



Ron Miller and Nikol Lohr outside one of their renovated schoolhouses in rural Kansas.

ABOUT PLACE

SCHOOLYARD HEROES

Artists find peace on the plains thanks to the Harveyville Project

By Kate Rockwood · Photo by Jesse Roberts

Most of us would cringe at the idea of returning to high school, let alone living there. But two years ago Nikol Lohr and Ron Miller decided to do just that. They bought four 1920s brick schoolhouses in rural Kansas, which they converted into an artist's residency and their own home.

"Since I was a little kid, my fantasy has always been to live in a school," says Lohr, a 36-year-old writer who founded *DisgruntledHousewife.com* and recently published the knitting guide *Naughty Needles*. She and Miller, a 32-year-old tattoo artist and musician, toyed with the idea of repurposing a missile silo, firehouse, or church before settling on the schools.

"There's been a whole lot of consolidation of rural schools out here so there are actually beautiful old school buildings available," Lohr says. In 2005 she and Miller purchased an elementary school and a high school on 9.5 acres of land in

Harveyville, Kansas. Lohr and Miller were able to move into the high school right away. They also bought two schools in nearby Eskridge, though the couple has yet to start renovations on those buildings.

Working under the name The Harveyville Project, Lohr and Miller hope to lure frazzled urban artists away from their daily distractions. Eighteen of the school's classrooms will be turned into living spaces or artist studios, complete with the school's original chalkboards and projection screens. The couple turned the old math classroom into their bedroom, the principal's office into Lohr's writing space, and a grade school classroom into Ron's art studio.

Lohr and Miller have also begun hosting workshops at the school, including Yarn School, a four-day yarn-making workshop held last year for 20 participants, some of whom traveled from as far as

New York and Hawaii to attend. "We taught the spinning classes in the gymnasium," Lohr says, "and the dye lab was upstairs in the old Home Ec room."

In a town of roughly 250 people, news of the art residency spread just as quickly as the rumors. "The funniest rumor is that we were running an Internet porn site," Lohr says, pointing out that at the time only dial-up was available in the town. Even the town residents who don't quite understand the project have expressed enthusiasm, though. "They're pleased that the schools aren't just going to sit and rot or be demolished," Lohr says, "because the schools are a big part of the community and they've been here forever."

Want to focus on your artwork out on the plains? \$425 a month or 20 work hours a week will score you room, partial board, and unlimited quiet. For more information about the Harveyville Project, visit harveyvilleproject.com.