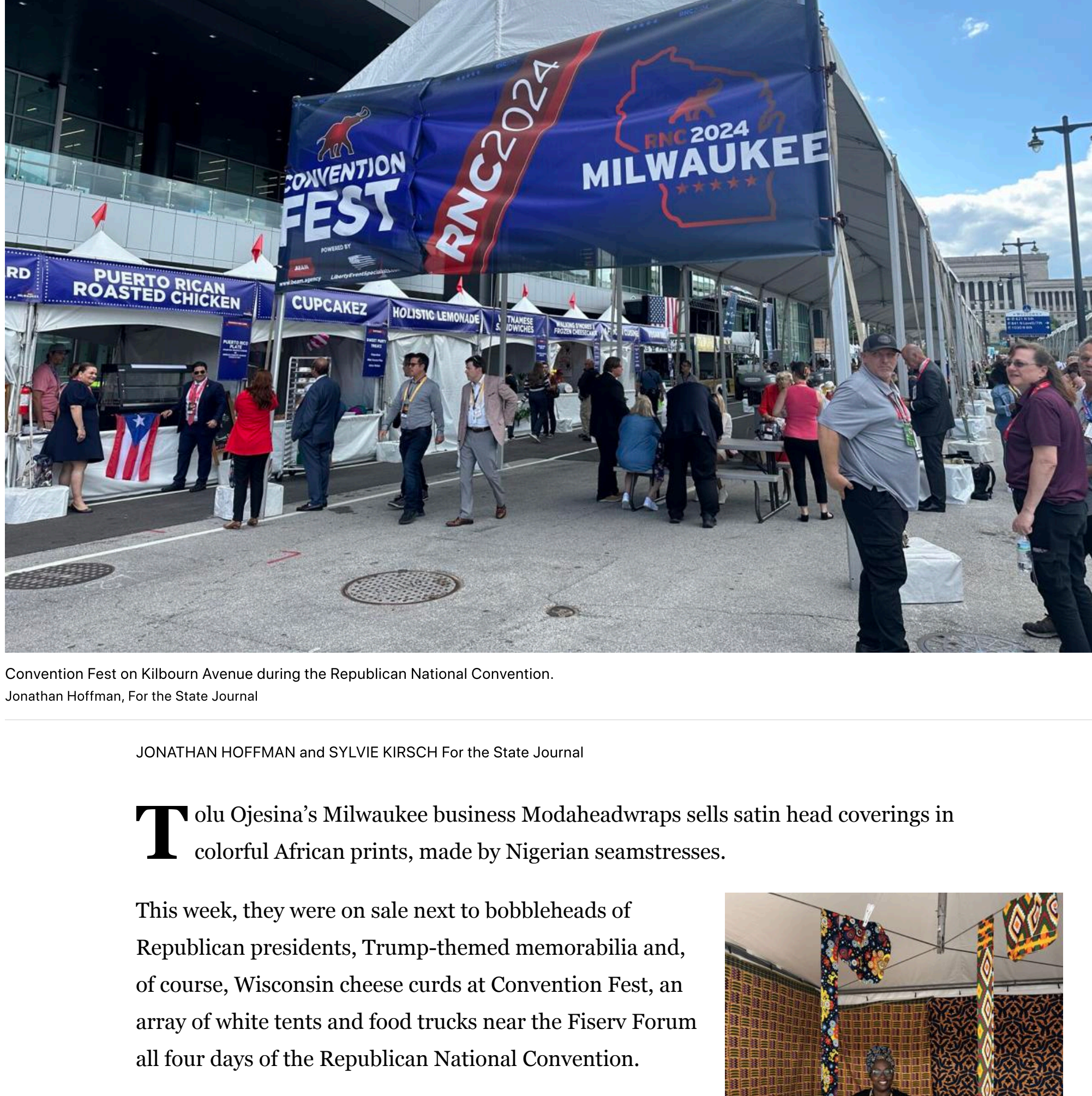


MILWAUKEE | CONVENTION FEST

From cheese curds to bobbleheads, the RNC Convention Fest has it all

JONATHAN HOFFMAN and SYLVIE KIRSCH For the State Journal
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Convention Fest on Kilbourn Avenue during the Republican National Convention.
Jonathan Hoffman, For the State Journal

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Tolu Ojesina's Milwaukee business Modaheadwraps sells satin head coverings in colorful African prints, made by Nigerian seamstresses.

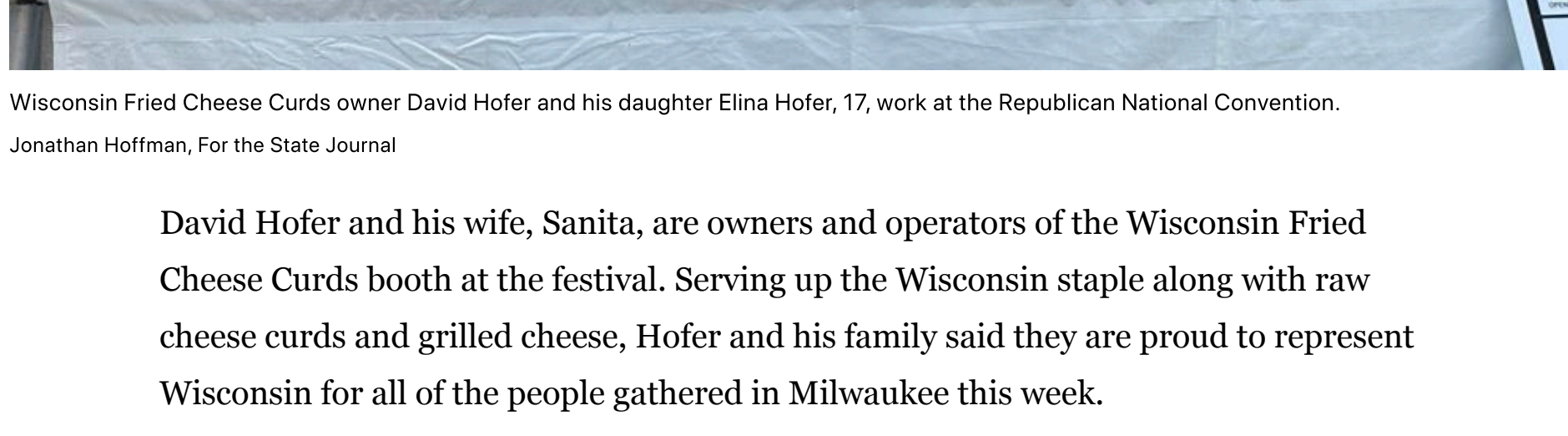
This week, they were on sale next to bobbleheads of Republican presidents, Trump-themed memorabilia and, of course, Wisconsin cheese curds at Convention Fest, an array of white tents and food trucks near the Fiserv Forum all four days of the Republican National Convention.

Ojesina said she was recruited in part through the Wisconsin Black Chamber of Commerce, which said the RNC was looking to feature minority-owned businesses at Convention Fest.

"I've met the most random people from the most random places and we've had the most awesome conversations," she said. "Where else would I have met those people?"



Tolu Ojesina shows off a no-tie head scarf from her brand Modaheadwraps at the Republican National Convention.
SYLVIE KIRSCH, FOR THE STATE JOURNAL



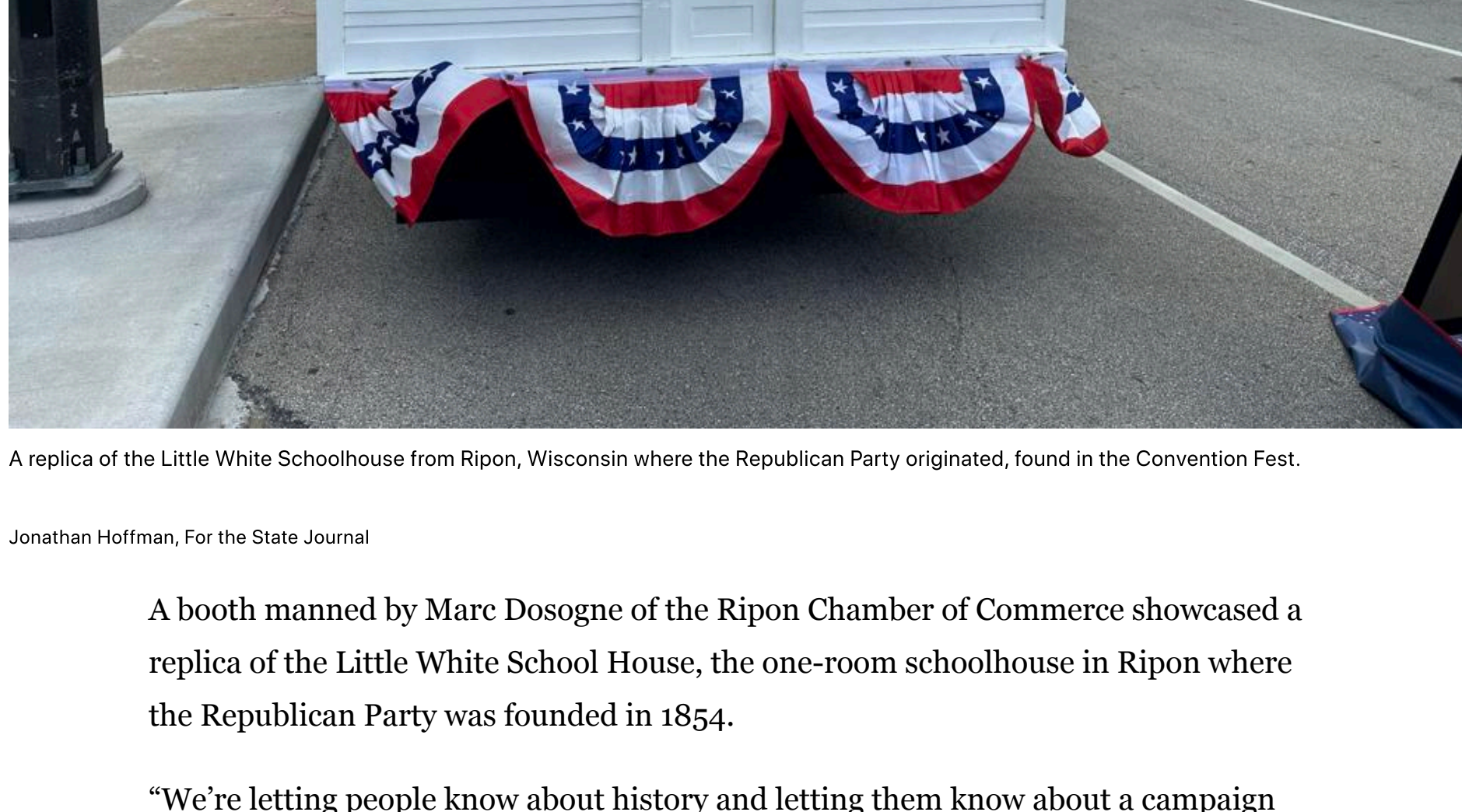
Wisconsin Fried Cheese Curds owner David Hofer and his daughter Elna Hofer, 17, work at the Republican National Convention.
Jonathan Hoffman, For the State Journal

David Hofer and his wife, Sanita, are owners and operators of the Wisconsin Fried Cheese Curds booth at the festival. Serving up the Wisconsin staple along with raw cheese curds and grilled cheese, Hofer and his family said they are proud to represent Wisconsin for all of the people gathered in Milwaukee this week.

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"Politics aside, we just want to sell our stuff and represent the great state of Wisconsin with what we got," Hofer said. "We could have aliens with three heads and five arms walking around — I still want to be selling stuff to them."



A replica of the Little White Schoolhouse from Ripon, Wisconsin where the Republican Party originated, found in the Convention Fest.
Jonathan Hoffman, For the State Journal

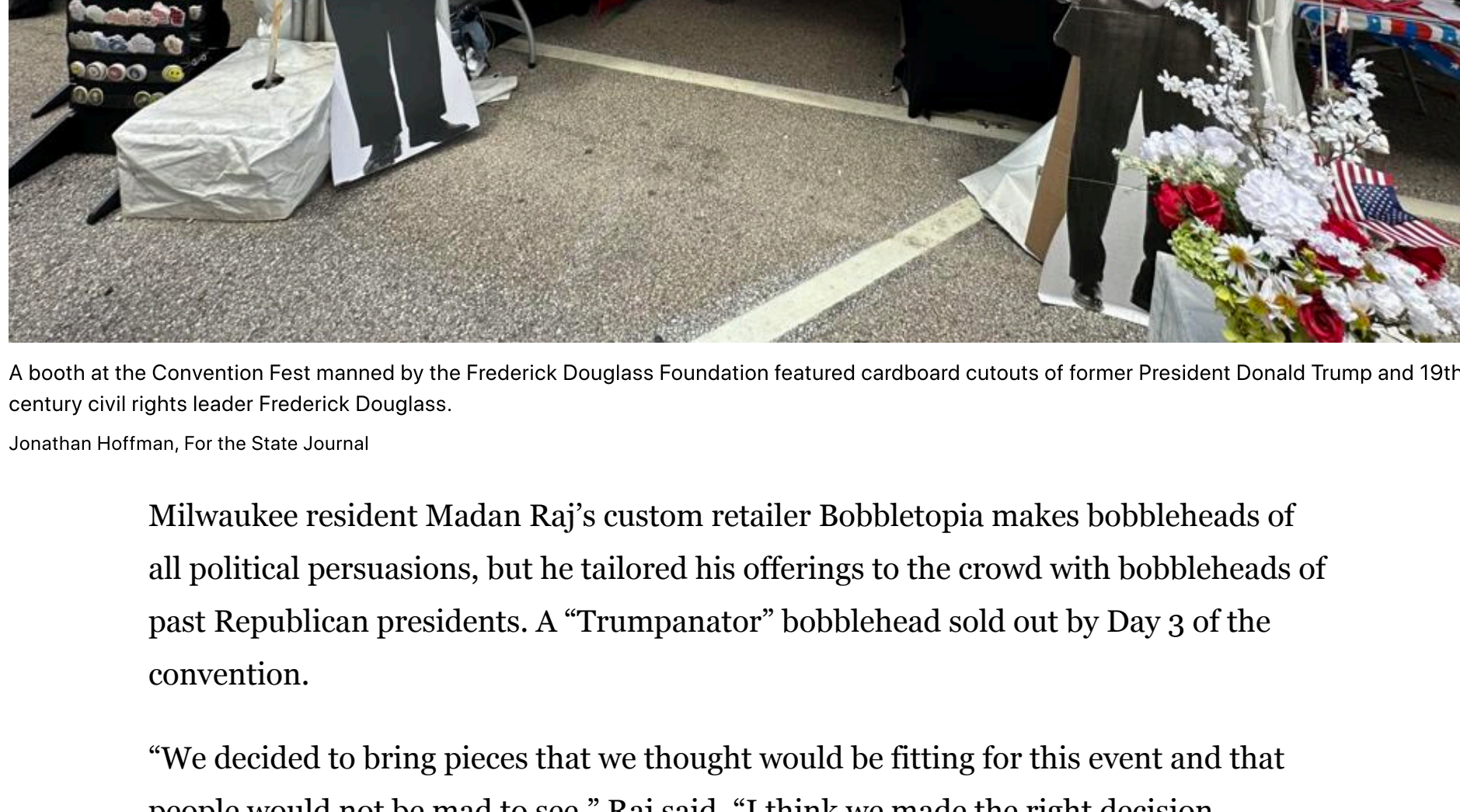
A booth manned by Marc Dosogne of the Ripon Chamber of Commerce showcased a replica of the Little White School House, the one-room schoolhouse in Ripon where the Republican Party was founded in 1854.

"We're letting people know about history and letting them know about a campaign we're doing now to add a welcome center" in Ripon, Dosogne said.

Dosogne said convention attendees who have stopped at his booth have been curious and friendly, happy to learn more about the Republican Party's founding.

"People already knew about (the schoolhouse) or they wanted to learn more about it, so it's just been very positive," Dosogne said.

"Christian conservative wireless provider" Patriot Mobile had a booth featuring a life-size cutout of Trump as Rambo. Another booth featured realistic life-size figures of both Trump and 19th century abolitionist Frederick Douglass. The Frederick Douglass Foundation is a Christian national policy group promoting free markets and limited government.



A booth at the Convention Fest manned by the Frederick Douglass Foundation featured cardboard cutouts of former President Donald Trump and 19th century civil rights leader Frederick Douglass.
Jonathan Hoffman, For the State Journal

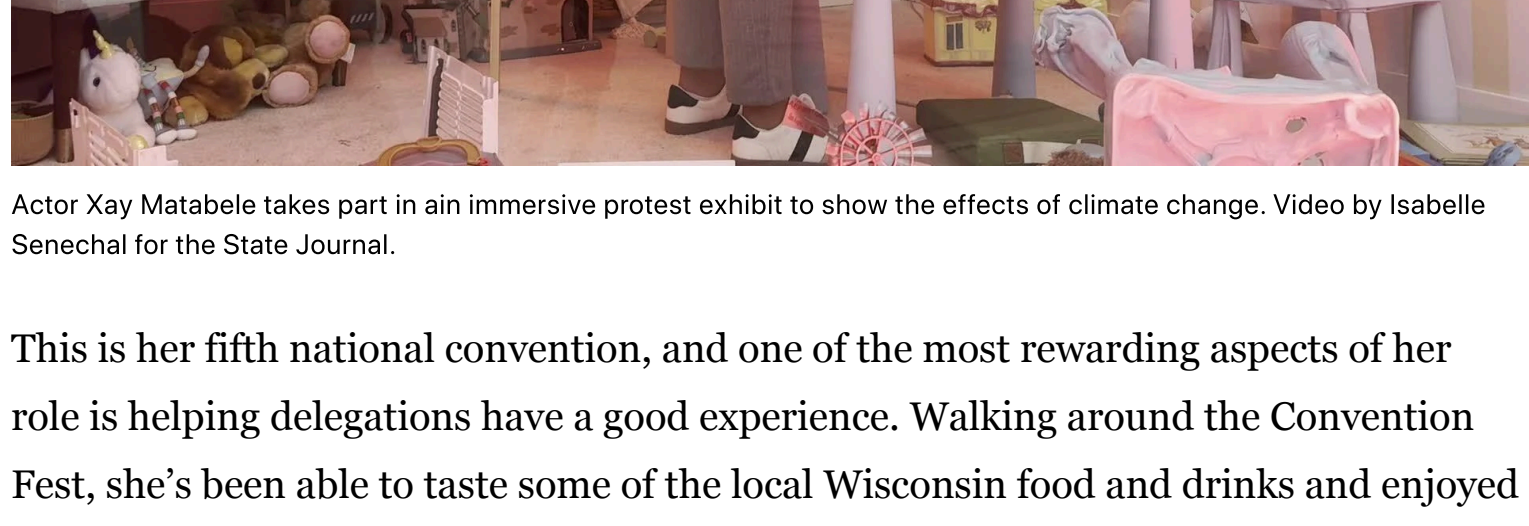
Milwaukee resident Madan Raj's custom retailer Bobbletopia makes bobbleheads of all political persuasions, but he tailored his offerings to the crowd with bobbleheads of past Republican presidents. A "Trumpanator" bobblehead sold out by Day 3 of the convention.

"We decided to bring pieces that we thought would be fitting for this event and that people would not be mad to see," Raj said. "I think we made the right decision because, for the most part, we're selling the pieces we brought."

Frank Keppler, owner of Brew City Brands, is happy to get the opportunity to promote his 37-year-old business at a political event, after he lost that opportunity when the Democratic National Convention slated for Milwaukee turned virtual in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It's important for Milwaukee to show that we can be put on the world stage and pull off an event that looks nice," said Keppler.

Making convention events look nice is one of Julie Ann Schmidt's jobs. She is working with the RNC to manage a number of delegations at the convention and support state party delegations' event planning and logistics.



Actor Xay Matabele takes part in an immersive protest exhibit to show the effects of climate change. Video by Isabelle Senechal for the State Journal.

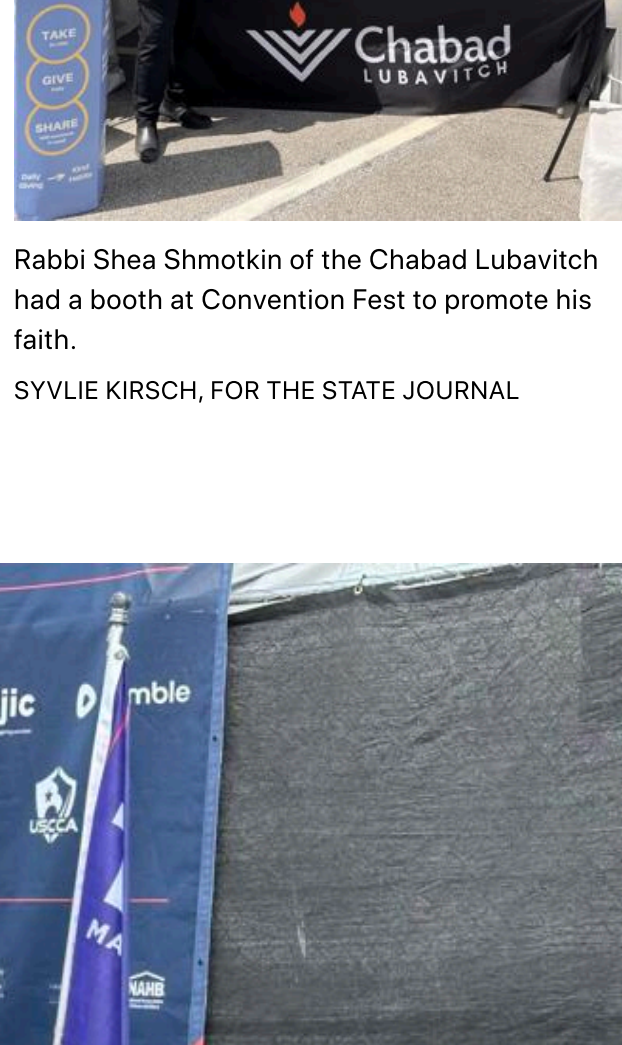
This is her fifth national convention, and one of the most rewarding aspects of her role is helping delegations have a good experience. Walking around the Convention Fest, she's been able to taste some of the local Wisconsin food and drinks and enjoyed the participatory booths.

"I liked signing the pink bus. It's stuff that's interactive that is always fun," Schmidt said.

The big pink bus is operated by evangelical nonprofit Concerned Women for America. Guests signed and wrote messages on the bus throughout the week.

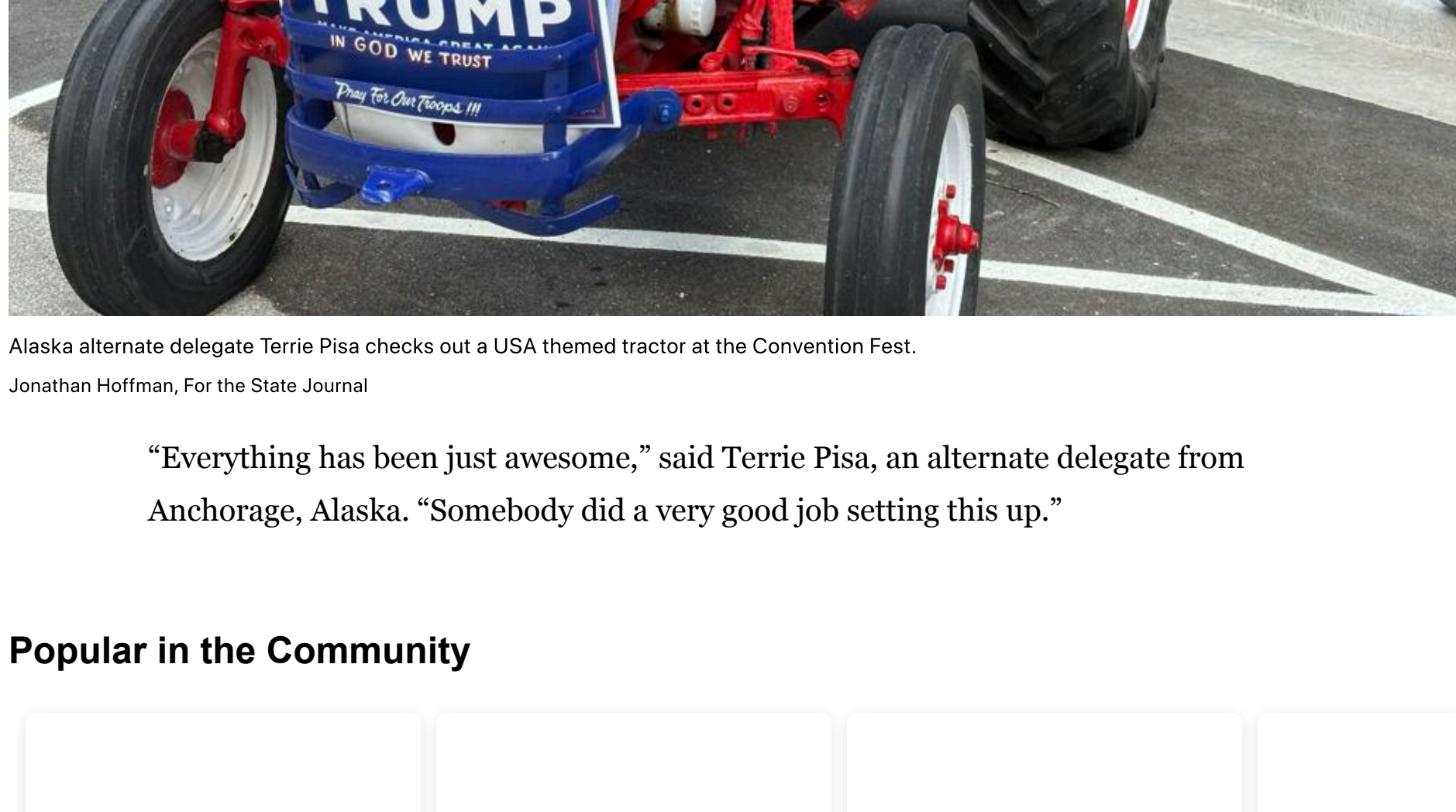
Concerned Women for America CEO Penny Young Nance said her organization is at the RNC to promote its core issues, including encouraging women to vote, the right to life, religious liberty and support for Israel.

Rabbi Shea Shmotkin of Chabad Lubavitch of Wisconsin had a booth at Convention Fest to promote his faith, and to hand out small yellow charity boxes in the shape of Noah's ark. It's part of an initiative called ARK for Acts of Random Kindness. "Kindness has to be trained," said Shmotkin, whose grandparents founded the Milwaukee chapter of Chabad in the 1960s. "Every morning you wake up and put a coin in there, and slowly you train yourself to just think about other people. That can bring us together."



Rabbi Shea Shmotkin of the Chabad Lubavitch had a booth at Convention Fest to promote his faith.
SYLVIE KIRSCH, FOR THE STATE JOURNAL

Convention Fest also had an outdoor stage featuring singer-songwriters performing and short talks by Republicans Donald Trump Jr., Turning Point USA founder Charlie Kirk, former professional wrestler and Trump administration official Linda McMahon and former swimmer Riley Gaines, an activist opposing transgender women's participation in women's sports.



Alaska alternate delegate Terrie Pisa checks out a USA themed tractor at the Convention Fest.
Jonathan Hoffman, For the State Journal

"Everything has been just awesome," said Terrie Pisa, an alternate delegate from Anchorage, Alaska. "Somebody did a very good job setting this up."

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