

Couple opens old Glenwood City farm as retreat for artists

Album release concert is Saturday

By [Samantha West](#) | Leader-Telegram staff

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GLENWOOD CITY —It had been two years since Minneapolis singer-songwriter John Mark Nelson had released new music — too long — but he couldn't.

"For the first time ever I kept hitting creative walls," Nelson said in a phone interview in late August. "I just felt like I wasn't saying anything new ... so I just kind of had to walk away from it."

So that's what he did — but he didn't give up.

Instead, he packed a bag, some guitars and recording equipment and headed east, exchanging his native Twin Cities for a 101-year-old former dairy farm nestled among the rolling green hills of western Wisconsin, just a few miles outside of Glenwood City.

After four days at the barn spent writing, recording and creating day and night — Nelson estimates he worked for about 14 hours a day — what emerged was his latest album, appropriately titled “Four Days Away.”

“My original hope was maybe two or three acoustic songs, but I just got there and the creativity started to flow and the space was really inspiring,” Nelson said. “... To create in open air, barn doors open, bees flying around, birds chirping was really great because there wasn’t any specific goal or need that I was trying to accomplish, I was just creating because I wanted to create.”

Although Nelson’s endeavor marked the first time an artist produced an album within the barn, it wasn’t the first time the barn had been part of art in the making.

The Everwood Farmstead Foundation’s purpose is to host an inspiring, natural space for artists to perform, teach and work, while also raising money for young artists in local public schools, Bill Underwood and Chris Everett, owners of the barn, said.

“When artists are happy and healthy and are doing good work, it’s good for everybody,” Everett said, perched on a stool in the large, California redwood barn on a sunny afternoon in late August. “So ultimately, this is all for the benefit of the community.”

But this wasn’t Everett and Underwood’s original plan for the barn.

From farmstead to foundation

The couple, who have been together for 13 years and married for three, live what Everett calls a “very urban life” working and living in downtown Minneapolis — Everett as a brand strategist and graphic designer and Underwood an attorney for Target.

Everett and Underwood began to crave nature and a retreat from the hustle and bustle of the city.

After years of searching for the perfect place, the couple eventually discovered the Glenwood City farm. Although the 57-acre property was run down, Everett and Underwood remember being instantly struck by the beauty of the big, red barn, beautifully rustic and exactly what they needed.

"It was love at first sight," Everett said of the property, which they named "Everwood," as a combination of both their last names. "We just fell head over heels for this property."

After restoring the property, replacing the roof on the barn, adding sliding doors and windows to the structure as well as furnishing the main house, the couple settled into their new personal retreat. Soon, they realized the property could be much more than that.

"We talked a lot about legacy ... and about what are we going to do on this Earth and how are we going to leave it," Underwood recalled. "We're both big supporters and lovers of the arts, so it just kind of evolved. ... We saw how people reacted to this space, and we just kind of started dreaming about what also might happen in this space."

Their project soon grew and the idea for the foundation came to be.

"It was kind of a big experiment," Everett said. "Is it good for us, is it good for the artists, is it good for the community? And it seemed after that first year, we had three events, it just felt like a big resounding yes for all three of them."

The foundation now

Since the launch of the foundation, in its sixth season and third as a nonprofit, the foundation has hosted John Mark Nelson, Jeremy Messersmith, Chastity Brown and other notable musicians from the Minneapolis music scene for performances.

Writers, dancers and actors also have graced the barn stage in the midst of fireflies in early summer or with their breaths fogging before them while performing in the unheated barn in winter.

“There hasn’t been an art form we haven’t explored,” Underwood said. “And that was really important to us to have a variety as much as we could.”

The foundation also hosts workshops for aspiring artists and will officially begin hosting artist retreats next year, as Underwood and Everett are currently building another house on the property.

Half the proceeds raised from the performances — about \$15,000 total so far — benefit art programs at local public schools in Dunn, St. Croix, Polk, Barron, Pierce and Pepin counties. Art teachers are invited to apply, and the board selects one to award every performance.

Joan Bartz, a member of the foundation board and a neighbor to the barn, said she was inspired to get involved immediately upon hearing about it from the couple.

“I think it’s really neat the connection of the rural and the urban and bringing that together. Those who are familiar with seeing the arts in the cities, in a whole different venue, get to come out here and see it in this wonderful setting,” Bartz said. “And those of us who don’t like to drive out to the city and don’t get to enjoy the arts as much get to enjoy it right in our backyard.”

For Nelson, who has taken part in every service the farmstead has to offer, not only does the cause motivate him to be part of it, but also Everett and Underwood’s overwhelming and contagious passion for their project is inspiring.

“The depth of their love (for the barn and cause) is evident,” Nelson said. “You can tell they really love the space they’ve created, so that love translates to the community they bring into it.”

Nelson’s album release performance will be hosted from 4 to 6 p.m. today at the farm.

Contact: samantha.west@ecpc.com, on Twitter @SamanthaWest196