

Milwaukee MAGAZINE



John Ridley. Photo by Christina Gandolfo

DIRECTOR JOHN RIDLEY PARLAYED HIS 2012 OSCAR WIN INTO NŌ STUDIOS

ZACH BROOKE • JANUARY 25, 2019

FEATURE STORY FILM MAGAZINE 2

LAST UPDATED ON FEBRUARY 21, 2019

When John Ridley won an Oscar for his screenplay of '12 Years a Slave', his family cheered him on. Now they're working together to help Nō Studios foster a new crop of creative talent in our city.

A visitor to Nō Studios in its first month of existence might have grabbed a bar stool next to actress Felicity Huffman and engaged her in a conversation comparing Milwaukee to Los Angeles, or relaxed in one of the cool gray club chairs in the 47-seat screening room and watched the Brewers say goodbye to their World Series dream.

The slow reveal that preceded the public opening in October drummed up plenty of excitement but didn't shed much clarity on the exact nature of the project. And the fact that it is backed by Academy Award winner and native Milwaukeean John Ridley, in partnership with Chris Abele, added to the mystique, as well as the confusion.

So, what is this place, anyway?

In a word, unique. "I am not aware of any other project [like] this one. And I've looked," says Lisa Caesar, Nō Studios' chief operating officer and Ridley's sister. Most of the 40,000-square-foot building at the west end of the Pabst complex is office space, with tenants that include Milwaukee Film, Milwaukee Filmmaker Alliance, the UW-Milwaukee and Marquette film schools and a variety of primarily arts-oriented businesses. Meanwhile, the first floor is a multi-purpose event space that houses the screening room and bar. Together, they form Nō Studios, a project designed to blend community, coworking and membership models to foster a powerful creative incubator.

"It's an attempt to capture the professional at every point in their career," Caesar says. "When you walk into the building, the chances you're encountering another [arts] professional are really high. The building is curated to have folks coming in either working in the industry or interested in the industry."



graduate of Harvard Business School and veteran of Lehman Brothers, Citigroup and JPMorgan Chase, the 56-year-old Caesar

Subscribe to our Newsletter

Email Address *

Subscribe

FIND A RESTAURANT



CURRENT ISSUES



CURRENT ISSUE

THINGS TO DO

Click to see the full calendar

- 21 MAY Milwaukee Scavenger Hunt: A Splash of Color
- 21 MAY Milwaukee Scavenger Hunt: A Splash of Color
- 21 MAY Milwaukee Scavenger Hunt: A Splash of Color
- 21 MAY Amazing Scavenger Hunt Adventure- Milwaukee

A has spent decades jumping between the trading floor, derivatives, sales and wealth management. It was Caesar who first pushed her younger brother to transfer the momentum from his 2014 Academy Award win as screenwriter of *12 Years a Slave* into a physical project. Winning an Oscar is a pinnacle for any career, but Caesar was determined to convince Ridley the gold statuette did not cement his legacy but merely opened the door to it.

"Winning an award like that is a bit arbitrary. There are so many worthy competitors. ... It's the kind of thing that either you exploit immediately, or you don't exploit it at all. It's very ephemeral," she says. "In the back of my mind, I was thinking he won for a reason."

For Ridley, who doesn't like talking about his Oscar, referring to it only as "that award I got," Caesar's words cut deep. "She said, 'Look, it's really wonderful it happened, but a year from now people aren't going to remember. This stuff recedes into the past very quickly. What do you want to accomplish and how do you want to be remembered?'" says Ridley, 53. "That's very powerful when you have someone in your family saying that."



21 MAY

ReactJS United

ASK ANN



Lisa Caesar

After a year of brainstorming, the pair hit upon a collaborative creative arts incubator and membership venue. The natural locations for such a project are Los Angeles, where John lives, or New York, Lisa's home, but neither of them liked those options. Calling the project "highly speculative," she thought it made more sense to bring it to a city not already saturated with arts startups, preferably with lower costs of doing business.

They could have looked anywhere but immediately zeroed in on Milwaukee, the city where they grew up, and where they enjoyed a large share of goodwill. Milwaukee is also the home of their younger sister, [Beth Ridley, 49, a thriver in her own right who's currently vice president of planning integration at Northwestern Mutual](#). She possesses solid sales and marketing acumen, along with a robust network of Milwaukee business contacts. But Milwaukee was not a done deal until they could secure a second investor: Abele, the prolific philanthropist and Milwaukee County executive.

"We couldn't have done it without Chris," Caesar says. "He made it easy to affirm our bias to locate the business in Milwaukee."

Even with the idea formulated, the city selected and the family on board, Caesar says it took two years to identify the exact building to house their idea. Here, too, Abele was indispensable, helping the siblings navigate the local labyrinth of commercial real estate. The Pabst location won out as the only building in the city combining the size, accessibility, beauty and safety they sought.

The path to Nô Studios can be traced back to when the Ridleys' parents, John III and Terri, relocated to Milwaukee with similar aspirations for their growing family. Now in their 80s, the couple moved from northern Indiana in the early 1960s when John III was invited to complete his residency as an ophthalmologist. Only Lisa was born at that time; John IV and Beth came after the family settled in the city, first in a rented duplex on Capitol Drive and later in their own home near [Rufus King High School](#). John III's practice prospered, and his income coupled with Terri's teaching job at [Oliver Wendell Holmes School](#) allowed the family to move out to a larger home in suburban Mequon.

"We moved there in '71. There was hardly anything in Mequon then. It was farm country. The whole area we lived in was fields," Terri recalls.

Still, it was the good life, and John III and Terri knew it. But they hoped the children wouldn't. "We thought they were privileged, but we didn't want them to know they were privileged," Terri says.



Beth Ridley

RELATED [This New Bucks Team Will Only Compete Virtually](#)

They took a hands-off approach toward their children's career prospects, letting each decide for him- or herself. But they were forceful in pushing their shared values of industry and education. The Ridley children were expected to work and perform well in school. Any pushback the parents encountered was easy to deal with. "Terri taught special education for children with behavior disorders. So there was nothing they could do she hadn't seen. She was ready for them," John III says.

The Ridley children proved competitive. At times there were flashes of what seemed to be an incipient sibling rivalry. Sometimes they harassed one another. Terri recalls all three fighting a lot. Lisa remembers John blocking her from her upstairs bedroom unless she gave him money, or locking her in a closet and riffing on the tagline for the movie *Alien*, saying, "At home without parents, no one can hear you scream."

There were also glimpses of what the children would become. Terri says John IV would spend hours alone in his room writing, sending drafts off in yellow envelopes only to receive rejections weeks later. She didn't exactly know he would become a writer, but she intuited he was heading toward a career in the arts. John IV had also tried acting

and stand-up, and even dabbled in ballet in his early years.

The spoils of middle-class life were not the only social aspect John III and Terri hid from the children. The two also made a concerted effort to minimize the effect of racism. John III can recall pulling into town in 1961 and having trouble finding a motel that would let him rent a room. Later that trip, he was physically threatened by a gang of young white men outside a Howard Johnson. They let him go only because he was with his wife and infant daughter, he says. Later, John III faced significant hurdles trying to buy a home in Mequon, succeeding only after finding a white homeowner desperate to flee his integrated subdivision.

"They called it Blackfish Bay," Terri says.

RELATED [Top Doctors 2018](#)

John III retains a lot of gratitude for his early white mentors who shepherded him through a professional minefield and set him on firm footing, but he also recognizes that special mentoring was needed because of racial prejudices. To this day, he is still panged by anxiety driving around the South Side, decades after he demonstrated in the streets alongside civil rights activist [Father James Groppi](#). John III says the prejudice he faced here in Milwaukee was no different than what happened in other parts of the country. Still, he lived here, and it happened here.

The younger Ridleys seemed to enjoy wider acceptance. John Ridley IV, whose most prominent work confronts the fount of racial injustice in America, says he did not feel the effects of discrimination growing up in Mequon. "In Wisconsin, I personally never experienced *overt*, and I really stress *overt*, identifiable racism the way I experienced some of it when I got to New York or when I came out to LA right ahead of the Rodney King beating," he says.

All three children graduated from [Mequon's Homestead High School](#). Lisa was third in her class, Terri says. John IV admits he didn't match her eagerness as a student but found success as a member of the cross-country team. "I did well. I went to state. I may not be the greatest ever to come out of the state of Wisconsin, but I may still have some top 10 performances at Homestead," he says.



John and Terri Ridley

Inspired by a play on words, *Nō* translates from a Sino-Japanese root word for "talent," while also referencing the English word for rejection known well by creatives.

Inside the event space, exposed Cream City brick walls create a hip, funky atmosphere, augmented by comfortable sofas and a rotating display of work by local artists. A stage rises at the joint of the L-shaped gallery, with a staffed bar and coffee counter at one end. This common area is where most visitors will mingle, either at the invitation of a member or as ticketed guest to a public event. Off in a side room is a state-of-the-art movie theater, complete with motion-capture technology that allows performers to control images projected on the screen behind them.

RELATED [Danceworks Shines a Light on the Female Body for 25th Anniversary Show](#)

John Ridley takes an active hand in scheduling film screenings and industry talks, which have included a showing of *If Beale Street Could Talk*, followed by a Q&A with the film's producers, [Jeremy Kleiner](#) and [Dede Gardner](#). Caesar says the plan is to host an artist from Ridley's network every six to eight weeks.

Marquee programming is joined by events showcasing the Milwaukee arts community. *Nō Studios'* [artist-in-residence](#), 29-year-old [Kristin Peterson Kaszubowski](#), runs two regular events: a salon series designed to shed light on the artistic process as guests workshop material in front of an audience, and a monthly film series featuring the best movies made by area auteurs.

"[Drew Rosas'](#) *Blood Junkie* was made many years ago and was one of the first major successful crowdfunded films made in our city. It's often talked about, but not many people have had the chance to see it," Peterson Kaszubowski says.

And *Nō Studios* member [Kiran Vedula](#), a 34-year-old music producer known professionally as [Q the Sun](#), plans to roll out a weekly music series this month, supplemented by monthly jam sessions and "open mic lotteries" – events where he calls rappers and poets to the stage to perform over beats he creates.

"Milwaukee as a whole still has a long way to go as far as becoming an arts or culture center or more of a metropolitan city, but things like this place are definitely where stuff is poppin'." Vedula says. "I'm seeing a lot of prominent black and brown artists in this space."

Others have reached out asking to host a book signing, a podcast, a maker's market and an all-Spanish-speaking day. Caesar is receptive to all of it, part of her strategy to cast a wide net: "Everyone is invited. We want to be reflective of the entire Milwaukee community. There really aren't any limits. I don't want that unsaid."

RELATED [Why Milwaukee Homeowners are Bankrolling Speed Humps in Record Numbers](#)

On top of showcasing artists, Nō Studios is built to put creatives to work. Members and tenants are encouraged to draw from the house directory to tap talent needed to complete projects. "Let's say Marquette University is working on a program where they need a visual artist. They can access the directory and connect with a visual artist," Caesar says.

Topping it all off is an exclusive fourth-floor rooftop event space slated to open this spring. In addition to a large patio, a glass structure will house a second staffed bar, making the views of the city usable year-round. Combined, the building represents one of the unique and loftiest aspirations in the city's big build era.

The Ridleys created Nō Studios, but its future belongs to Milwaukee. "This, to me, is an organic project which should be effectively owned by Milwaukeeans," Caesar says. "It's not for me to define the success of Nō Studios. It's for the community to define. There should be a sense of agency on the part of the creatives of Milwaukee."

The year John Ridley won his Oscar, he assumed the podium and thanked his parents and sisters by name. Years from now, perhaps the creators of a great Milwaukee arts project will find cause, amidst all the earned accolades, to praise the Ridleys once more.

4 Landmarks of the Ridleys' Milwaukee experience

The Oriental Theatre

You don't become an Academy Award-winning screenwriter without watching a lot of movies, and for John Ridley IV that path began at the Oriental on the East Side. "When I was a kid, that was way before streaming, even before video stores, which are no longer even in existence. I'd go to the theater to see art-house films," he says.

Homestead High School

All three Ridley children graduated from Mequon's public high school. Lisa ranked third in her class, according to her mom, and went on to earn a degree from Harvard Business School. John spent his time running cross-country and once represented the school in the state championships.

Northridge Mall

Mequon was very rural during the years the Ridley children were at home, meaning they had to travel to the city for most of their shopping. The location of choice was Northridge Mall. "Northridge was a really vibrant mall, back in the mall era. That's where kids hung out," John IV says. Beth remembers stopping during family excursions at [Captain's Steak Joynt](#), a chain of nautical-themed restaurants owned by the Marcus Corp.

John Ridley III's ophthalmology office

John's practice was in Seton Tower, a now demolished medical office building that stood across the street from present-day [Water Tower Medical Commons](#) in the [Columbia St. Mary's complex at the lakefront end of North Avenue](#). Beth recalls visits to her father's 10th-floor office, looking through the telescope he kept pointed at the Lake Michigan horizon.

"A Family Affair" appears in the February 2019 issue of *Milwaukee Magazine*.

Buy a copy at milwaukeeomag.com/shop or find the issue on newsstands, starting Jan. 28.

Be the first to get every new issue. [Subscribe](#).

Comments

0 comments

0 Comments

Sort by Oldest #



Add a comment...

Facebook Comments Plugin

NO STUDIOS



PREVIOUS ARTICLE

MILWAUKEE'S STATE OF THE ARTS: HOW DO WE COMPARE TO OTHER MID-SIZED CITIES?

NEXT ARTICLE

2019 MILWAUKEE SPRING ARTS PREVIEW



ZACH BROOKE

RELATED POSTS



REVIEW: MIDWESTERN-MADE 'PALACE' FILM IS 'HIGH MAINTENANCE' WITH HOOSIERS

KARISA LANGLO • FEBRUARY 21, 2019



MILWAUKEE'S ARTS & CULTURE YEAR IN REVIEW: THE HIGHS AND LOWS IN 2018

LINSEY ANDERSON • JANUARY 4, 2019

WANT MORE?

ADVERTISE
ARCHIVE
CAREERS
CONTACT
INTERNSHIPS
MEET THE TEAM
SUBMISSION GUIDELINES
SUBSCRIBE
SPECIAL ISSUES

SUBSCRIBE TODAY!



