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Barn Raisers

How a local couple revived an old farmstead into a getaway that has since evolved as a stage for events that benefit artists and educational programs.

BY MO PERRY • PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAUREN KRYSTI

CHRIS EVERETT AND BILL UNDERWOOD were looking for a sanctuary. Their Minneapolis life was rich and full (Underwood is a lawyer for Target and Everett runs his own creative agency, KNOWN Branding), but they were looking for a retreat from their North Loop loft and busy, urban life. "There's such a big lake cabin culture here," Everett says, "but we're attracted to space and land."

Everwood Farmstead is a working farm, with chickens, beehives, and "wild prairie poodles," Bishop and Lucy. Part of the land is leased to a local farmer, who grows corn, hay, and alfalfa. Owners Bill Underwood (opposite page, on the left) and Chris Everett harvest an array of seasonal bounty from their garden plots, and eggs and honey from the chickens and bees.

At last fall's Cultivate, chef Jim Christiansen used produce from Everwood Farmstead and neighboring Piney Hill Farm to create a true farm-to-table feast. The menu included marinated heirloom tomatoes and beets with garlic shallot vinaigrette, coriander, and parsley; an egg bake with caramelized butternut squash, gruyere, and sage; eggplant pie with sesame, mint, and grilled greens; and squash custard broulée with whey ice cream.

It was the barn that initially drew them to check out the 57-acre former dairy farm in the Driftless region of Wisconsin in July 2010. As soon as they pulled into the driveway, they were captivated. "There's something so special about the energy of that piece of land," says Everett. "We hear it from our guests all the time." They put in an offer, and by October, the land—complete with the barn and two farmhouses—was theirs. They christened it Everwood Farmstead (a mash-up of their last names).

Saving the 100-year-old California redwood barn was first on the to-do list. The previous owner had knocked out the windows, essentially turning it into a refuge for wayward pigeons. Underwood donned a HAZMAT suit and carted dozens of wheelbarrows of pigeon poop out of the barn, and they hired a contractor to sand and coat the floors. "All the materials selected for the barn and home were beautiful, sturdy, and sustainable," Underwood says. "It just needed some love."

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As they restored the barn, it began to speak to them. "It's such an inspiring, church-like space," Everett says. "It felt like something wanted to happen there." The couple had been talking about legacy; they had agreed that kids weren't in the cards for them, and they wanted to find a way to honor and share their values, to carry the things they care about into the future. One of their most strongly shared passions is the arts (Underwood has served on the board of Twin Cities theater company Theater Latté Da for 12 years, and Everett is a graphic artist and musician), and that quickly emerged as a natural fit for the beautiful space they had uncovered. "Once the barn was cleaned up, we thought, 'Let's experiment, invite some artists out, and see if it's good for them and for us,'" Everett says.

In June of 2012, they invited director Peter Rothstein, actor Sally Wingert, composer Aaron Gabriel, and poet Patricia Kirkpatrick to spend a few days in a collaborative creative retreat at Everwood, culminating in a performance of a new, original work in the barn. "I'll never forget walking into the barn, a couple days before the show, and seeing four artists working and creating something together. I lasted about 16 seconds before I totally lost it in an ugly-cry fashion," Underwood says. Everett agrees: "From that moment on, we knew it was all

"Our theme for decorating the barn has always been, 'it's a barn,'" says Underwood. The authenticity and beautiful simplicity of the space add a rustic intimacy to the performances and events that take place there, and nature becomes the set, sound, and lighting designer.

Underwood and Everett rent out the barn for corporate and private events and weddings, with proceeds supporting the work of the foundation. The pair held their own wedding here two years ago, surrounded by friends and family.

worth it. It inspired us to keep going."

Since then, Everwood Farmstead Foundation (which was officially launched as a nonprofit in 2014) has hosted an average of four performances a year as part of its Artist Series, which presents a range of pay-what-you-can performances, with proceeds split equally between the performers and Everwood's Aspiring Artists Fund, which supports arts-focused educational programing in six counties of the Driftless area. Performances in the barn have included storytelling, poetry readings, opera, folk music, cabaret, theater, film, and dance—all of them enhanced by the magical quality and natural beauty of the venue. (When Twin Cities vocalists Christina and Jennifer Baldwin sang opera in the barn last May, an oriole bird outside the window joined in to

Local singer-songwriter Chris Koza performed at last year's Cultivate and came back this year to perform with his band Rogue Valley. "It's so intimate [here]," Koza says. "The music that I make sounds more appropriate in a barn. The way the frequencies bounce off the wood and travel around the room—it softens and enriches the music."

the delight of the audience and Jennifer, who gamely embraced the moment and made her song a duet.)

The Artist Series is part of the foundation's mission to "host inspiring spaces where artists can perform, teach, and work in a natural environment." Workshops hosted by visiting artists comprise the "teach" part of the mission and have included a writing workshop by the poet laureate of Oklahoma and a "holiday nature DIY creations" workshop, where participants worked with materials they foraged from the farmstead. The "work" part of the mission is planned for 2017, when artists stay at the farmstead for working retreats.

Last year, Everwood held its first Cultivate, an annual fundraiser to support the administrative and operational costs of the nonprofit. As 100 percent of the proceeds from the Artist Series and workshops are passed directly on to the artists and local educational programs, Cultivate (which last year featured music by noted singer-songwriters Chris Koza and Jeremy Messersmith, and a farm-to-table meal by Heyday chef Jim Christiansen) is the only event they host to fund the foundation itself and the artist retreats. "We hope Everwood Farmstead Foundation will go on long beyond us," Everett says. "It's all about the art of hospitality. We want artists to walk in and say, 'I'm going to be taken care of here.'" ■