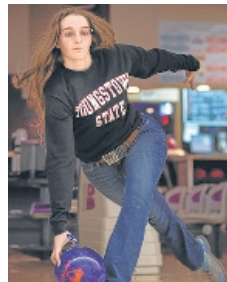


# Billings Gazette

## Testing the waters

Icy adventure skiing on Stillwater River provides thrills **OUTDOORS, PAGE D1**



## Striking spotlight

West senior Hope Bunk bowls her way to Youngstown State **SPORTS, B1**



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## ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT



AMY LYNN NELSON, BILLINGS GAZETTE

Jessica Kay Ruhle, the new executive director of the Yellowstone Art Museum, is seen here at the museum recently.

# ‘On a forward momentum’

## New YAM director Jessica Kay Ruhle is up for the challenge

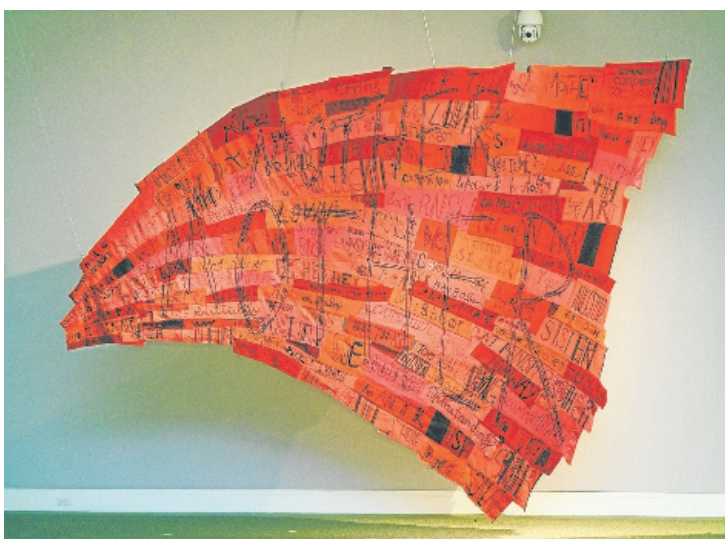
**JAKE IVERSON**  
jiverson@billingsgazette.com

Yams are funny things. They’re sweet but versatile. They’re wonderful in their own right, but even better in a dish, where they can shine and elevate everything else around them.

The Yellowstone Art Museum, generally referred to as The YAM, is the same way. The region’s largest and most prestigious institution of its type is a marvel in and of itself, but it gets better when the YAM is a prominent part of the Billings arts community.

That’s a truth that new YAM executive director Jessica Kay Ruhle knows. “I am really committed to relationships,” she said, citing her desire to “really be collaborative with artists, local organizations and any number of community partners” as one of her biggest strengths.

That community relationship has been a bit strained lately. Ruhle’s predecessor Bryan Knicely resigned last July, after a hailstorm of issues worsened by the lingering COVID-19 pandemic. The Gazette reported in October 2021 that at least 40% of the museum’s staff had left in the previous 10 months, including the education director, curator, assistant curator and development director.



Marie Watt’s 2019 piece “Companion Species (Speech Bubble),” is a part of the new collection at the Yellowstone Art Museum. This reclaimed wool blanket is comprised of embroidery floss and thread and is the work of community sewing circles in Northwest Arkansas, Eastern Oklahoma, and Honolulu, Hawaii. The words on the piece serve to draw attention to indigenous ways of acknowledging relatedness.

Those issues resulted in the YAM losing or postponing at least two exhibitions from local artists. One of those artists was Jane Deschner. The Billings-based artist’s solo debut “Remember me,” was due to premiere at the YAM until COVID, and specifically the departure of the museum’s curator, derailed those plans.

Deschner has found the new regime under Ruhle easy to deal with. “She was great,” Deschner said about a recent meeting with Ruhle. “She spent two hours and we went through everything. She listened to all my concerns

about the problems [the YAM has] had.”

That opening of dialogue is something that’s important to Deschner. “[The YAM is] in really good hands,” she said. “I think everybody’s feeling really encouraged.”

“Remember me.” will now open on Sept. 11, and run through the fall and into 2023. “We’re really excited to have that back on the calendar,” Ruhle said.

Knicely’s resignation led to a nationwide hunt for the YAM’s new director. Ruhle was hired in December and moved to Billings in January.

Her museum experience is primarily in education. She grew up in Florida, but moved to North Carolina for college. “I was really certain in college that I wanted to work in museums,” she remembered, “and I found museum education to be the space where the artwork and the visitors intersect most.”

After a short stint in Washington, D.C., she returned to North Carolina and worked for a variety of institutions, including a children’s museum and a history museum. Ruhle eventually settled at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina.

“I really found myself at home in contemporary art and at places that were really visitor focused,” she said. She spent 12 years there, as the associate curator of education and eventually the director of education.

It was the YAM position that pulled her from the swampy climes of the southeast and into Montana. “It just really felt like an ideal opportunity,” she said. “When I came for my interview, I fell in love with Billings and the access to the outdoors.” She moved with a two-year-old dog, and the two have spent their “nights and weekends making the most of this area.”

On her off hours she enjoys roller skating. And although she hasn’t made it to a rink in Billings yet, she’s excited to have ordered some new “wheels” she can use

Please see **MUSEUM**, Page A7

## 5 WEEKS OF WAR

# Ukrainian forces retake territory

Russians are even booby-trapping bodies, Zelenskyy says

**NEBI QENA AND YURAS KARMANAU**  
Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian troops moved cautiously to retake territory north of the country’s capital on Saturday, using cables to pull the bodies of civilians off streets of one town out of fear that Russian forces may have left them booby-trapped.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy warned that departing Russian troops were creating a “catastrophic” situation for civilians by leaving mines around homes, abandoned equipment and “even the bodies of those killed.” His claims could not be independently verified.

Associated Press journalists in Bucha, a suburb northwest of Kyiv, watched as Ukrainian soldiers backed by a column of tanks and other armored vehicles used cables to drag bodies off of a street from a distance. Locals

Please see **UKRAINE**, Page A6

## HEALTH CARE

# Ripple effect feared from conviction in nurse’s case

**TRAVIS LOLLER**  
Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The moment nurse RaDonna Vaught realized she had given a patient the wrong medication, she rushed to the doctors working to revive 75-year-old Charlene Murphey and told them what she had done. Within hours, she made a full report of her mistake to the Vanderbilt University Medical Center.

Murphey died the next day, on Dec. 27, 2017. Late last month, a jury found Vaught guilty of criminally negligent homicide and gross neglect.

That verdict — and the fact that Vaught was charged at all — worries patient safety and nursing groups that have worked for years to move hospital culture away from cover-ups, blame

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## Museum

From A1

for trail skating. Since moving to Montana, she's had a new found affinity for skiing, excitedly talking about finding a used set of skis.

The move has been a big change, but one that's helped along by Montana's charm. "The people are so welcoming," she said of her new state. "The South likes to think it has the handle on hospitality, but I have just found Montana to be so delightful."

The leap from education to executive director has likewise been a climb. Traditionally, museum directors are curators. But Ruhle doesn't see her education background as an impediment, and in fact thinks it's one of her strengths as a director.

"When I think about being an educator," she said, "I think about being really comfortable with being in discussion with folks around works of art, or being in conversation with diverse audiences and varied groups who have relationships with the museum. It's a different skill set, and it's a different way of working with people."

Ruhle wants to use that different way of working with people to broaden the YAM's reach.

"Having strong educational offerings for adult visitors is really important," she said. "It lets those of us who are excited about the museum sort of expand either our history knowledge or our art studio practice."

Ruhle lamented the slashing of arts funding in schools, but noted that museums like the YAM can help fill that void. "Art can be a really important tool for having big conversations, thinking critically and addressing issues that are in broader society," she explained.

She also wants to reach out to Billings' universities, improving the YAM's partnerships with the Northcutt Steel Gallery at MSUB and the Ryniker-Morrison Gallery at Rocky Mountain College.

"The arts can really support and add another dimension to any discipline that's being taught," she said, adding that she'd like the YAM to start "working with the sciences, and working with the history department and working with the English department."

That spirit of collaboration drives Ruhle. She'd like to see the YAM have musicians play in their galleries and have historians and scientists weigh in on discussions about how their disciplines intermingle with art.

The YAM has rejoined the Downtown Billings ArtWalk, planning to start with the June 3 event. "It just makes all the sense in the world," said Ruhle.

There's been change already in Ruhle's short time as director.

But the big issue facing the YAM remains the same: staffing.

"It is absolutely incredible what this team has continued to do with a smaller staff," she said, but "it's a top priority to get a full working team as quickly as possible."

Under Ruhle's leadership, the YAM has been able to fill some of the major vacancies. Adam Beaves-Fisher is the new advancement director, and Carrie Goe-Nettleton has been hired as education director, who is in the process of hiring other positions in that department, Ruhle said.

That leaves the curator as the big position that's still open, although Ruhle said they're in "the midst" of the interview process right now, with June 1 as a hopeful start date for the eventual new hire.

Once the YAM can move forward with a fully staffed senior leadership team, Ruhle promised "subsequent hires throughout the rest of the team."

The YAM will need all the help they can get, with a full exhibition calendar going through 2022 and into next year.

Current exhibitions at the YAM include "Companion Species: We Are All Related," a multi-artist, multi-discipline installation that examines the broader relationship between humans and animals. Ruhle said that she "loves having a show with this much diversity," as the exhibition features works from a variety of styles and time periods.

Also up now is "In Conversation," which will be a rotating series that combines loaned works with ones pulled from the YAM's permanent collection.

On April 1, the YAM opened an installation from Jesse Albrecht and Sean Chandler called "The Homecoming of Uncle Dirty and Jimmy Cardell." It combines Albrecht's pottery work with Chandler's paintings to examine themes of ancestral trauma and the rippling effect of war.

Through the year, the museum will run works from Robert Royhle and Michael Haykin, who are both Montana artists.

The YAM is also back to a full slate of summer programming, with its Summer Art Academy running at Rocky Mountain College June 6-10, and various camps throughout the season.

It's an exciting time for the YAM, but also one that can feel uneasy after a few tough years for the museum and for the art industry in general.

"It's really important for cultural organizations to be transparent with their communities," Ruhle said. "The conversations that lots of organizations have had over the last two years have been really critical to having a community understand how museums are run and how they



AMY LYNN NELSON PHOTOS, BILLINGS GAZETTE

Roy Lichtenstein's 1972 oil and magna on canvas, "Still Life with Lobster," is one of the pieces displayed at the Yellowstone Art Museum.

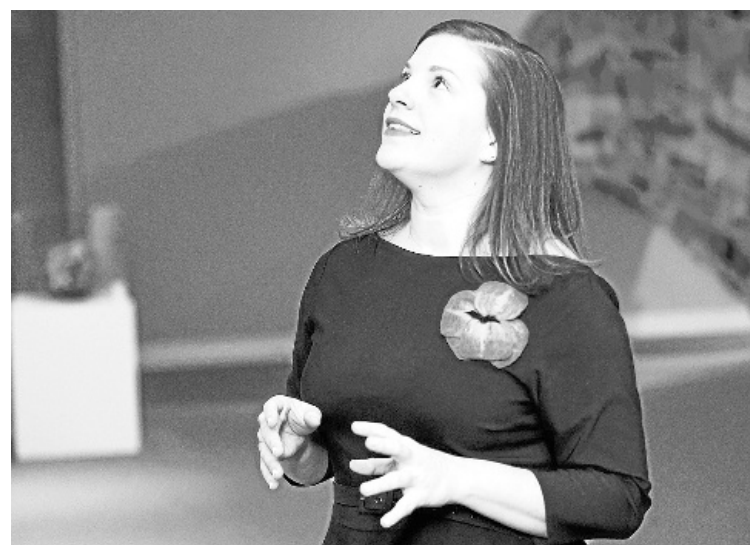


Kristen Cliffl's 2012 ceramic and wood piece, "It Seemed Like A Good Idea At The Time," is paired with a Zuni artist's 1880 piece, Frog Vessel. These pieces are a part of a new collection at the Yellowstone Art Museum.

work as businesses."

Deschner sees this as potential pivot point for the YAM. "All of us, as artists," she said, "we have a lot of hope that it will rise again... [Ruhle's] got a lot on her shoulders because this could be the last chance before people just throw up their hands and say, 'We give up.' But I think she has the personality and the integrity and the communication skills to pull it off."

Ruhle is looking up. "All of the conversations I've been having lately have been people being really excited about what's on the horizon and really enthusiastic to get back in the galleries and to see our upcoming exhibitions. I think we're on a forward momentum."



Jessica Kay Ruhle, the YAM's new executive director, leads a tour of the "Companion Species" exhibition.