

WIGCOT

GREEN BAY 2023



GOVERNOR'S TOURISM AWARDS

DREAM

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2023 Awards Presentation

GOVERNOR'S TOURISM AWARDS

Wisconsin tourism continues to grow because we DREAM BIG. The Governor's Tourism Awards recognize individuals, businesses and destinations that turn big dreams into exceptional results, leaving a lasting impact on Wisconsin's tourism industry. Congratulations to each of the 2023 nominees in our six award categories.

The Governor's Tourism Rising Star Award - This award will be presented to an individual who is new to the tourism industry, within the last five years, and has shown leadership, commitment and a passion for Wisconsin's tourism industry.

The Governor's Tourism Innovation Award - This award will be presented to a business or community that has implemented a new strategy that has positively impacted their organization or destination through an innovative approach in technology, sustainability, adaptivity and/or the implementation of best practices (formerly the Stewardship Award).

The Governor's Tourism Arts, Culture and Heritage Award - This award will be presented to a business or destination that showcase the arts, culture or heritage for the enhancement of the tourism experience and economic well-being of a community.

The Governor's Tourism Service Excellence Award - This award will be presented to a business or an individual that has achieved significant success and growth by providing exceptional service to their customers and a strong, charitable involvement in their community.

The Governor's Tourism Diversity, Equity, Accessibility and Inclusion Award - This award will be presented to a business or destination that has demonstrated leadership in raising awareness or facilitating change to build a more inclusive and welcoming environment for visitors to Wisconsin.

The Governor's Tourism Legacy Award - This award will be presented to an individual who has shown a long-lasting and permanent contribution to the industry over the years. A nominee for this award should have 25 years or more of distinguished service to the tourism industry, 15 years or more of which has been in Wisconsin.

The following nominees guide our collective efforts, enhance our reputation and inspire our greatness. Please join us in saluting the 2023 Governor's Tourism Awards nominees.

RISING STAR NOMINEES

Aaron Eickhorst, Fox Hill RV Resort

Aaron Eickhorst has a long history in the tourism industry, growing up in a family of resort owners and now owning Fox Hill RV Resort south of Wisconsin Dells. He prioritizes providing top-notch customer service and memorable experiences for his guests. Aaron has enhanced the resort's facilities, demonstrates a commitment to customer satisfaction and works to elevate the state's reputation as a top-tier destination for travelers. His combination of experience, expertise and commitment make Aaron a standout figure in the industry.

Abigail Martin, Farm Wisconsin Discovery Center

Raised on a Milton dairy farm, active in agricultural organizations through school and a former Alice in Dairyland, Abigail Martin's role as program manager at the Farm Wisconsin Discovery Center is a natural fit. Abigail manages the Manitowoc facility's programming, along with overseeing its popular birthing barn. The position requires Abigail to develop engaging programming to draw visitors to Farm Wisconsin, including the creation of events like Alpaca Llama Extravaganza and Cranberry Jamboree that tell the story of the state's agricultural heritage. She also oversees the organization's marketing and serves as its spokesperson.

Alex Zimdars, VISIT Milwaukee

Within three years in the industry, Alex Zimdars has cemented herself as a creative engine on VISIT Milwaukee's marketing team. Starting as graphic designer and becoming the creative marketing manager this past summer, Alex has played a powerful role in curating the visual aesthetic of the organization as a brand. She's also helped orchestrate VISIT Milwaukee's popular series of promotional passes like the Brew City Beer Pass and the Milwaukee Cheese Curd Pass, along with organizing partnership giveaways from scratch and developing the branding for the newly established Milwaukee Theater District.

Bethany Jurewicz, Garver Events

Bethany Jurewicz approaches programming at the Garver Feed Mill - an events space and business incubator in Madison - through a creative, inclusive lens. As co-owner of Garver Events and its director of public programming, Bethany focuses on unique approaches to visual, edible and audible arts. She came up with ideas for safe, outdoor arts programming at the start of the pandemic and has hosted events geared toward Madison's diverse communities like Femmfestival. These activities and programs have helped establish Garver Feed Mill as one of the top places to visit in Madison.

Carey Hegge, Explore La Crosse

In her short time as director of tourism at Explore La Crosse, Carey Hegge has established herself as a force in the industry. She oversees the day-to-day operations and staffing of five welcome centers in the region, coordination of

thousands of volunteer hours, distribution of visitor guides, the development of Trolley Tours and more. Having started her career in scheduling for the health care field, Carey seamlessly transitioned into the tourism industry, demonstrating a contagious enthusiasm for promoting tourism and approaching any given situation with optimism and confidence.

Forest County ATV Association

Committed to the promotion and expansion of ATV and UTV trail riding, the Forest County ATV Association has been an advocate for its members and trail riding since forming in 2001. In response to growing interest in trail riding, the Association has developed several new trails to draw visitors to the Northwoods. The organization works with local municipalities and adjoining counties to grow the trail system by allowing the use of town and county roads for ATVs and UTVs. The Association acts as a solitary group working toward a goal of inviting visitors to enjoy the scenery, people and attractions of Forest County through trail riding.

Heidi Prestwood-Funkhouser, Sparta Area Chamber of Commerce

Heidi Prestwood-Funkhouser joined the Sparta Area Chamber of Commerce as executive director in May 2020, immediately facing the challenges and obstacles brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Her initial focus was on safe, public programming, such as Concerts in the Park and a new event called Open Air Market, to spur visitation to the Monroe County community. Heidi has also worked to refresh the Chamber’s website to make it more inviting, added social media channels, and continuously seeks new ways to entice visitors to Sparta.

Heidi Zimmer, Wild Rice Retreat

As a real estate professional with over 25 years of experience in the field, Heidi Zimmer entered the hospitality industry by founding Wild Rice Retreat in Bayfield. The \$10 million arts and wellness retreat embraces sustainable practices, innovative design and the guest experience. Heidi, a yoga and meditation teacher, brings a compassionate, inclusive approach to her work. Since opening in 2021, Wild Rice Retreat has received national media attention, shining a spotlight on the one-of-a-kind retreat and Bayfield. Through her work, Heidi is committed to supporting the surrounding community and her employees and bettering the lives of guests.

Holly Tierney, Fort Atkinson Area Chamber of Commerce

Holly Tierney has already made a large impact as tourism manager for the Fort Atkinson Area Chamber of Commerce since starting the position in August. She assessed the Chamber’s needs, created attainable goals and surpassed those goals, including growing the organization’s social media presence by 20%. Holly also serves as president of the Jefferson County Area Tourism Council, helping to promote visitation to not just the city but the entire county. She has brought new ideas to promoting the area, such as a jingle contest and a grant process to streamline tourism proposals for driving interest in Fort Atkinson.

Jessica Jacobs, Marcus Hotels & Resorts

Jessica Jacobs has seamlessly transitioned from a previous career in finance to the hospitality industry, rising through the ranks at Marcus Hotels & Resorts to become an area account executive at the Milwaukee-based company. In her position, Jessica is on the sales team representing The Pfister Hotel, Saint Kate - The Arts Hotel and the Hilton Milwaukee City Center. She regularly attends trade shows to sell the properties, City of Milwaukee and Wisconsin to meeting and convention planners. She has fully embraced the hospitality industry, learning all she can about hotels, sharing recommendations and insights from her personal travels across the state, and forming relationships with her industry peers.

Katie Apfel, Discover Green Bay

In a short time as Discover Green Bay's digital marketing specialist, Katie Apfel has invigorated its social media presence, grew followers by nearly 21,000, set records for views on blog content and enthusiastically co-hosted a new podcast. Katie's passion for marketing began in high school when she started a freelance digital and social media marketing company even before graduation. At Discover Green Bay, she has established a reputation for constantly seeking new and unique ways to share the city and Wisconsin with new audiences.

Megan Langer, The Port of Prescott/The Cove Guest House/ The Harbor Hotel

In the last three years, Megan Langer has remodeled and opened three luxurious, affordable boutique hotels in the Mississippi River community of Prescott - The Port of Prescott, The Cove Guest House and The Harbor Hotel. The properties, which are largely renovated by Megan and her father, have opened up the door for tourism opportunities and new events in Prescott with visitors now having places to stay the night. The hotel tax revenue Megan's properties generate also helped with the formation of the newly established Prescott Tourism Committee, which Megan chairs along with sitting on the Pierce County Tourism Board.

Melissa Martinez, Washburn Area Chamber of Commerce

Melissa Martinez has helmed the Washburn Area Chamber of Commerce as its director since 2019, successfully navigating the organization's tourism promotion through the struggles of the COVID-19 pandemic and growing its reach to audiences through increased advertising. Melissa significantly expanded the distribution of local visitor guides, led a new destination marketing campaign and has overseen the development of a soon-to-launch website redesign. She consistently demonstrates her commitment to the tourism industry by attending conferences, collaborating with other entities and learning about new marketing strategies from webinars and articles.

Mindy Simons, Hayward Lakes Visitors and Convention Bureau

Born and raised in Hayward, Mindy Simons was eager to promote her hometown when joining the Hayward Lakes Visitors and Convention Bureau in February 2021 as the marketing administrative assistant. A former sales professional, Mindy honed her marketing skills through professional development and was able to

kick off a new content creation program, grow the organization’s social media and online presence, and arrange and design the 2022 and 2023 vacation guides from start to finish. Mindy was promoted to assistant director last year and brings a smart, resourceful and energetic approach to her many responsibilities.

Morgan Rusnak, Destination Door County

Morgan Rusnak demonstrates her values as community engagement manager for Destination Door County both in her professional and personal life. Since joining the organization in 2019, she established a new partnership model for tourism businesses in Door County to have a free level of partnership and created a new outreach and educational program for the Leave No Trace mindset of outdoor recreation. Morgan serves in local government outside of her position at Destination Door County, and as an outdoor enthusiast, advocates for outdoor experiences being available for all, regardless of race, socioeconomic status and gender identity.

Sarah Howard, Visit Pleasant Prairie

Sarah Howard has ignited a passion for promoting tourism in the local community as executive director of the newly formed Visit Pleasant Prairie. Bringing with her a technically effective skillset in digital marketing, Sarah has made a deep impression on local business owners in the Kenosha County community. She has an ability to bring together different groups to collaborate on ways to enhance tourism in the Village of Pleasant Prairie and has been developing professionally since joining Visit Pleasant Prairie in 2020.

Sherry Hulett, Tomahawk Regional Chamber of Commerce

Sherry Hulett has jumped headfirst into driving tourism to her area since becoming the executive director of the Tomahawk Regional Chamber of Commerce in July 2021. Almost immediately, Sherry was presenting a budget request to the Oneida County Board to successfully preserve funding to promote the area, while looking at other approaches to increase travel. Sherry spearheaded an effort to reinvigorate and rebrand the Northwoods Fall Ride by working with Harley-Davidson and local nonprofits. She serves on several local committees, regularly appears on radio and television stations, and constantly displays a true passion for the Northwoods.

Tracy Fishnick, Village of Cassville

Initially hired parttime in August 2021 as the director of tourism for the Village of Cassville, Tracy Fishnick took on the position fulltime this past September after demonstrating successful results. Focused on the Village’s main event – Christmas in Cassville – Tracy boosted vendor and parade participation, while improving the financial position of hosting the event. She is committed to creating new events in the Grant County community to attract visitors throughout the tri-state region. Tracy also continuously seeks opportunities to partner with regional organizations to promote the area.

INNOVATION NOMINEES

Carol Fahrenkrog, Bayfield Chamber and Visitor Bureau

Seeking to highlight the vibrant arts community and extend the summer tourism season, the Bayfield Chamber and Visitor Bureau (BCVB) launched its inaugural Art Escape in September. The BCVB organized artists living in Bayfield County and Madeline Island to host open houses, demonstrations and workshops to attract visitors to experience the high-quality art scene in the area. To entice visitors, the BCVB put together an Art Escape guide and distributed it to target markets in Wisconsin and Minnesota leading up to the event. After a successful first year, Art Escape will return in 2023 to build off the momentum the event created.

Dan and Ashley Wegmueller, The Dairy at the Wegmueller Farm

Operating a fourth-generation dairy farm near Monroe, Dan and Ashley Wegmueller invite visitors to experience life on an operating farm by staying at the farm's onsite Airbnb called The Dairy at the Wegmueller Farm. The house is steps away from the barn and milking parlor, and guests are encouraged to take part in farm activities. Dan and Ashley educate visitors on aspects of dairy farming and introduce them to their herd of 50 Brown Swiss cows. Dan was inspired to host visitors on his Green County farm after touring small dairy farms in Switzerland.

Jack-O'-Lantern Nights, Racine Zoo

A spectacle of hand-carved, lit-up pumpkins wowed thousands of visitors to the Racine Zoo this past fall for the inaugural Jack-O'-Lantern Nights. The month-long event through October displayed more than 1,000 foam pumpkins carved with custom designs like cats, scarecrows and other Halloween themes. Additionally, the Racine Zoo hosted a contest where local businesses and organizations decorated spaces in the Zoo, and visitors voted on their favorite. The event capitalized on an appetite for a Halloween light display and drew 23,000 visitors to the Racine Zoo for the experience.

Jamie Biegel and Rochelle Hoffman, Rooted in Red

Inviting visitors to experience Wisconsin's cranberry heritage, mother and daughter duo Jamie Biegel and Rochelle Hoffman run Rooted in Red, a Wisconsin Rapids events space operated on the fifth-generation Dempze Cranberry Marsh. Rooted in Red offers marsh tours, harvesting experiences, space for weddings, farm-to-table dinners and an on-site store with other locally sourced goods. Visitors to Rooted in Red are encouraged to become connected to the land and build a deeper appreciation for Wisconsin's state fruit in interesting, engaging ways. The business fills a recreational, entertainment and educational need in the agritourism industry and broader community.

Mad Dog & Merrill Midwest Grill'n®

The Mad Dog & Merrill Midwest Grill'n television series is partnering with the Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association (WATA) to drive tourists to Wisconsin

farms. The syndicated outdoor grilling show, which airs in 35 states and in Canada and is available on more than 160 streaming and video-on-demand platforms, will promote WATA's "LUV-R-AG" destination marketing campaign, which uses signs as an interactive tool for visitors to find a WATA destination or another agritourism attraction.

Sand Valley Resort

Spread across 12,000 acres of tumbling sand dunes, Sand Valley Resort transforms the world-renowned golf resort into a winter wonderland through its Sand Valley Pursuits campaign. The central Wisconsin resort in the Town of Rome welcomes visitors to stay the night and experience on-site winter activities like ice skating, cross-country skiing, fat tire biking, ice fishing and sledding. Sand Valley also runs a series of curated events throughout the winter from an outdoor pond hockey tournament to food- and wine-focused weekends. Sand Valley Pursuits has allowed the golf resort to become an all-seasons destination for adventure.

Sauk County

Looking to attract visitors, businesses and residents, Sauk County launched in 2022 an updated brand – "Land Made" – to unify its communities under a single, unique brand. The idea speaks to the beauty and vastness of the land, such as Devil's Lake State Park and the Dells of the Wisconsin River, as well as the man-made attractions like the Circus World Museum and waterparks. The brand update included building a new website, [ExploreSaukCounty.com](https://www.exploresaukcounty.com), and a media campaign to reach potential visitors. The collaborative effort encourages people to uncover the unexpected in Sauk County and build a deeper connection to the people, land and moments around them.

Sparta Area Chamber of Commerce

The Sparta Area Chamber of Commerce organizes the city's annual European-style Christmas market, known as Kriskindlmarkt, which has been growing in popularity since its inception in 2015. The market started as a way for downtown merchants in the Monroe County community to revitalize their storefronts and boost business. It has since expanded and is recognized as one of Wisconsin's best outdoor holiday markets. The event includes more than 20 huts to shop at, traditional food and drink such as bratwursts and glühwein, and entertainment. In 2022, the Sparta Area Chamber of Commerce significantly expanded marketing efforts, including into out-of-state markets, and saw successful results from the campaign.

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In September, the University of Wisconsin-Platteville opened a \$55 million, state-of-the-art engineering building – Sesquicentennial Hall – that at its center includes one of the Midwest's largest makerspaces. The 20,000-square-foot Huff Family Innovation Center provides a space for students and community members alike to share ideas, collaborate on projects and build prototypes. The Center had more than 18,000 students, faculty, staff and visitors during the first semester of being open and is anticipated to attract educators, engineers, professionals and partners to Platteville.

ARTS, CULTURE AND HERITAGE NOMINEES

Bayfield Chamber and Visitor Bureau

Seeking to highlight the vibrant arts community and extend the summer tourism season, the Bayfield Chamber and Visitor Bureau (BCVB) launched its inaugural Art Escape in September. The BCVB organized artists living in Bayfield County and Madeline Island to host open houses, demonstrations and workshops to attract visitors to experience the high-quality art scene in the area. To entice visitors, the BCVB put together an Art Escape guide and distributed it to target markets in Wisconsin and Minnesota leading up to the event. After a successful first year, Art Escape will return in 2023 to build off the momentum the event created.

Bookworm Gardens

Bookworm Gardens is a family-friendly, botanic garden inspired by children's literature. Open six months of the year, Bookworm attracts visitors to Sheboygan each year to experience the living garden spaces interpreting popular children's books. In 2022, the independent nonprofit welcomed more than 65,000 visitors from 43 of the 50 states and consistently sees its events selling out. Entering its 13th season, Bookworm delivers an immersive, nature-based experience for guests of all ages and adds to the depth of attractions in the Sheboygan area.

Bradley Symphony Center

Through a \$90 million investment, the Bradley Symphony Center transformed an abandoned downtown Milwaukee movie theater into a stunning, welcoming home for the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra. The renovation inside the rejuvenated Grand Avenue Mall faithfully restored the opulent charm of the nearly 100-year-old theater, modernized the facility aesthetically and functionally, and improved accessibility. Elements of the design like large windows into the theater were meant to convey the message that everyone is welcome to take in a show. Since opening in late 2021, the Bradley Symphony Center has regularly hosted sensational symphonic sounds, fostered music appreciation and education for school children through the Arts in Community Education Program, and been a catalyst in the rejuvenation of Wisconsin Avenue.

City of Manitowoc

The City of Manitowoc has long embraced its historic connection to the Space Race after a piece of the Russian satellite Sputnik IV fell in the community in 1962. The annual Sputnikfest and the Rahr-West Art Museum's efforts to revitalize the festival demonstrate a community-wide celebration of arts and culture in Manitowoc. In addition to popular costume contests and space-themed, creative activities, Sputnikfest invites residents and visitors to paint the town as part of a community-wide mural called Art Slam. In a separate support of the arts, Manitowoc recently commissioned local artists to paint utility boxes modeled off

permanent artwork displayed at the Rahr-West Art Museum. The program was expanded to include more utility boxes after a successful first round.

Danbury Jordan Buck Committee

The Danbury Jordan Buck Committee paid homage to the heritage and history of deer hunting in Burnett County and northwest Wisconsin by honoring a local hunter who held the world record buck for nearly 80 years. The Committee organized the first-ever Jordan Buck Day in September, celebrating the story of Jim Jordan, a 22-year-old local who in 1914 shot a buck eventually recognized by the Boone and Crockett Club as the world record until 1993. The Committee organized the erection and dedication of a statue telling the story and horse-drawn wagon rides to the site of the hunt. The event drew an estimated 2,000 to 2,500 visitors to Danbury, a community of 500 where the hunting heritage runs so deep nearly all normal activities come to a standstill during the deer season.

Eagle River Historical Society

Recognizing the benefits of heritage tourism, the Eagle River Historical Society (ERHS) focuses on showcasing local heritage and culture through a multi-pronged approach. The ERHS operates two museums, plans a wide range of events like historic home tours and public lectures, and collaborates with other community organizations and events. For example, members of the ERHS offer public tours during the annual Cranberry Fest, which is attended by 40,000 to 45,000 visitors. A recent initiative led by the ERHS is to establish a historic district in Eagle River. All the efforts are being done with the intention of capturing the popular, fast-growing segment of heritage tourism and bringing more visitors to the Vilas County community.

Farm Wisconsin Discovery Center

Farm Wisconsin Discovery Center is fully dedicated to telling Wisconsin's agricultural story – a deeply ingrained part of the state's heritage – at the Manitowoc attraction. Opened in 2018, Farm Wisconsin educates visitors with interactive exhibits on the foods grown and processed in Wisconsin, environmental practices and technology used in farming, and the careers employed by the \$100 billion agriculture industry. Farm Wisconsin regularly collaborates with other agricultural organizations to make its space available for events or otherwise further promote agritourism in Wisconsin.

Forts Folle Avoine, Burnett County Historical Society

The Forts Folle Avoine Historical Park is dedicated to telling the local history to visitors of the Burnett County living history site. Outside of Danbury, Forts Folle Avoine features recreations of fur trading posts, an 1800s schoolhouse, a Native American village, a logging museum and more to explore. Reenactors and interpreters provide visitors with rich portrayals of the past and education on topics like blacksmithing and Anishinaabe traditions of hunting, fishing and trapping. The nonprofit organization strives to educate visitors of all ages about not just the cultures and heritage of Burnett County but its connection to the wider world.

John Michael Kohler Arts Center

A local treasure for more than 50 years, the John Michael Kohler Arts Center (JMKAC) in Sheboygan is on a mission “to generate a creative exchange between artists and the public.” The visual and performing arts complex supports the work of self-taught and contemporary artists. The JMKAC’s two free museums, festivals, programs and more attract thousands each year, which include 10% to 15% out-of-state visitors. In 2021, the JMKAC opened The Preserve – an experimental space to house and save its collection of “artist-built environments,” or a unique form of art encompassing spaces artists transform to express aspects of themselves. In addition to nurturing artists in the creation of new work, the JMKAC offers a wide variety of programming to engage community members of all ages.

Kinstone Megalithic Garden

Located on 30 acres near the Mississippi River, Kinstone Megalithic Garden is a modern take on a mysterious classic. The Fountain City destination features large stone megaliths laid out in a circle (picture Stonehenge), other stone sculptures, natural building structures, restored prairies and more to craft a spiritual setting for visitors. Kinstone annually hosts art events, concerts and workshops designed to showcase various artforms and cultures, while also inviting folks for mindfulness activities like yoga, meditation and drum circles. Kinstone works to immerse visitors with the wonders of the earth and discover a feeling of renewal.

Luxembourg American Cultural Society

The Luxembourg American Cultural Society (LACS), located in the Ozaukee County community of Belgium, serves as the cultural connection between the small European country and those whose ancestors immigrated to the United States from there. The LACS aims to “preserve the roots of our heritage and nurture the leaves of ongoing relationships between Luxembourg and America.” This is accomplished through a historic cultural center in Belgium, LACS’ membership of thousands across the world and its hosting of the annual Luxembourg Fest. The unique festival has educated visitors for nearly four decades on the lesser-known Luxembourg – the last Grand Duchy of the world – while showcasing the country’s folk dancing, food, music and culture.

Madeline Island School of the Arts

The Madeline Island School of the Arts (MISA) is a renowned destination for visitors across the country. Located on the largest of the Apostle Islands in Lake Superior, the MISA and its instructors lead workshops in painting, quilting, photography, writing and more that are all taking place in a gorgeous, inspiring setting. The MISA has also partnered with the Loft Literacy Center in Minneapolis on a program to offer writing teaching fellowships, called Excellence in Teaching, for Loft instructors to receive a one-week, all-expenses-paid retreat on Madeline Island. The program is designed to generate new ideas and transformative writing to help writing educators improve their craft.

Milwaukee Art Museum

While the Milwaukee Art Museum displays more than 2,500 works of art on the inside, the first impression for many visitors comes on the outside from the stunning Quadracci Pavilion and the structure’s signature moveable wings. In 2022, the Museum embarked on a project to recognize the cultural landmark and invited Santiago Calatrava, the Spanish architect behind the Pavilion, back to Milwaukee for the first time since its completion in 2001. Positioning the Museum and Milwaukee as a beacon for the arts, the initiative involved extensive media outreach about Santiago’s return, a press conference with key stakeholders and a social media campaign. In the end, it resulted in 506 million global media impressions and communicated Milwaukee as a world-class arts destination.

Niagara Escarpment Resource Network

The Niagara Escarpment Resource Network (NERN) focuses on geo-tourism, conservation, education, events and tours to help build awareness and inspire stewardship of the Niagara Escarpment – a 430-million-year-old, 1,000-mile-long geological feature that emerges in Wisconsin and connects the state to Niagara Falls. In 2022, NERN launched the interactive story map “WI LEDGE RAMBLER” to highlight cultural sites and natural features along the Niagara Escarpment’s path through Wisconsin. To further promote tourism in the region, NERN partnered with businesses and nonprofits to highlight sustainability efforts on the story map.

Northwest ITBEC Tourism

The Northwest (NW) ITBEC Tourism Committee is continuing the long-standing tradition of the Governor’s Fishing Opener. Hosted by another organization for more than 55 years, the NW ITBEC Tourism Committee, which represents 12 counties, took on ownership of the event in 2022. The celebration spotlights the heritage of fishing in Wisconsin, capitalizing on the energy and excitement opening day brings. Going forward, the Governor’s Fishing Opener will continue to promote the legacy of and opportunities for fishing in northwest Wisconsin for years to come.

Rhineland Area Chamber of Commerce

Grown from local lore and known worldwide, the Hodag is etched into Rhineland’s heritage and culture. The Rhineland Area Chamber of Commerce uses the story of this mythical creature – a clawed, tusked and horned beast created as a hoax in 1893 – as a tool to spur tourism to the area. The Hodag Heritage Festival, a new festival coordinated by the Chamber, celebrates the unique creature and its longtime connection to the community’s heritage, while its brand to “Live the Legend” invites visitors to experience a destination that has kept the story of the Hodag alive for generations and where legendary vacations await.

Village of New Glarus

The Village of New Glarus may be in south-central Wisconsin, but for visitors, its festivals, architecture and cultural traditions deliver a slice of the Swiss Alps.

Known as “America’s Little Switzerland,” New Glarus has worked to share the community’s Swiss heritage for almost 100 years. Commercial buildings with aspects of Swiss architecture, two Swiss museums to visit, and festivals and traditions like Volksfest and roaming yodelers to welcome the new year all work in concert to promote New Glarus’ cultural heritage to travelers.

Village of Waunakee

As part of a multi-year partnership with UW-Madison’s UniverCity Alliance, the Village of Waunakee has undertaken efforts to build relationships with the Ho-Chunk Nation in recognition of the Dane County community being in the tribe’s ancestral territory. Several projects and initiatives have explored and educated the public about Ho-Chunk history, heritage and culture. Examples include inviting the Ho-Chunk Nation to begin a hand-crafted dugout canoe journey in the Village’s Six Mile Creek, the addition of the Great Seal of the Ho-Chunk Nation to the Village’s welcome signs, and a stained-glass light box commissioned by the Village and gifted to the Ho-Chunk in recognition of the growing relationship.

The Fireside Dinner Theatre

The Fireside Dinner Theatre is an established destination for musicals featuring Broadway performers, concerts and other entertainment in Fort Atkinson. Since becoming a theatre-in-the-round in 1978, The Fireside has grown a reputation as an intimate venue for live performances, and a place where guests are welcomed like family. The Jefferson County attraction draws visitors from across Wisconsin and neighboring states, and The Fireside is well known as a top destination for travel tours. In 2022, The Fireside was recognized by the Wisconsin Restaurant Association with an Innovation Award for creative solutions to stay open throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Woodland Indian Art, Inc.

Woodland Indian Art, Inc. (WIA) is a nonprofit dedicated to expanding awareness and appreciation for the distinct artwork and culture of the Woodland tribal nations of the eastern half of the United States. Located in Oneida, WIA supports Native American artists by offering networking opportunities and a platform to sell artwork year-round. The organization’s premier cultural and tourism event is the Festival of Woodland Indian Art and Culture Show, which includes an art show and market, performances and classes.

SERVICE EXCELLENCE NOMINEES

Brian Pagani, The Waters of Minocqua

Brian Pagani has worked his way up the ladder at The Waters of Minocqua over more than a decade, focusing on customer service throughout his career at the full-service Northwoods hotel. Brian started out working the front desk before

becoming the guest service manager, then the front office manager and finally his current position of revenue manager. His focus on ensuring guests have the best possible experience has resonated with the staff, helping The Waters of Minocqua build a customer base that returns annually.

Curtis DeCora, Superior Marketing

Curtis DeCora, owner of Hayward-based Superior Marketing, serves his community in professional and personal capacities. In 2022, Superior Marketing generated more than \$1 million in revenue for its clients, donated \$42,000 in services to nonprofits, and was ranked a top digital marketing company by Goodfirms. A recipient of a 40-under-40 award from the National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development, Curtis also helps local tribal businesses attract visitors and customers through his nonprofit Tribal Business League. He is also deeply involved in a local basketball club, providing marketing services for free.

James (Jim) Netz, James Netz Photography

As the owner of a Hayward-based photography and videography company, James (Jim) Netz knows how to capture the spirit of northwest Wisconsin. He uses his skills as a professional photographer to help destinations, attractions and businesses stand out, allowing them to elevate their brand. Whether it's partnering with a local business or shooting world-class events like the American Birkebeiner or the Spooner Heart of the North Rodeo, Jim helps keep his customers competitive in a constantly evolving marketing world through his images and videos.

Jon Kluever, Holiday Inn Express and Suites Wausau

In less than four years as general manager, Jon Kluever has taken the Holiday Inn Express and Suites Wausau from the bottom 1% in customer satisfaction to the top 1% in the company's North American portfolio. He has been a consistent champion of customer service during that time, going the extra mile to keep guests happy while staying at the hotel. Jon is also involved in the local tourism industry by reviving the Central Wisconsin Lodging Association as its president, serving as vice president of Wausau Events and sitting on the board of Visit Wausau.

"LUV-R-AG" Destination Marketing Campaign

The "LUV-R-AG" Wisconsin, America's Agricultural Tourism Destination Marketing Campaign elevates the visibility of Wisconsin tourism opportunities in agriculture. Visitors will learn about agritourism opportunities through custom-built signs resembling license plates at rest stops and visitor centers, and associated QR codes direct them to the Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association's website. The campaign is designed to help more families and individuals discover Wisconsin's diverse agriculture-based adventures.

Mary Claire Olson Potter, Hudson Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism Bureau

Mary Claire Olson Potter has a passion for welcoming visitors to Hudson and western Wisconsin. As president of the Hudson Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism Bureau, Mary Claire turned the Chamber into a welcome station

for travelers where she can often be found chatting with visitors, providing a personalized experience and pulling materials for other destinations. It's all done with the mindset of attracting tourists to the Hudson area while also supporting their interests to explore elsewhere in Wisconsin. For those who visit the St. Croix River community, Mary Claire is dedicated to putting on top-notch experiences, often being the first to arrive to set up for an event and the last to leave the office.

Nicholas Bonilla, Playa Vallarta Mexican Grill

Nicholas Bonilla takes great care to provide a five-star experience for guests at his Playa Vallarta Mexican Grill in Jefferson. He'll personally greet diners, accommodate parties of all sizes with fast, friendly service, and donate gift cards to his Jefferson County restaurant for local silent auctions. The quality of customer service Nicholas provides has built a reputation on its own. When the restaurant recently closed for a month for renovations, the community felt the impact of its temporary closure and the level of service at Playa Vallarta Mexican Grill.

Pam King, Grafton Area Chamber of Commerce

Pam King has centered the visitor experience during her 20-plus years as executive director of the Grafton Area Chamber of Commerce. The powerhouse behind popular events and festivals, Pam has been integral in drawing thousands of tourists to the Ozaukee County community. She'll accommodate visitors by organizing shuttles to the well-attended Independence Day celebration so no one misses out, while also taking the lead in organizing the holiday season parade. Pam, who is retiring soon, helped put Grafton on the map as a tourism destination.

Paul Bartolotta, The Bartolotta Restaurants

Over three decades, The Bartolotta Restaurants built a reputation of exceptional cuisine and exemplary customer service. Paul Bartolotta, who co-founded and owns the company that now operates 17 restaurants in the Milwaukee area, emphasizes the importance of people in the organization, from welcoming guests with a memory-worthy experience to helping elevate the careers of the hospitality workers at his restaurants. The quality of service at The Bartolotta Restaurants is recognized nationally, having been nominated for an Outstanding Restaurateurs award by the James Beard Foundation for four consecutive years. Outside of the hospitality industry, Paul and his company aid Milwaukee-area nonprofits through its charitable arm, Care-a-lotta.

Sun Prairie Sweet Corn Festival

The Sun Prairie Chamber of Commerce is undertaking an effort to create consistent branding, marketing and a public relations plan for the Sun Prairie Sweet Corn Festival, or simply Corn Fest. While it attracts 80,000 to 100,000 visitors a year, Corn Fest had no consistent branding materials prior to 2021. Last year, the Chamber developed a new logo, style guide and other materials for Corn Fest, engaging with local students to help in the effort. The organization also created the first public-facing website for the event, which will celebrate its 70th anniversary this summer, and developed a comprehensive advertising campaign.

The Rochester Inn

The Rochester Inn is a historic, six-room boutique hotel in downtown Sheboygan Falls known for its exceptional customer service and guest experience over 35 years of operation. Guests stay in clean, spacious and timelessly decorated rooms inside a building constructed in 1848, while just miles away from world-class attractions and amenities in Sheboygan County. The Rochester Inn prioritizes a cozy, relaxing stay for its guests, and the hotel consistently ranks as the best reviewed hotel in the county on hospitality review platforms. The owners also volunteer their time on efforts to spur economic development and tourism in the community.

Wild Rice Retreat

Wild Rice Retreat offers a truly immersive guest experience at the wellness retreat in Bayfield. When guests arrive, they can expect a fully inclusive stay with delicious, healthy meals, on-site activities like yoga and meditation, relaxing spa amenities, modern Scandinavian-inspired accommodations and more. The staff approach hospitality with a similar attention to detail and thought that is found in the design of the retreat. They welcome guests with warmth and empathy, while making them feel safe and cared for.

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSION NOMINEES

Alan Nugent, Stockholm Pie & General Store

A member of the LGBTQ community and the owner of the nationally recognized Stockholm Pie & General Store, Alan Nugent is a pillar in the small Mississippi River community. Alan has established his business as a loud supporter of diversity, equity, accessibility and inclusion and has been setting examples for years. In 2018, Stockholm Pie made changes to allow better accessibility to the popular shop. Alan also supports, hosts and participates in events during Lake Pepin Pride every June, while fiercely standing up for employees who experience racism or hate.

Dr. Bert Davis, America's Black Holocaust Museum

A story of resiliency, struggle and eventual triumph, America's Black Holocaust Museum (ABHM) reopened to the public last year in Milwaukee's Bronzeville neighborhood. ABHM was founded in 1988 under the vision of Dr. James Cameron, who was inspired to create a space to reflect on the centuries of oppression left in the wake of slavery after a visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum. The ABHM closed in 2008 following the death of Dr. Cameron and the economic recession, but a grassroots movement to reopen a space to foster respectful, open discussions about our nation's shared racial history culminated in the \$9.5

million museum. The success of ABHM has invigorated the thriving Bronzeville neighborhood, received national recognition and created a narrative Milwaukee is a city that celebrates the many cultures in the community.

Damian Buchman, The Ability Center

The Ability Center is on a mission to provide opportunities for people with disabilities to be fit, active, healthy and to play. The Milwaukee-based nonprofit helps communities become more universally accessible and provide recreation opportunities for people of varying abilities. Through the RampUp program, Milwaukee's Bradford Beach was transformed in 2020 to the country's most accessible beach. The project involved the creation of a safe, accessible route to get to Lake Michigan through the installation of a ramp and an accessible beach mat that leads right to the edge of the water. It is one of the many efforts The Ability Center has undertaken in a goal to make Milwaukee the most accessible recreation destination in the country.

Isobel O'Rourke, Roadside Facilities Wisconsin, Disability Service Provider Network

Roadside Facilities Wisconsin is a program through the Disability Service Provider Network and led by Director Isobel O'Rourke to provide job opportunities at Wisconsin's rest areas and welcome centers for people of varying abilities. The team members of Roadside Facilities Wisconsin play a valuable role in maintaining these facilities and contributing to positive first impressions when visitors stop at attractive, organized and clean rest areas and welcome centers.

Jeff Rennie, Friends of the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore

Operating under the promise that national parks belong to everyone, the Friends of the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore have spearheaded several initiatives to increase accessibility to this gorgeous stretch of Lake Superior shoreline. The Friends have raised money for an all-accessible amphitheater for park ranger talks on Stockton Island, helped with fundraising for a 2.5-mile wheelchair accessible boardwalk project on Sand Island, contributed to an accessible overlook on the dock at Little Sand Bay, and redesigned the group's website with accessibility features. The Friends have been a leader in making one of Wisconsin's most popular outdoor recreation destinations more welcoming and accessible for all.

Marietta Reuter, Friends of Sauk Prairie Parks and Recreation

As president of the Friends of Sauk Prairie Parks and Recreation, Marietta Reuter has spearheaded a fundraising campaign to bring a large-scale park and sports complex to the Sauk County community. The vision is for the park to be a destination for all, including event space, multi-use competition fields, an inclusive playscape, walking paths and other amenities for visitors of all ages. The Friends group has so far raised \$12 million toward its initial goal of \$18 million to bring the park to fruition, with the hope it will spur sports tourism to the community.

Northwestern Mutual Community Park

Since opening in 2020, the Northwestern Mutual Community Park in downtown Milwaukee has become a destination for children of all abilities to play together. The accessible playground and event space, located at the Henry Maier Festival Park, includes age-appropriate play equipment for children as young as 6 months up to 12 years old, ramps to allow wheelchair access, a soft flooring surface for safer play and a shaded seating area for parents. Open for free to the public on non-event days, the park also has quiet sensory rooms, a fully accessible family services building and other amenities to offer barrier-free enjoyment.

LEGACY NOMINEES

Crandon International Raceway

For more than half a century, the Crandon International Raceway has been a fixture in the off-road motorsports world. The Forest County racetrack brings in 80,000 visitors during the summer racing season and has grown an enthusiastic fanbase across the country. The importance of the Crandon International Raceway was recognized in 2022 with an Outstanding Facility of the Year award from the Performance Race Industry – a recognition previously awarded to prestigious venues like the Charlotte Motor Speedway. In addition to drawing huge crowds to the Northwoods, the Crandon International Raceway is a generous supporter of the local communities, donating nearly \$1 million to area organizations and schools last year.

Donna Justin, Justin Trails Resort

Donna Justin has demonstrated a lifelong commitment to community development and the tourism industry through her championing of tourism opportunities for family farms, inn keepers, rural communities, regional destinations and the state as a whole. Donna and Don Justin purchased their family farm in 1970. Seeking ways to diversify, Donna worked to add cross-country skiing trails to the farm in the mid-80s, followed by lodging to accommodate its growing visitors. Justin Trails Resort expanded its offerings for guests over the decades to include bird watching, hiking, events, workshops and more. Throughout her career, Donna has mentored other small business owners and worked to create awareness of Wisconsin's agriculture and tourism industries.

Eva Hoey, Visit Kenosha (retired)

Over a four-decade career, Eva Hoey assisted hundreds of thousands of travelers in her positions at the Kenosha Travel Information Center. She helped guide them to their destination, visited all of Wisconsin's 72 counties herself and advocated for the tourism industry at large. Eva began her career in 1981, initially as a temporary summer worker at the Kenosha Travel Information Center, before becoming the assistant manager and eventually director of the center. She passionately shared her love for Wisconsin and its beauty with all she

encountered and impressed visitors with her knowledge of the state. A fixture of Wisconsin tourism, Eva retired in 2022.

Greg Stillman, Foremost Management Services

An advocate of his Door County community and Wisconsin tourism as a whole, Greg Stillman has dedicated his career to the industry. Greg owns Foremost Management Services, a management company with several Door County resorts in its portfolio, after rising up through the ranks of the hospitality industry. He has also volunteered his time and expertise to serve on various boards and committees for years, including 17 years on the board of directors for Destination Door County and nine years on the board for the Wisconsin Hotel & Lodging Association. Tourism is an industry Greg lives and breathes as a business owner, volunteer and an avid traveler himself.

Kathy Neumeister, Woodward Communications (retired)

Before retiring in February 2022, Kathy Neumeister led a career of more than 40 years in support of tourism in southwest Wisconsin. The former publisher of Woodward Communications, Kathy was a founding member of the Grant County Tourism Council. She also was instrumental in the creation and development of several publications to promote tourism in the area, including the Grant County Activity Guide. Kathy has also been involved with the Platteville Regional Chamber of Commerce, the Tri-State Tourism Council and other organizations seeking to boost visitation to the region.

Romy Snyder, Wisconsin Dells Visitor & Convention Bureau

Romy Snyder has lived and breathed tourism her entire life. A graduate of Wisconsin Dells High School, Romy grew up working in her family's motel and then the iconic Tommy Bartlett Show. For the past 27 years, Romy has led the Wisconsin Dells Visitor & Convention Bureau as its president and CEO through a period that saw the region become a year-round destination and an explosive growth in visitor spending. Romy has also offered her expertise by serving on various committees and is a respected leader in tourism across the country.

Tim Smith, Marcus Hotels & Resorts (retired)

Tim Smith recently retired as the general manager of The Pfister Hotel in downtown Milwaukee after decades of working in hospitality, advocating for the travel and tourism industry, and mentoring the next generation of hospitality professionals. Tim began his career in hotel management in Eau Claire before moving to Milwaukee in 1987. He worked in sales for the Marc Plaza (currently the Hilton Milwaukee City Center), helping to draw in big name conventions and events to Milwaukee. Tim later joined Marcus Hotels & Resorts. He managed the company's flagship property, The Pfister Hotel, and architected the launch of Saint Kate - The Arts Hotel all the while serving on various tourism and hospitality committees for Milwaukee.

