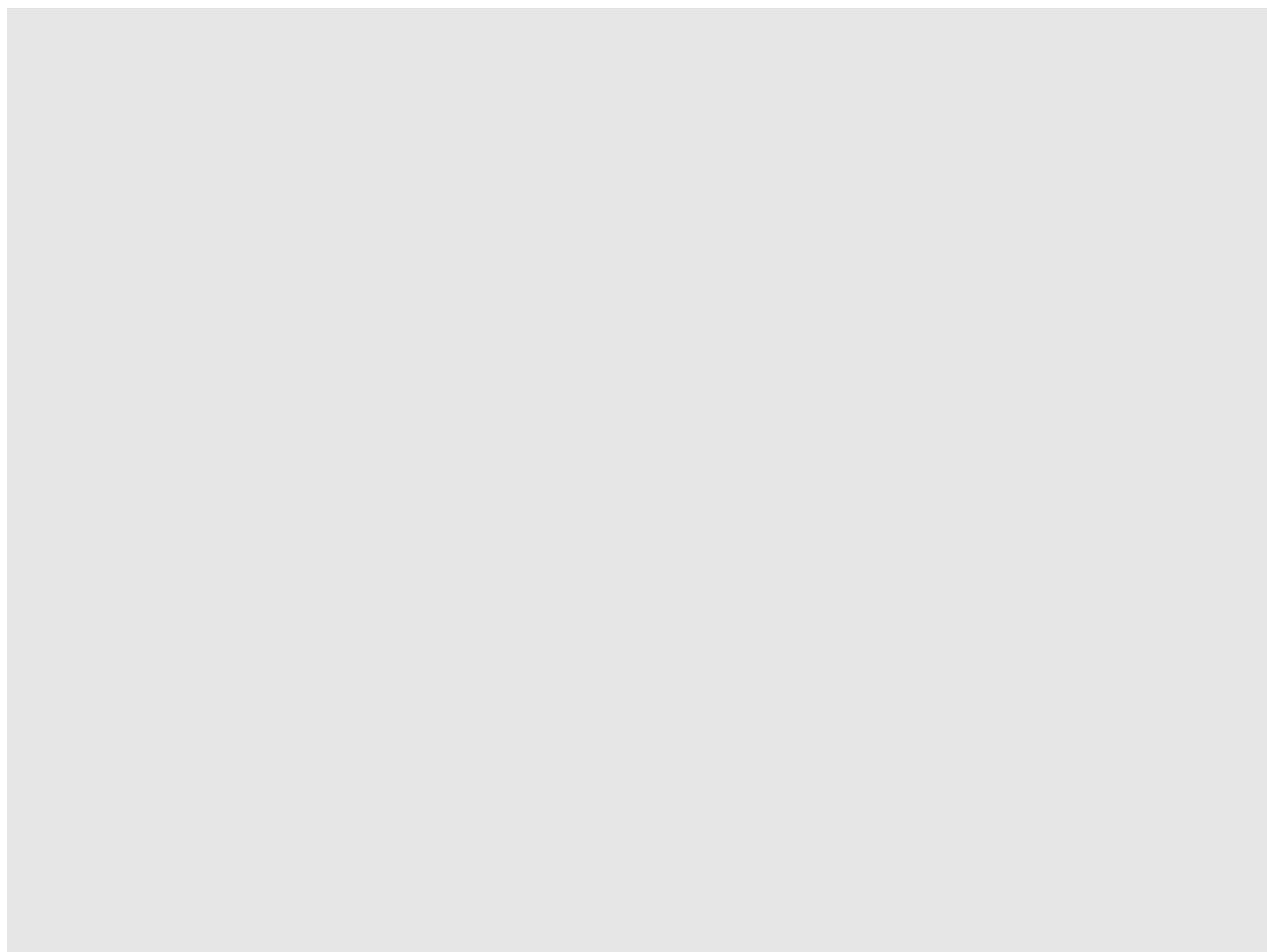
“Up to this day I’m still administering rapid tests and making sure people are masked in certain spaces,” she said. But the preventive steps have worked, she said — nearly two years later, no one in a Forward production has tested positive for COVID.

“Our mission statement is to provide a home base for Wisconsin artists, and we were determined to keep everybody employed and to have a product for our audience,” Klehr said. While other theaters had to shut down, Forward continued hiring.

“I’m just so, so incredibly proud of Forward Theater (**forwardtheater.com**), that we continued working all the way through and honored every single contractor that we had,” she said. “I’m so grateful to the Madison audiences and our subscribers who stayed with us, and are staying with us.”

BlueStem Jazz

BlueStem Jazz had been bringing world-class artists into Madison for about four years before the pandemic hit. But once COVID struck, the outlook for live music was bleak.



Musicians Vincent Davis, Corey Wilkes and Hanah Jon Taylor perform in a BlueStem Jazz performance on the Garver Feed Mill patio in 2021.

Indoor shows were out of the question. So BlueStem Jazz (**bluestemjazz.org**) — which presents progressive, experimental and avant-garde jazz music — reached out to Garver Feed Mill. The venue welcomed organizers Thomas Ferrella and David Stone to book outdoor performances on the Garver patio.

Within four days of getting Garver’s blessing in summer 2020, “Dave and I booked 14 shows, embracing local musicians but also bringing in musicians from out of state, mainly Chicago,” Ferrella said, and that led to a nomination in the arts category of the Silver Lining Awards.

At the time, “The world was falling over, the musicians were falling over — they were going to die of starvation — and people were dying of starvation from no music,” Stone said. “So it all fit together really well.

“At the time we were (presenting outdoor concerts), nobody else was doing it,” he said. “Once the musicians realized that we were doing gigs, they contacted us wanting to do gigs. And Madison was receptive to what we were doing.”

Seventeen more outdoor concerts followed in 2021. With a national and international reputation, BlueStem Jazz’s programming now “has surpassed anything we’ve done in the past,” Ferrella said. “We are on fire with requests from musicians from around the world.”

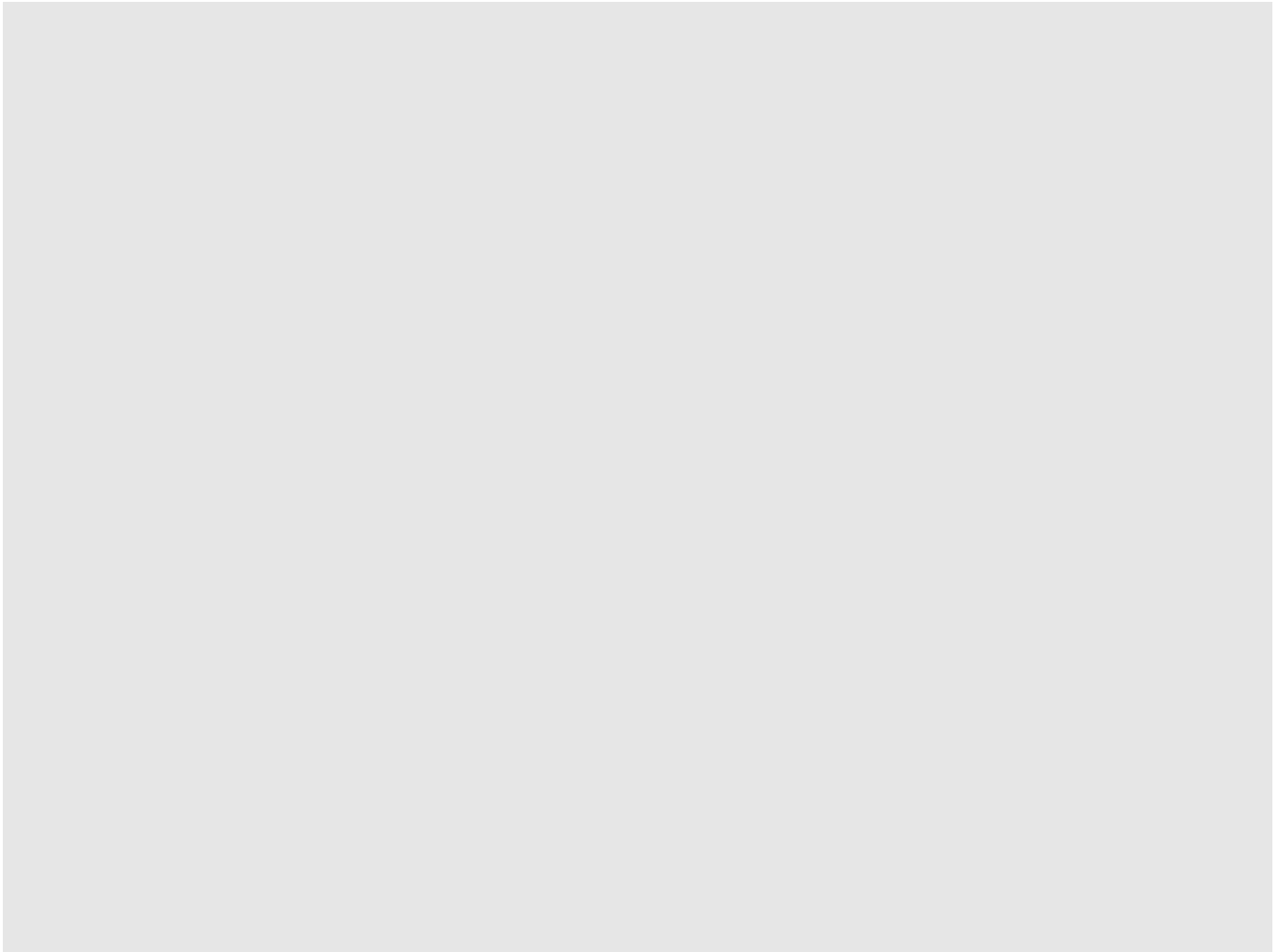
“This jazz series, we’re being told by many, many people, is probably the third-best jazz series in the country,” he said. “This is not happening anywhere else in the country outside of Chicago or New York City. But it’s happening here.”

Alejandro Miranda Cruz and Noel Miranda, Bravebird

Alejandro Miranda Cruz grew up in Los Angeles and appeared in a number of Hollywood movies — but he said he was always typecast “as a delinquent.”

“I just didn’t like the way people of color were being depicted in films and in media,” he said. “There were a lot of tropes and stereotypes.”

He moved to Madison in 2013 with his wife, Noel Miranda, to take a creative director position at an advertising agency. In 2018, the couple premiered their first film, “Fantasy in D Minor” and created the film production company Bravebird. They’re nominated in the Silver Lining Awards arts category.



At right, Alejandro Miranda Cruz of Bravebird, a Madison-based film production company, shows footage taken of the owner and staff of Compadres restaurant in Middleton during a shoot there to highlight the restaurant's energy-efficient approach.

MIKE GORSKI

“Bravebird is really rooted in living out dignity, and depicting dignity,” he said. “That was a big impetus to pursue (filmmaking) full time. I had some interesting experiences in the entertainment and advertising industries, and I felt like I wanted

to work in a space where there was more dignity and art and excellence. ... I wanted to do something that is more honoring to our communities. More diverse.”

During the pandemic, Bravebird produced the independent feature film “Trace the Line” in Madison.

“It was very COVID-compliant filmmaking. A lot of the filming was done outdoors,” Cruz said. “It was interesting, but a lot harder.”

“Trace the Line” takes place in the Midwest, “and is about 2020 through the eyes of two young artists. One is Black and one is white. One’s a poet, one’s a painter. And through their heart, they explore what they are feeling in 2020. It’s a timeline of COVID — starting in 2020, (moving to) George Floyd, Jacob Blake and social justice movements.”

Today, Bravebird (www.wearebravebird.com) continues to raise funds for “Trace the Line” and is working on a range of other projects. As part of his emphasis on dignity, “I’m crafting different approaches, so the interviewee can select how they want to be depicting, and to give them a say in the edit,” Cruz said. “And even looking into how to give them copyright to the content that they’re in. I’m trying to think of ways of re-empowering, and creating space for people to share their voice on their terms.”

If you go

What: Silver Lining Awards ceremony, presented by Friends of the Madison Arts Commission

When: 7 p.m. Thursday, May 12

Where: Garver Feed Mill, 3241 Garver Green

Event: Doors and cocktail hour at 7 p.m., featuring performances by Yid Vicious and Cycropia Aerial Dance, plus “Defending Black Girlhood” mural display by Lilada Gee. Awards program at 8 p.m. with emcees Cooper Talbot and Kia Karlen; DJ Femme Noir; and award statues by TetraPAKMAN. After-party with DJ Femme Noir from 8:45 to 10 p.m. and film screening of “Winter is Alive” by Aaron Granat and Gracie Wallner (20 minutes) at 9:30 p.m. on the patio.

Admission: Full-price tickets \$20. Half-price and free tickets, plus donor opportunities for special projects, are also available. Ticket includes glass of champagne and dessert buffet. Cash bar available. Proceeds will support public art projects in the city of Madison. Purchase tickets at www.friendsofmadisonarts.org.

2022 Silver Lining Award nominees

Aaron Williams, LEGO Architecture

Alejandro Miranda Cruz and Noel Miranda, Bravebird

Alexzandra Shade

Alicia Rheal and Yvette Pino

American Players Theatre

Angela Johnson

Art Party

ARTWORKING

Association of Wisconsin Artists

Audifax, Shiloah Coley, Emida Roller, Gabrielle Javier-Cerulli, Sara Jordan (The Bubbler at Madison Public Library)

Bach Dancing & Dynamite Society

Blue Stem Jazz

Brewer Stouffer, The Roman Candle Pizza

Celia Klehr, Forward Theater Company

Christina Martin-Wright/ARTS for ALL Wisconsin

CoCoVaa Chocolatier

Cycropia Aerial Dance

Dane Arts

Dane Arts Mural Arts

Dave Heide/ Little John's Kitchen

Doug E. L. Haynes

Friends of Waisman Center, Linda Berman, Event Chair

Garver Events

Harmonious Wail

Harvey Black

Healthy Kids Collaborative

Helen Klebesadel

Inspiring Hope Ministries

Isthmus Dance Collective

Jazzman Brown, Feeding the Youth

Jeanette Deloya

Jody Clowes

John Lombardo, SwingTime Music Jazz Band

Kaitlin Esche-Lyon, Quarter Life Leap

Kurt and Nicki Stapleton, Prairie Road Pantry

Latino Chamber of Commerce

Leopold-Arbor Hills Neighborhood Resource Team

Li Chiao-Ping Dance

Lilada Gee, Defending Black Girlhood

Lisa Thurell and Robert Cleary, Kanopy Dance

LunART

Luv Joy Seamon

Madison Ballet

Madison BCycle

Madison Circus Space

Madison Opera

Martin Saunders

Mary Ellyn and Joe Sensenbrenner

Middleton Community Orchestra

Monroe Street Arts Center

Music Theatre of Madison

Oscar Mireles, LOUD (Wisconsin Conference on Latinx Art & Culture)

Overture Center for the Arts

Paulo Delgado, Dane County Neighbors Helping Neighbors Facebook Group

Perfect Harmony Chorus

Prentice H Berge, Madison Song Circle

Rob DZ, Mad Lit

Rowan Childs, Madison Reading Project

Sara Meredith, Communication

Solarpunk Surf Club

SUPA Friends

Tamsie Ringler, Winter is Alive! A Cooler World Carnival

The Umbrella Transition Program

Wisconsin Chamber Choir

Wisconsin School Music Association

Wisconsin Youth Symphony Orchestras

WORT-FM Community Supported Radio

Yid Vicious Klezmer Ensemble

You Of All People

Yusuf Bin-Rella, Traderoots

By Gayle Worland | Wisconsin State Journal

Gayle Worland is an arts and features reporter for the Wisconsin State Journal.
