



James, Simone and Heidi Steeno.



Heart In Hand (made)

James and Heidi Steeno get neighborly to keep fellow artists working.

BY LORI ACKEN

James and Heidi Steeno knew their tight-knit Washington Heights neighborhood was something special long before 2020 rolled around.

But when pandemic struck, closing the independent stores and kiboshing statewide art fairs at which James sells his signature “art maps” and other watercolor depictions of Wisconsin life, that neighborhood rallied around the Steenos and their fellow artists in a way they never imagined.

Noticing that nearby yard sales were still taking place, the Steenos ruefully joked that they should set one up, too, but for art. To their surprise, a next-door pal was dead serious about the idea. “She said, ‘I really think you should do it. Nobody will mind on the block. This is how you make a living, so just go for it,’” Heidi recalls.

The pair also noticed that regular customers eagerly fetched online purchases at the Steeno residence to sidestep postal delays. “We thought, well, if people are willing to come over for Etsy purchases, maybe they’re willing to come to the front yard,” James says.

Two weeks later, on a brilliant July day, the Steenos and a handful of other artists willing to give it a go set up tents on volunteered yards on their 52nd Street block. The group donned masks — which they politely requested shoppers do as well — set out bottles of hand sanitizer and waited nervously.

The shoppers came — in droves, ready to buy, and masked up without exclusion. “We actually had someone come and shop who worked for the health department,” James recalls, “She’s like, ‘How did you get everyone to wear face masks?’ I said, ‘We just asked and everybody did.’ She was blown away.”

Encouraged that everyone made good money, and that even neighbors battling chronic illness could gather and shop, the Steenos decided to host the gatherings monthly, switching out vendors to

ensure variety and adding local musicians. To their delight, word spread from art lover to art lover and across social media, more yards were offered up and a full-blown neighborhood mini-fest took shape.

“It was a very grassroots effort on all of our parts,” says Heidi. “Most of the artists who were in this have a following and their customers were looking to be able to purchase from them. This was a safe way for them to do it.”

As the weather cooled, they bundled up and came clasp cups of coffee, buying pumpkins and other fall produce along with their art. And in October, the Steenos also resurrected their TOSA Locally Made pop-up at Wauwatosa’s Hoyt Park, even though civil rights protests had surged through nearby streets the night before. Again, art lovers came ready to spend. “It was successful in a lot of levels,” says James. “For Tosa, just bringing everyone together as a community during a very tough time and with what everybody was struggling with. We had the Milwaukee Artists for Racial Justice there — they were part of our events the whole season. There were some real positives that came out of our event relating to that time.

“We were all kept separate to a degree — for good reason,” James reflects of the tumultuous year. “But it really messed with the psychology of a neighborhood, of a community as a whole. When we had those things to think about . . . we had something to work towards.”

Adds Heidi, “So many of the artists were like ‘This is what kept us alive last year. This is what paid the rent. This is what allowed me to put a new roof on. This is what allowed me to fix my car. None of us were doing anything extravagant. But it was keeping us all functioning and alive and paying our bills. It was really awesome to see what took place on our block then spread out around the city.’”

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