



# GRIFFIN



## 2024 Polk and Renaissance awards celebrate positive neighborhood contributors

BY ABBY WOJCIK

The Central West End Association honored the restaurant Dressel's Public House and Koplars Properties official Frances Thompson with its two most prestigious annual awards at a celebration held Oct. 11 at Maryland House on Maryland Plaza.

Dressel's Public House was recognized with the 2024 Renaissance Award for its positive impact on the neighborhood. The Renaissance Award annually recognizes select organizations that have made a positive economic or social impact on the Central West End neighborhood.

Frances Thompson, vice president of marketing at Koplars and a past CWEA president, was honored with the 2024 Polk Award. The Polk Award annually recognizes the impact and leadership of select individuals who have made consistent,



Ben Dressel, left, speaking to patrons at the bar. Dressel's Public House officially reopened in 2023.

long-lasting, and positive contributions to the neighborhood.

### GENERATIONS OF CHANGE: DRESSEL'S PUBLIC HOUSE

Over the course of opening in 1980, taking a three-year hiatus dur-

ing the pandemic and then reopening in 2023, Dressel's Public House on Euclid Avenue has seen the CWE through decades of different eras. Owner Ben Dressel purchased the business from his parents, who originally opened the bar as a

literary, intellectual social place for students, writers and academics.

"What my dad and mom created was sort of their culture, and this was what they wanted to do," Dressel said.

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## Behind-the-scenes with The Muny's wig manager Kelley Jordan

BY NICKI DWYER

The 106th season of The Muny is now a fond memory for the 12,000 nightly patrons who were dazzled by seven fabulous productions this past summer. As *Anything Goes* was sailing toward its final performance, wigmaker Kelley Jordan said she has never experienced a season like 2024's.

Jordan, who is manager of the hair and makeup department at The Muny, was also the wig designer for four of the productions:

*Dreamgirls*, *Waitress*, *In the Heights*, and *Anything Goes*. "Everyone felt the pressure," she said. "There were two big shows back-to-back, *Les Mis* followed by *Dreamgirls*, which had 107 wigs because of the play's timeline, 1968 to 1976. It takes five days to get a production ready for tech rehearsal. But in the middle of *Dreamgirls* prep, there was a holiday and a photo shoot, so we really only had three-and-a-half days to get the actors' wigs fitted and styled. When we started the season we were geared up for the pace, but even when it slowed down, we still had to hustle."

"After all these years at The Muny, I'm used to operating with speed. We have to be mentally and physically prepared to get everything in and done in five days. When you are committed to 'The Muny scene,' this is what you expect. I thank God I learned how to do this job here, so that when I work in other cities, I am ready to go."

"A Muny production is a team effort," Jordan said. "I didn't understand any of that until I was part of the production team and sat at the table with the others. After that



Kelley Jordan styles a wig for "Anything Goes."

NICKI DWYER PHOTOS

first meeting, I went back to my department and explained that we had been operating in our own bubble instead of as an important part of the whole design team working tirelessly to make the production fall into place." That information spurred Jordan to work even harder.

Jordan's mother, a self-taught wigmaker who made hairstyles

like Afros for back-up singers, taught her skill to her three children so they would always have something to fall back on. At age 12, Kelley learned to cut wigs up and sew them together. "I learned more from my mom than what is taught in beauty school," she said.

As if out of a play script, Jordan got her start in 1985 while working

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Jon Dressel remembrance

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Weekend in the Park, a photo essay



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sel said. “This is a great place. They created something that generations of people really fell in love with.”

Having grown up here, Ben Dressel has also personally witnessed the neighborhood’s varied history over the years. While he still feels like the CWE is in a state of constant change, he also feels genuinely excited and hopeful to be a part of making it a vibrant and intriguing place for people to visit and live.

“We’re in a great corner of the neighborhood. There’s a lot of life and things that don’t change about the neighborhood, in terms of the architecture and why people come here.”

Dressel hopes to bridge his parent’s vision and the tavern’s established reputation with fresh perspective, while adapting to the rapidly evolving post-pandemic restaurant culture.

Along with his wife, Elizabeth Sharp, they used the three-year closure to renovate and open a brewery, an idea that Dressel’s has been excited to bring to the CWE. One of their signature beers, Red Horse Ale, is an homage to a beer from the town Llanelli in Wales where Dressel’s great-grandfather came from.

They are excited about future art installations coming to their brewery space and to host more banquets and events. Their goal is to continue adapting to and serving the needs of the community, while being a welcoming social hub for all generations.

“I always joke, ‘I tried to kill it multiple times,’” Dressel admitted. Nonetheless, The pub’s unique character and history has established it as one of the rare, longstanding St. Louis restaurants and a landmark in the CWE.

**A FONT OF POSITIVE IMPACT AND LEADERSHIP:**

**FRANCES THOMPSON**

To recognize consistent, long-lasting, positive contributions from an individual to the CWE neigh-

borhood, the CWEA’s Board of Directors honors Frances Thompson, vice president of marketing at Koplal Properties, with the 2024 Polk Award.

Thompson has called St. Louis and the CWE her home for 25 years. She raised her three daughters Alana, Charlie and Malia here, while becoming a valued leader in the community. Having hosted over 125 events, serving on the CWEA Board from 2011 to 2015, and assisting with the redevelopment of Maryland Plaza and York House, Thompson has helped make the neighborhood more vibrant, safe and welcoming.

Thompson recalls her first memory of St. Louis on a winter visit in 1998, coming from the airport during a snowstorm, turning down a dark, quiet street and then seeing a fountain in the middle of the road, a coffee shop called The Grind and the only restaurant open that night, Culpepper’s.

“I couldn’t have imagined then just how important this neighborhood would become to me,” Thompson said. “St. Louis became my home — especially the Central West End, which has played a significant role in my life.”

In her position at Koplal Properties, her responsibility of promoting the plaza grew into organizing community-focused events. These events have become memorable and cherished experiences for the community.

“It has been incredibly rewarding to create opportunities that bring people together and feel more connected to the neighborhood,” Thompson said. “I’ve been fortunate to be part of many such experiences — whether hosting a major event, helping someone navigate a parking meter, or celebrating an employee at one of our businesses winning a performance award. These everyday moments, both big and small, build lasting connections and community.”

A particular event that stands out as one of Thompson’s personal fa-



2024 Polk Award Recipient Frances Thompson (center) shows off her award with CWEA President Brian Flowers and CWEA Director Lindsey Tsvetanov (right).

vorites was the 2014 CWEA House Tour on Portland Place, where they peeked inside some of the most historic, magnificent homes in St. Louis. This December marks 20 years of celebrating Holiday on the Plaza, a continually evolving and favorite tradition.

Thompson truly loves her CWE community and being a dedicated, loyal, inclusive representa-

tive of everything that makes it a wonderful place.

“All of these experiences, whether it’s hosting events, managing properties or simply being part of the fabric of the neighborhood, have brought me to this moment. I’m deeply honored to be recognized for the work I’ve done, but in truth, it’s the connections with people and the sense of community that mean the most to me.”



Group shot, left to right: CWEA Director Lindsey Tsetanov, 2024 Polk Award Recipient Frances Thompson, CWEA President Brian Flowers, CWEA Director Carol Curtis, CWEA Director Chris Peimann, CWEA Secretary Celeste Vossmeier, CWEA Vice President Becca Vossmeier, and CWEA Director Dan Boccabella.


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