

NINA MOINI: Beautiful new public library in Moorhead, and to get there, we took scenic Highway 10 from St. Paul to learn more about our state from the road. The show for Moorhead will air Thursday, but all this week, leading up, we're airing stories from the stops we made along the way.

Today we'll take a stroll to find some trolls-- Barefoot Frida, to be specific. She lives in the Ortenstone Gardens in Sculpture Park in Detroit Lakes, otherwise known as the DL. We went with our guide, Amy Stearns, who says the trolls are part of a larger effort to make the DL a more vibrant place.

AMY STEARNS: We just wanted to find different ways to elevate Detroit Lakes. We felt like this is a really unique community. This community has done a lot of really big things over the years, from saving the mile-long public beach to bringing back Detroit Mountain. We have a fantastic community center in historic Holmes Theater. We have great medical facilities, great schools. And we're like, what else could there be here? And that's how this idea of Project 412 came to be.

Our name is a little bit of a nod to the history of the area. There are 412 lakes within 25 miles of Detroit Lakes. So our organization started in September of 2022. So we're only 3 and 1/2 years old. And our first project was we built a woolly mammoth out of Detroit Mountain that you can actually climb into. We lit up the city park, started doing some murals around town, and but in the back of our heads, we knew we wanted to contract with artist Thomas Dambo and bring his fantastic trolls to Detroit Lakes. And--

NINA MOINI: This is really uphill, Amy. No, Amy, I'm just kidding, no, right now, yeah. It's not far at all.

AMY STEARNS: And so then we contracted with Thomas Dambo and brought his trolls here in May and June of 2024. They opened June 10, 2024. And it's just been phenomenal. We've had about 100,000 visitors since then.

NINA MOINI: So why is Frida the main kind of attraction? Or why does she, I guess, live here?

AMY STEARNS: Well, the story of the trolls really begins in our city park. So "Alexa's Elixir" is the name of this exhibit, and Alexa is a troll who's cooking up a concoction. She's making an elixir, and she invites her troll friends to come to Detroit Lakes, because she believes that the people, the little people-- that would be all of us-- aren't paying attention, really. We're a little too absorbed in working. We're not spending enough time with our family and our friends. We're not getting really involved in our community. And so she invites her troll friends to Detroit Lakes.

And so one of the troll friends is Barefoot Frida. And her challenge for you is that you should walk a mile barefoot because then, through feeling the earth between your feet and between your toes, you feel connected to it.

And so Thomas Dambo's whole story is that he thinks that people really need to be better to each other. We need to be kinder. We need to take better care of the environment. He's a recycled artist. He just thinks we have been consuming too much, and we're not really paying attention to the world around us. And so he wants to really shine a light on that.

So each of the trolls has a challenge for you. Like Ronnie Funny Face, his challenge for you is, can you make a stranger laugh? Because through laughter, we build connection. Jacob, every year, who's just over in Frazee, just a little bit away, he has large, oversized ears. And his challenge is, can you climb up on him and tell a story about a loved one?

And then, the other two, Barefoot Frida, who is the one who lives here, her challenge, of course, is to take your shoes off, walk a mile barefoot so you can feel the earth and feel connected that way. And then Long Life is the world's tallest troll at 36 feet. And his challenge for you is, can you go home and plant a tree? And then the elusive Golden Rabbit, if you can find the Golden Rabbit-- she's really hidden away. But the Golden Rabbit's challenge is, can you go a day without buying something new?

NINA MOINI: Whoa! [LAUGHS]

AMY STEARNS: Yeah, there's Barefoot Frida. I love this view of her because you can see the frog pond in front of her. And the water is down a little bit this spring, but sometimes that is full. And just, like, a week ago, there were frogs in there croaking like crazy and singing. It was so, so wonderful. And she also has one eye closed because she is winking at you.

NINA MOINI: [LAUGHS] I see that now, yeah. And just to give people perspective, one of Frida's fingernails is about the size of my hand.

AMY STEARNS: Correct. Yes, that's true. Yeah. And I mean--

NINA MOINI: So this one probably took a long time to put Frida together.

AMY STEARNS: I think so. And her feet would probably be a size-- I don't know. Like, if a large man's foot is, what, a size 15, this is, like, 150--

NINA MOINI: Yeah. [LAUGHS]

AMY STEARNS: --sized foot.

NINA MOINI: Good thing she's barefoot.

AMY STEARNS: Yes, exactly. Exactly. So the trolls, they're made by Thomas Dambo, who's a Danish artist. And he makes the heads and the hands and the feet in Denmark. And then they are shipped over, and then their whole bodies are made here locally. So we had about 300 volunteers who helped us build the trolls.

NINA MOINI: What's the wood type? Do you know?

AMY STEARNS: It's all variety of wood. It's a lot of it is pallet wood. Inside them is some other-- some different recycled-- like, we found some recycled white oak we were able to put in some of these trolls. Yeah, we were able to get all this material and save it from a landfill and make it into these crazy pieces of art.

NINA MOINI: What about maintenance? This will be my last question, I promise.

AMY STEARNS: Oh, no. I love them.

NINA MOINI: But what about--

AMY STEARNS: So--

NINA MOINI: How do you keep-- I mean, it's raining. All kinds of stuff's going on. What's going on?

AMY STEARNS: Well, Thomas Dambo's goal is that the trolls will return to earth because they are out of natural products, natural pieces. Of course, there'll be screws and everything that we'll have to gather, but we're trying to keep her alive as long as we possibly can, her and all the other trolls.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, OK. Wonderful. This was so fun. Thank you for bringing us here.

AMY STEARNS: You're welcome.

NINA MOINI: What a cool gig.

AMY STEARNS: So you can walk up here. We could see this other part. You might think that's kind of fun.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

NINA MOINI: That was Amy Stearns, executive director of Project 412, taking us on a hike through the Ortenstone Gardens and Sculpture Park in Detroit Lakes. We'll have more from our trip to Moorhead tomorrow on the show.