

In the history of career transitions, Laurana Wong may have set some sort of record. Two and-a-half years ago, she made the leap from electrical engineer to Circus Ringleader. This was no ordinary circus, however. Wong is the guiding light behind the Dayton Circus Creative Collective, the city's most thriving artistic cooperative.

The 34-year-old Wong moved to Dayton from Memphis about 10 years ago. Hired straight out of grad school by a local engineering firm, she was living what most people consider the American Dream, replete with a fat income and a house in the Oregon District. But something just didn't feel right.

Throughout high school, friends were skeptical about Wong's decision to become an engineer.

"They all thought that I'd be an artist," Wong said. "People kept trying to tell me, but I couldn't hear them at that point." Increasingly, she began to realize that those high school kids were right. The more she realized it, the unhappier she became. "I've always

created things, but I was always following other people's rules. If I cooked, I followed a recipe. If I made stuff, I always followed directions. I never trusted myself enough to generate my own ideas."

Years later, she was generating plenty of them. Still at the engineering firm, she thought increasingly about art, and of bringing Dayton's creative forces together. She describes her vision as a "huge, community-based art event involving every kind of artist you can think of - even a tattoo artist. My dream was to have these massive installations where people could come into this place, see the worlds of the artists, and be consumed by it."

She made her dream a reality by organizing the first annual Dayton Sideshow. Using her own money (which she later recouped in donations), the Sideshow was held in an 8,000 square foot vacant space donated by The Cannery, and involved months of planning, hard work, and the combined talents of 50 artists. The event was free to the

public, and nothing was for sale.

"It wasn't about the money - it was about the art," Wong recalls.

The result was a creative extravaganza, held June 24, 2006. It included "performance art, sculpture, painting, interior design and music. It was huge." Over 1,000 people attended, and the event became one of the defining moments in Laurana Wong's life. She realized that, although trained to be an engineer, her true calling was that of an artist. The call kept getting louder. Her wheels were still turning as the idea of forming a permanent artistic cooperative in Dayton took shape.

"After the Sideshow was over, and I dealt with the post-partum depression of that, I started thinking, 'There's got to be a way that I can help artists make a living off of what they do.'" Her solution was "to band together, to create something so big and so diverse... that it could survive and help foster what creative people love to do." Six months later, she quit her job and ran away with the Circus.

Today, Wong's occupation is artist and unabashed Dayton Circus enthusiast. She sold her house and moved to less expensive digs. She now earns her living by teaching classes, public speaking engagements, and creating performance art. She recently received two commissions for her clothing designs as well. In her spare time, she dances, plays the flute, and is active in the local arts community. She no longer follows recipes.

There were over 20 enthusiastic Dayton Circus members from its inception, creative folks from all walks of life who had participated in the Sideshow. Early on, they incorporated and gained non-profit status.

From the beginning, their focus has been on bringing artists together by promoting each other's projects, as well as organizing activities as a group. It's a community of individuality, inspiration, encouragement and support, and a visit to their Web site ([www.daytoncircus.org](http://www.daytoncircus.org)) proves it. Online you'll find a calendar of past and present events



as varied as the Circus members themselves - a potpourri of activity from visual artists, musicians and writers, and discussion forums, blogs, and images of local artists' work. It's a giant bulletin board, not just for Circus members, but for everyone in the creative community.

In addition to hosting the second Dayton Sideshow in September, the Circus recently sponsored a figure drawing class and an International 24-Hour Comics Day (a marathon in which participants were challenged to write a 24-page comic book in a 24-hour span). Members teach an array of classes or volunteer at the K12 Gallery for Young People. They keep each other informed of community happenings, such as wall painting at a local YWCA, a Critical Mass bike ride, concerts, conferences, film series, art openings, and a Halloween gathering called "Pimp Your Pumpkin." The activities are as diverse as the membership.

Having fun is also emphasized. Urban planner Kate Ervin fondly recalls the camping trip that some Circus members organized a few months ago. "Seeing 15 or so urban artists trying to start a fire and pitch tents is always memorable."

Eventually, the Circus' goal is to have a shared space where artists of all disciplines can gather and create. Their dream locale is at McDonough and Bacon Streets, a six-story warehouse space nestled in an industrial district behind The Cannery. Ideally, this will one day house a café and coffee shop, living space, a venue for music and art events, and a communal studio. Wong sees it as a revolving door of creativity. If a person leaves or a project ends, there will always be new people and projects to replace them. She also sees it as a haven that will provide relief from the solitary existence of most artists.

In the meantime, Wong is happy with the way things are and the progress that the Dayton Circus has made.

"More and more people are finding us and wanting to be a part of us. Things are going really well now. That whole support thing that I'd dreamed of is starting to happen. It's just going to get bigger."

