

Arts | Entertainment | Lifestyle | Things to Do

The 40-foot-tall, hand-carved limestone chimney is a highlight of the Sharon Lynne Wilson Center for the Arts' lobby.

Home Is Where the Art Is

The Sharon Lynne Wilson Center celebrates 20 years of arts enrichment in Milwaukee's western suburbs.

By **LAURA BENGIS**

The Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra performing at the Harris Theater



Cafeteria by day, auditorium by night, *cafetorium* is a term familiar to any Elmbrook School District grad before 2003. Without dedicated fine arts spaces in the schools, the district's performances were taken on the road to local churches and private rental spaces or presented in cafeterias to parents seated in metal folding chairs.

But in 2002, Brookfield's Sharon Lynne Wilson Center for the Arts made the cafetorium a thing of the past. And that's not all it did for the community.

Affectionately referred to as a "fine arts freeway" by co-founder Kate Wilson, the Sharon Lynne Wilson Center now carries the Milwaukee arts conversation from the lakefront to Lake Country, presenting professional performances, work by regional visual artists and educational arts programming to Milwaukee's western suburbs.

A special season celebrating the center's 20th anniversary has welcomed back several past favorites among its national and international performing artists. Also tied to the milestone, the center launched the Wisconsin Artists Greenroom Series showcasing local musical talent.

Prior to the center's opening, suburban audiences trekked Downtown for dynamic arts

offerings. Now, those performances and other programs from Milwaukee's professional arts organizations happen in their local community. The Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra stages an annual holiday show at the Wilson Center, while organizations like First Stage Children's Theater and the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music run classes for young artists in its studio spaces.

The center's relatively cozy 9,000-square-foot, 613-seat Harris Theater allows audiences to connect with artists, notes Susan Reed, director of development. Similar concert experiences in Downtown Milwaukee typically include audiences in the thousands. "I'm just blown away by the quality of the performers and the quality of the artists that we bring in and that intimate experience we allow and have here," Reed says.

In the past two decades, the center has welcomed artists with a haul of Grammy and Tony awards between them, including Audra McDonald, The King's Singers, Anaïs Mitchell and Richard Marx.

The center makes the most of its idyllic setting amidst Mitchell Park's 400 acres of prairie and woods with two outdoor performance spaces that host the picnic-style

How It Got the Name

As fundraising efforts for the fledgling arts center waned in April 1998, its board began discussions of downsizing or altering the project. Don Wilson, retired vice chairman of investment firm Fiduciary Management, and his wife Kate read an article about the center's halt and came forth in May with a defining gift that restored the project's momentum – and gave it its name. The couple's gift was in honor of Don's first wife, Sharon Lynne Wilson, an arts education advocate who loved children, family and the Milwaukee community. She died of breast cancer in 1995.

Upcoming March events

FRIDAY, MARCH 4
Reilly

The Wisconsin-based band plays traditional, contemporary and original Celtic/Irish music as well as some Americana.

FRIDAY, MARCH 18
Sam Ness

The award-winning singer-songwriter (and native of Sauk City) has a sound rooted in Americana and folk.

SUNDAY, MARCH 20
Frank Almond & Adam Neiman

Almond's 1715 Lipiński Stradivarius inspires this evening of music, based partially on *A Violin's Life, Volume 3*, the former Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra concertmaster's recording exploring his violin's history and lineage, with pianist Neiman also featured.

Starry Nights free summer concert series, introduced in 2012, and the Cafe Colonnade Concerts featuring Wisconsin musicians, added in 2020 to safely support the arts during the pandemic shutdown. This year, an interactive sculpture garden in Mitchell Park will join permanent installations by local artists on the grounds.

While the center is well known for its live performances – particularly jazz – director of education Peter Mol says audiences don't typically realize the entirety of the center's mission, specifically its focus on arts education.

"Everybody wants to be creative, and everybody has a spark of creativity," Mol says. "We try to stoke that spark, to make it grow, to promote you to go out and create, to get you to go out and advocate, so that spark continues on for generations."

Altogether, the center aims to deliver "a lifetime of arts education and experiences," as the center's mission says.

"It's really made me develop and grow as a person," says longtime patron and supporter Carrie Matteson. "I don't ever want to stop changing, exposing myself to learning new things. And I think that I can do that at the Wilson Center." ●



A student at one of the Wilson Center's visual art classes.