

The people behind the places

By [Margaret Plevak](#)

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DELAVAN — Delavan Mayor Mel Nieuwenhuis knew he only had 30 seconds in front of the camera to make a good impression of his city.

So, like the punch line in the old joke about how someone gets to Carnegie Hall, he practiced.

Nieuwenhuis was among the Delavan residents filmed last summer for an episode of the Milwaukee Public Television program, “Around the Corner with John McGivern,” which will be broadcast Thursday, Feb. 16.

The show, now in its sixth season, profiles communities around the state with a visit by the Emmy-winning actor, writer and Milwaukee native McGivern. Past Walworth County communities appearing on ATC have included Whitewater, Lake Geneva and, in 2015, East Troy. This season, besides Delavan, Beloit, in nearby Rock County, will be featured.

Each episode ends with McGivern asking a municipal leader what makes his or her community a great place to live, work and play. Their answer, however, must be limited to 30 seconds while the end credits of the program roll by onscreen.

Nieuwenhuis prepped in advance by writing down everything he wanted to mention about Delavan, but soon realized he wouldn't have enough time, so he shortened his spiel considerably. And he practiced it often.

“I was a little nervous, but we got the filming done in three takes,” he recalled. “I liked the second take I did and the production crew did, too, but they said, 'Let's do it one more time.'”

“It was pretty cool to meet with John McGivern. He was a pleasant guy to talk with, easygoing and made it real easy to be yourself,” Nieuwenhuis said.

Deb Alder, president of The Alder Companies in Delavan, and her husband, Jeff Scherer, president of the Delavan-Darien school board, spoke with McGivern under the shady trees in the front yard of the couple's home, taking advantage of a beautiful summer day.

“They were looking for residents to talk to, and I grew up here,” Alder said. “We talked for about five or 10 minutes about how things have changed, the diverse community in Delavan and some of the great things here. It was very relaxing and a lot of fun, but how much ends up on the cutting room floor, I don't know.”

Alder said the show's producer and crew members genuinely were enthusiastic and upbeat about the community, mentioning how much fun they'd had during the filming.

Lois Maurer, producer of ATC, said a niece's boyfriend with a house on Delavan Lake urged her to take a look at the community and she was surprised by what she discovered.

“Delavan isn't the first thing that comes to your mind when you think about the area here because I think it's overshadowed by Lake Geneva so much of the time,” Maurer said. “But there's a nice, warm feeling to Delavan. We're calling it the unsung hero of the sixth season. It's got a cute little downtown, a lake nearby and all that circus heritage. Where else can you find statues of an elephant, a giraffe and a clown on a main street? And what other community has a water tower on its main street?”

Maurer said she also enjoyed filming a segment in Bradley's Department Store downtown and meeting store owner Lois Stritt.

“It's unbelievable to find another woman named Lois who's under the age of 80,” Maurer said, laughing.

Maurer said typically the researcher on ATC's crew will come to a community in advance of filming.

“She'll walk into the library, a convenience store, a coffee shop, sit down and strike up a conversation with residents to find out more about the area,” Maurer said. “It's kind of like being a secret shopper.”

Maurer noted ATC isn't funded by Travel Wisconsin, the media arm of the Wisconsin Department of Tourism. As a result, the show looks less at tourist hot spots and more at the interesting stories within a community.

“That's the beauty of PBS,” Maurer said. “We love being able to include those things like a Beloit father and son who've run a cleaning business for so many years and are part of the fabric of the community in a lot of ways.”

Maurer also was surprised by Beloit.

“When I heard Beloit, I thought of Gary, Indiana, and those towns that have been hit hard by the economy and sort of rusted out,” she said. “If you're farther away than Madison, you might not know it, but there's so much renovation going on there. It's like all the cool kids are in Beloit now.”

Joyce Berg is a fan of ATC, so she was “tickled” to learn she and the Angel Museum she owns would be included in the episode on Beloit.

Berg sometimes wears an angel costume, complete with wings, and producers wanted her dressed in the outfit for the filming.

“I'm sure John (McGivern) must have known I would be wearing it, but maybe not,” she said. “When he come through the door, the first expression on his face was ... well, I think it took his breath away.”

Berg found the filming in the museum — a former Catholic church — an interesting experience.

“The crew told me, 'You're going to stand here. John's going to stand across from you. You look into John's face all the time. Sometimes the camera will move closer, sometimes right in your face.' That's exactly how it was,” she said. “It took about a half hour, but it all goes by so fast.”

Unlike Berg, Rod Gottfredsen, owner of Austin's Barber Shop, had never seen ATC because he doesn't own a TV. But he does have internet access and owns an iPad, so when he was asked to take part in the episode, he turned to YouTube to catch a few past episodes of the show. Since the filming, he's watched many more.

“John and his crew were delightful,” Gottfredsen said in an email. “He himself ended up being exactly as I expected, just what you see on the shows. We had a lot of laughs and John was a hoot.”

Gottfredsen said the crew spent about an hour and 45 minutes at his barber shop, which was established in downtown Beloit 100 years ago and still bears traces of its past.

“I guess we will find out just how impressed they were by how much airtime my shop and I get,” he said. “The show is only about 24 minutes long and there is so much to do and see in Beloit, I'm sure other people and places from our area were more interesting.”

“I'm anxiously awaiting the premier party. However, I'm also a bit nervous on how I will come across. I so want to be a goodwill ambassador of Beloit. I love this town and it's been very good to me.”