

Picturing the POSSIBILITIES

Two Iowa artists discover ways to use their education and training to reach out to communities and enrich lives



Sarah Grant-Hutchison, 1980 Iowa art graduate and art entrepreneur



Jennifer Litterer, 2002 journalism graduate and documentary photographer

In the small northeast Iowa town of Dougherty, past Main Street's four-way stop and around the corner from a radiator shop, sits a stucco-walled town hall that once brimmed with the Friday night dance crowd. These days, it is mostly a place to hold council meetings.

But for one Sunday afternoon last winter, the lonely building surged with new life. Inside, an unlikely collection of children, mothers, farmers, feed mill workers, and others gathered to celebrate, of all things, the opening of an art exhibit.

Many of the show-goers were subjects of the artwork on display. There was the Noss family, who make their living on a small farm. There were the three nuns who run Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Convent up the road from the town hall. There were the people from Main Street—a postal worker, a storeowner, and a banker, among others. And in the middle of this scene, 35mm camera strapped around her neck, was Jennifer Litterer, 2002 Iowa graduate in journalism and theatre arts from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. In all, more than 120 people showed up, in a community where the population has shriveled from nearly 200 in the 1970s to fewer than 80 today. They came to spend a few hours with Litterer and the series of 39 black-and-white photographs she created for an exhibit she calls *Heading to the End*.

Litterer started documenting her hometown for a photojournalism class, and the project grew into an honors thesis. After shooting 60 rolls of film of the people and places of Dougherty, Litterer wanted to bring her project to life in the troubled town where so many people had shared with her their fears and concerns.

"The town is dying," says Jennifer's mother, Becky Litterer.

With her husband, Larry, Becky Litterer is one of the few business owners left in Dougherty. For more than 20 years, she and Larry have run a repair shop and a small general store in a town whose shrinking tax base cannot pay for much-needed renovations to its well system. Dougherty still has a bank, a post office, a grain elevator, and a Catholic church, but Larry and Becky have been watching the losses mount.

"We've lost our hardware store, our one true grocery store, and a restaurant," Becky says. "With every one that goes, we lose a vital part of the community, and we'll never get it back."

In photographs like *Behind Main Street*, *Not an Exit*, and *Rusted Shut*, Jennifer Litterer wanted to capture this loss. Litterer, who plans to pursue graduate work in photography, says she has to hand it to Iowa photojournalism professor John Kimmich for opening her eyes to imaginative possibilities she otherwise might have missed.



“He diagnosed me with Midwestern Politeness, for which the cure was taking one step closer to people and letting them fill the frame,” she told show-goers during a brief program. “Being able to capture a town that won’t be here years from now was more important than anything else I could have done.”

Sister Walter Marie of the Blessed Sacrament Convent was among the admirers at the show.

“These are hard times for Dougherty,” she says. “But Jen’s show has brought so many friends and neighbors together in one place. This is something really good.”

DESIGNING A DREAM BUSINESS

The claylike pungency of drying ink and oil perfumes the building that sits on the edge of an industrial park in West Des Moines. By the natural light that pours through tall windows, workers are busy creating painted storybook scenes like those that decorate the towering glass-paneled doorways of their workplace.

This is Sticks. It’s not a factory but rather a studio, where imaginations are constantly churning. Artists and artisans of all kinds, from painters to carpenters, put their heads together in this building to produce original painted furniture.

Sticks is the brainchild of Iowa graduate

and fine-arts painter Sarah Grant-Hutchison. It’s a thriving business that has filled homes and galleries from Portland, Ore., to New York City with contemporary objects of art disguised as tables, chairs, beds, and other furnishings. And, it’s a business guided by the philosophy that good things come from creative people bouncing ideas off each other. Even the company name came from a festive brainstorming session fueled by wine and cheese and a romp through the thesaurus.

“I love the collaborative spirit that feeds our work,” Grant-Hutchison says. “I also love knowing I can offer so many artists a way to make a living doing what they love to do.”

Many of the people who work at Sticks got their start where Grant-Hutchison did—with degrees from Iowa in painting, drawing, design, or sculpture. In the 1970s, Grant-Hutchison studied with printmakers and University teachers Mauricio Lasansky, Virginia Myers, and Keith Achepohl in the School of Art and Art History in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Her fine-arts background, she says, contributes to the Sticks painterly style of brush strokes, mixed colors, and special effects created with tools like rags, scrapers, and even the palm of the hand.

“Growing up, I was interested in acting and in writing, too,” says Grant-Hutchison,

who grew up in Ames and graduated from Ames High School. “Art was a passion, but I never gave it much thought as a way to make a living.”

Now, she and partner Jim Leuders, along with 130 employees, are living proof that artists can make a living from their art—and with huge success. The business started from a small project, a wooden nativity set that Meredith Publishing Co. commissioned Grant-Hutchison to design for a *Better Homes and Gardens* specialty magazine in 1991. Twelve years later, the company boasts a long résumé of commissioned projects, a constant stream of orders for custom pieces, and a proud list of more than 100 galleries around the country that show and sell the furniture Grant-Hutchison and her team of artists dream up.

Some of Grant-Hutchison’s favorite works have been installation projects that have furnished libraries, restaurants, hospitals, and universities.

“I took from my teachers at Iowa the idea that the artist is not in this alone, that the artist is responsible over a wide circle of influence,” she says. “Through our work, we artists touch other lives. We can inspire, lift people up. That is our responsibility, and our reward.”

by Gary Kuhlmann



Top: Sarah Grant-Hutchison employs graduates of the University’s painting and drawing programs. Above: Journalism graduate Jennifer Litterer thanked the people of Dougherty, Iowa, for their help. “You were gracious to let me take your picture,” she said in prepared remarks at her exhibit opening. “This show is for you as much as for me. It took a community to transform a struggling, poor college student into an artist.” Bottom left: Prints from Litterer’s *Heading to the End* exhibit.