



# Lady Bird Johnson's Centennial at the Wildflower Center



Tucked away in south Austin is the 275-acre Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. Walking through the grounds of meadows, trails and various gardens, the eight-foot painted metal sculptures by Texas native Logan Stollenwerck are positioned quietly among the flora, but they make a loud and bold statement nonetheless. “I’m a native, and I’m the reason you’re here,” they’d probably say if they weren’t so quiet. Of the hundreds of native species on display throughout the grounds, Stollenwerck has created metal representations of five as his tender tribute to honor his family friend, Lady Bird Johnson, for her centennial year. This exhibit is his first at the Wildflower Center. As guests walk along the entrance path into the facility, Stollenwerck’s *Indian Blanket* sculpture rises in a north meadow, while *Bluebonnet* greets guests in a small grassy area to the south.

“People just enjoy these,” said Joseph Hammer, Director of Product Marketing and Exhibits for the Wildflower Center. “They make the visitor smile. We’ve had lots and lots of people get their pictures taken with these sculptures in the background.” It’s easy to see Hammer is enamored with the beauty of all the exhibits as he walks through the grounds, and his enthusiasm is contagious. Hammer can’t help saying hello to everyone he meets, from docents and gardeners to visiting guests.

Mrs. Johnson started the organization in 1982 with her friend, actress Helen Hayes, as a means to educate people about native wildflowers that help identify the regions of the United States, and particularly Texas for her cause. Over the years, the center continues to flourish. As of 2006, it is an Organized Research Unit at the University of Texas at Austin.

Currently, the Wildflower Center is hosting two three-dimensional sculpture exhibits: “A Bouquet for Mrs. J” by Stollenwerck (March 17-Sept. 3) displayed throughout the grounds and “Many Fold

Manifolds” by origami master Robert Lang (June 2-Aug. 19) on display in the McDermott Learning Center.

Hammer remembers Lady Bird as being very curious. He holds dear her personal copy of a field guide to wildflowers, which still contains wildflowers she picked and pressed herself within the pages of the book, and her comments written in red ink in the margins.

“She loved that book, and it’s very special,” Hammer said. And with that



book, one can imagine she began a more passionate exploration of native wildflowers.

The Wildflower Center has been displaying art for at least 10 years, and most often uses the McDermott Learning Center for many of the exhibits. Once a fixture on the University of Texas campus, the 125-year-old building that is now the McDermott Learning Center is a piece of art itself. Known as the former Driskill/Scarborough carriage house, the building was moved and reconstructed on the west side of the Wildflower Center.

“Lady Bird hung art in her home and at the ranch. She and the president collected

art,” Hammer recalled. Lady Bird had a wide range of interests and was known to be very intelligent. In fact, Barbara Walters once called her the most interesting “conversationist” to which she’d spoken.

Wandering the grounds of the center, guests witness life regenerating season after season, but the sculpture exhibits are not to be missed while they are in season themselves. Each eight to twelve-foot tall painted cast-iron sculpture arrived at the center in heavy pieces from Stollenwerck, who after earning a degree in art from Baylor University, studied sculpture extensively in Italy.

“They have been very well received because they’re whimsical and they’re fun and we like to show a sense of humor. The kids love them and adults love them,” Hammer said. The other well-known wildflower species Stollenwerck chose to create are *Baby Blue Eyes*, *Mexican Hat* and *Texas Bluebell*, the latter one being one of Lady Bird’s favorite flowers. While some of the species had gone to seed in early June, one strong remaining Texas Bluebell stood quietly by itself in a small garden.

“Oddly enough we have plenty of flowers and trees out here to look at, but sometimes when visitors look at another representation of something, it makes them appreciate it from a different angle even more. Then they’ll go out and look at the real thing and say wow. It’s quite a phenomenon,” Hammer says of the sculptures. “The main thing is to have something that helps them appreciate wildflowers and native plants.”

Moving toward the west side of the grounds, visitors come to the *Baby Blue Eyes* sculpture before heading to the newest exhibit at the Wildflower Center, the origami work of Robert Lang showcased in the McDermott Learning Center. Hammer first contacted Lang almost four years ago after catching an interview of





him on a Sunday morning news program. Lang's work immediately appealed to Hammer who persisted in securing a grant to underwrite the exhibit from the Mays Family Foundation, which finally came to fruition earlier this year. Aside from the display, Hammer keeps an amazingly accurate origami horse on his desk and some of Lang's 13 books about origami which can be purchased in the Wildflower Center gift shop.

Lang learned origami, the Japanese art of folded paper, when he was six years old from a teacher who introduced him to it in an effort to keep him occupied in class. By the time he was 14 years old, he was creating his own origami designs. Some of Lang's designs can be purchased through his web site, in his books or via canvas wall art, some of which is on display in the McDermott Learning Center alongside the origami creations represented in the design, such as a scorpion and a water spider.

"As in music, there are both composers (designers) of original works and performers (folders) of the works," Lang notes in one of the exhibit display guides. "I compose and fold my own works, and often develop my designs based on my own ability to execute those designs. I use a variety of papers in my work, typically various handmade papers that provide the combination of thickness, strength, texture, and foldability best suited to the specific figure."

The main window of the McDermott Learning Center displays an 18-inch tall, 8-point buck deer created by one piece of

8-foot by 8-foot paper. In fact, most pieces of the 25-piece exhibit were made with just one piece of paper. As an artist, Lang develops his designs before he folds them and incorporates various techniques (like wet folding) and paper types.

"For most of the works in this show, I have followed the modern ethic of folding each distinct figure from a single uncut sheet of paper. In multiple-subject compositions, each identifiable figure is folded from a single sheet," Lang explains his work in a display guide. He notes that for the Austin show he took inspiration from the nature in the Austin area to create some special pieces that represent this part of Texas. This is Lang's first show in Texas.

On display are an iridescent mosquito, four herons in flight suspended from the ceiling, butterflies, turtles, a variety of insects, a rattlesnake with more than 1,000 folded scales, an armadillo, a barn owl and an accurate American flag with 13 stripes and 50 stars. One of Lang's favorites is a multi-colored hummingbird, appearing suspended with its beak nuzzled in the stigma of a white flower. The folds and creases in each piece are so tiny and so precise. One must remember they haven't been cut, they have just been folded delicately into place.

"Origami is a visual art, but unlike paintings, from which prints can be reproduced, or sculpture, from which replicas can be cast, there is no mass-production process for folded origami. Every figure must be folded by hand—a process that can range from several hours to several days—and no two folded figures

are identical," Lang wrote as part of the exhibit guide.

Lang first became famous by making a cuckoo clock out of origami, and some may remember his recent Google Doodle from March 2012 in the origami style to honor origami master Akira Yoshizawa. However, before embarking on what could be called his second career, Lang earned a PhD in applied physics from the California Institute of Technology and worked for the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Many of his lectures help bring to light the mathematics behind the origami. His origami techniques have brought more thought to one German car company to engage Lang to help them create a new folding airbag.

During a recent lecture at the Wildflower Center, Lang worked to create the 8-point buck deer seen in the window display. While he had only folded this design a few times before, he chatted away with the audience of more than 100 onlookers, even continuing to fold while answering questions. Hammer admits he is fond of the deer, but he loves all the designs for different reasons. But he suspects that one of Lang's favorites, the hummingbird, would also be one admired by Lady Bird as well, since she was so fond of flowers and the birds.

"Everything we do with art here applies to nature, the environment, to native plants, to our mission, to sustainability in the big realm of things," Hammer said. "It gets people to look at things differently in a new way."