

Julilly Kohler

RENAISSANCE WOMAN

Julilly Kohler is fascinating — not just because she's the great-granddaughter of John Michael Kohler, founder of Kohler Company; not because she was instrumental in the revitalization of a dying Brady Street; and not because she's undertaken a massive green real estate project on the Milwaukee River. She's also a promoter of Milwaukee's local arts scene and a founding member of the Milwaukee Urban Agriculture Network. But none of these singular distinctions are, in themselves, that unusual.

It's the combination of all these activities that makes Kohler intriguing. She's a believer in grassroots growth, and she also knows how to make connections between locals and government officials. Spend time with her and you'll begin to see a beautiful side of plain old, ordinary Milwaukee that's not always revealed in the mainstream press: the efforts of the neighbors, the locals, the little guys, to beautify, save and celebrate our city through artistic talent, community networks and a legendary get-things-done attitude.



How long have you lived in Milwaukee?

I moved here after law school in 1968.

What things contributed to you leaving your law practice?

I had two young children and I was going through a divorce. I realized I was spending too much time on other people's children and other people's divorces... one day my sixth-grader said, "Mommy, did you realize that three of my friends have tried to commit suicide?" And, for all three of them, the parents were going through divorce. It was obvious that my children needed me, so I took some time off.

Tell me about the art gallery you owned on Brady Street.

It was dedicated to showing local artists. But in those days, people were not used to buying art and they wanted either to match their couch or to buy art as an investment. To be an art dealer, you really have to do it full-time. You have to cultivate your customers, go to parties, constantly search for pieces they might like; it's a hard life.



What got you interested in real estate development?

I hadn't even noticed how run-down Brady Street had become. Of course, there were Glorioso's, Scortino's Bakery and Mimmas. Then the two towers, which had been elderly, changed. The SSI housing laws were revised to include drug and alcohol dependence. And God

bless John Norquist: because of him, one tower became elderly again, and the other became "one strike and you're out." Brady Street was part of helping the Federal Government to change that law.

So I started buying distressed properties on the street and rehabbing them. There was nobody in the city who would give

me financing for a mixed-use building. I had to go to Chicago for my financing. But you could start seeing the effect pretty quickly. Most of all, we had a good group of neighbors. We developed a Business Improvement District, and then the City of Milwaukee started taking us seriously.

How are things going with your current green development on the river?

It's going great. We're probably halfway done. People will begin moving in, hopefully, by the end of the year.

What are your favorite restaurants in Milwaukee?

Well, I'm extra partial to my Brady Street restaurants! From Mimmas to Casablanca to Bosleys to Balzac... I just think they're great. And for breakfast, there's always the Brady Street Pharmacy.

What art galleries are you partial to?

I have more art than I have a place for! Honestly, I try to stay away from them these days. But... I do like those that double as other things, like Rochambo and Brewed Cafe, right down the street.

If you have overnight guests, where do you like to take them?

Of course, I always take them to Turner Hall and Brady Street. Then there's the art museum and the public museum. In season, I take them to the Boerner Botanical Gardens; and out of season, the Domes. And I love to take people to Club Timbuktu, the Alem Ethiopian Village, EE-Sane and La Merenda.

Where do you go to listen to good music?

I love concerts! It's fun to track live music. On Wednesday nights, near Pier Wisconsin, the Rotary holds concerts in summer. I also enjoy the artist series at the Pabst. The Turner Ballroom now has concerts — there was a terrific band there that played gypsy punk, called the Gogol Bordello. And of course we have



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LEAP (Local Emerging Artist Platform) at Turner's.

What is your involvement with the Turner Ballroom?

I'm the president of the Board of Directors and co-chair of the Turner Ballroom Preservation Trust. The Trust is primarily about restoring the Ballroom: the electrical, the air conditioning and other mechanicals. We're going to keep the atmosphere the way it is because it's funky. Milwaukee doesn't need another Grain Exchange. We need places like the Turner for the local art scene.

What projects are you currently working on?

Milwaukee Urban Agriculture Network (MUAN); it's an informal local monthly gathering of agricultural and food security people. These are backyard gardeners. At one point, during the wars, Victory Gardens provided one-third of our vegetables — we want to bring the community gardens up to production levels.

And there is another one called River Pulse. The purpose is to connect Brady Street with the residents on Commerce Street. So the Marsupial Bridge was built — that was a big \$3-million project with Federal funding. Now Ray Chi, an artist and cellist, is translating Dr. Tim Ehlinger's data sondes (equipment used to measure specific water qualities) of the water into videos, and they'll be projected onto the Holton Street Viaduct. We're doing similar installations at RiverEdge Nature Center and in West Bend.

What is the most important thing for residents and visitors to know about Milwaukee?

I love Milwaukee. I think it's funky, ornery and eclectic, at least the parts of it that I know and love. I don't believe Milwaukee will become one of those defunct cities that they talk about. A city is like a tree:

if the heart of the trunk rots, the rest of it can't stand. But there's a cohesive group of leaders trying to do good things for the community. Forever there was this gap between them and what the people really want, but I think that it's starting to close now.

I want people to know that it's a delightful, safe, friendly and fascinating place. We have wonderful music, dance, theatre, restaurants and art galleries. There are such rich grounds and such well-intended people that it's a joy to live here. ■



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