

Creative force

Karin Wolf is a tireless advocate for art

by **LAURA JONES**

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LAURA ZASTROW

Karin Wolf at Mike Burns' "Updraft" sculpture, Brittingham Park.

It's Gallery Night, a breezy 82 degrees, and packs of Madison residents are roaming east-side locations looking at art. Karin Wolf, the city's art administrator, stands under the eaves of a **temporary installation** near the construction site at Union Corners, noting the way the structure blends in with the canopy of oak trees overhead.

Dressed in a zigzag wrap dress, orange beaded necklace and cool-girl glasses, Wolf is an attractive combination of sharp focus and free-range spark. As is often the case, her connection to this particular piece of art is strong. The sculpture, modeled on a Native American longhouse, received a \$1,500 BLINK grant from the Madison Arts Commission, which Wolf administers. For the Intentionally Welcoming Communities group, which facilitated the creative process, the grant represented more than a pot of money; it was an important endorsement that allowed the organizers to tap other funding streams.

It's only 5:30 p.m., but this is already Wolf's second stop. The first was a poetry reading at Michelangelo's Coffee House on State Street. Rushing out of there, she ran into Andrea Musher, former poet laureate, and after a quick hug, promised to listen to a recording of Musher's newest project, a musical. Wolf's schedule is filled with such commitments. Her proposed agenda for Gallery Night was organized into frantic categories like "*must go*" or "*try*."



JOHNNY AND MARIE JUSTICE

Longhouse at Union Corners.

Before the evening is over, Wolf will have visited more than a dozen galleries, shops, new art spaces and the Central Library. If the arts administrator is anything, she's in demand. Wolf has spent almost a decade nurturing a vibrant network in a creative city; one that runs on little money. The **Madison Arts Commission** — an appointed advisory committee of 10 citizens and an alder — is responsible for public art projects, music programs, poetry, arts in education and basically any other project you can think of where an individual artist or organization creates something for the city. Wolf is the one full-time staff person devoted to pulling it all off. "Basically, I play with red tape and jump through hoops," Wolf says. "My role is to fill in the gaps."

But Wolf, 47, is more than just a bridge for artists. She's a proactive dynamo who has championed art and artists in an era of low to nonexistent funding. Since her hire in 2006, she has given herself over to the city's art community, so much so that they feel she belongs to them; and she's expert at incubating ideas and matching artists to funders. If she's overcommitted, working long hours, including nights and weekends, to be on hand for openings and events, it's in the service of her higher calling: art, which she calls "her religion." Moving into the future, Wolf hopes to institutionalize the city's financial commitment to art and artists. She is spearheading efforts to create through city ordinance a program that would provide guaranteed funding for art in multimillion-dollar city construction projects. If it passes, the Percent for Art program just might become her legacy.

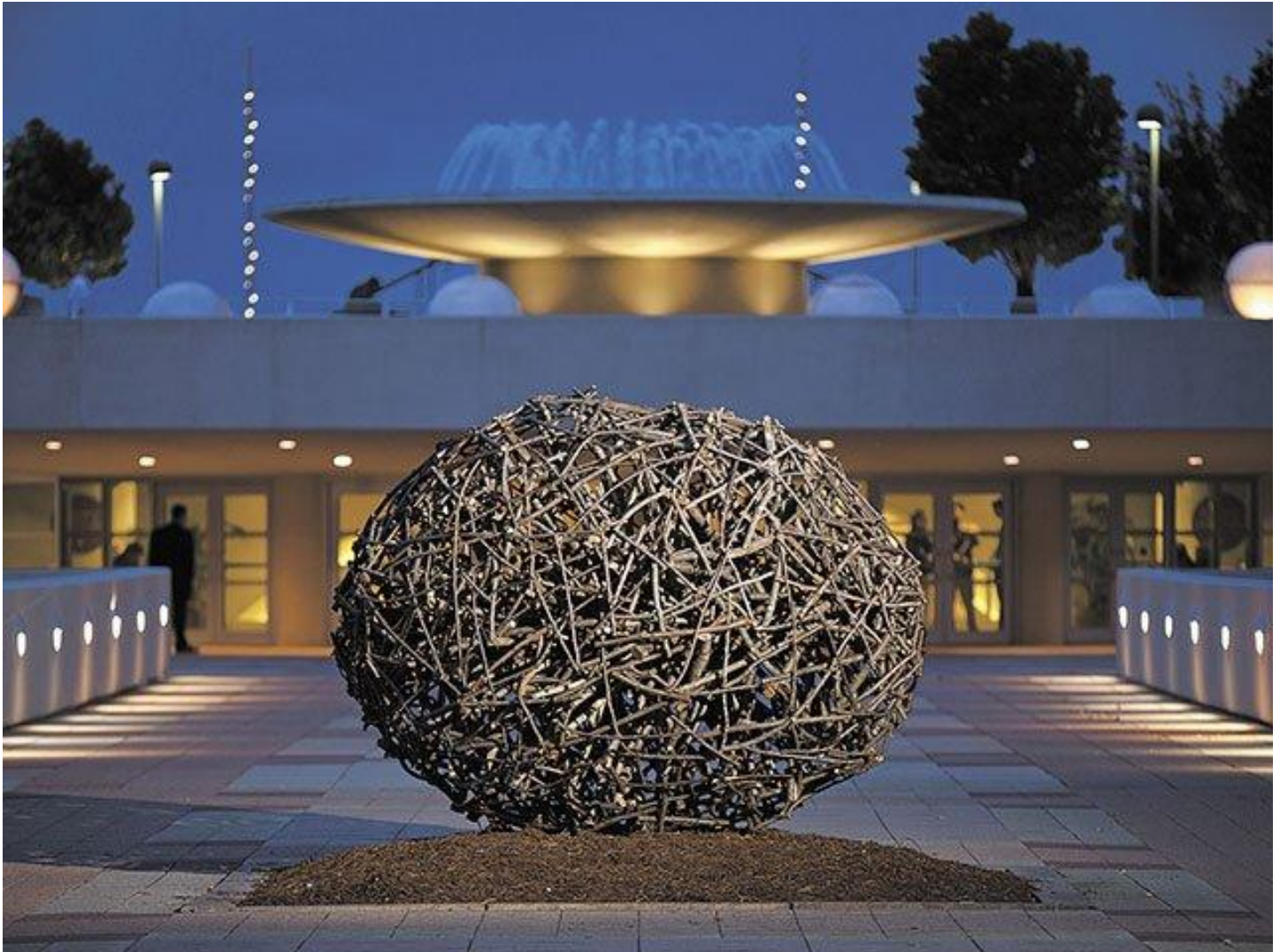
Wolf's determination hasn't gone unnoticed. Katie Crawley, deputy mayor for public works and communication, says that in her five years on the job, Wolf stands out as a city employee she'd like to clone: "She's passionate. She's an inspiration. She's one of those people who say, 'I love my job.'"

Try as she might, Wolf can't be everywhere at once. On her whirlwind tour of galleries, an artist takes her aside, upset she'd missed a recent opening. No matter how much she gets to, there's just not enough of her to go around. "I'm always happy when I look up and she's at an event," says Trent Miller, coordinator of the Central Library's Bubbler program. "But she needs three assistants. There's just so much going on, and she's working on it all. It's an impossible job. Organize all of the art in the entire city? How do you do that?"

Boise, Idaho, a city with 30,000 fewer people than Madison, has a Department of Arts and History Public Art Program with 10 employees. Most cities have cultural affairs teams that tackle such activities as place planning, murals, arts in education and grants to artists. In Madison, Wolf administers all of these activities, working as a liaison with various city departments and neighborhoods and helping artists' vision merge with city needs. "She really knows the whole city infrastructure and how to navigate that," Miller says. "People don't realize how many people you have to talk to in order to get something to happen here."

In addition to the BLINK grants, which support creation of temporary pieces, such as the longhouse sculpture at Union Corners, the city offers a couple of different grant programs for public art, including one for permanent work. Mike Burns, a local metalworking artist, received a \$5,000 seed grant from the planning department for "Updraft," a new installation at Brittingham Park that includes a giant steel arched sculpture, benches and ornamentation for the fence around the park's community garden. Burns says an earlier commission at a different site fell through, but Wolf stuck with him, helping redirect funds and supporting the neighborhood in fundraising efforts.

"As artists, we aren't skilled in all areas. Fundraising is probably the least of our skills. But Karin's creativity and persistence helps an artist take the long view," Burns says.



ERIC BAILLIES

Brenda Baker's "Seed Pod" at Monona Terrace.

Under Wolf's stewardship even a temporary artwork can have a long-term impact. In 2013, Brenda Baker, an artist and director of exhibits at the Madison Children's Museum, created "Seed Pod," a sculpture made of woven branches from invasive plant species. The egg-shaped structure was placed on the walkway to Monona Terrace as part of an ecological conference. "Monona Terrace had never engaged a local artist before," Wolf says. "It was all strictly Frank Lloyd Wright." But with Wolf's cultivation, and the early support of BLINK, more than 1,300 conference attendees from 57 countries had a chance to see it — along with countless local residents who visited the terrace.

"Everyone started taking photos there," Wolf recalls. "It became an icon for the summer. Then Monona Terrace said, 'why don't we always do this?'" Now sculpture is a part of the rooftop landscape; in 2014, the convention center started a temporary art program of

its own, curated by David Wells, the gallery director of Edgewood College. It might not have happened without Wolf's behind-the-scenes intervention.

Wolf is proud that "Seed Pod," which later moved to a Milwaukee sculpture garden, began with a BLINK grant. She is passionate about inserting the arts into every setting. Currently, her position is housed in the planning department, which she appreciates. Planners know what's going to happen in a place before anyone else, and her mission is to include arts in discussions early on. She knows that not everyone agrees on the importance of public art. Part of her job is to raise public awareness of what the arts mean to Madison — how they contribute to the look and feel of the city, enrich citizens' lives and bring millions of dollars to the regional economy.

Last year, Wolf gave the keynote address at the UW-Madison Advocacy Consortium for Entrepreneurs. She showed a handsome photo of ice skaters in front of Monona Terrace and then flipped to another slide where the same photo was manipulated, replacing the convention center with a drab office building. Then she asked the group: "Which Madison attracts talent?" Her message, as she recalls it, was: "If you don't pony up, we aren't going to get Frank Lloyd Wright buildings without artists or attention to the environment."



CREATIVEMORNINGS.COM

Wolf speaking at "Creative Mornings," an online breakfast chat.

She isn't one to mince words. ("I take the path of least resistance, because there's so much to do. If you don't want a sculpture in your neighborhood, there are other neighborhoods that do. I won't beat my head against the wall.") At the same time, she prepares PowerPoints with creative options for new work in parks. She'll help a poet's widow craft an elegant book in his memory. If you can pin her down, she might even listen to the long musical you just wrote, headphones on, as you carefully explain the whole thing.

"Karin is a major driver for expanding the arts," says Barbara Schrank, chairperson of the Madison Arts Commission. "She'll meet with artists that are new to the community and help them make connections. To me that stands out, that she has the energy for that."

One thing she won't do is let you buy her a cup of coffee. As someone intimately involved with the grant-making process, Wolf learned early on not to take favors. "Lynn Eich [retired director of the Dane County Cultural Affairs Commission] taught me total best practices — complete fairness, ethics. We give out grant money, so I do not take a cup of coffee."

Growing up in St. Louis, Mo., Wolf's earliest exposure to the arts came from her mother, an immigrant from Transylvania. The family had little money, but her mother's love of the arts kept her seeking new and inexpensive cultural experiences to share with her family.

Wolf's father and sister are both musicians; her sister plays oboe, and her father is a brass player. They were art-makers, Wolf says, while she and her mother were the supportive audience.

Wolf left home the day after high school graduation, yearning to escape the conservative bubble of St. Louis County. In Madison, she found the likeminded people she craved. She soaked up the radical culture like a sponge. "I'm very curious about everything," she says. "Everything fascinates me." That's evidenced in her undergraduate career at UW, which took 10 years to complete and spanned three majors — history, history of culture and Afro-American studies — and a minor in women's studies.

"I love education, but I resented being forced to learn a certain way. I was doing this kind of protest. But then my teacher said to me, 'Who's hearing your big protest against academia? Who are you hurting besides yourself?' She encouraged me to finish my degree. In the meantime, I collected classes."



Wolf (center) with her stepdaughter, Kaiya Solomon (right) and muralist Sharon Kilfoy at Allied Drive Pavement Painting, August 2014.

Classes and experiences. During that 10-year period, Wolf moved to Sierra Leone for a year, married Abu-Hassan Koroma, and became stepmother to his 4-year-old daughter, Nina. The two later divorced, but Wolf continued to raise their daughter, now 25, who attends UW-Madison. Wolf is now married to former Ald. Brian Solomon, and is once again a stepmother to his children, Kaiya, 12, and Tamirat, 10.

Her relationship with Nina was significant. Because Wolf wanted her stepdaughter to attend a good arts-based preschool, she started teaching there as a partial barter for tuition. Like her mother before her, she carted Nina to free or inexpensive programs in the city, including at the Madison Art Center (now MMoCA). “I called Sheri [Castelnuovo], the curator of education, and said, ‘Hey I’m a poor mom, and I’d like my kid to do this.’ I asked about scholarships. Sheri said, ‘Just bring her.’”

Wolf began volunteering at the museum, teaching kids about contemporary art with simple materials like pencils and paper. The work called for ingenuity and performative flash. Wolf loved it, and hoped to follow in Castelnuovo’s footsteps and become a museum educator. But in grad school at UW’s Department of Curriculum and Instruction, she had an awakening. “I realized, maybe the city is the museum. Maybe I can do something more than just art in an exclusive domain. It’s about breaking down those exclusions and creating access.”

Kia Karlen, a member of the Madison Arts Commission and director of education at the Madison Children’s Museum, says Wolf is intent on making sure all people, regardless of income or race, have access to participation in the arts: “[Karin] has been focused on equity in the arts and making sure they are accessible to everyone.”

Wolf represented the city of Madison in [Any Given Child](#), a multi-city Kennedy Center program that examines equity in arts education. Beginning in 2013, representatives from the Overture Center, the school district and the city collected input from the community, examining racial and economic disparities in arts education in Madison’s K-12 schools. Then the panel created an action blueprint for offering an “arts rich” environment for all schools, regardless of neighborhood income or individual school circumstances. “One of the great experiences has been asking for the truth and then hearing it and deciding what to do,” says Wolf. “We had to face our current state and find out who is getting access and who isn’t.”

To this point, Wolf has accomplished much with very little funding. According to a 2013 study by the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, Wisconsin ranks 48th in the nation for arts spending. Minnesota ranks first, spending \$6.36 per person, while our state squeaks by on just 13 cents.



Wolf with Elizabeth Doyle at “Feed the Dream,” Allied Drive Mosaics.

The disparity is dismal. Yet the arts are an economic generator. According to the 2012 study “[Arts and Economic Prosperity IV](#),” published by [Americans for the Arts](#), the arts generated more than \$535 million for Wisconsin’s economy in 2010; that’s 66% more than comparably sized states. The Madison Arts Commission’s grantmaking arm issues just \$100,000 to artists and art organizations annually. But Wolf excels at leveraging that small pool of money. “Karin definitely helps us do a lot with a little,” says Karlen. “She’s created that culture among the committee members.”

This summer, Wolf says she and the commission plan to propose a Percent for Art ordinance for the city, which could dedicate at least 1% of public construction budgets to art. That threshold amount is still being discussed, but Wolf predicts the ordinance would focus on projects with budgets exceeding \$5 million. Madison has never had such a program, though the state had one for decades, providing two-tenths of 1% of public construction budgets for art. The 31-year program was repealed by Gov. Scott Walker and the Wisconsin State Legislature in 2011.

Nationally, such programs exist in 28 states and several cities, including Boise, San Francisco and St. Paul. Interestingly, Joe Spencer, St. Paul’s director of arts and culture, considers Percent for Art a baby step. (“Welcome to the ’80s!” he says.) That city, which has 50,000 more residents than Madison, has had a Percent for Art ordinance in place for decades. It also employs two salaried artists and a full-time staffer who oversees funding for the arts generated from the sales tax.

At this stage, it’s difficult to predict exactly how much money a Madison program could provide for art projects; but with 15 planned projects that exceed \$5 million, it could generate as much as \$1.71 million in the next two years.

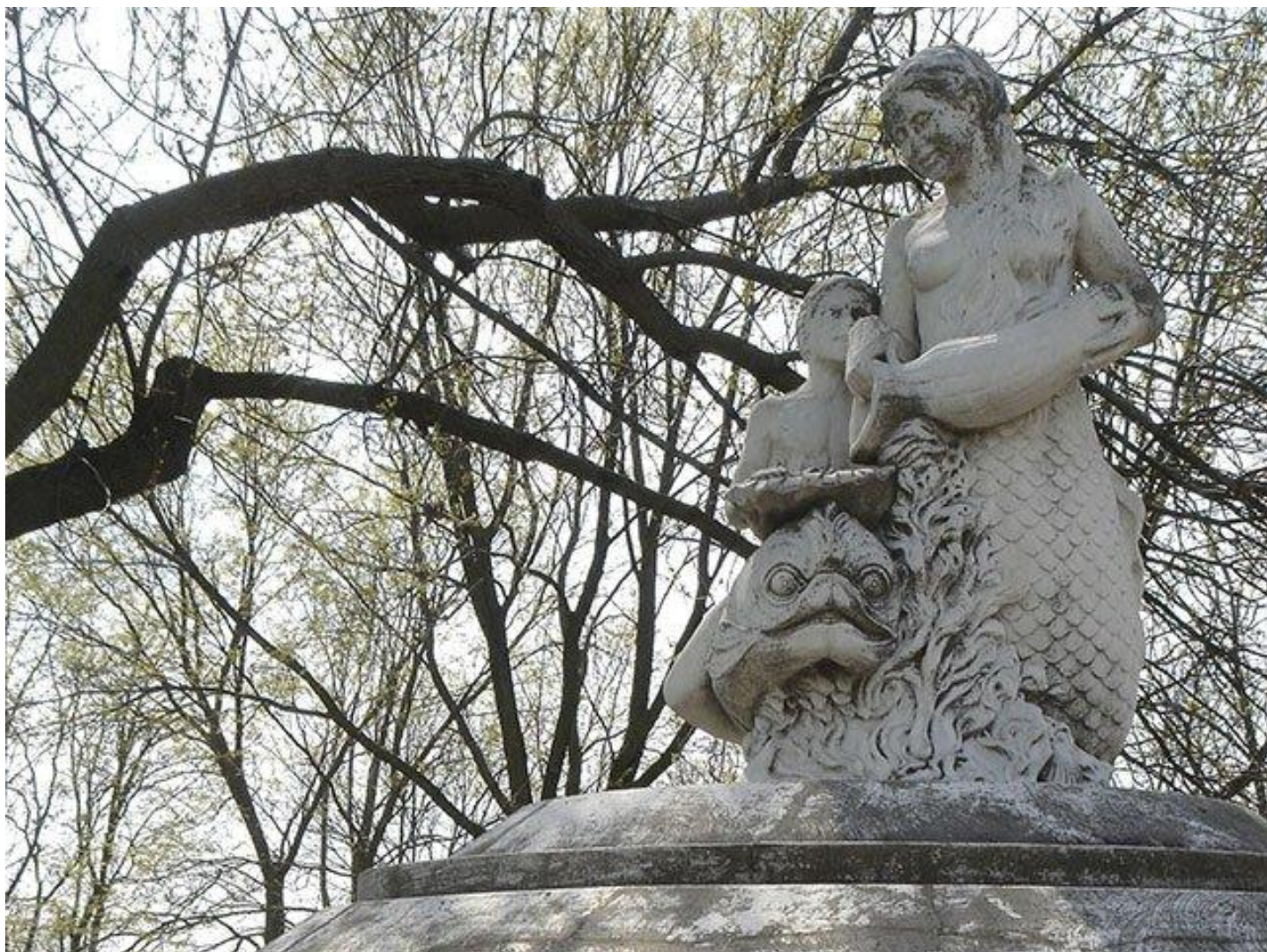
Creating Percent for Art would be an important initiative for art and artists in the city, and passing it will require building a strong consensus, something Wolf plans to pursue with her typical devotion. “Whatever draft ordinance is presented, I’m going to make sure [city engineer] Rob Phillips and the Parks Department and all the other stakeholders have signed off on it so there isn’t any resistance.”

One of the possible ripple effects of Percent for Art could be additional city staff devoted to the arts. For this reason and more, Wolf wants it to pass. But she also recognizes that the low-budget environment has brought out a certain hearty, DIY culture among artists and organizations in Madison she doesn’t want to lose.

She points to the Central Library, where the art budget was just \$15,000. “But we have \$300,000 worth of art in that library because we scraped together and convinced architects to use artist-made parts; it made the same financial sense. I love that library. To me, it’s the best you can do.”

Wolf says she wants to keep that resourceful spirit and work ethic, which, along the way, creates support for ideas and projects that otherwise might not have been there. “As a city, we need both [money and ingenuity]. I really want to try with Percent for Art to do it in such a way that it doesn’t take off the pressure.”

Percent for Art is only one part of Wolf’s strategy for spreading the gospel of arts. She’s also looking at ways the city can better support neighborhood-based creative activity and deepen its relationship with the university. She’d like Madison to help more musicians earn a living wage. And she has a personal passion: restoring the crumbling [Annie Stewart Fountain](#) in Vilas Park, which was built in 1925. “After the mounds, this is the oldest art we have. It’s history. It’s the past’s gift to us,” says Wolf. “The neglect of it makes me uncomfortable. If we can’t take care of what we have, I don’t know if we should be aggressively pursuing adding more.”



CAROLYN FATH

Annie Stewart Fountain

Wolf is still going strong at 9 p.m. on Gallery Night when she bumps into **Faisal Abdu'Allah**, a local artist and associate art professor at UW-Madison, on the stairs of the Central Library. He updates her on his project working with at-risk teenagers; how they seemed to come alive while working on the large self-portraits currently on display in the library windows facing Mifflin Street. Wolf listens attentively, excited about the future possibilities for the work.

“We are collectively making meaning together; fixing things, celebrating things, through arts and culture,” says Wolf. “I don’t want the light on me,” she adds. “I want the light on all of us and what we are accomplishing together. My role is to do what needs to be done so that the vision and will of the citizens happen.”

- See more at: <http://isthmus.com/arts/karin-wolf-is-a-tireless-advocate-for-art/#sthash.LYFUhhvp.dpuf>