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FOOD & DRINK

Madison LGBTQ pioneer Dick Wagner immortalized in new portrait

By Victoria Davis | Special to the Cap Times
Mar 18, 2023



Rae Senarighi, a local artist also known as Transpainter, painted this portrait of Madison LGBTQ activist and public servant Dick Wagner. The painting was purchased by the city and now hangs in the hallway outside of the city council chambers in the City-County Building in Madison on Thursday, Mar. 16, 2023. RUTHIE HAUGE

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The year was 1986 and Karin Wolf, at the time a student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, was riding her bike around Lake Monona. She came across a statue in Orton Park unlike any she'd ever seen.

It featured a gay couple and a lesbian couple sitting on a bench. The piece, titled "Gay Liberation," was made by artist George Segal. Dick Wagner, who had been an openly gay member of the Dane County Board of Supervisors for six years by then, was part of the team from Dane County Cultural Affairs and New Harvest Foundation to get the sculpture placed in Orton Park for the public to see.

"I had never seen anything like that in my life," said Wolf, a member of the LGBTQ community who has now been the Madison Arts Program Administrator for 16 years. "I was from a small, conservative area in St. Louis, and my friend in high school was terrified of losing his job if somebody found out he was gay."

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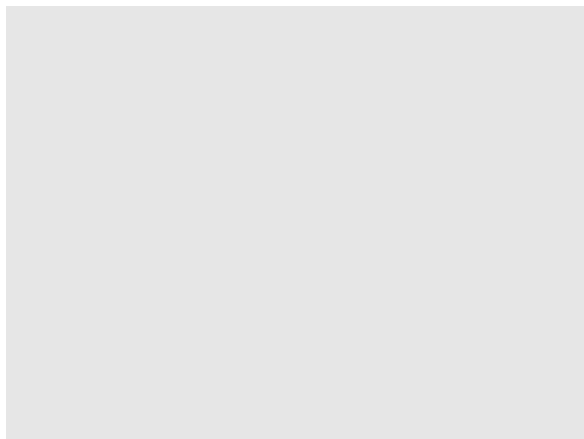
“Bringing a sculpture to Madison of LGBTQ love, and having it publicly displayed in the 80s, Dick set a bar for Madison to be an inclusive place. He was a champion of that, and it made me want to live here.”

Wagner, who passed away back in 2021, served on the Dane County Board for 14 years, as well as serving on the Wisconsin Arts Board, the Madison Landmarks Commission, the Madison Trust for Historic Preservation, and the board of Fair Wisconsin. He was the first openly gay county board chair in the state, was appointed co-chair the Governor’s Council on Lesbian and Gay Issues, and helped create a 1980 county nondiscrimination ordinance protecting gay and lesbian individuals. He also co-founded the New Harvest Foundation, the only foundation in Dane County that funnels charitable contributions exclusively to LGBTQ organizations for community development, along with a long list of other inclusion-focused accomplishments.

So it’s all too fitting that Wagner would be immortalized in artwork as well, via the colorful brushstrokes of trans painter Rae Senarighi. The portrait, featuring a smiling, multi-colored Wagner with the backdrop of a bright blue sky, now hangs in the City-County Building, outside the Council/County board chambers (Room 201) following a dedication ceremony which took place at the beginning of March. The portrait was previously on display outside Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway’s office as part of an exhibition featuring some of Senarighi’s portraits of trans individuals.

“We had one of his huge portraits hanging up where you turn the corner to the hallway leading to my office, then a number of smaller prints following that, and then there was the portrait of Dick, which was hanging right by my office doorway,” said Rhodes-Conway, who had served on a panel with Wagner about being an openly gay elected official.

“It was such a joy to walk into work every morning and see Dick’s smiling face, and to be reminded of his care and his kindness. I am a little sad that I don’t get to walk by it every day now, but it’s nice to have it where the rest of the public can see it.”



Dick Wagner is pictured at his historic home on the shore of Lake Monona on May 20, 2019. Wagner passed away Dec. 13, 2021.

Ruthie Hauge

Senarighi's work is meant to reflect the LGBTQ+ rainbow as well as the color spectrum and how human eyes perceive light. "I always feel a great sense of responsibility to get these portraits right, so that if their loved ones walked into the room, they'd think, 'There's that person I love.' And I did feel a tremendous amount of pressure when asked to paint Dick Wagner because he is so well known and so beloved. The fact that I've had people tell me how much they see Dick in that portrait has meant a lot."

It's also fitting that the painting, originally commissioned for the cover of the March-April 2022 issue of Our Lives Magazine, would play a large role in seeing Madison's rainbow crosswalk at the top of State Street come to fruition. Senarighi donated all the money used to purchase the portrait to support the rainbow crosswalk.

"I don't think that The Rainbow Crossing Initiative would have ever happened at all without Dick and his influence on this community," said Meri Rose Ekberg, Community & Cultural Resources Planner for the City of Madison. "Public art can also often be controversial, and the 'Gay Liberation' piece, the rainbow crossing...that type of work can be a challenge to put in the public eye, but with support from community leaders like Dick, those works can survive and be celebrated instead of coming under attack."

According to one of Wagner's closest friends, Scott Thornton, a former Chair of the Madison Arts Commission, Wagner approached every task with the understanding of not only the impact it would have on a community, but on individuals as well.

"When it came to getting the city to agree to place the Gay Liberation statue in Orton Park, Dick and a few others went around knocking on the doors of people in the neighborhood to explain why a statue like this was important," Thornton said. "He was always working with the public in mind. The issues mattered, but so did how it affected individuals."

It may not be his most famous triumph, but Wagner's work with George Segal's sculpture is still affecting Madisonians today as well as New Yorkers in its new home as part of the Stonewall National Monument in Greenwich Village

"I had a chance to see it when I was there for pride during my first year as mayor," says Rhodes-Conway. "I was there for an event of the Victory Fund, which Dick also helped to start as a way to fund LGBTQ+ candidates."

"It was an overwhelming experience to know the sculpture's connection with Madison, and with a man whose influence, like his compassion, was endless."

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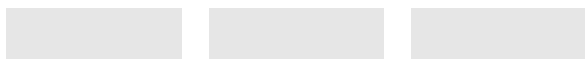
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