

NATALIE BOMSTAD

# We Created a Survey to Measure Community Well-Being and Activated a “Messy Middle”

How a Wisconsin county realized that systems change requires shared sensemaking as much as innovative metrics.

Wisconsin’s Brown County has a population of approximately 275,000 people, just under half living in the city of Green Bay. It spans urban and rural settings, blue- and white-collar employment, with a broad mix of ethnicities and a tribal nation. Over the past decade, residents and organizations here have co-created the means and mindset to guide systemic change. At the heart of the effort is a biannual survey to measure well-being, led by the community itself.

The survey is now in its fourth iteration and administered by Wello, the nonprofit I’ve led for over a decade. Since the survey’s inception, thousands of individuals across socioeconomic strata, educational backgrounds, ages, and sexual and racial identities have participated. We have come to realize that we are building much more than datasets.

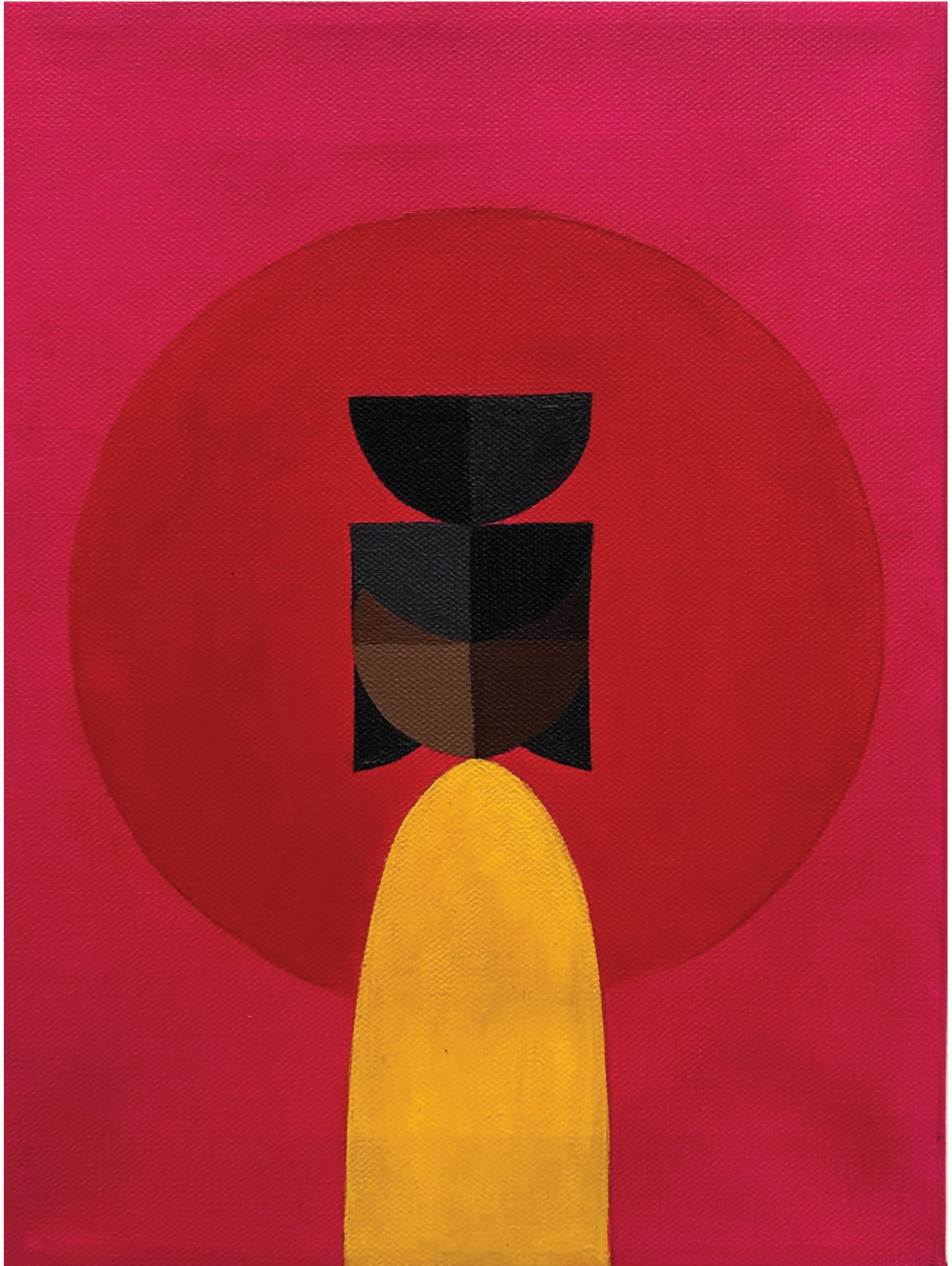
My organization began in 2010 as a local initiative to reduce childhood obesity in Brown County. Even then it was becoming abundantly clear that what creates health for people and communities is broader than both objective health measures (body mass index, diabetes rates) and economic indicators (gross domestic product,

unemployment rates). We yearned for holistic metrics spanning physical, mental, and social health—metrics that could capture how people feel about themselves and their lives; metrics that would show us how to really make things better in Brown County.

By 2017, the organization’s initial funding was sunsetting, and my team and I were convinced that promoting healthy outcomes needed a whole-person, whole-community approach. We worked together with community groups, clinics, civics organizations, and other partners across the region to measure resident well-being. Over the years we’ve been doing this, evaluation has become a shared practice of sensemaking. The relationships forged across community are as important as the data itself.

This process has led to collective well-being work that is iterative, experimental, and responsive. It builds incrementally, adapts quickly, and thrives on emergent connections. At a recent planning meeting, one of our stakeholders told me: “I feel seen, my people are heard, and this survey helps us all lead better lives.”

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FITGI SAINT-LOUIS, *Ti Soley*, 2024, acrylic on canvas, 9 x 12 inches.



FITGI SAINT-LOUIS, *Our Matriarchs*, 2022, painted mural in Elmont, New York, 9 x 36 feet.



# FITGI SAINT-LOUIS

## *and the Art of Building Community*

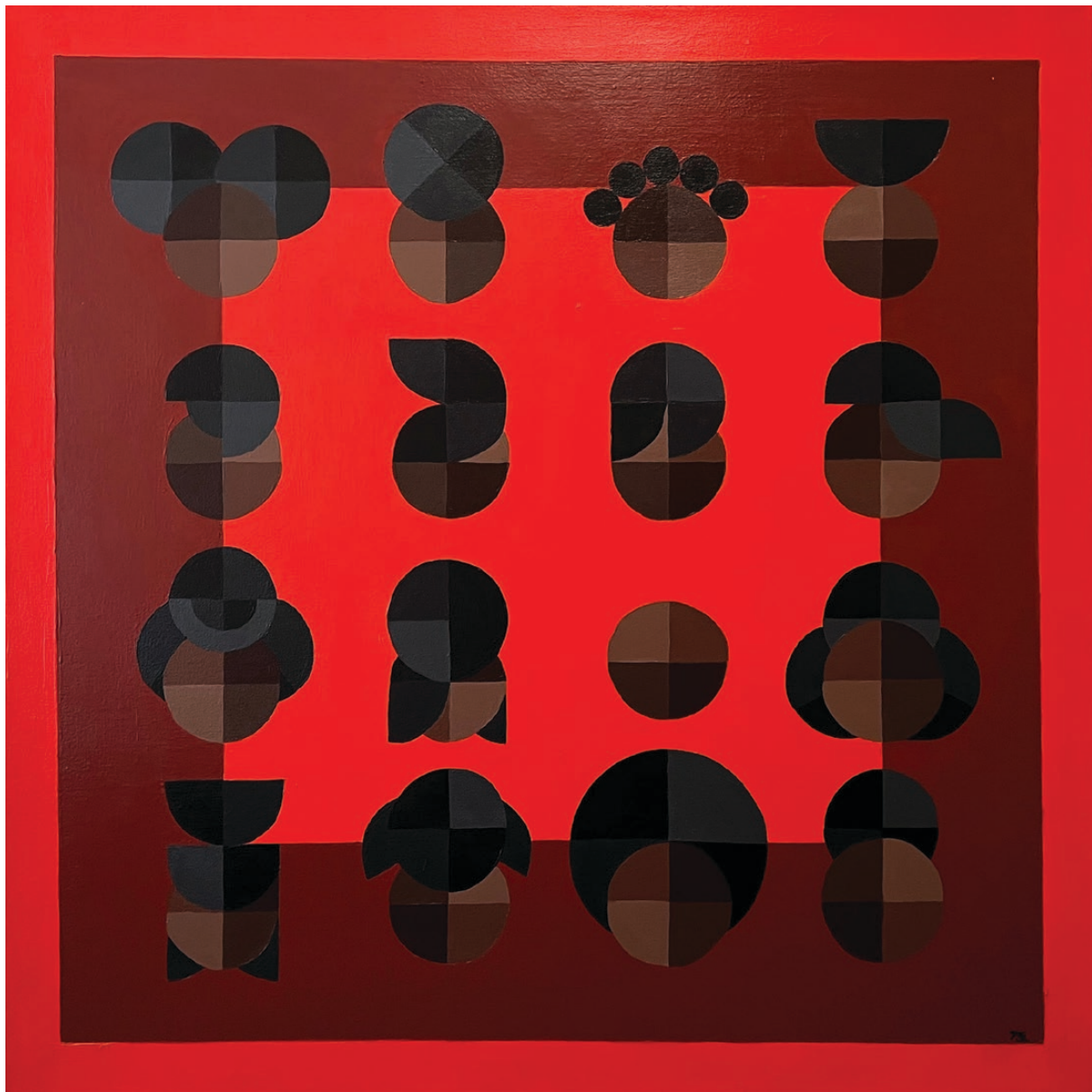
At a busy Harlem intersection, large-scale figures emerge from layered wood and vibrant color. Titled *Aunties*, the public installation honors the women whose care and labor sustain community life. The figures are not portraits or decorative murals. They function as points of recognition, inviting passersby to find shared histories reflected in the spaces they inhabit. *Aunties* is the work of multidisciplinary artist, designer, and educator Fitgi Saint-Louis, whose practice shows how art can make collective memory visible and strengthen community life.

Saint-Louis began her career as a performer and dancer, working in film, television, and theater for more than two decades. That background shaped her sensitivity to movement, narrative, and embodied memory. Over time, her practice expanded into public art, where stories became structures and communities became collaborators.

Her work explores identity and remembrance within African, American, and Caribbean cultures. Rather than depict specific individuals, her figures evoke layered histories within the African diaspora. By resisting fixed representation, she creates space for multiple interpretations and shared ownership of meaning.

Saint-Louis's work can be understood as a form of social infrastructure, the cultural spaces that help people connect and build trust. While libraries, parks, and schools are traditional examples, her installations function similarly. They are not simply aesthetic objects; they are sites of encounter. They invite reflection, conversation, and recognition within the public landscape, contributing to the social fabric of neighborhoods.

Central to her approach is collaboration. Saint-Louis works with community organizations, schools, and residents as active participants. Her projects reflect local histories and aspirations, emerging from the communities in which they are situated. *Aunties*, located at West 124th Street and Lenox Avenue in Harlem, exemplifies this model. The installation honors women who nurture and organize communities across generations, figures often central to cultural life yet absent from official monuments. The monumental but abstract forms evoke heritage craft traditions and the accumulation of memory and ancestry. Their openness allows viewers to project their own stories onto them.



FITGI SAINT-LOUIS, *Aunties*, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 inches.

A similar ethos informs the mural *Our Matriarchs*, created with Elmont Memorial High School and local groups as part of the Elmont Walls initiative in Elmont, New York. Spanning 36 feet along a retaining wall, the mural is a bold, abstract tribute to Caribbean and immigrant women. Facing businesses, schools, and spiritual spaces, its impact lies not only in its scale and color but in its capacity to generate engagement. Students encounter their cultural histories reflected in public space. Residents pause and talk. Conversations emerge around migration, identity, and belonging. The mural creates a shared cultural space where reflection and dialogue can unfold.

Based in Harlem, Saint-Louis has collaborated with the Dance Theatre of Harlem, the New York City Department of Transportation, NYC Health + Hospitals, and the NYC Health Department. These partnerships place her practice at the intersection of culture and public service, positioning art within broader conversations about health, well-being, and civic life.

Saint-Louis's work reminds us that community is not simply a place. It is an ongoing practice, sustained through story, symbol, and shared experience. By making collective memory visible, Saint-Louis demonstrates that art can play a vital role in strengthening the social foundations of civic life.

## Origins of a survey

Many scholars have called on governments to pursue collective well-being over economic growth. The World Health Organization has developed surveys to assess well-being. In 2023, Australia unveiled the Measuring What Matters framework to track progress across five themes: health, security, sustainability, cohesiveness, and prosperity. Several years before, the city of Santa Monica worked with the locally based RAND corporation as well as other experts to use localized, already-existing city data to create a Wellbeing Index that broke out perceptions of health, security, connection, and more.

Efforts to assess well-being are often led by governments. In Brown County, it was community groups that came together to measure collective well-being. My team at Wello hoped to both demonstrate and achieve a powerful possibility: Communities that assess well-being for themselves can catalyze the change they want.

The non-white, non-Hispanic population of Brown County increased dramatically between 2000 and 2024. Community organizations around the region were looking for a way to

ideas. A 15-person measurement team derived from the original coalition meets quarterly to refine questions. It includes representatives from community nonprofits, local government, and schools, plus community members and relevant business, civics, and health groups.

In every iteration of the survey, which we conduct on odd-numbered years, we work to improve representation. From 2019 to 2023, survey participation of non-white residents increased to mirror regional demographics, from 7% to 22%. What changed? Over the years, Wello continued to capture and disseminate data across communities, thus increasing awareness of the survey and its utility. Members of our measurement team offered advice and connections. Businesses and organizations that work with underrepresented communities helped us cast a wider net using their emails, websites, and events, plus we ran strategically placed ads on buses and television and in newspapers and magazines. We also provided incentives in the form of \$5 gift cards in places like specialty grocery stores that are frequented by members of underrepresented groups. We collected responses both on tablets and paper,

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adapt to diversity without entrenching systemic injustices, a way to pull together rather than be divided by fear and othering. We found a promising path forward in the pursuit of collective well-being, a community effort to assess it, and a shared commitment to finding mutually beneficial (or win-win) ways to improve it.

Following an extensive literature review and multiple meetings with dozens of community stakeholders, the Wello team decided the best way to learn was to start. We took a three-pronged approach: a survey across residents, a longitudinal panel to track individuals over time, and a ground-truthing effort to test and contextualize individual findings. The idea was to gain a sense of who is thriving, struggling, or suffering across the domains of physical health, mental health, social connections, and community conditions such as income, housing, and safety.

An inclusive and diverse coalition spent hours designing our survey. It takes about 10 minutes to complete and is based on the quality of life assessment from the World Health Organization combined with local indicators, such as trust and confidence in local government, feelings of belonging, and how accepting the culture is of people with different

so people could use whichever felt more comfortable.

We've expanded our sample size by partnering with employers and community organizations. One example is our collaboration with Schreiber Foods, a multinational company that started in Green Bay in the 1940s. We administer the well-being survey to their workforce. Together, we add company-specific questions and provide tailored analysis, creating the kind of win-win Wello strives for. Schreiber gains meaningful insight into the well-being of their employees, and the broader community dataset grows stronger, more representative, and more able to fuel collective transformation. We have a similar arrangement with the city of Green Bay.

Rather than asking the same questions time and again, the measurement team adapts to reflect what's needed for the people the survey is meant to support. For example, the 2023 iteration added questions about residents' experiences with food insecurity and discrimination, plus their feelings of belonging and trust in government. In 2025, our team added questions on housing security and caregivers' health, again based on community feedback that these issues were growing more important.

Alongside the survey, we created more dynamic, supplementary inputs. One is a longitudinal panel that tracks several hundred individuals over time to provide additional insight. For example, when the panel was used to examine the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on personal well-being, women reported a more pronounced decline in mental health than men. Our stakeholders regularly use the panel to detect trends in real time, identify areas for deeper inquiry (such as understanding such disparities), and inform resource allocation.

The panel's inputs naturally lead into our practice of ground truthing, for which we employ qualitative interviews, focus groups, and consensus workshops to engage directly with community members. Local facilitators draw on an established technique called Technology of Participation, structured to elicit equitable, authentic participation. The goal is shared learning rather than a move toward predetermined outcomes. Our assumption is that the lived experiences and combined knowledge within the group can show what's needed to improve collective well-being.

A useful analogy comes from the natural world. Mycelium networks are vast underground webs of fungal threads forming connective tissue that support the largest organisms in the world and even entire ecosystems. These networks signal distress and facilitate the exchange of nutrients, information, and support across species and generations. They communicate needs, distribute resources, and safeguard the continuity of life. In their often-invisible brilliance, mycelium networks embody the principles of collective well-being.

Inclusive framing (such as our survey work) can help communities and community groups function in much the same way. Instead of each acting alone, they begin to see themselves as part of an interconnected system, a mycelium-like network where information, trust, and resources can move more freely. Stakeholders embrace interdependence and co-create systems where resources, ideas, and relationships flow across a diverse web of actors. The system evolves because resources flow across boundaries, relationships deepen, and trust grows. No single organization owns the solutions, and wins are

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These approaches use participants' input to validate, challenge, or contextualize quantitative findings and to reveal nuances that individual-level measures cannot capture alone. Ground truthing also creates opportunities to strengthen community trust, foster relationships, and boost shared sensemaking.

Wello makes sure its results are available in multiple ways. We provide survey data visually by census tract across Brown County—aggregating data at the neighborhood level suggests where to focus resources. We also produce reports stratified by demographic characteristics such as age, race or ethnicity, and LGBTQ+ status; this level of detail helps groups serving these demographics to plan and assess their work. Moreover, making these data available encourages a collaborative mindset across community groups.

### **Moving toward collective well-being**

Still, individuals' in-depth input does not automatically lead to improvement and offers only limited insight on how to make change. How do we move from charts and graphs to targeted actions that improve whole systems?

shared. Using a mycelium network as a metaphor reveals more—and more varied—ways for stakeholders to work together, which makes impacts more stable and more inclusive.

### **Making a “multi-solving” mycelium network**

Rather than addressing issues (like business opportunities and food security) in isolation, or focusing on lowest-cost solutions, we design best-value strategies that meet multiple needs and distribute benefits across sectors. This kind of “multi-solving” recognizes that systems change requires changed mindsets, which demands repeated exposure to new ways of working across institutions, issue areas, and community networks. Multi-solving thus becomes both a practical strategy and a cultural intervention, seeding new norms of collaboration and shared responsibility and honoring local wisdom. Our community survey has done more than focus attention on well-being; it has helped open up a bountiful, messy middle space where no single actor holds all the answers and where community members and groups can collectively seek opportunities.



FITGI SAINT-LOUIS, *Aunties*, 2025, wood, metal, exterior paint, 72 x 17 x 6 inches.

One example was when coalitions mobilized to declare racism a public health crisis in 2020. In Wisconsin, the Black infant mortality rate is 14.3 deaths per 1,000 live births (compared to 4.4 for white babies), one of the highest in the nation, and Brown County is worse than the state average. Wello's surveys found that non-white residents in Brown County reported lower well-being in terms of physical health, quality of life, and every other category assessed; life expectancy is also lower. Our 2023 survey found that 66% of white, non-Hispanic respondents identified themselves as thriving compared to 43% of non-white respondents. Without our local data, it would have been easier to overlook these disparities as a problem that was common—but elsewhere.

“Our truths all look different,” Robin Nicole Scott, executive director of We All Rise: African American Resource Center, told a local reporter. “With this data, we’ll be able to see that just because we’re resourceful doesn’t mean that the resources are reaching everyone.”

During the pandemic, we also helped coordinate partners in organizing eight pop-up well-being clinics held at community resource centers in Brown County. These clinics provided COVID-19 vaccines as well as meals and other offerings tailored to each culturally specific setting, including a translator and nurses from local communities. One hundred twenty-eight people received a full set of COVID-19 vaccines at the pop-up clinics—and we

purchased more than \$7,000 in goods from local Somalian and Black-owned businesses.

Our Cultivating Community project focuses on food systems. Rather than resourcing pantries to provide food, we take a collective well-being approach, connecting the people who need food to the people who grow it. By 2024, more than 40 small farms were participating in the initiative, with many growing culturally specific crops such as jicama, mustard greens, and Chinese broccoli. Since community distribution sites often rely on donations and aren't set up to buy food directly, Wello purchases the produce and delivers it to more than 14,000 people across 15 locations. This supports small to midsize farms, increases access to healthy, local foods, lowers transportation emissions, and builds cross-cultural local connections. These win-wins across the community are a wonderful example of multi-solving. By being both community centered and strategic, Cultivating Community simultaneously addresses multiple, interconnected issues.

We have done similar work with the Brown County Farm to School Task Force, which supports nine school districts, including the Oneida Nations School System, plus local farmers, producers, aggregators, and other stakeholders. The task force's work has raised local food procurement by Brown County schools from an average of \$27,000 per year to \$500,000 in 2024. It's also allowed schools to provide more nutritious, culturally appropriate menus, as well as school gardens.

### **Moving through the messy middle**

None of these collaborations happened overnight. The conversations and regular meetings that swirl around the well-being survey enable us to start small and learn. Starting small enables tentative, exploratory steps that build into locally tailored initiatives capable of evolving and scaling with the communities they serve.

I've come to see that you can't solve complex problems by adding more complexity. You solve them by getting closer to what people are experiencing. For collective well-being work, measurement can't be a rigid, one-and-done design. It has to move with the community, respond to change, and reflect what's actually happening, not our assumptions. When many stakeholders meet to find solutions for their varied, overlapping communities, neither initiatives nor exact outcome metrics are predictable. That's why I think of this multi-solving, community-nourishing mycelium network as the "messy middle."

The messy middle is the space where we hear what our partners and community are truly struggling with. Getting there takes all our measurement and ground-truthing methods, but also vulnerability, honesty, and a willingness to sit with what's uncomfortable. It's only once we've done that work that we can build solutions together.

This sort of community work can be hard to sustain, especially as grantmakers and decisionmakers tend to design solutions in the abstract or inadvertently pick one "winner" from the get-go, cutting off exploration and adaptation. By contrast, we make sure every initiative is anchored in a community-identified need and small enough to sunset or pivot if necessary. We follow the Cynefin framework from complexity science, developed by management researcher David Snowden, where learning expands the ability to respond.

Once partners have engaged with one another in the messy middle, they are more ready to come together to develop deeper trust, shared values, and a common understanding of systemic barriers to well-being. That doesn't mean all partners must engage in all the same strategies or agree on everything, but sustained engagement establishes a foundation for coordinated, strategic action that reflects priorities shared by the whole collective.

### **So much more than a survey**

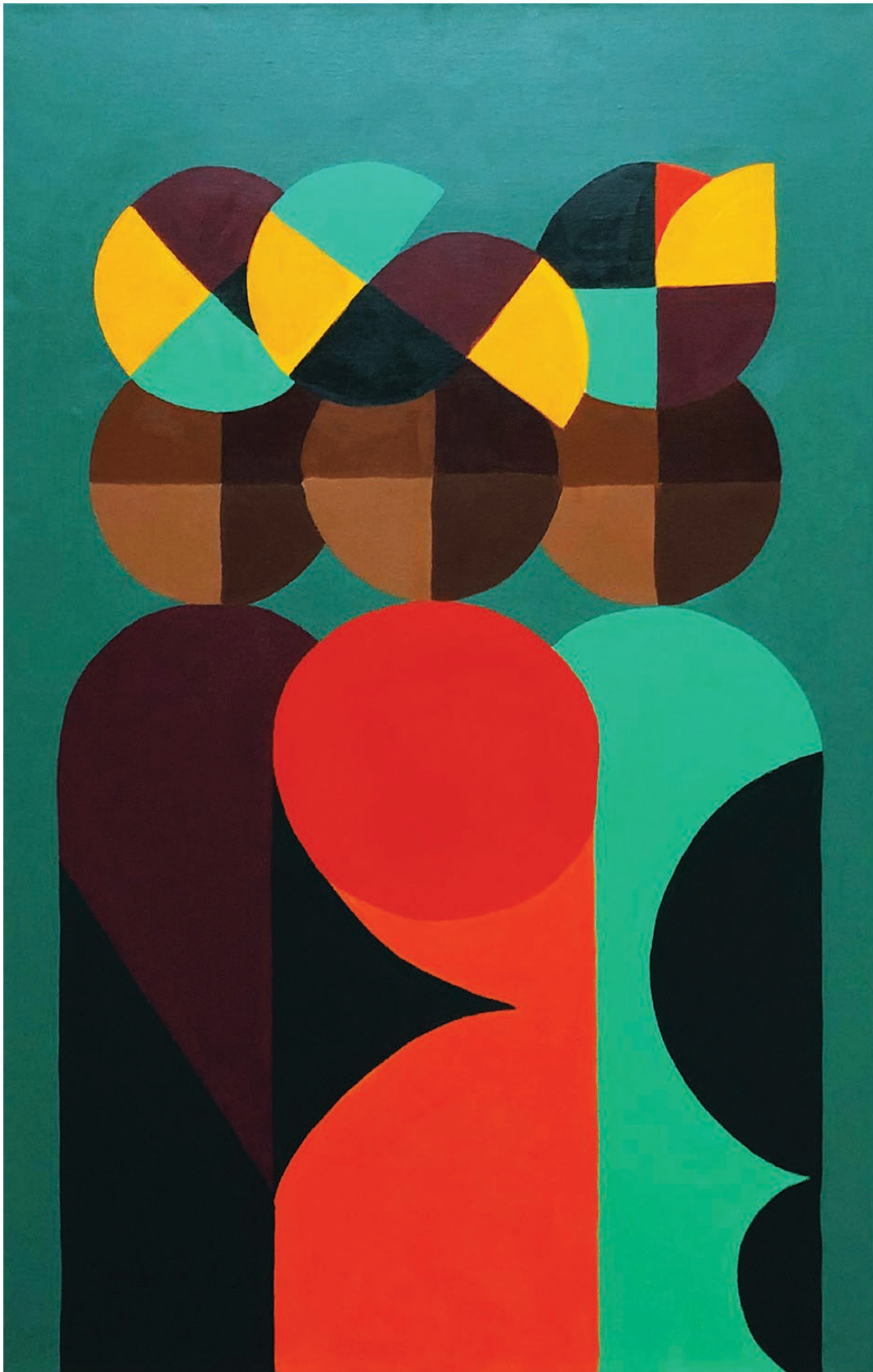
Our innovations in community-led well-being measurement have been recognized by the National League of Cities, Harvard Business School's Opportunity Project, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation via its Culture of Health Prize, but the relationship-building that goes into obtaining our metrics is its own innovation. Our work on the survey helps the messy middle coalesce.

When I'm in our community measurement meetings, I feel what collective well-being looks like in real time. This is where a school district administrator, a community organizer, an epidemiologist, a resource center specialist, a senior executive from a global company, social justice advocates, a lawyer, nonprofit leaders, and other neighborhood champions all sit together with a shared purpose. The space itself is intentional—a flat table where every voice carries weight. In these moments, I can sense the mycelium network flowing and shaping, rather than dictating, how we measure and understand well-being.

I notice how I've changed. I used to arrive with a prescriptive agenda; now I focus on holding space for energy, ideas, and emotions to move through the room. It's a balance of rigor and openness, honoring strong analysis while staying flexible.

What everyone on the survey's measurement team understands is that this process is special—mirrored in community—and creates outcomes no single data point in a survey can fully capture.

*Natalie Bomstad is the executive director of Wello in Green Bay, Wisconsin.*



FITGI SAINT-LOUIS, *Three Sisters*, 2022, acrylic on linen, 30 x 50 inches.