

A sanctuary for storytellers

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Nestled in the rolling hills of western Wisconsin's Dunn County just outside of Glenwood City is a 57-acre expanse of farmland, forest and restored prairie grasslands. The idyllic setting is a place of tranquility and renewal for the couple who originally purchased the property as a refuge from the hustle and bustle of everyday city life.

Bill Underwood, a 1993 UW-Eau Claire political science graduate and 2014 Blugold Hall of Fame inductee, and his husband, Chris Everett, bought the former dairy farm in 2010 after searching for nearly two years for a personal retreat. Once they settled in and became aware of the property's potential, they realized the old farmstead could be destined for greater things.

Underwood, an attorney for Target Corp. in Minneapolis for the past 11 years, and Everett, a brand strategist and graphic designer who owns his own business in the Twin Cities, live hectic lives in the fast-growing North Loop neighborhood of Minneapolis during the week. Come the weekend, they escape to the quiet and solitude of their country home.

Making the discovery

"Originally, we weren't specifically looking for a farm," said Underwood, an 11-time first-team All-American and nine-time conference champion on the powerhouse Blugold swim teams from 1989-93. "While we were seeking a place for a retreat, we were attracted to properties with land and space rather than water. We visited the farm motivated by pictures of the near-perfect vintage barn. When we pulled into the driveway, the place spoke to us immediately."

Underwood and Everett immediately restored the main house and replaced the roof on the barn. They found that the barn, built in 1916 and constructed of California redwood, was a sound structure. After shoveling out years of "pigeon residency," they added sliding doors and windows on the east and west sides of the barn to maximize views and breezes.

"The weekend after it was finished, we hosted a small wedding there for one of our closest friends, and we began to see the potential of this beautiful, churchlike space," Underwood said. "The acoustics in the barn are incredible. Guests were moved by the space and the land as much as we were. After the wedding, we were inspired to think big. Our conversation turned to the concept of our legacy as a couple, and the early seeds of the Everwood Farmstead Foundation were planted."



The power of storytellers



Artists can have a particularly tough time forging the path to a successful, fulfilling career. Underwood and Everett believed that by creating the Farmstead Foundation, they would be able to provide artists with an opportunity to work, perform and teach while communing with the natural environment.

"We believe in the power of our storytellers," Underwood said. "In the end, we feel that they may be the ones who can actually make a real difference in the world. In a time when everything may feel out of control or hopelessly at odds, it's the arts that can build bridges and help us find our common humanity. A song, a play, a story, a piece of music can bring us together and build community in ways few other things can."

The couple hope to use several buildings on the property to accomplish the foundation's vision. Initially, the barn will be used as a performance and gallery space. Future plans include using the existing mother-in-law suite for an artist retreat and renovating the calving barn into an artist studio.

Underwood and Everett launched the Everwood Farmstead Foundation in 2014 and created a nine-member board of directors, with Everett serving as president of the board and Underwood as secretary-treasurer. The board's first pursuit was the continuation of the Artist Series, which the couple had started on their own in 2012.

"The Artist Series brings a wide array of artists to an underserved, yet sophisticated, rural audience and gives urban audiences and artists a unique venue," Underwood said. "In the first three years we hosted 11 events featuring such artists as Kevin Kling, Ten Thousand Things, Dan Chouinard, Rogue Valley and Sally Wingert. We want to present a wide variety of disciplines from music to dance to theater to storytelling."

The 2015 Artist Series season began May 30 with a performance by singer-songwriter Chastity Brown before a sold-out house, which translates to a crowd of 100 to 150 patrons depending on the art form.

"We are super fortunate to be able to be here and to welcome artists like Chastity Brown into our home and have her be our guest," Underwood said. "It gives back to us just as much as we put into it."

Half the proceeds from each Artist Series event goes to the artist while the other half is donated to a local school extracurricular program.

"In our first three seasons, the Artist Series provided over \$6,000 to Wisconsin school programs," Underwood said. "This year the board suggested the foundation donate the proceeds from the entire season to one organization to magnify the impact of the gift. We chose Launchpad, an exciting program of the Wisconsin School Music Association."

It's about the artists

The artists who perform as part of the series are invited to retreat at the farm the weekend of their performance.

"We encourage them to spend some quality time on a hammock, hike the property, visit the beehives or get to know one of the 14 resident chickens," Underwood said. "Some of our favorite moments at the farm over the past four years involve our time visiting with the artists."



New this year is the Artist Workshop, which gives artists an opportunity to teach.

"Three incredible artists are joining us in our inaugural season providing instruction on watercolors, poetry and breaking through creative boundaries," Underwood said.

Still to come in 2017 is the Artist Retreat, which Underwood says will allow artists to live on the property for a period of one to eight weeks to stimulate the creative process.

"They'll be able to finish that book, write those final three songs or complete a painting," he said.

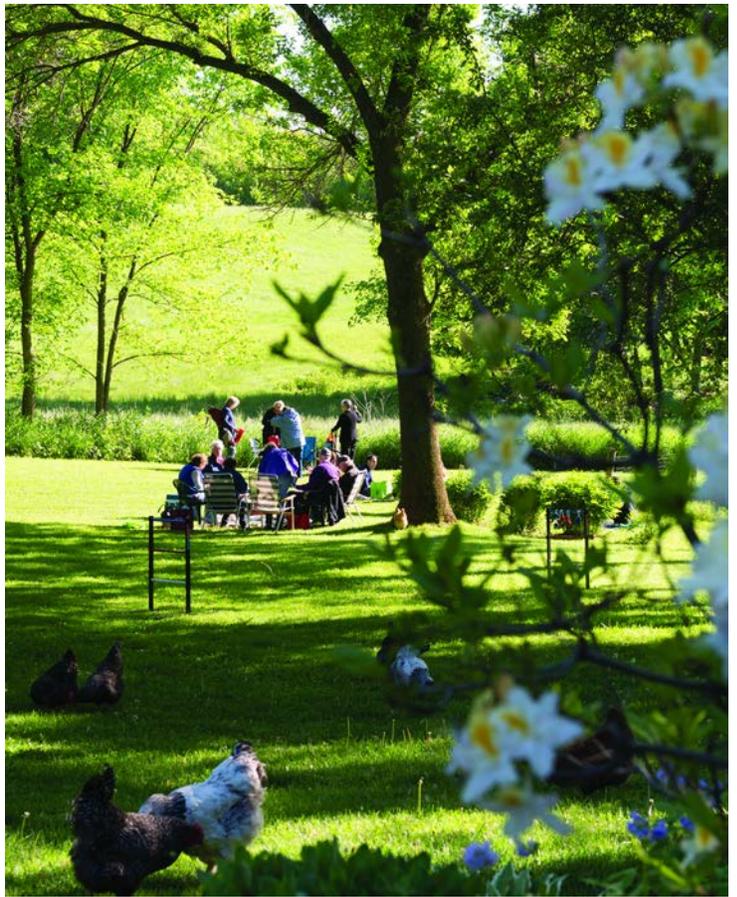
Providing a place for artists to work, teach and perform is at the core of Everwood Farmstead's mission, Underwood said, adding that he and Everett believe that the creative spirit is present in everyone.

“We’ve designed a space to regard both the professional artist and aspiring artist,” he said. “Each inspires the other, and we all benefit. There is a powerful intersection that happens at the farm — nature, art and community coming together. When this happens, something great is bound to happen.”

For more information about the Everwood Farmstead Foundation and its programs, visit www.everwoodfarmstead.com. To be added to the Artist Series email list, send a note to info@everwoodfarmstead.com (<mailto:info@everwoodfarmstead.com>).

Photo captions:

1. Bill Underwood and Chris Everett kicking back on the farm.
2. Chastity Brown performed before a sold-out crowd in the farmstead barn.
3. Singer-songwriter Chastity Brown opened Everwood Farmstead’s 2015 Artist Series season.
4. One of the 14 resident chickens.
5. Visitors to Everwood Farmstead picnic and walk the grounds before an Artist Series performance.



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