

From anonymous nomination to White House celebration: Valentine recognized as National Rural Innovator

By Karrie Carlson, Daily Journal Media, Jan. 29, 2025

From as early as second grade, Nancy X. Valentine knew there was a special connection between her and art. She could not have known, however, that one day her creative heart would lead her to The White House.

Her ties with art in the Fergus Falls community began long before the first piece was displayed at a gallery. "My family immigrated from China, and my grandparents didn't join us until later," Valentine explained. "There were ladies that volunteered at A Center for the Arts who kind of took us under their wing and got us involved. My earliest art experience in Fergus was popping popcorn at the center and seeing shows."

Knowing at a young age that she wanted to be an artist, the pressure to have economic success was something that was of great importance in her family. Other interests would come and go over the years, but it was art that remained a constant passion.

Around 2016, Valentine first claimed the identity of an artist and knew it was a staple in her future. "The rural art landscape and the idea of the starving artist is changing," she said.

Today, in addition to creating art, Valentine is the executive director of Kaddatz Galleries in downtown Fergus Falls. Among the many things Valentine does at the gallery, chatting with the visitors has been a great joy, especially in the summer, when the foot traffic increases and people want to come in, look at the displays and talk about them.

There are also numerous outreach programs, classes and activities that are offered through the Kaddatz, which Valentines hope to increase and grow each year.

For Valentine, the journey to D.C. began in early December, after an anonymous nomination, when she received an email stating she had been selected to have a phone interview with The White House after they received an anonymous nomination, nominating her as a National Rural Innovator.

During the spring/summer of 2024, the Biden-Harris administration announced that it was accepting nationwide nominations in search of those who are making a positive impact on their rural communities. Someone nominated Valentine, and the nomination generated notice.

"There are so many phishing scams out there, so I didn't know what to think at first," she said about the initial contact. After in depth Google searching, a link was located for the email's sender on The White House website. Valentine knew then that it was a legitimate message, and a phone interview was scheduled.

During the interview, Valentine was given the opportunity to share what she was doing to enrich her rural community. When offered the chance to ask questions of her own, her first was: "What did I get nominated for?" She was told it was for her role as an artist and as an arts administrator.

Valentine admitted it was a little intimidating knowing she was talking to someone in Washington, D.C., but once she started sharing about Fergus Falls and the area's art culture she is so proud of, it turned out to be quite fun. Not only that, but the woman she was speaking with happened to originate

from a small Wisconsin town, which felt relatable to Valentine. "It was like we were just having coffee and chatting."

Three hours after that Friday phone call, Valentine received an email inviting her to The White House as one of 14 people who had been selected as National Rural Innovators.

The National Rural Innovators Ceremony and associated events were to take place in just a few days, but when The White House invites you, Valentine said, you make it work.

Accompanied by her husband, Cameron Stewart, and his parents, Christine Christianson-Frisell and Matt Frisell, Valentine landed in D.C. around midnight and had little time to rest before a full day of activity.

Prior to National Rural Innovators activities, Valentine and her family were able to take a tour of The White House, which was decorated in all its holiday splendor. "That was magical and also reminded me I'm 'not in Kansas anymore' because of the opulence of it," she explained. It was an eye-opening experience for other reasons, too. "I forget sometimes, when I leave the state, that not everyone is Minnesota-nice. People were elbowing and shoving past and not saying 'excuse me,' or interrupting photographs. When we finally met the cohort, it was almost like all of us could exhale — because we were all rural people who are used to a slower pace of life," she added.

Of all the once-in-a-lifetime moments experienced throughout the trip, the one that made the top of the list was bowling in the Truman Bowling Alley, located in the Eisenhower Executive Offices building right next to The White House. "It was surreal bowling with historical photos on the wall," Valentine shared.

The prestigious honor of being named a National Rural Innovator was noted at a special ceremony, illustrating the administration's commitment to investing in rural communities and praising their success. Valentine said the honor not only recognizes her work, but also the work of fellow rural artists and everyone connected with the Kaddatz.

"We're committed to making art accessible and meaningful in rural Minnesota, and this honor reinforces the importance of individual artists and cultural institutions in building vibrant rural communities."

Although she still doesn't know the identity of who nominated her for the award, Valentine expresses a big "thank you" to whoever it was.

No matter what the future holds, Valentine will always be able to look at her signed letter of recognition from President Joe Biden as a benchmark on her journey from little girl making popcorn at A Center for the Arts to a celebrated guest at The White House.