

# NWA Profile: Robin Atkinson puts fashion to work at INTERFORM

When Robin Atkinson learned the relationships immigrant and refugee communities have to sewn trades, she wanted to find a way to incorporate them in Northwest Arkansas Fashion Week.

March 24, 2024 at 4:40 a.m.

by [April Wallace](#)



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Robin Atkinson, CEO of INTERFORM, found herself presenting to a room of 50 other CEOs during a NeighborWorks leadership cohort and trying to describe what it was that her nonprofit does. Their collective response made her stop in her tracks.

"I said, 'INTERFORM is trying to create a revenue stream through small-batch manufacturing to fund our arts programming.' I'm so used to (the idea) that it's like 'Of course we are, of course that's what we're doing,'" Atkinson said. "But I said it to this room of people, and they were like 'Come again?'"

Based on their reaction, she realized her approach must be unique. INTERFORM is, in broad strokes, a nonprofit organization that puts on annual runway shows full of diverse models that represent all parts of the community. That's in addition to year-round programming, such as offering free sewing classes to the community and platforms for Black and Latinx voices. It recently turned one branch of its outreach into RHIZOME, a for-profit subsidiary, with the hope of making the nonprofit financially stable and less dependent on grants.

"Return to Form," this year's Fashion Week events, will take place March 28-30 at Ledger in Bentonville.

Atkinson founded the organization INTERFORM seven years ago. People "respond to what she's built, that is her gift," said Sonia Spinks, INTERFORM Board chair. What she especially appreciates about Robin is "I never have to wonder what she's thinking. She's transparent and focused on the mission with a real gift in being able to make decisions that make the most impact and most value and also represent inclusion."

Spinks said Atkinson appreciates the creatives behind the scenes, people who build the sets and do the hair and make products and that "all of that is so effortless to her."

Atkinson should be most proud "of creating and evolving an organization that actually does what it says it's going to do, internally and externally," said Ro Bailey, communications manager for INTERFORM. Plenty of organizations are "saying they are diverse and not being it, (but) she walks the walk, and she should be most proud of how many artists and models that she has included and elevated to opportunities to share their art ... and paying the artists,

giving them not just exposure, but pay to do a workshop and career development. That's big."

Robin is "really smart, a great organizer," said artist Kathy Thompson. "She's very intuitive and capable. She's just a real advocate for the arts and [that] shows up in everything she's doing in the fashion world. She's just one of the people that you go to in those worlds. She's just ... got that way about her, to help organize people and see the bigger picture and the possibilities in it.

"That is how you can make things happen in our world."

#### ARTISTS CHANGE THE WORLD

Robin Atkinson grew up on a dairy farm, despite her father being a doctor and her mother a nurse -- but they bought property for their home behind a dairy farm beyond Siloam Springs that was along the Illinois River. The cows lived on their land.

Young Robin was outdoorsy. She spent much of her time at the milk barn and with the many, many dogs they had. Back then, she told everyone she was going to be a veterinarian or a heart surgeon when she grew up.

Living so far away from even a small town meant Robin quickly learned how to entertain herself. She had a rich internal world. And while in some ways that childhood was idyllic, living on a river in the Ozarks before more people really came to understand how wonderful those places were, there was more to it than met the eye.

"Both of my parents were in medicine in the beginning of the opioid crisis in the '90s ... and they were very involved," Atkinson said, meaning they both used the drugs. Both of her parents went to rehab when Robin was 11. Going through that phase of life with them had a bell curve. "It was idyllic, then it was horrible, then (worse), and then it was normal."

While Atkinson admits the experience was traumatic and a big punctuation mark in her life, she's grateful that the conversation around the opioid epidemic has changed in recent years, becoming

common knowledge and more widely talked about thanks to shows on Netflix such as "Painkiller." Those truly educate people about what was actually happening.

"I had a front row seat to that," she said. "It was wild, tore people's families up. I'm lucky my parents didn't die."

Her parents went into recovery, and the family moved to Fayetteville after that. Her father ultimately became a specialist and began to treat people in their drug addiction journeys. Not only did it change his life, it changed Robin's too, giving her a sympathy that she says she wouldn't have had otherwise and an ability to project into other people. "Life isn't always easy and people are often coming from very difficult backgrounds," Atkinson said. She finds perspective when connecting with others at INTERFORM, such as one person who moved to the U.S. from a Tanzanian refugee camp, where he lived for 25 years. Robin tries to understand the traumas that other people go through, but then also to set it down and see the people underneath. "We're just people trying to be people here. We all want opportunities to fit in and be seen and balancing the acknowledgment of traumatic histories with the total, universal desire to be recognized and try to do all that with kid gloves."

Once she moved to Fayetteville, Robin was in a tough spot, having gone through something so tumultuous. Trust in her parents had suffered, she didn't like her new school and, like so many 12-year-olds, she didn't like herself. She enrolled in art classes and wound up in Kathy Thompson's art studio on the downtown Fayetteville square, where the two connected on a deep level. Robin found Thompson a gentle soul who allowed space for things to be both hard and beautiful, both complicated and easy. She was hired as Kathy's studio assistant at age 13.

"How useful was I, I don't know, but I wouldn't be who I am without her," Atkinson said. "Her entering my life was a pivotal moment."

"Robin is one of my best friends, like a daughter, we've just been together through thick and thin," Kathy Thompson said. When they first met, she realized that Robin "was exceptional in many ways." Over the years "she's just been many things, a helper, student, best friend, family member."

Atkinson's affinity for artists began with Thompson, saying that she learned artists can change the world because her own world was drastically changed by one single artist.

Not far down the road, Thompson would encourage her to go to graduate school and help her make connections for a pivotal job. Eventually Atkinson would name her first child Parker, which is Thompson's maiden name, and the whole lot has dinner together once a week, rain or shine -- something they all need and look forward to.

#### STAR OF HER OWN MOVIE

Robin was Thompson's assistant from age 13 to the time she left Northwest Arkansas at age 24. In that decade-plus, she learned how difficult it was to make a living as an artist and how entrepreneurial you have to be to really make it. At first, Robin was a painter herself. When she disclosed to her parents that she'd like to study art history in college they insisted she had to do it at the University of Arkansas because they weren't excited for her to choose the arts.

Having already been plugged into the underground arts scene for some time prior to hitting college meant Robin was ready to do something, to act on an idea she had. In 2003, she became one of the founders of Art Amiss, which she was heavily involved in from ages 17 to 23.

"Being a painter is what got me into doing Art Amiss, and through that I realized that I wasn't good at painting, but I was good at organizing arts organizations," Atkinson said. She spent most of her college years checking boxes in class, then rushing home to plan art exhibits, art parties and other parties.

Rent was \$300 a month. She was 19 years old, and the world was her oyster. She was set up for a perfectly bohemian 20s. All the stereotypes of living a creative, artsy life were her experience: tattoos, late nights, terrible boyfriends. She was "the star of my own movie I was directing, a screen of one," and she loved it. She was "tortured in the right ways, in that 'Girl Interrupted' way."

Then Atkinson learned of Prospect, a giant art exhibit happening in New Orleans. Atkinson had never been to a biennial, but she gave the organization a call, and they arranged an interview. The first one she had was a bust. It was for a transportation position, and she hadn't been on a bus in New Orleans and had no idea about the streetcars. But they brought her back for a second interview, this one for a curatorial assistant and hired her that day. They asked her to start the Friday after.

Atkinson returned to Arkansas to tell Thompson, notify her parents and to end things with the guy she was living with. Then she moved to New Orleans. So began her curatorial career.

As assistant to Dan Cameron, founder of Prospect New Orleans who later became executive director of the New Museum in New York, Atkinson's job was right hand man/problem fixer. On her first or second day, she was handed two portfolios. In one were 12 to 14 large scale artworks that still needed to be placed. In the other were a bunch of complaints. The region was freshly in the recovery process following Hurricane Katrina. Placing artwork in neighborhoods still grieving was a delicate process.

She had only two months until the show when they asked her to locate a life-sized replica of a World War II battleship on hydraulics and put it in an indoor venue. Of the buildings still standing, only one could work. It was a community center that was in need of a new roof.

Atkinson introduced herself to the owner and offered to help divert funding to his roof fix in exchange for the space to place the replica battleship. While a weird request on the surface, in the end he was

glad to have some visibility for his organization and an avenue to bring more attention to the neighborhood.

Atkinson's trajectory went upward from there, from Prospect New Orleans and collaborating with David Zwirner Gallery in New York on special projects, then going off to Korea to do a retrospective on Korean artists.

#### CHOP WOOD, CARRY WATER

By 30 years old, Robin Atkinson was "not healthy, not well." She returned home to sort through her many complicated feelings about her curatorial career and determine what she really wanted to do for a living. In that process, she also realized she needed to get sober.

"There was no way I was going to make it to 31 if I didn't fix the way I was living," Atkinson said. She quit her job, let her friends go and relocated to Northwest Arkansas. She planned to take one year off to figure things out and did "six of the hardest months" of her life in rehab.

It was the "chop wood, carry water" phase of her life, based on the Buddhist saying in response to "What do you do for enlightenment?" (chop wood, carry water) and "What do you do after?" (chop wood, carry water). She would essentially carry on.

Atkinson was back working at the same coffee shop where she'd worked as a 17-year-old after having had the life of a curator working around the world. It was a humbling moment.

"I was never going to work in art ever again, because I didn't think that I could," she said. But "I had no idea what I was going to do because I believed in that myth that you have to drink and party and use substances to be creative."

Based on that mindset, she thought she'd never be creative again, so she took time to contemplate what might be next. Around the same time, she met Cash Acrey on a dating website.

He had just earned his Ph.D. in finance and so had similarly been out of touch with the world for a while. After persistent messages, Robin

finally answered and Cash invited her to see a Ben Harper concert in Tulsa.

She agreed only to first meet and have a chat on his porch, provided he would make raspberry sorbet and Perrier available. After driving around all day in search of raspberry sorbet, Cash landed a tub. The two met, and Robin vetted him, deeming he was not a murderer.

They made it to the Ben Harper concert, then Silver Dollar City and finally married at Thompson's house in October 2016.

Having met someone and fallen in love meant Robin was here to stay, something she hadn't expected when she returned to Northwest Arkansas, so she began to look more seriously for an opportunity to restart her career.

While stylist Sunshine Broder was doing her hair one day, she asked if Atkinson had ever heard of Northwest Arkansas Fashion Week. She had, from afar. Art Amiss had done work with the earliest iteration of the event, and it had intrigued her. Broder knew Atkinson's background in arts organization and explained that someone needed to take it over and gently nudged that maybe it should be her to do it. Robin went ahead and met the people who were involved in the original iteration and inherited the remnants of its structure, along with a few problems.

"But I thought worst case scenario I go and do something else," Atkinson said. "The stakes were very low."

It had a strong brand, but in dreaming how to relaunch it into a collaborative organization, Atkinson wanted it to have a better relationship with representation than it previously had and start to reflect the population as it was, not only the blonde, white folks of the region.

She also wanted to uncover a creative network of people working in fashion. Atkinson started by doing photo shoots, then, before getting back into Fashion Week, the first event she put on was the Textured Hair Affair, which had a runway show and Black hair expo.



Ro Bailey was a model at that event and met Atkinson there. At first she felt a little intimidated because Robin had credibility in the art world, a master's degree and was generally a pretty big figure. But as Bailey got to know her, it became clear to her that Atkinson is someone you can comfortably share your experience with and know she'll get it.

Atkinson asked Bailey to run a model boot camp to not only teach models how to walk the runway but cover the parts of working in the industry that no one taught her, such as how to be safe while working with photographers and identifying scams masquerading as opportunities.

"Robin really tries to make sure everyone is included, especially in fashion," Bailey said. "Everybody should be represented on the runway, showing the community back to itself. (She said you) don't want to go to a fashion show where they models are all 18-year-old, double zeroes (as) the whole thing. We want to see moms and older people, and I just really respect that part of her. She's very adamant. She walks the walk."





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Self portrait

Robin Wallis Atkinson

Place of birth: Shreveport, La.

Family: husband Cash Acrey and children Parker Acrey, 6, Zoya Acrey, 4

The question people ask me the most (and the answer): Can I have some juice? My kids are persistent, and the answer is usually yes. A typical Saturday night for me includes: At home with my family. I'm a real home body when I'm not expected at an event or work function. Among the craziest part of my job as CEO of INTERFORM is: The amount of financial modeling I have done for apparel manufacturing in the United States.

What I'm most looking forward to about the upcoming Fashion Week: Watching my incredible team execute on another phenomenal event. This time we have several short films that will be featured on the runway that I am super excited about, along with three nights of incredible creative content from the community.

An outfit I can never forget: A guest at our fall event in 2022 at Crystal Bridges wore a full body spandex muscle suit, and I will never not remember that guy. He runs a fashion organization in Tulsa; it's phenomenal.

My personal philosophy on fashion is: Fashion is how we tell the world who we are.

My fantasy vacation destination: I would love to take my family back to Puglia on the Adriatic Coast of Italy. I spent some time there in my 20s, and I dream about going back with Cash and the girls.

The book/play/movie that had the greatest impact on me: Luc Boltanski "On Critique"

The best advice I've ever received: No one is coming to save you; you have to save yourself.

People might be surprised to find out that I: Spend a lot of time watching movies about failed expeditions to Mount Everest.

I know I've done a good job when: Happy tears from participants or the team always let me know we really did the thing. I love to watch other people feel seen.

My favorite place in Northwest Arkansas: My house! I am such a home body, my garden and my pool are 100% my happy place.

The accomplishment I'm most proud of is: Career 2.0, becoming successful the first time felt inevitable but this time around is a gift.

My most unusual talent: I can do almost anything 65% well.

What makes me laugh the most: My husband. Hands down weirdest, funniest person on earth.

The hardest thing I've ever done: Starting over. Leaving one life behind to become the person I was supposed to be.

Something I think everyone should try at least once: Sobriety.

Three words to sum you up: persistent, curious, detailed.