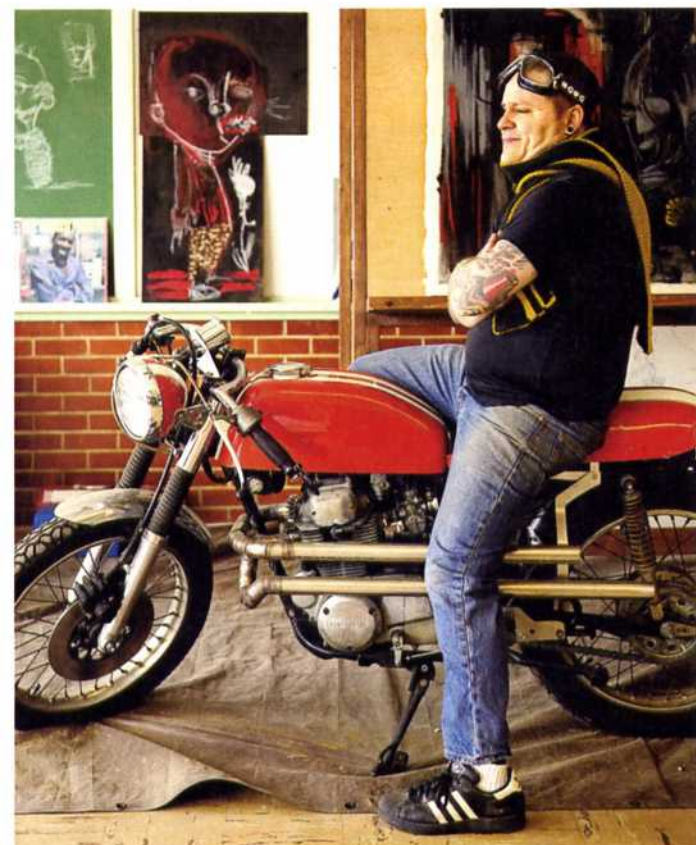


/Boarding School/
Leaving behind two big cities, a couple relocates to the Great Plains to convert gymnasiums, classrooms, and cafeterias into one big happy nexus of creativity.

/by Lisa Selin Davis/

/Photographs Colby Lysne/





population 252 (about five hours from St. Louis and two from Kansas City), isn't the throbbing cultural hub of Seattle or Austin. "The town itself is the size of a small neighborhood. There's a bank, post office, ma-and-pa shop, farmers' co-op, taxidermy shop, firehouse, some churches, and a feed store," says Lohr. "If you're going to be out in the middle of nowhere, you need to import people for a community."

So they decided to transform the schools into an artists' colony. The Harveyville Project will eventually house at least half a dozen long-term residents, and a smattering of short-term ones. The spaces will also serve as venues for workshops and retreats, like last October's Yarn School, which drew knitting aficionados from Boston to Hawaii who learned to spin their own wool in a weekend. And then, of course, there's prom. "We have a gym," says Lohr. "How can you not have a prom?" Around 70 people showed up to last year's dance, 20 of them locals.

Already, Lohr and Miller have two full-time residents (in addition to themselves)—a computer programmer named Gordon Fischer and his knitwear-designer wife, Lisa—who've rooted themselves in the Harveyville high school's English and science classrooms (classrooms generally run between 700 and 900 square feet). One pays \$425 a month; the other participates in the live-work option, cleaning for 20 hours a week in exchange for room and board.

The Harveyville schools were purchased in pretty much move-in shape, so cleaning was, in fact, Lohr and Miller's biggest task—that, and getting the kitchen ready. "We spent our first year cooking with a hot plate and toaster oven," Lohr says. But the built-in oak cabinets and art deco ceiling fans just needed a polish, the floors only required a re-sanding, and a wash of paint was all it took to renew the walls and 10-foot-high ceilings.

The Eskridge schools are still awaiting their rebirth. They've got harder-to-solve problems, like asbestos and a failing roof. Lohr and

Miller say they bought them just for the kitchen equipment, since the industrial-size pots and pans had already been sold off at the Harveyville schools. "The price was so low, it seemed crazy not to buy them," Lohr says.

Today, Lohr and Miller shower in the old locker room (where they recently added a claw-foot tub), eat breakfast in the cafeteria, and conduct business in the principal's office. Living in the school is the easy part; it's living in the middle of nowhere that's been tough. "It was definitely culture shock," Miller says, though he admits it was a more difficult adjustment for him, the social butterfly, than it was for Lohr.

"I was a crazy hermit in Austin," Lohr says. "I get in my little pod and work on my projects incessantly." Her work embodies both the mundane and the subversive; she once conceived of knitting a ball gag for a journalist whose work offended her (let's hope that doesn't happen with this story). The next project: a burlesque show for which Lohr is knitting the costumes.

Neighbors thought the school's new residents were a little nutty, too. Miller is the most heavily tattooed fellow in town, and Lohr is the only local with a page on her website called Naked Ladies. "It's pretty risqué by standards out here," says Lohr. "There were rumors that we were running an Internet porn site." Not only was that unfeasible because, well, they're artists, not pornographers, but, says Lohr, "when we moved out here, there wasn't DSL; there was only dial-up. The idea was exceptionally ridiculous." 🙄