CULTURE BRIGHT:

A WINTER ESSAY SERIES

Reflections on art, culture, and the future *of the Quad Cities from* ***Linda Bowers,*** *Board Chair of The Cultural Trust.*

The Original Vision



"An idea became a seasonal outing. Through years of attention, teamwork, and returning guests, that outing became a tradition."

In November 2016, the outdoor gardens at the Quad City Botanical Center were settling into their dormant season.

Attendance slowed. Familiar paths grew quiet.

The team wanted to give people a reason to return when the flowers had finished blooming.

The idea for Winter Lights came from Ami, then the Center's executive director. Ryan Wille helped promote the event to the public and worked its first season. Bringing it to life required the team, sponsorship, and a willingness to try something new.

In 2017, Winter Nights, Winter Lights, powered by MidAmerican Energy, opened for the first time.

Approximately 30,000 lights filled the outdoor gardens. Two QCBC employees worked each evening, welcoming guests, serving free hot cocoa, and tending a gift shop stocked with holiday items.
About 200 people visited on weekends, with lighter attendance during the week. By season's end, admission fees had covered the display's cost.

The first year gave the Botanical Center a foundation to build on.

Ryan made a point of greeting visitors at the entrance. He thanked them as they left and asked them to complete a survey about what they enjoyed and what could improve.

He listened closely. The QCBC team used those answers to shape the next season.

Kate Mapes, one of the Center's growers, brought experience from Disneyland, where the details of a visit shape how guests feel. She helped the team consider the experience from arrival through the moments that made a family stop, look, and remember.

Visitors were also seeing the dormant garden differently. Bare branches created shapes against the sky. Prairie grasses gave the paths texture. A place associated with summer offered another kind of beauty after dark.

The Cultural Trust had not yet launched Culture Bright. That would come in 2024. But the gardens were already demonstrating what could happen when people brought new ideas into a familiar setting.

As Winter Lights grew, Ryan and the QCBC team welcomed The Cultural Trust and fellow Legacy Partners into the work. Art, music, children's activities, and special-effects lighting created opportunities to combine their expertise.

Those relationships helped shape the collaborative approach that became Culture Bright.
The Cultural Trust's annual unrestricted support also helped sustain the organization doing the work. Its continuing partnership with QCBC gave those creative conversations a lasting foundation.

One season became another. Guests returned, offered suggestions, and brought people who had never visited before. The team kept asking what would make the next experience better.

This winter, 400,000 lights mark the display's tenth season.

The bare branches still reach like witches' arms, and the prairie flowers still look like hay.

The people who care for them have given the community a reason to appreciate those shapes in winter.

An idea became a seasonal outing. Through years of attention, teamwork, and returning guests, that outing became a tradition.

Tomorrow, we turn from how the display began to the personal moments that give the gardens their meaning.

Find the series lineup and ticket information at CultureBright.org.

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And it always will.

Come see why Culture Matters Here. And why it always will.

To learn more about the Culture Bright Winter Series go to CultureBright.org.

The Cultural Trust

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