

Sixth-floor surprise: California couple's art gallery widens eyes in McCook

By Natalia Alamdari | December 9, 2022



FLATWATER FREE PRESS

MCCOOK – In a 100-year-old building in downtown McCook, push the round number six and an elevator ride takes you up, up, up to the highest floor in this railroad town's tallest building.

The elevator lurches to a stop. The doors slide open.

And there it is – an open, gutted concrete floor covered in hundreds of sculptures, paintings, art. There are glimmering benches and chairs pounded out of iridescent metal. Figures carved into discarded bits of wood. Hundreds of drawn, sculpted and stitched pieces of “outsider art,” whose creators have shown work in New York, Washington D.C., London.

The space is an explosion of color and materials and textures. It's a tour of contemporary art throughout America and the world. It's a four-hour drive from the closest major city, and it is oh-so-cool.

“People come off the elevator and are like, ‘Whoa, I didn't expect to see this in McCook, Nebraska,’ said Chad Graff, one half of the pair behind the gallery.

“Why not?”

Welcome to the 6th Floor Project, a contemporary art gallery in this southwest Nebraska town of 7,400. On the top floor of McCook's Keystone Business Center, the gallery is just a slice of Graff and wife Joann Falkenburg's enormous collection of art.

Here, Falkenburg and Graff are challenging the assumption that unique art spaces and talented artists don't exist in rural places like this one.

“We're compelled and inspired by unexpected artists. Artists who may not have had traditional training or traditional backgrounds,” Graff said. “But, somehow, when given the opportunity, really made amazing and beautiful work...they can't imagine their lives without the making and creating of art.”

Both Falkenburg and Graff are Nebraska natives – he, hailing from McCook, and she from Harrison, a town of 239 people 9 miles from the Wyoming border. But the pair has spent most of their adult lives in Oakland, California, Graff working as a lawyer and Falkenburg as a family doctor.

Traveling back and forth between McCook to see family and their home in California, the pair felt like they had a foot in two worlds, Falkenburg said. They'd be in the Bay Area, hearing people speak disparagingly about the Midwest and “flyover states.” Then, they'd be back in Nebraska, hearing friends and family speak disparagingly about the coasts.

In the years surrounding the 2016 election, it felt like “America started coming undone,” Falkenburg said. “We can talk about this, or we can be part of the solution and bridge that gap culturally.”

What better way to do that than through art, Graff said.



A visitor looks at art at the 6th Floor Project on Nov. 30. Photo by Staci Blomstedt for the Flatwater Free Press



Joann Falkenburg speaks to a visitor during the Nov. 30 event at the 6th Floor Project. Photo by Staci Blomstedt for the Flatwater Free Press

In 2018, when Graff's nephew showed the pair the empty sixth floor space, the vision became clear – transport their collection to small-town Nebraska, and share it.

For a year, they split their time between California and Nebraska to work on the gallery. Then the pandemic hit. To make the gallery a reality, the couple from the Bay Area, home to roughly 7.8 million people, decided in July 2021 to move to McCook, pop. 7,446 and an hour off the nearest interstate.

For Graff, it was a return to his hometown after 36 years away.

Growing up, he watched his father support local businesses as the owner of McCook National Bank. Graff and his ten siblings are still majority owners of what's now MNB Bank. His mother was a school board member, and frequent volunteer with her church and Meals on Wheels.

But he and Falkenburg spent 24 years living in California, longer than their childhoods in Nebraska. They know they're outsiders to McCook, Graff said, even with his family's roots.

"It's not that kind of, 'boy comes back home' story. It's more, we're attempting this bridge-making through art. We realize that part of that bridge needs to be us ourselves," Graff said. "To help launch these spaces, it made sense for us to be here and do it in earnest."

The collection itself is like a walk through the couple's lives leading up to their move to McCook.

There are the woven baskets and vibrant paintings of Navajo daily life, from the five years Graff spent as an English teacher on a reservation in Arizona and where Falkenburg did medical rotations with the Indian Health Service. It's where they watched Native artist Shonto Begay set up shop in the school library, painting for and with students. Begay's paintings are now a central part of their collection. And it's where their appreciation and support of local artists began.

There's the art they acquired in Oakland, after befriending the artists at Creative Growth Art Center, a place that "grabs ahold of you and never lets you go," Graff said.

Creative Growth is a studio for artists with developmental disabilities. Its artists have had their work displayed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Smithsonian. Falkenburg and Graff have come to know many of the artists whose art they've purchased, like Monica Valentine, who pins hundreds of multi-colored sequins and beads to cover foam shapes.

Valentine is blind and can "feel" the temperature of colors through her hands. When she meets new people, she asks their favorite color, and then describes how that color feels to her, Falkenburg said.

When you know the artist personally, "the art kind of comes to life," Falkenburg said. "It's like being with family."

There's art from Japan, Paris, all the far-flung places they've traveled to.



Chad Graff speaks to a group from Hitchcock County High School during an event at the 6th Floor Project on Nov. 30. Photo by Staci Blomstedt for the Flatwater Free Press



Visitors to the 6th Floor Project
Photo by Staci Blomstedt for the Flatwater Free Press

And art from Nebraska.

They own Rastus Snow's wooden benches made from fallen Nebraska trees in the Litchfield sawmill he bought after serving in Iraq. They have film photographs of the Great Plains, taken by 90-year-old Jack Stevens of McCook. And Lucas Kotschwar's oil paintings, worked on when he isn't farming near McCook.

Kotschwar often comes to the gallery. It feels like an escape, he said. A space to take his mind off the farming grind and worrying about corn prices.

"There's going to be a lot of people that go up to the 6th Floor and totally not get it, and not be interested or impressed," said Matt Sehnert, the longtime owner of famed area restaurant Sehnert's Bakery, which he sold last year. "But I've seen so many people who haven't had a place in rural Nebraska...the 6th Floor has been the place that they either were looking for, or that they found that they didn't even know they were looking for."

Beyond the gallery, Falkenburg and Graff own anywhere from "a couple hundred" to "about a thousand" pieces – the pair couldn't agree on a number, or whether to count wearable art like handmade jewelry and clothing.

In three years, their initial gallery idea has grown to take up five different spaces in McCook. There's the 6th Floor gallery. A community kitchen on the first floor of the same building. A building near the train station, where local art teachers host camps for kids.

Falkenburg and Graff recently purchased a former downtown Wells Fargo building to turn into another gallery and event space – the "Art Bank" is the current working name. They also own the Morrison building, where former governor Frank Morrison long had an office. Now the couple live in the building, where they have also created studio spaces for local and out-of-state artists.

Already, they've had out-of-state artists come to town for residencies, and formed a partnership with Maple St. Construct, an Omaha-based gallery. They hope to continue bridging the gap between coastal and Great Plains artists.

"We're aware of artists in urban areas being priced out of things, struggling for affordable studio space," Graff said. "Here's affordable space. Here's interesting landscape. And here's quiet and the opportunity to be left alone and make art."

With Sehnert, Falkenburg is also part of a team working to get part of downtown McCook certified as a Creative District by the Nebraska Arts Council, a move that would open the door to grant money and more community-building projects.

Falkenburg and Graff don't view their art collection as an investment. It's been built because they appreciate art and what artists do, Graff said. Their work in McCook is much the same – a way to support people through creativity.

"The return on investment may be decades," Falkenburg said. "We may never know if there's a kid that gets to come up to the 6th Floor to do an art program and that just is a vivid memory that changes them into their 30s or 40s. But it's



Two visitors check out a piece of art during an event at the 6th Floor Project on Nov. 30.

Photo by Staci Blomstedt for the Flatwater Free Press



Chad Graff speaks to a group from Hitchcock County High School during an event at the 6th Floor Project on Nov. 30.

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worth it to activate a space like this if it influences young people that way."

Not only is the 6th Floor a space for people already living in McCook, it's also a way of bringing people in, said Charlie McPherson, executive director of the McCook Economic Development Corporation.

Like most small Nebraska towns, McCook faces a shrinking population, having lost 7% of its population in the past 20 years. And while the main focus is on housing and jobs to attract new people, towns also need to focus on amenities, McPherson said, like arts and creative spaces.

Visiting the 6th Floor has become a regular stop when prospective employees interview for jobs at businesses like the YMCA and local hospital, said Ronda Graff, the coordinator of the McCook Community Foundation Fund and the couple's sister-in-law. Potential hires get to see the art, along with one of the best views in town.

"You use it, to put it bluntly, almost as a marketing tool," she said. "To show what we have, and also what is possible."

Rural America is at a tipping point, Chad Graff said. Some towns are going to make it, and others won't.

"We're standing on the shoulders of the people who built this 100 years ago," Graff said. "And it just goes one way or the other – either the bricks start to cave in and fall apart, or we take the next step of shoring it up. I think art is the way you do that."

A version of this article appeared in the Lincoln Journal Star, North Platte Telegraph, Norfolk Daily News, Hastings Tribune, Sioux City Journal, Grand Island Independent, Scottsbluff Star Herald, Kearney Hub, York News-Times, Fremont Tribune, Lexington Clipper-Herald, Summerland Advocate-Messenger, Columbus Telegram, and McCook Gazette, among other publications.

Appointments to see 6th Floor Project may be made by calling/texting (308) 340-7854 or e-mailing 6thfloormccook@gmail.com



A visitor peruses a book while surrounded by the art of the 6th Floor Project on Nov. 30.

Photo by Staci Blomstedt for the Flatwater Free Press