

The simple dining room paneled with honey-colored wood has been obeying the jovial command of Max Flannery Sr. for "30 years and four months." It's a subtle place with faces you've never seen before that seem oddly familiar, with food you might not recognize that makes your stomach growl. It's Max's Loudon Square Buffet, and it's not a place you'd expect to find any art.

But for the last month, this peculiar little diner has been the stage for a contemporary art project starring Tammy Ramsey. A professor of English and journalism at LCC, Ramsey had no idea she'd be falling in love with Max's when she answered an ad for a poet-in-residence at a restaurant.

"It was just too unique an ad not to answer it," she said. "I sent in my poem, my 50-word essay, and then I waited to hear from them. I'd almost given up on the whole thing when I finally heard I got it. They asked me, 'Do you write poetry? Do you eat?' and I thought, 'Well, yes I do.'"

The poet-in-residence project was the second event put on by Lexington's two-man contemporary art center, Con/Temp. Latitude Co-Owner and Artist Bruce Burris and Transy Professor and Artist Kurt Gohde met several years ago when Gohde walked past Burris's house on his way to work. Burris learned he was the new art professor in town and decided they needed to talk.

approached with my list of gripes about the art scene," Burris said. "But he was one of the few who stood still long enough to take the list and take it home and call me back."

The infamous list, which Gohde said took Burris an hour of non-stop talking to get through, became the motivation for this unlikely pair to launch a contemporary art center on a very grassy arts level.

"Most of the art scene here and artists here are dominated by a culture of selling art," Gohde said. "The point of Con/Temp is

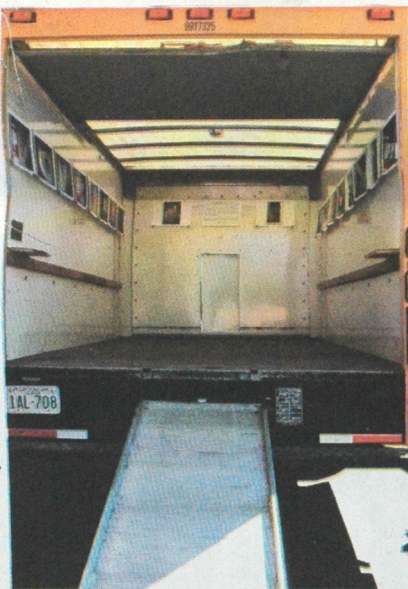
residences, Latitude, Wal-Mart, UK's Reynolds Building, Gray Construction and Third Street at Gray Inc., he's also involved in the public art project in the Ashland Park neighborhood.

Dutton, who is director of Miami University's Center for Community Engagement in Over-The-Rhine, has worked



this experience," she said. "I would sit for long stretches and watch people come and go, and I became very interested and curious about the lives that people stepped out of to come in here and then stepped back into when they left. You start to be really aware about what people carry around with them when you sit still and

CON/TEMP CULTIVATES CREATIVITY IN UNLIKELY COMMUNITIES by Amber Scott



extensively renovating residences in the Over-The-Rhine neighborhood, which suffers from homelessness, segregation, building abandonment, unemployment and political alienation, to provide well-designed living space that will enhance quality of life. He's been on this mission since 1981.

Dutton participated in the Penske truck exhibit not only by offering photographs of his work, but also by giving a lecture at the close of the reception to a standing-room-only audience. The entire event was \$35, the cost of the truck rental, Burris said. Dutton offered for free, and Gohde and Burris did the rest of the work pro bono.

The spirit of Con/Temp was contagious after that first event. Gohde and Burris befriended Max Flannery Jr., who has had an affinity for art practically his whole life. At age 15, Flannery Jr. tested his craftsmanship in bicycle making, producing a long, low, lawn-chaired cycle and winning the prize for most unique bike. Now an architect

His interest in Con/Temp and his connection to his father's restaurant wrote the script for the next event.

The call to artists was answered by more than 20 interested poets. Ramsey's poem "Button Show" earned her the top spot, and she took up residence on June 4. The commitment only required her to visit the restaurant three times and for a final reading, but Ramsey spent twice as much time there.

"I loved it," she said. "They treated me like a queen. And I got to eat for free."

Aside from the nutritional nourishment the gig got her, Ramsey said the experience gave her more ideas than she could put to paper.

"I'll be thanking Max Sr., Max Jr., Kurt and Bruce for years to come for all the ideas this project supplied," she said. "It reinvigorated me as an artist. It inspired me and pushed my comfortability. I'd like to line one of these up every month."

Ramsey made a point to visit Max's at different times of the day to get a full feel of the place. Sometimes she'd work on drafts or take notes, sometimes she'd write poetry, and sometimes she'd talk to the people coming in. Once she even got to watch Max Sr. make his top-secret beer cheese recipe. "I got a lot of perspective from

pay attention."

Among the people Ramsey met while doing her residency were a woman grieving her dog, men in fatigues waiting to hear if they were called to duty, grandparents who had been eating at Max's since it opened bringing in their grandchildren. All walks of life passed through the doors at Max's, and every one of them got a warm welcome and a hot, renewable plate of food for only \$6.

"You see people that could be eating anywhere they wanted, and you can tell based on their dress and adornments," Ramsey said. The diversity of clientele is something that Flannery Sr. is quietly proud about.

Ramsey said Flannery Sr. was one of the greatest inspirations she got from the experience. He works seven days a week, unless it's his annual vacation week, in which case he works three days. He doesn't slow down, is friendly to everyone he meets and is up for trying anything new. When Flannery Jr. brought the idea of a poet-in-residence to him, he said go ahead.

"I've always liked art, but I've never taken time to pursue or enjoy it," he said. "It was nice to have it walk in the door and stay for a while."

The residency culminated in a poetry reading on June 26, complete with Bluegrass music from

Blue Dawg and overflowing plates of country style flavor. The shell of the building looked as unimposing as ever, and the only thing different about the dining room was the oversized speakers against one wall. But in this simple space, art was created, lingered for a moment and left a lasting impression in the most unlikely of places.

"It's important to find links to other communities - Hispanics, blacks - and to expose them to art, even if it's just for a couple hours," Gohde said. And that mission has led them right into their next project.

Refusing to let the community rest on its heels, the next Con/Temp exhibit is being put to a vote. Anyone can go to <http://homepages.transy.edu/~kgohde/contemp/index.html> and cast a vote for what should be the next Con/Temp event. Perhaps you'd like to see seven strangers picked to curate a show together and offer it to the community to find out what happens when art stops being for museums and starts being for you. Maybe you'd be interested in unexpected conversations on public access television that bring together very different people that share a least common denominator. How about a showcase of stolen flyers or show posters whose imagery compelled someone to take it for themselves? Or would you like to see Salomon Vergara expand his remarkable puppet community and produce a bi-lingual performance based on the work of a Kentucky writer? You decide.

"There are so many processes for getting people involved in something that they might otherwise not be involved in that we might just experiment with all the different processes, continuing with community-driven and selected events," Burris said. "The structure of Con/Temp is as interesting as the projects it inspires."

"The great thing about art is that it's so democratic. You don't need to know how to play a bass guitar to go buy one and be in a rock n' roll band. It's the same way with art. There's so much space for people, they're really is... We want to show people that you don't need everything in the world to change the world. It's really just a dynamic of energy and wanting to do something you believe in."

<http://homepages.transy.edu/~kgohde/contemp/index.html> and cast a vote for what should be the next Con/Temp event.

TAMMY RAMSEY

Writing Poems at Max's

After years of hard searching for my dream career, I'm refilling my plate and staying right here. Finally, I've found the best job in the land. The hours are flexible, the benefits grand. The dress code is casual, the co-workers kind, I eat while I work and the bosses don't mind.

Max, the ringleader, sure knows how to cook. When it comes to feasting, he wrote the book. And poems, like food, can be nourishment too. Writing poems at a restaurant - too good to be true! How lucky to find such a dream job for myself. Contentedness truly is the best kind of wealth.

Every hour's lunch hour when I'm on the clock. I wait for inspiration and find plenty in stock. While I'm eating hominy and Cajun hot slow, I'm watching and listening, taking note of it all. The crew's hard work keeps the buffet replete; I'm thinking of lines, eating all I can eat.

A poet tells stories and tries to see what is there, seeks to wake up the world and make them aware, selects words as ingredients and cooks up some verse, serves it up to an audience, waits to see if it works. A poet writes best when a poet's content, So my job at Max's is quite an event.

Now, I've worked in offices answering to suits, and I've worked on a movie where the star was real cute. I've worked for a doctor taking calls from the sick, and I've worked as a teacher praying, "Summer, come quick!" I've gotten some raises over the years, but I'm being paid best when I'm working right here.

Sometimes, if I'm lucky, I'll find someone who'll chat who'll tell me a story about some this or that. A story of six people born on the same winter's date, the story of a son and the comics he creates. A story of a retriever so beautiful and smart no other dog can fill the void in their heart.

Men in Navy fatigues help me understand their job of being at the nation's command. Three women in scrubs say their work is not dire. They introduce the phlebotomist as "the vampire." Some have come more than 30 years to visit and dine, and I can taste why they come back every time.

The happiest cooks make the food taste delicious. Stir in some art, and it's twice as nutritious. Max knows music can spice everything, so back in the kitchen, they dance and they sing. Max's place has bluegrass and photography collage, and now he's added poetry to the sensory montage.

And his lucky poet gets to go back for more as those who work elsewhere head for the door. From salads to veggies, from beer cheese to cake, I have found my calling; there is no mistake. My job is right here. I'd have it no other way. My job's writing poems at Max's Loudon Square Buffet.

Max Makes Beer Cheese

The precise amount of each ingredient I cannot tell you for two reasons: first, he said he'd have to kill me if I did; second, I turned my head so as not to risk it. What I can tell you is this: one batch will fill 15 one-pound and 20 half-pound containers. A Hobart mixing coil the size and shape of a road construction drill extends into a deep silver bowl. Even a broken gear does not hinder the process.

Max leans against the machine, adjusting the gear manually. Satisfied it's right, he grabs a six pack, pops open several and empties them into the bowl. He instinctively adds just the right amount of cheese and spices and switches on the blade that blends the ingredients into a creamy yellow spread. Finally, with a lever, Max lowers the bowl and -- a one-man assembly line -- labels the containers.



fills them with an ice cream scoop, weighs them and snaps on the tops. "That's it," he says. Scoop by scoop, he has served up more than a ton since last October. He's serving it right now, there on the table. Go ahead, don't be shy. Load up a cracker and raise a toast to Max, the King Bee of beer cheese.

War Footing

The morning war breaks out, a new bird arrives at the feeder, black with dirt-brown head, bristling young, soft feathers. Oblivious to constant news coverage, he has taken no precautions, stocked no duct tape, hoarded no plastic sheeting, has no notion the color orange means high terror alert. On television, the embeds model anti-chemical suits and gas masks, transforming photogenic heads into creatures ready for catastrophe. We're prepared for anything, the reporter's muffled voice says. We're taking every precaution. Outside my window on the green birdfeeder, the bird stands, his body the size of a hand grenade, his trigger-thin legs ankle deep in seeds. He kicks through them, king of this regime, puffs out his feathers and sings.