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# LANESBORO ARTS

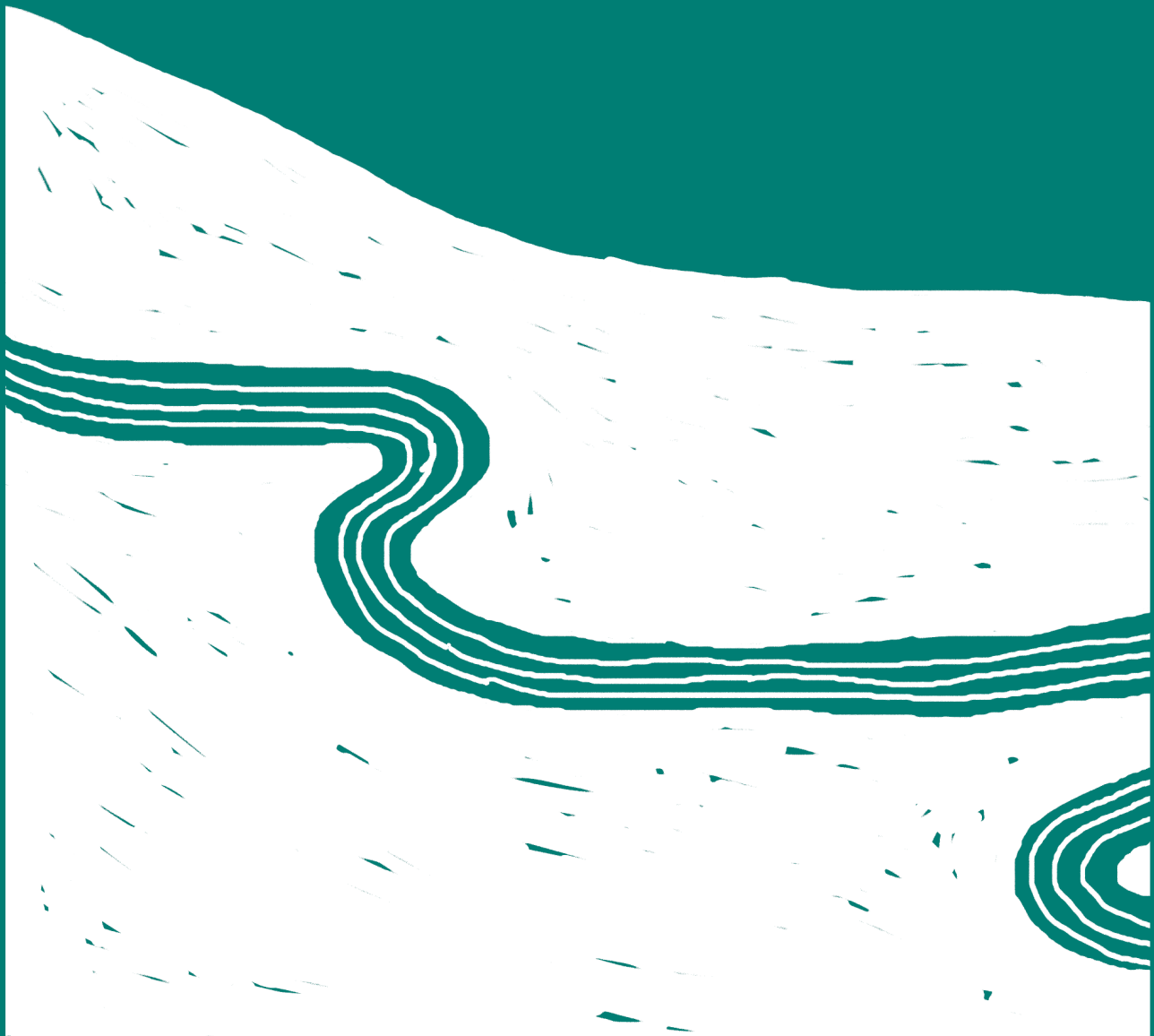
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**INNOVATION  
STORY  
NO. 5**

**STORY  
NICOLE  
NFONoyIM-HARA**

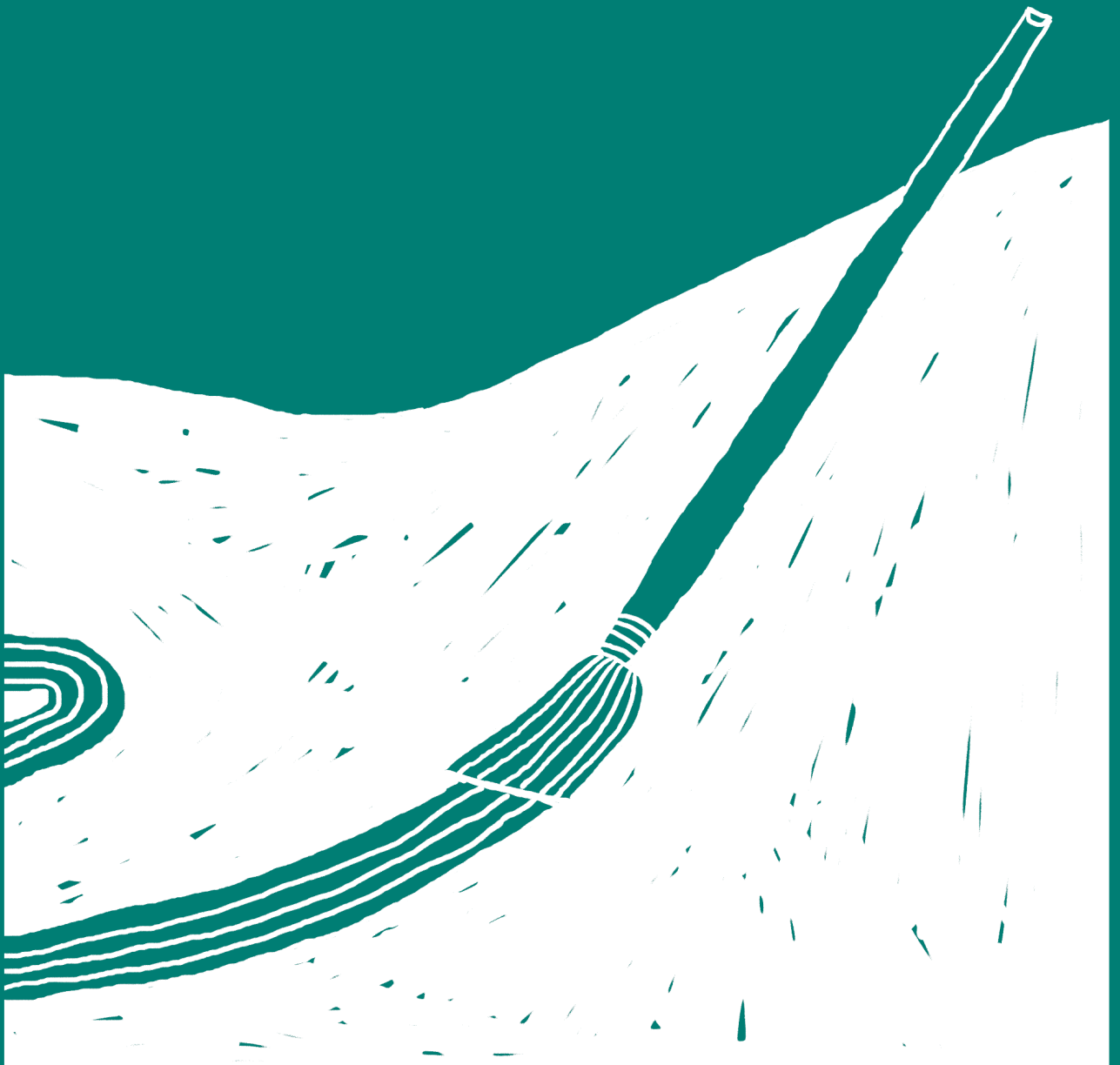
**LOCATION  
LANESBORO,  
MN**

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Not long ago, Lanesboro, like many small towns, was facing an aging population, lack of jobs and a vacant downtown. With assets of agriculture and natural beauty in tow, Lanesboro Arts, along with the town's creative community, started a renaissance with the Lanesboro Arts Campus.

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**ON AIR**

**LEADER**  
JOHN P. DAVIS

**BUDGET**  
\$250,000–\$499,999

**GEOGRAPHY**  
MINNESOTA

**YEARS ACTIVE**  
FOUNDED IN 1980

**THE LANESBORO ARTS CAMPUS IS STRATEGICALLY WEAVING THE ARTS INTO CITY INFRASTRUCTURE AND FOSTERING A MORE INCLUSIVE, VIBRANT COMMUNITY.**

**BREAKTHROUGH**

To help prevent its town from sliding into decline and to enhance quality of life and sustainability, the creative community in Lanesboro started an artistic renaissance. Lanesboro Arts patiently listened, then engaged locals with art in new ways, allowing entrepreneurs, city officials and residents to discover how creative initiatives could make a positive impact on the town's livability and economy.

Through a creative placemaking initiative called the Lanesboro Arts Campus, the organization set out to reimagine the entire town as an arts center. The project puts creativity at the center of the community's plan for economic and cultural sustainability. The initiative engages citizens as more than just art supporters, but as creators, too.

**ART  
EVERYWHERE**

**A SHARED VISION**

Instead of forcing a grand vision of the arts onto the town, Lanesboro Arts built its vision over time around the people who lived there. To use art as a creative solution in addressing or responding to local needs, Lanesboro Arts staff had to first learn who the community was and what it wanted to be.

**VALUES INCLUSIVITY**



**FOSTERS CREATIVITY**



**WELCOMES IDEAS**



**PLACEMAKERS: A RURAL  
COMMUNITY THRIVES ON  
THE ARTS**

The man stood in the warm glow of the gallery lights, his utility boots and pants caked with days-old mud. He stared at the wall in front of him, captivated by a large photograph of a farmhouse on display. As John Davis, executive director of Lanesboro Arts, approached him, the man pulled a small, faded photograph from his pocket and said, “It looks just like my grandfather’s farmhouse.”

This is one of John’s favorite stories. “It was an incredible moment. I thought, ‘Wow, this is why we do this work.’ This is why we suit up every day—to make real connections with people who would otherwise never step foot in an art gallery.”



That photography exhibition melded the rich agricultural roots of Lanesboro with its growing art scene. For the show, Lanesboro Arts selected regional artists who photographed the Lanesboro Sales Barn, a business where livestock auctions take place, and featured the photographs to represent the rural agricultural community. Fillmore County Cattlemen's Association grilled steaks provided by the Minnesota Beef Council, and the pub next door supplied drinks. "It was a big experiment in not only bringing the arts and the agricultural community together, but also engaging local businesses in supporting the arts," says John.

Lanesboro Arts is a multi-disciplinary arts organization at the heart of a growing creative movement in the small, southern Minnesota town of Lanesboro. The valley community, cradled by regal bluffs and the Root River, embodies John's guiding mantra that art should be everywhere. Non-gallery spaces throughout town host art events, and the landscape—from the storefronts and street lights to the bike trails—are covered in art. Yet the town's identity as an artistic haven was far from an overnight phenomenon. In the mid-1970s, Lanesboro shared a fate similar to other small, rural towns: population decline, economic decay, struggling farms, abandoned storefronts and waning community life. Since the early 1980s, the arts have been a key player in revitalizing the local economy. Local artists created the Lanesboro Arts Council and the Cornucopia Art Center, which later became Lanesboro Arts. The award winning Commonwealth Theater Company also opened its doors in 1989. Thanks to the completion of the 42-mile Root River State Trail in the early 1990s, tourism grew and thousands of bicyclers and outdoor enthusiasts flocked to the area to enjoy the growing cultural and artistic attractions in town.

The last three decades of growth in Lanesboro has provided a rich and sturdy foundation for exciting new developments. "Right now, as a community, there is an amazing foundation and we're moving forward—building the frame and putting up that house," says John.



### VALUES INCLUSIVITY

In 2009, Lanesboro Arts became the only organization in south-eastern Minnesota to welcome the Iraqi and American Reconciliation Project (IARP). The programming included an exhibition of Iraqi art, a reception featuring Iraqi cuisine and a town hall forum with 14 Iraqi delegates. By hosting artists from around the country and the world, Lanesboro Arts has opened up new opportunities for dialogue and cross-cultural exchange in its community.

**ART EVERYWHERE**

Today, Lanesboro Arts is at the forefront of implementing a city-wide economic and community development plan called the Lanesboro Arts Campus. The new campus will transform the walkways, historic buildings, streets, businesses, bike paths and public spaces in Lanesboro into places that showcase creativity and art. Honoring local history, identity and culture is a cornerstone of the plan.

“Lanesboro is a very special place. We’re not just designing a town; we’re making and creating together. We’re activating spaces by thinking of different ways to use them and move in them. We’re using what we’ve already built and the incredible things we already have and finding new approaches, new uses and new alternatives,” says John.

In a downtown parking lot, tourists will find large signs featuring Japanese haiku poems posted as part of the Poetry Parking Lot project Lanesboro Arts launched in 2014. The idea for the project began as a way for the organization to improve parking congestion and pedestrian safety through new informational signage and haiku poetry that would encourage visitors to park in the Poetry Parking Lot when they visited downtown. After the city council gave the go ahead, the organization invited residents to submit haikus. Acclaimed writer Ed Bok Lee selected the entries now displayed downtown for all to enjoy. The approval process was a slow one and there was skepticism about the potential impact of the signs. Yet, the project was more than just the final display of the poems. It deeply engaged community members as artists and involved the collaboration of city leadership and



local businesses. The parking lot has become a site of ongoing public art installations and art events.

Public projects like the Poetry Parking Lot re-energize city spaces and make the arts accessible to community members outside of the gallery. They invite Lanesboro community members and businesses to engage as artists, makers and supporters of the arts in their own right. Adam Wiltgen, program director at Lanesboro Arts, imagines the organization as a community center and collaborator. “We use the arts to connect our community. That work happens with businesses, schools, community members, youth, local artists and city leaders. The most exciting work we do happens outside the walls of buildings and through the lens of creative collaborations.” Every year the educational program, Surprise Sculpture, works with youth and adults to create public art installations all over town. In the summer of 2016, Lanesboro Arts partnered with local businesses that donated supplies for the program and offered locations for the art installations.

The Lanesboro Arts Campus seeks to build a strong local economy based on the collaboration and growth of both arts and businesses to drive tourism and investment. John is passionate about linking the arts with the town’s economic vitality and future growth. After Lanesboro Arts completed the initial phase of the arts campus, 10 new businesses opened in town; an estimated \$2 million in additional downtown investment followed shortly after. Now when investors or entrepreneurs need input or support on a potential development, they often go to Lanesboro Arts first.

“In addition to tourism, the goal is to make sure that our community members, families, young professionals and local artists want to stay here and see opportunities for growth in Lanesboro.”



### FOSTERS CREATIVITY

To make the community a place where people want to stay or move to, Lanesboro Arts has partnered with the school district to show local youth that creative careers are a viable option. In addition, the organization is currently working to develop a relocation program that invites artists and their families to make Lanesboro home. Thanks to the creative culture Lanesboro Arts continues to foster through its arts campus, several independent art initiatives have sprung up: a local dance and theater artist created a walking history performance highlighting important people, places and events in the town’s past; and a group of local artists started a studio tour and opened their workspaces to visitors on designated weekends.

Image: Lanesboro’s Historic Dam

**“WHEN I FIRST PROPOSED THE IDEA [OF THE LANESBORO ARTS CAMPUS] IT WAS REJECTED UNANIMOUSLY. IT TOOK EIGHT YEARS FOR THAT IDEA TO BECOME A SHARED VISION FOR THE COMMUNITY. IT WAS A SPARK.”**

**—JOHN DAVIS, LANESBORO ARTS**



**A SHARED VISION**

Before moving to Lanesboro in 2000, John lived in New York Mills, Minnesota and helped transform that community into one of the nation's top art towns. "It took me a while to be an advocate for the arts in any real public way. For a long time I was just the guy who painted houses to make a living. No one knew I had any interest in the arts," he says. "But just living in town and working there taught me so much about the community. I listened. I heard what people said, the needs they articulated and the concerns they had, and I started there. Using art as a solution or a response to those needs came from learning about who the community was and wanted to be."

When John arrived in Lanesboro, he faced several challenges, including local entrepreneurs and city leaders who didn't understand how the arts could be used as a tool to bring the community together and address its needs. Just as he had done in New York Mills, John started off slow. "I didn't just jump in and start changing things, forcing people into some grand vision for the arts. The arts campus vision didn't come out full grown. It's shaped by all the people in Lanesboro over the years. It took a whole lot of time and listening, meeting, building relationships and trust. We failed and heard 'no,' but kept at it."

Image: Poetry Parking  
Lot Sign



Projects like “Discover Sculpture, Explore Lanesboro” helped city leaders to see how the arts could be a vehicle for engaging community members in their history and culture. For the project, an artist worked with the town historian, area schools and residents to translate local stories into medallion sculptures that the artist then displayed around the town. “It was about creating significance and relevance for people and their everyday lives,” says John. Lanesboro Arts is rooted in moments of creative connection like this.

For Lanesboro Arts, the entire community is both audience and primary stakeholder. The town shares ownership of the organization’s vision for the arts campus, and in turn it remains committed and responsive to what the community needs or wants. Staff hosts community engagement sessions and shapes the group’s plans through community input. When a resident suggested building an amphitheater near the river instead of a sculpture park, Lanesboro Arts agreed to switch its plan in favor of the new idea that quickly gained community endorsement.

City leadership and local support isn’t always a given with community development initiatives like the arts campus, but the backing that Lanesboro Arts solidifies project after project reflects a remarkable shift in community culture. “The community is more open and welcoming of change,” says John. “Instead of just rejecting ideas outright, residents and city leaders are asking, ‘How can we make this happen here?’”

Through the shared vision of the arts campus, the people of Lanesboro are now their own advocates and leaders for the arts in their community. Each a builder of the town’s future and a maker of the place they call home.



### WELCOMES IDEAS

Through unique programs, staff invite the community to find creative, out-of-the-box solutions to community problems. Adam, a program director at Lanesboro Arts, recently organized a three-part event on housing that included a film screening, a discussion at the St. Mane Theater and an open house at a tiny house. “We wanted to help the community stimulate ideas and create solutions for housing in Lanesboro. As a community that attracts a lot of visitors and artists, flexible housing solutions are an interesting option. Our role is to encourage the community’s imagination of what is possible. We aren’t necessarily going to go out tomorrow and buy a lot to start a tiny house village, but our programs provide valuable space for those ideas and future solutions.” After Adam’s tiny house program, a city zoning official felt compelled to look into what it would take to support tiny-house living in Lanesboro.





Images: Mainstreet, artful way-finding signage, view of Lanesboro's sky at night, Executive Director John P. Davis