

## Illustrator draws from love of art, science



Botanical illustrator Karina Helm often visits Pioneers Park Nature Center to work. (Robert Becker)

*BY KATHRYN CATES MOORE/Lincoln Journal Star  
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Last year, when Karina Helm was preparing her botanical print competition entry, her refrigerator was stuffed with about 25 sunflower heads in different stages of decay.

It wasn't pretty.

But the scientific illustrator knew she needed to examine every angle of the common sunflower before she put pencil to paper.

Helm slices her subjects into small pieces.

And she turns them over and upside down, counting petals, examining the ways the leaves stand up or droop and looks closely at the stem. Is it hairy? Or shiny and slick?

For this kind of art, the composition is in the details.

Helm's illustration won the traditional botanic print category of the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum's competition in 2006 and again this year with her drawing of Little Bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*).

"It was a challenge," she said. To learn more about it, she asked a friend who researches native grasses (she calls him the "grass master") to walk with her through Nine-Mile Prairie, pointing out the various stages of Little Bluestem development.

After collecting samples (at another location, of course), Helm began examining the subject.

The process is a natural one for Helm, who has a double degree in biology and studio art from Pacific Lutheran University. It's a kind of left brain/right brain specialty.

Originally, she was aimed at biology — not toward medical school, but more the natural history side, she said.

Growing up in Alaska, Helm spent a lot of time in the outdoors and her parents instilled in her a love of nature, she said.