

Paducah, Kentucky

For an ARTful Good Time

By Colleen Birch Maile

Life is a dream come true for Paducah artists Charlotte and Ike Erwin. The couple live and work in a renovated 5,000-square foot, brick, Queen Anne home in a spiffy historic district. Hibiscus bloom in the garden. Neighbors are friendly. Fine dining and downtown shops are within walking distance. So is the local performing arts center where Broadway touring companies and big-name acts stop on their way to Memphis or St. Louis. Life is so good it's hard to believe that ten years ago the couple contemplated leaving this charming river town.

Ike, an artisan bookbinder who grew up in Paducah, recalled, "Nothing was happening for us. There were other artists here but we were a scattered group of individuals making our own way." Charlotte, a nationally recognized multi-media artist, had closed her Working Artists Studio and Mocha Lisa Coffee Bar. Ike explained that the studio "had been an opportunity for artists just out of college to come and have a place to work and show their art. But it just wasn't paying the rent. So we downsized and started a frame shop. We thought about moving. Then we heard rumblings about an artist relocation program."

The rumblings turned to reality and in August 2000 the Paducah Artist Relocation Project was born. The goal: to transform Paducah's neglected LowerTown neighborhood into a haven for accomplished artists. The Erwins were the first to buy in. Ike explained, "The people behind the program—Mark Barone, an artist who lived in LowerTown and could see its potential, and Tom Barnett, the city manager at the time—were not from here. They didn't have the mindset that 'this is the way things are and will always be.' They were



Ike and Charlotte Erwin were the first artists to buy into the LowerTown renaissance. They're shown here with one of the fine, artisan books Ike produces. This work often features marbled papers and fabric art created by Charlotte.

just on fire. So was the mayor, Albert Jones. When you spoke with them they could deliver the dream and help you see that this program was not only possible it was destined for success."

Barone, who now consults with other communities attempting to replicate Paducah's renaissance, placed ads in national arts magazines. The city established relocation incentives. The homegrown, privately held Paducah Bank and Trust Company took a risk, making loans based more on potential than appraisals. In 2002, the Erwins took possession of a house that they'd long admired for its possibilities. The 1898 structure featured a charming wrap-around porch and turret room but was in disrepair.

Despite the rigors of renovation, Ike maintains the process was not difficult. "The city made it easy for us to believe in this. The bank made it easy. Soon artists were coming from all over the country

and we realized that we were building a place where artists belonged."

Today, that sense of community runs deep according to William Renzulli, a Maryland physician and self-taught painter who moved to LowerTown shortly after the Erwins. Renzulli whose painting is featured on this edition's cover, spent his working life combining art and medicine before giving up his Maryland practice to make the move. "We bought a shell of a house, gutted by fire," he said. "There were no windows, no doors. I am sure my wife's friends had a contract out on my life when they saw the photos." In Maryland, the Renzullis

CARYL: PADUCAH VISITORS BUREAU AND BRYERPATCH STUDIO



Cover artist William Renzulli produced a series of posters commemorating historic Paducah buildings such as the ones shown here.

lived on 18 acres at the head of the Chesapeake Bay. "It was beautiful but I was looking for more of a community. When I got to Paducah I was just in awe of the energy everyone had for this project but I still don't know that any of us, in the beginning, thought it could take off like it did. The first year there were eight of us, the next year 16; it just kept growing."



Internationally acclaimed textile artist Caryl Bryer Fallert was well acquainted with Paducah as the site of the National Quilt Museum before making the move to LowerTown.

Now 50 working artists, all with national reputations, live and work in LowerTown, including Caryl Bryer Fallert, an internationally known fine-art quilter with a book-length roster of awards to her credit. The self-proclaimed, life-long nomad also lauded the ease of her relocation process. "The city was in charge and it had someone whose job it was to work with us. He put me in his pickup and drove me all around LowerTown showing me properties. He introduced me to the banker who introduced me to the lawyer who introduced me to the accountant. Everyone was so enthusiastic."

Bryer Fallert did not need to be sold on Paducah. She's been coming to the American Quilters Society's annual show just a few blocks from LowerTown since 1984. The event is held at



PAINTING: WILLIAM RENZULLI

William Renzulli and one of his whippets enjoy the casual atmosphere in his Paducah studio.



Caryl Bryer Fallert created *Feather Flower #2* for the World Series of Quilting Challenge Alzheimer's Art Quilt Initiative.



The National Quilt Museum in Paducah is home to an impressive, permanent collection of fine art quilts including *Birds of a Different Color* by Paducah LowerTown resident Caryl Bryer Fallert, the only three-time winner of the coveted American Quilters Society Best of Show, Purchase Award. The background quilt is *Air Show* by Jonathan Shannon.



This close-up of the quilt's detail shows the intricacy of Bryer Fallert's work. The quilt was made as part of an effort to raise funds for Alzheimer's research and is the second in a series of original abstract floral forms that borrow design elements from the award-winning artist's Feather Study series of quilts. Bryer Fallert also designed the fabric.

the impressive National Quilt Museum. Proximity to that facility solidified her decision to make the move. "We had lived in a Chicago suburb for 27 years while I traveled the world as a quilting instructor and United Airlines flight attendant. And while I knew who my neighbors were in Chicago, there wasn't a sense of community. My husband wanted to retire and put down roots some place warmer, and he also wanted to have a place in the country. I realized that if you're going to have a gallery and put on workshops, then you need to be in a place that has other attractions. In Paducah there are lots of antique shops and boutiques and the [Luther F. Carson Four Rivers] performing arts center. I have traveled all over the world my whole adult life and Paducah's restaurants are world-class. There are no chains in Paducah. As a businessperson, being adjacent to the quilt museum and having all the other attractions made a lot of sense. My husband found a farm he loved just 45 minutes from LowerTown. So all our needs were met. Unfortunately, my husband died a year-and-a-half after we made the move."

Bryer Fallert moved to her LowerTown studio and whole-heartedly embraced small town life. "Especially having lost my life partner, it's wonderful to be part of a community that is like family. We get together for potlucks and openings. There is so much to do. I can walk to a nice restaurant and a Broadway show at the Carson Center. The art museum is downtown, and there's a great movie theater that hosts an international film festival every



Luther F. Carson Four Rivers performing arts center

year. Paducah has a long-standing cultural base. If they didn't care about the arts here before we arrived, we never would have been invited."

Renzulli agrees that the lifestyle is "exceptional beyond imagining. My day is my own. I might work as hard as I did as a doctor but I can set the psychological tone. I have a nice porch. I cook a lot of pasta. We've served more people dinner in this house than we did in the past 20 years [elsewhere]." However, he acknowledged that Paducah's status as a viable arts market remains to be seen. "You certainly have to sell yourself here just like anywhere else. Some artists live here and do the show circuits; some supplement their income with workshops or framing; some market through other galleries, but for us all Paducah is a great place to live." ■

IMAGES: COURTESY PADUCAH VISITORS BUREAU

QUILTS: ©CARYL BRYER FALLERT

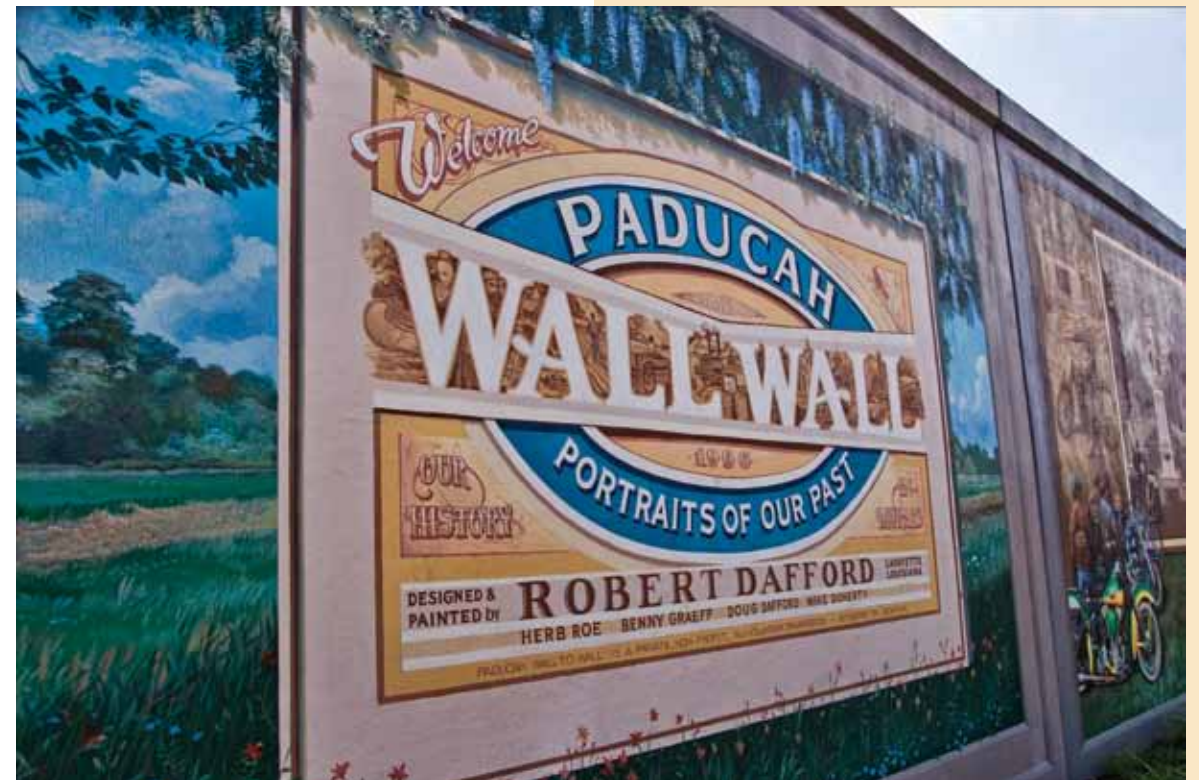
BEFORE AND AFTER IMAGES: PADUCAH RENAISSANCE ALLIANCE

IF YOU GO: Plan Ahead.

Most Paducah galleries and many restaurants are closed on Sundays and Mondays making Fridays and Saturdays the best days to visit. The Second Saturday of the month is recommended. That's when all the artists open their studios. Quilters will want to be in Paducah during the National Quilt Show, April 27 - 30 next year. More than 30,000 quilters attend—doubling the town's population.

LowerTown is both home and workspace for 50 artists. If you happen to visit Paducah when their galleries are closed simply ring the bell. If someone is home you'll likely get a personalized tour. If no one answers, phone the artist and schedule an appointment. LowerTown is long on hospitality.

Paducah's rich history comes to life in a series of more than 50 murals adorning the seawall along the Ohio River. It depicts topics ranging from Native American life to steamboats and river barges. Paducah's location at the confluence of the Tennessee and Ohio rivers continues to influence the community. The murals will be retained as part of a new riverfront project and marina.



Before and after. The LowerTown Artists' Relocation project's transformation of structures such as the one shown here has received numerous awards including the American Planning Association Award for a Special Community Initiative and the James C. Howland Award for Urban Enrichment.

PADUCAH:

Continuing to Think Beyond the Box

Paducah is a small town with a big reach. While its population hovers around 30,000 the city serves as a hub for more than 200,000 residents of western Kentucky and southern Illinois. It is also a major transportation center and is home to several barge and shipping companies.

The Artist Relocation Project stabilized the once troubled LowerTown neighborhood and is currently administered by the quasi-governmental Paducah Renaissance Alliance. While a few available properties remain, the city now applies its "outside the box" attitude to other projects. A more traditional neighborhood renewal program is underway in the Fountain Avenue district. A "Business Concierge" position was created to assist companies or entrepreneurs contemplating expansion or relocation. A \$50-million riverfront project starts this fall with a



new promenade and marina. Plans are in the works for a hotel to supplement the community's ample supply of bed and breakfast inns.

There's also a grand effort underway to build on Paducah's waterway heritage. "I didn't know it until I moved here, but Paducah sits at the confluence of four rivers—the Ohio, Tennessee, Clarks and Cumberland. It's the only place on the planet where that happens," Caryl Bryer Fallert explained.

BUILDINGS: PADUCAH VISITORS BUREAU

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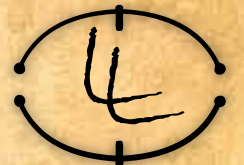
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Creative Movement

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