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DECEMBER / JANUARY 2024

Northwest Indiana Business Magazine

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and North Central Indiana
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Spotlight on 'hidden gems'

*2023 E-Day Awards winners all faced
adversity but kept their sights on future*



*Jeanne Robbins
President
Munster Steel*



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CONTENTS

DECEMBER / JANUARY 2024

TOP STORY

E-DAY AWARDS

12

Spotlight on 'hidden gems'

*2023 E-Day Awards winners
all faced adversity but
kept their sights on future*



ON THE COVER



12 ► Cover photo of Jeanne Robbins by Joel Alderson

FEATURES



SOCIETY OF INNOVATORS

22

Spirit of ingenuity

*Society of Innovators
at PNW honors ideas
of creative, determined
2023 inductees*



ACCOUNTING

26

More than > numbers

*Experts work to
diversify industry,
change stereotypes
about CPAs*



SUCCESSION PLANNING

30

Legacy of daughters

*Region women
lead their
families'
businesses*



THE FUTURE OF GARY

34

Vision for Steel City

*Academics, advocates,
public officials
reimagine what's
possible for Gary*

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- Travel Medicine
- Tuberculosis Testing
- Health Risk Assessments
- Audiometric Screenings
- Quantitative Fit Testing of Respirators including N95 masks
- Wellness Screenings
- Immigration Physicals
- On-Site Clinic Services

COLUMNS



PROFESSIONAL ADVICE

40

Three-part framework:

How to decide to sell your business or expand?



MAKING A DIFFERENCE

41

Culture of giving

Legacy Foundation connects people with knowledge, funding



OFF HOURS

42

Know the ropes

In life and in business, these Region sailors cast off with the waves

ON OUR WEBSITE



BUSINESS NEWS

IUN, city of Gary partner on entrepreneurship program



► Read on your phone



READI UPDATE

U.S. Cold Storage invests \$124 million in Lake County location



► Read on your phone

EVERY EDITION



AROUND THE REGION

6

Professional advancement

Businesses, organizations share latest news about new hires, promotions, accolades



VIEWPOINT

44

Level Up for a better tomorrow

United Way NWI program key to financial freedom for participants

ADVERTISING INDEX

Burke Costanza & Carberry LLP	19	Purdue University Northwest	25
Centier Bank	C4	Tech Credit Union	8
Community Healthcare System	C2	US Business Systems	29
Edward Jones	11	Wightman	20, 21
Fifth Third Bank	15		
Franciscan Health	3		
Indiana University Northwest	37		
Krugger Lawton CPAs	32		
Larson-Danielson Construction	28		
McMahon & Associates CPAs	C3		
Munster Steel Company Inc.....	9		
NWI Business Magazine.....	33, 39		
Peoples Bank	1		
Purdue Federal Credit Union.....	17		

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DEC-JAN 2024

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GOOD BIT

4,300 The number of men and women who work at U.S. Steel's Gary Works facility. The company paid those workers \$700 million in 2022. ► PAGE 34

IN THIS ISSUE

I had the privilege to join a group of budding entrepreneurs at Indiana University Northwest this fall.

The Start UP Business Success Program is a partnership between the university and the city of Gary to help small businesses get a jump start after the last few difficult years.

The energy in the room of eager entrepreneurs seemed a little magical. That same feeling of anticipation also was prevalent at the Society of Innovators induction, Ignite the Region luncheon and E-Day awards ceremony this fall.

At the Society of Innovators event, videos showed highlights of the five innovations that landed creators the honors.

Don Babcock of the Northwest Indiana Forum team, which was an inductee, said "Without passion, nothing better happens."

That passion could also be felt during the Forum's luncheon. The room was buzzing as the crowd waited for Gov. Eric Holcomb to speak. He did not disappoint when he surprised Forum CEO Heather Ennis with a Sagamore of Wabash Award. She reminded the audience that "You can't grow alone."

That sentiment carried over into the E-Day ceremony. Ten awards honored

people and businesses that show collaboration is key to success.

"Northwest Indiana is lucky to have all of you," said Linda Hough, the Lifetime Achievement Award winner.

We feature the stories of the Society of Innovators inductees and E-Day winners.

As for the rest of our issue, we find out why CPAs are "fun," and how the industry is trying to overcome the stereotypes that accounting is "boring."

We were glad to find so many daughters taking over their family businesses, including our cover subject Jeanne Robbins of Munster Steel. (She also was an E-Day winner!)

In our "Future of" series, hope abounds for the city of Gary. Micah Pollak, of IUN, said "Of all the cities in Northwest Indiana, Gary has the most potential for positive change."

We also feature stories on sailors, the Legacy Foundation and the United Way's Level Up Program. And we made space for professional advice on mergers and acquisitions.

Finally, I was promoted to publisher and executive editor of the magazine. I am honored to serve the Region's business community. Enjoy this issue!

— Heather Pfundstein, publisher/editor

PICTURE PERFECT



Photo provided by Society of Innovators

Catisha Toney brought her sons (left) Camden and Terrell Toney to the Society of Innovators' 19th annual luncheon Oct. 19 at Purdue Northwest's Westville campus. Toney was inducted as the founder and executive director of Coates Inc. in Merrillville.

► PAGE 22

Professional advancement



Businesses, organizations share latest news about new hires, promotions, accolades

HEATHER PFUNDSTEIN

Accounting

CPAs **Gretchen Kalk-Castro** and **Kylee Frazee Norman** were made partners at Northwest Indiana-based **CLH, CPAs & Consultants**. Kalk-Castro has worked for CLH for 23 years and started as an intern. Frazee Norman joined the company in 2015.

Banking

Kristine Clark, a mortgage loan specialist at **Purdue Federal Credit Union**, was named the Northwest Indiana Realtor Association's Affiliate of the Year. She works at the Crown Point and La Porte branches.

Joe Wicklander joined **Old National Bank** as senior director of the bank's new Financial Institutions Group in Chicago. **Joe Kiser**, a 13-year Old National team member, was named president of the **Old National Bank Foundation**.

Merrillville-based **Centier Bank** promoted **Anthony Jones** to officer of the bank. Jones is manager of the bank's Hammond downtown branch, 5433 Hohman Ave. He joined the bank in 2021 and has 15 years of banking experience. **Chimere Griggs** was promoted to branch manager of the

Hammond Strack and Van Til in-store branch. She joined Centier in 2014. **Scott Vermillion** was named the regional sales manager overseeing the bank's Michiana and Fort Wayne markets. **Brian Wujcik** was appointed manager of the South Bend West Branch, 2850 W. Cleveland Road.

John Wilkening joined Crown Point-based **Tech Credit Union** as senior vice president and chief banking officer.

Michigan City-based **Horizon Bank** promoted **Tammy Kerr** to senior vice president, director of treasury management. Kerr joined Horizon Bank in 2016 and helped lead its Michigan and Northwest Indiana treasury management teams.

Construction

Hammond-based **Korellis**, an exterior building envelope contractor, appointed **Thomas Shanahan** to its board of directors. He served the National Roofing Contractors Association from 1989 to 2022 as its vice president of enterprise risk management and executive education. Shanahan was appointed to OSHA's Advisory Council on Construction Safety and Health as a management representative by the U.S. secretary of labor. **Ronnie Strain** is the new director

of operations, and longtime employees **Phil Junge** became director of sales, and **John Zamojski** promoted to quality and training manager.

Louisville, Kentucky-based **Louisville Tile**, which has a South Bend location, promoted CFO **Walter Newell** to CEO.

Economic development

The Indiana Economic Development Corp. hired **Jonathan Laramy**, founder of Stealth Mode Solutions, to build Indiana's brand in the Great Lakes region.

The **Michigan City Chamber of Commerce** named **Johnny Roder** as the Ambassador of the Quarter for the third quarter of 2023. Roder is an account executive for **Duneland Media**.

Julia Plumb, the business adviser for **Northwest Indiana's Small Business Development Center**, was named **America's SBDC State Star** for Indiana.

Former Fortune 100 executive **Vanessa Green Sindors** will be the **Indiana Chamber's** next president and CEO. She will replace longtime leader **Kevin Brinegar**, who will retire in early January.

Liliana Franco is the new operations director at **Economic Development Corp. Michigan City**.



ACCOUNTING
Gretchen Kalk-Castro



ACCOUNTING
Kylee Frazee Norman



BANKING
Kristine Clark



BANKING
Joe Wicklander



BANKING
Joe Kiser



BANKING
Chimere Griggs



BANKING
Brian Wujcik



BANKING
John Wilkening

Education

Ivy Tech Community College named **Marcos Rodriquez Jr.** its new Lake County chancellor. Rodriquez served as the interim chancellor since July. **Kathryn Lash** is the new vice president for K-14 and strategic initiatives. She most recently served as executive director for East Central Educational Service Center in Connersville.

The **Rev. John Jenkins** will step down as president of the **University of Notre Dame** at the end of the 2023-24 academic year to return to teaching and ministry. Jenkins, the university's 17th president, has served in the role since 2005. **John Veihmeyer**, retired chairman of KPMG International, was elected chair of Notre Dame's board of trustees, effective June 2024. **Pedro Ribeiro**, senior vice president for communications and public affairs at the Association of American Universities, was appointed vice president for public affairs and communications. **Debra Johns** was named assistant vice president for undergraduate.

Symphony Raudry joined the team at **Indiana University Northwest** as

a lecturer in business and coordinator of graduate programs. Accountant **Diane Chabes** is the new clinical assistant professor of accounting and finance. **Christina Parsons** joined the advising team. **Amy Diaz**, chief of staff in the office of the chancellor, was selected by the **Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities** as a fellow for the fifth cohort of its Leadership Academy/La Academia de Liderazgo. **Crystal Shannon**, associate professor of nursing, was named dean of the College of Health and Human Services.

Teresa Bals-Elsholz, professor of meteorology and chair of the **Valparaiso University** meteorology department, was recognized by the **American Meteorological Association** with the **2024 Edward N. Lorenz Teaching Excellence Award**. **Jennifer Prough** was appointed dean of Christ College — The Honors College.

The **STARTedUP Foundation** recently announced the 2024 cohort of the Indiana Innovation Educator Fellowship: **Dawn Combis** — Lake Central High School; **Anne Dines**

— Merrillville High School; **Debera Hinchy** — Lowell High School; **Krissy LaFlech** — Munster High School; **Brian Nicksch** — Valparaiso High School; and **Daniel Schultz** — Hobart High School.

Facilities

Performance Plus recently welcomed **Michelle Kornelik** as corporate controller of the cleaning and janitorial services company that has locations in Gary, South Bend, Michigan City and Indianapolis.

Finance

The **John Mutz Philanthropic Leadership Institute** in Indianapolis recognized South Bend native **Tina Patton** as a distinguished member of its 2023 graduating class. Patton is vice president and director of nonprofit and foundation engagement at Mishawaka-based **Indiana Trust Wealth Management**.

Government

The **Indiana Chamber of Commerce** honored U.S. Sen. **Todd Young** with



BANKING
Tammy Kerr



CONSTRUCTION
Ronnie Strain



CONSTRUCTION
Phil Junge



CONSTRUCTION
John Zamojski

AROUND THE REGION



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
Vanessa Green Sindors



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
Liliana Franco



EDUCATION
Marcos Rodriquez Jr.



EDUCATION
John Jenkins

the 2023 Birch Bayh-Richard Lugar Government Leader of the Year award.

Former State Sen. **Michael Griffin** will serve as **Merrillville's** town manager until a search for the permanent position is complete.

Gov. Eric Holcomb made several appointments: **Troy Weirick** of Elkhart, a physician with **Beacon Health System**, to the executive board of the **Indiana Department of Health** until Dec. 31, 2027; **Mike Daigle** of South Bend, CEO and executive director of the

St. Joseph County Airport Authority, to the Judicial Nominating Commission for the **St. Joseph Superior Court** until June 30, 2025; **Santiago Schnell** of South Bend, the William K. Warren Foundation Dean of the College of Science at the **University of Notre Dame**, to the **Rare Disease Advisory Council** until Sept. 30, 2026; **Scott Thomas** of South Bend, chief of trauma services for Beacon Health System and medical director of trauma services at **Memorial Hospital of South Bend**, to

the **Trauma Care Commission** until Sept. 30, 2025.

Health care

Cardiologist **Roland Njei** joined the **Franciscan Physician Network** cardiology location in Munster. **Ebony Thomas** received the **Franciscan Health Michigan City 2023 Maria Petti Memorial Scholarship**. Family medicine nurse practitioner **Katheryn White** joined the staff at the **Lowell Health Center**. **Franciscan Health**

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ILLINOIS

Calumet City
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EDUCATION
Pedro Ribeiro

Dyer and **Franciscan Health Munster** Chief Financial Officer **Pamela Ott** was elected vice chair of the **Healthcare Financial Management Association's** board of examiners for 2023-2024. Dr. **Robert Korsch**, a urological surgeon based in Michigan City, was named a Center of Excellence physician by **Boston Scientific**. Pediatrician **Emily Switzer** joined the family medicine and pediatrics location in Dyer. Obstetrician and gynecologist **Omar Abuzeid** joined the maternal fetal medicine and genetics



EDUCATION
Amy Diaz

practice in Crown Point. Cardiologist **Abul Basher** joined the staffs at the Legacy Hills Health Center in La Porte and the Franciscan Health Heart Center in Michigan City.

Northwest Medical Group welcomed **Ashley Milcarek**, a family nurse practitioner who specializes in obstetrics and gynecology, to the women's health centers in La Porte and Knox; **Chike Okolocha**, a family medicine physician, in Valparaiso; board-certified hematologist/oncologist



EDUCATION
Crystal Shannon



EDUCATION
Teresa Bals-Elsholz

Mohamad Khasawneh to the hematology and oncology center in Valparaiso; **Taiwo Falaiye**, a board-certified family medicine physician, to the primary care office in Michigan City; **Michael Schwuchow**, a nurse practitioner, to the urology center in Valparaiso; interventional cardiologist **Setri Fugar** at La Porte Hospital and an office in Knox.

Dr. **Chiedu Nchekwube** joined Gary-based Edgewater Health at its Merrillville clinic in family medicine. He is also the founder of **The Wellness Shoppe**.

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AROUND THE REGION



EDUCATION
Jennifer Prough



FACILITIES
Michelle Kornelik



FINANCE
Tina Patton



HEALTH CARE
Roland Njei

Hospitality

David Meisner rejoined Merrillville-based **White Lodging** as a regional vice president. He also worked for White Lodging from 2014 to 2022.

Information technology

Elkhart-based **Surf Internet** appointed **Steve Miller** vice president of outside fiber plant engineering and construction.

Chip Miceli, CEO of **Pulse Technology**, served as a panelist at the **2023 Business Technology Association's** national conference in Boston.

Law

Indiana Lawyers, a publication for lawyers, awarded Gary Attorney **Shelice Tolbert** of **Tolbert & Tolbert Legal** with its Diversity in the Law Award. Tolbert was one of 23 attorneys and judges to win the award. The firm also was certified a Minority Business Enterprise by the **Indiana Department of Administration**, Division of Supplier Diversity.

Longtime attorney **Frank Hoffman** joined **Krieg DeVault LLP's** public finance and municipal law practice as counsel of economic development and public welfare investment. Hoffman also is managing director for **CRSUPPORT**, a nonprofit public welfare support organization. **Bryan San Jose** joined the firm's estate planning and personal services practice as an associate. **Shawn Peterson** joined its public finance and municipal law practice as an attorney. **Michael Zaradich** joined as a partner in the firm's commercial and real estate lending practice. Senior Associate **Elizabeth Roberson** was named a 2023 recipient of the **Indiana Lawyer's** Leadership in Law Up and Coming Lawyer Award. **Jacob O'Donnell** is an associate in the firm's business practice.

Logistics

The **USW International** Executive Board appointed **David McCall** the union's new president. He is a former Burns Harbor millwright.

The **Ports of Indiana** promoted **Jennifer Rachau** to the new position of

chief of staff and **Travis Kohl** to senior director of projects and infrastructure. **Ed Hamilton** returned as senior engineer. **Eric Powell** joins the organization as director of communications

Marketing

Jackie Thomas launched **South Shore Public Relations** in Chesterton.

Nonprofit

AARP selected **Mattie Perry-Lightfoot** as its 2023 Indiana Andrus Award for Community Service honoree.

Valparaiso-based **Opportunity Enterprises** welcomed two new board members: **Ann Marie Woolwine**, an attorney and partner at **Krieg DeVault**; and **Dana Rifai**, an attorney and partner at **Burke Costanza & Carberry**.

Munster-based **South Shore Arts** named **Jessica Corral** its new director of education.

The **Northwest Indiana Influential Women's Association** added three members to its board of directors: **Delana Orban**, Franciscan Health; **Carrie Upchurch**, Everwise Credit



HEALTH CARE
Ashley Milcarek



INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
Steve Miller



LAW
Shelice Tolbert



LAW
Frank Hoffman



LAW
Shawn Peterson



LAW
Jacob O'Donnell



LOGISTICS
Eric Powell



MARKETING
Jackie Thomas

Union; and **Teresa Wallace**, Wallace Consulting.

The **Legacy Foundation** honored **Calvin Bellamy** with its first **Excellence in Nonprofit Board Leadership Award** at its inaugural Heart of Lake Country Awards. Bellamy is **Lakeshore Public Media's** treasurer and finance committee chair. He also retired from Krieg DeVault.

Whitney Bradshaw is the new curator of the **Lubeznik Center for the Arts** in Michigan City.

News

Munster-based **Community Healthcare System** landed the top spot on **Forbes** magazine's 2023 list of America's Best Employers in Indiana. It has facilities in Munster, East Chicago, Hobart and Crown Point.

StorSafe Self Storage, 3950 W. 73rd Ave., Merrillville, recently expanded by two new buildings.

Fontaine and St. John Dental Group is expanding its general dentistry services in Crown Point. The

dental practice has two locations: 1108 E Summit St., Crown Point; and 10895 Park Place, St. John. ■

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SPOTLIGHT ON 'HIDDEN GEMS'

Linda Hough earned the Lifetime Achievement Award at E-Day this year for her longtime commitment to helping employees succeed at Michigan City-based CLH CPAs & Consultants. Her employees noted that she is the H in CLH.

2023 E-DAY AWARDS WINNERS ALL FACED ADVERSITY BUT KEPT THEIR SIGHTS ON FUTURE



DOUG ROSS

This year's E-Day honorees are a diverse crop, but they all have some things in common.

The Northwest Indiana Small Business Development Center has sponsored the Entrepreneurial Excellence Awards for 30 years to honor business advocates and entrepreneurs.

Lorri Feldt, regional director of the NW-ISBDC, said candidates were asked: "How did you experience adversity and get through it?"

"This year's group didn't have any trouble answering that question," Feldt said.

The pandemic, still fresh in everyone's mind, offered plenty of adversity.

"One of the things that stood out as I was reading each of the stories is the entrepreneurial journey isn't easy. Everybody thinks it's like that straight line, but it isn't," Feldt said. "Each of these business owners has really dealt with some hard stuff and dealt with it in a strategic and very human way."

The honorees were chosen by a committee of judges. There was strong competition, Feldt said.

"There's always not fistfights, but they always do debate around certain categories because we'll have a couple of particularly strong nominees and how do you choose?" she said.

"It was a good group," Feldt said. "I know the committee was really pleased. I know that we were."

In reviewing the nominees, the judges look for "those hidden gems," stories that probably most folks weren't aware of, she said.

That includes Munster Steel's unplanned relocation of its industrial plant because of the overpass construction at Calumet Avenue and 45th Street. Or Precision Maintenance Solutions hiring up, then not only keeping employees on the payroll during the pandemic but also investing in their training.

"I feel like that's a perfect example of how this group, this class, faced adversity, and then not just got through it but chose to handle it with the long-term view in mind," Feldt said.

The honorees received their awards at a Nov. 9 luncheon at Avalon Manor in Merrillville.

Cynthia Roberts, dean of the School of Business and Economics at Indiana University Northwest, was on the event's steering committee. "It's one of the highlights of my year," she said.

"I like the diversity of the honorees and the inspiring and creative ideas they have," Roberts said. "It's a good problem to have when you have so many good candidates."

Hough started out with a small CPA firm in Michigan City, then a larger firm, then with a private client, then joined a new firm with just three CPAs — including her — and an administrative assistant in 1997. Now it has 40 employees.

Partners Bob Lange and John Craighead joined her to form CLH, the name derived from their initials. "We're not going to be a law firm where everybody's name has to go on it," she said.

Hough occasionally goes to the Michigan City office, where she still has



Photo provided by NW-ISBDC / Norman Turner Photography

The 2023 E-Day class was honored during a luncheon Nov. 9 at Avalon Manor in Merrillville.

Lifetime Achievement: Linda Hough

Hough is notable not just because of her success in breaking glass ceilings but also because she is eager to help other women.

When Hough earned her accounting degree, she was a nontraditional student — married with two small children. She graduated in 1985 from Indiana University South Bend.

"I don't think I would be happy in any other profession," she said.

Hough enjoys helping small business people achieve their goals.

"When you love something, you just naturally want to succeed at it."

a desk. Although she's nominally retired, she gets called in for special projects. Because she was busy elsewhere, not everyone in the Michigan City office knows her. When someone asks who she is, a veteran employee gleefully introduces her: "This is Linda. She's the H."

As CLH's female partner, Hough took over responsibility for things like human resources and quality control.

"My passion has to be on the HR side of things," she said. "I love to mentor people."

Hough hired and named the next two female partners. She mentored them and is proud of them.

Hough has been involved in several charitable organizations. She's known for mentoring women so they can follow

E-DAY AWARDS

her lead in becoming successful in business and life in general.

"I don't believe in quitting or giving up," Hough said.

She also doesn't believe in flying solo.

"Nobody does it alone," she said. "You've always got someone behind you, pushing you from behind."

She was surprised by the latest push.

"I don't necessarily like the spotlight," Hough said. "This award just blew me away."

She didn't know she was nominated until she was invited to do a Zoom call: "Linda, we need your opinion on something," she was told. On the call, she learned of the award. "I started crying. I had to shut my computer so they wouldn't see me crying."



JOHN VODE

Small Business Person: John Vode

John Vode, founder of Chesterton-based Precision Maintenance Solutions, worked for a few big contractors in area mills and refineries, gaining some skills while he attended college.

"There's so many crazy stories along the voyage of 30 years," Vode said while reflecting on his career.

The newly minted college graduate was hired as operations engineer for a manufacturer in Chicago. He lasted four days, not happy with the bureaucracy and boredom.

Vode went back to the contractor world, then borrowed \$1,500 from his mother to buy a welding machine and paid her back right away.

He learned the hard way that running a business isn't about skills but managing people and dealing with customers.

As he hired employees, he found ones who shared his values.

Sam Walton's book, "Made in America," inspired him to invest in his employees, giving them the resources to be successful. That includes everything from tools, equipment and training to just support.

"We spend more time with our coworkers than we do our family," Vode said.

He said he tries to live a humble life.

"I don't like to toot my horn because I know I would be nothing without the people around me," he said.

"We're a reliability engineering company," Vode said. That means going to plants, identifying dysfunctions and inefficien-



ALLEN KENT

cies, and helping them manage assets — people, buildings and equipment.

"We're embedded in the manufacturing sector all over Chicagoland," Vode said. "There's hundreds of manufacturers in Northwest Indiana, and we need to take care of them."

He takes care of the community, too.

Vode coaches high school football and teaches data analytics and business intelligence at PNW.

"I've always done this under the radar, intentionally," he said.

Vode doesn't want to be head coach but wants to help people. Coaches and other people in his life were influential in who he is today.

"Everybody's got this greed-driven thing," he said, but you'll feel better if you go into it with a mindset of serving others.

Entrepreneurial Success: Allen Kent

Allen Kent wasn't planning to follow in his father's footsteps at Valparaiso-based Kent Heating & Air Conditioning. His children won't follow, either.

Kent recently completed the paperwork to sell the business to two of his upper-level managers.

"The company is going to be in very capable hands. They're not going to miss a beat," he said.

"It's still going to be family owned since 1954," just not by the Kent family.

Kent learned the value of hard work early.

"Growing up in it, Dad made us work. His thing was, you don't work, you don't eat." At age 6 or 7, Kent was cleaning



JEANNE ROBBINS

the office. In high school, he became an installation technician. That cut down on his social life.

"Sometimes when you grow up in that environment, you feel like you're getting cheated," he said. Later, he learned how important it was.

"I've always liked working for Dad. I've always had an interest in mechanical things," Kent said.

His father urged him to get a job in the real world to gain experience — varied experience, it turns out.

Kent worked for the wood preservative industry, producing products like utility poles and pressure-treated lumber. Then he became a financial planner.

In fall 1989, his father invited him to work as general manager of the HVAC firm. In 1991, Kent bought the company

on a 15-year buyout. “He didn’t sell cheap,” Kent said.

“We had a unique situation because he became my employee,” he said.

“When you buy a business from your dad, you’re also buying his employees,” Kent said. He had to build a team that shared his values.

“We’ve got a pretty tight group there, and they care. If you take a short cut, they’re going to call you out on it,” he said.

Along the way, Kent faced challenges, including balancing God, family and job.

“You have to have those things in order to succeed. Sometimes the job seems like it’s taken over family,” he said. “In the long run, your family is going to mean so much.”

Family-Owned Business: Jeanne Robbins

Jeanne Robbins’ grandfather started OCR Steel in 1957. It was incorporated as Munster Steel in 1958.

Munster Steel is now in Hammond. It was forced to move because of the overpass construction at Calumet Avenue and 45th Street.

“You can’t move a steel facility overnight,” Robbins said. It took 10 years to move, with six or seven years to find an appropriate site and three years to build the facility and move into it.

Munster Steel has been at the new location, where Columbia Avenue dead-ends at the Indiana Toll Road, almost 10 years. “It’s incredibly quiet. When I leave here, I see deer walking,” she said.

The facility is about 123,000 square feet.

“We are a structural steel fabricator, and we fabricate buildings and bridges,” Robbins said.

Want to see some of its work? Go to Chicago. “A lot of our steel is in those bridges.”

One example is the Wells Street bascule bridge, a lift bridge, with a train on top and vehicles below. More than 100 of those bridges are in Chicago. They’re protected and can’t be changed, she said, but they can be repaired. Munster Steel is repairing steel that was last replaced 50 years ago, Robbins said.

“The other great thing about steel is it’s recyclable,” almost 100%, Robbins said. That gives steel an edge over concrete, one of Munster Steel’s biggest competitors.



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E-DAY AWARDS

Robbins attributes the company's success to hard work and a team effort. "The staff here is exceptional. They work very hard and are committed to Munster Steel." The company strives to deliver quality products to customers while providing a safe and environmentally sound workplace, she said.

Robbins is in her 31st year at Munster Steel. "I'm hoping that I have at least 15 or 20 more years."

"I would always come visit my father, but to be perfectly honest, I never thought that I would work here," she said. Robbins earned a business degree but didn't study engineering. Her father, Ronald Robbins, taught her engineering after she became an employee.

"I just fell in love with the business."

In 1993, she started working as project manager and estimator. Two years later, she added purchasing duties; two years after that, she became vice president of procurement. In January 2002, she was promoted to president — the third Robbins generation to hold that title.



ANN COGLIANESE

Woman-Owned Business: Ann Coglianese

Ann Coglianese, founder and CEO of Highland-based Region ATA Academy, got into martial arts when her son Nathaniel was in first grade.

Now the 26-year-old is her business partner.

Nathaniel brought home from school a flier for martial arts classes at a Hammond church.

"As a mom, I was sitting there watching the entire time," Coglianese said. He

was a brown belt when she decided to start taking classes.

"It was quite intimidating at first," she said. "The physical part wasn't hard for me; it was the mental."

The more she learned martial arts, the smarter, more physical she became. She got to the level where she could teach. "That's when I truly understood what my goal in life was."

Coglianese found the American Taekwondo Association in 2013. That's what organized, structured martial arts are supposed to be, she said.

Students learn forms and techniques, the structure and true benefits of training with a licensed, patented form of martial arts.

The E-Day award wasn't expected. "We're just walking around doing what we do, and someone wants to praise you for your greatness."

That's not to say that awards and competitions are rare. "Nathaniel is five-times world champion," Coglianese said. "I've come in second in the world."



CORY ARMAND

"We're always competing in regional tournaments, and I think people are inspired by that," she said.

Coglianese enjoys working with children. "We want their children to be hyperactive. We want them to be running around and energetic."

The pandemic convinced her to open an e-learning center and a new location.

"We're going from 2,000 square feet to 7,800 square feet. It is our dream building," she said. The previous building on Spring Street was a warehouse with front offices and smelled awful.

"I'm looking into the back door now, and it is just magnificent," she said.

"We have a lot of families who are just out there working at gas stations, grocery stores, doctor's offices," Coglianese said, so she opened an e-learning center for families who have been in martial arts.

"It was a way that we could be of service in a way that we never imagined," Coglianese said.

Minority-Owned Business: Cory Armand

Cory Armand, CEO of Gary-based Armand Investment Group, got his start rehabbing houses for a real estate investor. Now he's doing his own investing.

His main source of income is rental properties, 90% of them in Gary. "We buy them, we fix them up, we rent them out," he said.

Most of the buildings need a lot of work, but that brings down the initial investment. Gary properties don't cost as much as those in surrounding cities, a big plus for investors just getting started.

"It gives people like me and other investors opportunities to buy up real estate and put them back on the tax rolls," he said.

His latest project is AIG Business Venture, a coworking space near 37th and Broadway for entrepreneurs who don't have their own brick-and-mortar location. Two tenants are there, including the King's Wings and Things restaurant in front.

Armand bought the 2,000-square-foot building for his own office and had so much left over he decided to share it. "And I utilize every inch of the building," he said.

The building includes a kitchenette and conference room. A mailbox system serves people who don't want to use a post office box or their home address for business purposes.

In addition to the tenants, another six entrepreneurs have memberships for access to the building's amenities.

Indiana University Northwest business school dean Cynthia Roberts nominated Armand, an alumnus. "I still go back to the university and speak and give presentations to the classes," he said.



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E-DAY AWARDS

Armand also gives back to the community through a male mentorship program for ages 7 to 18. The group meets Saturdays during summer.

"They work beside me and work behind my other guys," he said, learning construction trades, contracts and assessing properties.

Consistency, resilience and the ability to look past the blight and current condition of buildings and situations is key to his success, he said. "Not see what it is but see what it could become."

"Pursue your passion, and your money and success will truly follow," Armand added.

Colleagues in Elkhart and Marshall counties have expressed interest in creating similar pitch competitions.

"We're more than happy to share our template for doing this," Perren said.

Starke Tank is a free community event. Although no admission is charged, food pantry donations are encouraged. This year, 94 pounds of food and \$20 in cash were collected.

To keep spectators' interest, door prizes are distributed between pitches. That allows time for the next team to get set up.

Small businesses that can't afford a full sponsorship can contribute a door prize. Contestants also can contribute

Young Entrepreneur: Aylin Cornejo

Aylin Cornejo, founder of Whimsy Do's in Schererville, offers haircuts to kids in a fun setting.

Instead of sitting on a standard salon chair, children can ride in a Power Wheels car.

"I really just enjoy working with kids," she said, including children with special needs, sensory issues or just plain reluctance.

"We get a lot of screaming and crying kids, and the other kids just love it," she said.



LISA DAN, MARY PERREN



AYLIN CORNEJO



BRANDI SMITH

Business Advocates: Lisa Dan and Mary Perren

Lisa Dan and Mary Perren, winners of the Business Advocates award, are no strangers to competition. Together, they created the Starke Tank contest to nurture business growth.

Dan, executive director of Starke County Economic Development Foundation, and Perren, its executive assistant, created the competition four years ago.

Like the TV show "Shark Tank," the contestants on "Starke Tank" must pitch their product or service to a panel of judges. The best pitch wins.

Originally, the competition was limited to North Judson. But the contest required enough work to expand it countywide.

"It exploded. We had 10 contestants, more prize money than we ever had before," Perren said.

but that doesn't influence their chances of winning. It does, however, allow them a chance to promote their business.

Contestants have to enter well in advance, about two months or more, Dan said.

Among the requirements is a one-on-one talk with an ISBDC adviser. "Their services are free, and this is just a wonderful organization," Perren said.

"We want to attract good candidates, good businesses, to take part," she said.

Even if they lose the competition, contestants can emerge as winners. A pizza firm that was a runner-up is catering events because of the exposure from Starke Tank.

"It makes us proud to see all these businesses working together like that," Perren said. "It's just about promoting what we've got here and keeping it in the community."

"We could go on all day about how great this is for a community this size," she said.

"I just really like making people feel good about their look."

Cornejo saw a need for a kids salon in that part of Lake County.

Planning for Whimsy Do's began during the COVID-19 lockdown. Jim Hubbard, a volunteer with the Service Corps of Retired Executives, helped Cornejo with the planning.

The launch didn't take long, just three months. Cornejo funded it herself. "I've been saving since I was 15," she said.

The salon offers family-focused fun in a family-run business.

Special events help the salon, and its customers help the community. A monthlong food drive supported the local food bank. A fund drive aided a regular client diagnosed with a brain tumor at 3 years old.

"We just do things like that to help around the community," Cornejo said.

Emerging Business: Brandi and Jamaal Smith

Brandi and Jamaal Smith own and operate Merrillville-based All Pieces Fit, which works with kids and adults with autism and other special needs.

"We've taught children who were diagnosed as nonverbal to be able to speak and communicate their needs and wants," Clinical Director and CEO Brandi Smith said.

"Social skills are really a big deal," she said. "Communication is a huge deal. Some are verbal, some are nonverbal."

"We also work on problematic behavior" and how to attain appropriate behavior, Smith said.

Most services are done at the clinic, so the client can focus and learn. Being in the clinic removes distractions to focus on what's happening, why it's happening and how to fix it.

"It's kind of hard to have someone come into your home and tell you what to do and how to do it," Smith said.

She was in college when she saw a job posting for a group home, checked it out and enjoyed being with "the ones that people typically didn't want to be around."

"I fell in love immediately" with working with kids with autism, Smith said.

All Pieces Fit opened in 2017. Maintaining quality employees, especially during the pandemic, was a challenge, she said.

Smith has master's degrees in special education and business.

Connecting with the families is important to Smith.

"We put a lot of time and energy into our families, and we really do care about them," she said.

One joy is when families see changes in their children they never thought possible. Another is "seeing my therapists just as excited as I would be when they hit a breakthrough with a client."

Advocate for Youth Entrepreneurship: Krissy LaFlech

Munster High School's Krissy LaFlech isn't a typical teacher.

She was a district manager in Chicago when she left Starbucks after 13

years. She and her husband moved to Northwest Indiana, and she wanted to do something different.

Her best friend, a teacher in Lowell, said her school district was looking for a business teacher.

"It was completely off the radar, but it worked," LaFlech said. She got a workplace specialist license. Two years after she began teaching at Lowell, she was hit by a drunk driver

and couldn't make that 40-minute commute anymore.

LaFlech's teacher friend at Lowell was interviewing for a chemistry teacher job in Munster and asked if they had a position for a business teacher. LaFlech was hired.

When she became a teacher, LaFlech had to quickly figure out lesson plans.

As a new teacher, "I was about 15 minutes ahead of the students about to walk into my classroom," she said.

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"I have to flex a different muscle than other teachers who have an SAT as their final product," LaFlech said. "Their end goal is can we get a patent created?" They



KRISSY LAFLECH

must figure out how to get funding, whatever soapbox they need to get on to promote their product.

"I have to talk about my life experiences, so they have learning from that," she

said. Everything in class is trial-and-error, pivot from mistakes and failures. "That is driving our conversation more than anything else."

"I push my kids probably harder than they've ever been pushed," she said. "They get so excited on the first day of class when I tell them they have no tests. But the next day I tell them they have about 15 presentations to make to the class."

Her students have had success in the Innovate WithIN student pitch competition. The students develop a product or service, come up with a business plan and try to get funding to launch their business.

One team stands out for her.

"They're in the air freshener market. They've created scents that match people's cultures." Feeling homesick? The scent can take a person born elsewhere back to that time and place. The team is creating candles now to see what scents would be most popular.

Some businesses take off, including

"I am blown away by the winners here today. Northwest Indiana is lucky to have all of you."

— Linda Hough
CLH CPAs & Consultants

Munster High School students who are interviewing postsecondary graduate-level students for intern positions at their business, using startup money from a grant they won.

That kind of thinking is what makes the event and the E-Day awards program

so special. They are meant to inspire everyone as well as honor achievers.

"Part of the purpose of this, and you always have to think about it, is how we want to feel when we leave this event," Feldt said.

This year's class certainly brought that "uplifting feeling" to the awards ceremony, she said.

Feldt said the energy evident in the large, packed banquet room showed the value of hosting the annual event.

She wasn't the only one excited about this year's honorees.

"I am blown away by the winners here today," Hough said. "Northwest Indiana is lucky to have all of you." ■

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Jason Williams, assistant director of the Society of Innovators, gives opening remarks during the 19th annual induction luncheon Oct. 19 at Purdue Northwest's Westville campus.

Photos provided by the Society of Innovators

SPIRIT OF INGENUITY

SOCIETY OF INNOVATORS AT PNW HONORS IDEAS OF CREATIVE, DETERMINED 2023 INDUCTEES

KERRY SAPET

The 2023 inductees to the Society of Innovators are driving growth in Northwest Indiana through the power of innovation.

"This is a place that punches above its weight class," said Jason Williams, assistant director of The Society of Innovators. "We are changing the historical narrative about our Region. These awards shine a light on some of the folks in Northwest Indiana who are doing that."

The Society's annual awards recognize innovative individuals and teams across diverse industries and backgrounds. Business and community leaders gathered at a luncheon in October to honor the inductees and celebrate their achievements.

Gary Johnson, chairman of the board for the Society, reiterated that the event is the fulfillment of the Society's mission.

"The purpose (of the Society) is to expand economic development in

Northwest Indiana ... our constant since our founding," he said at the event.

Johnson also announced a five-year extension of the Society's memorandum of understanding with PNW. The organization has been affiliated with PNW since 2018.

The now nonprofit was founded in 2004 through the vision of John Davies, its founding executive director, as a program of Ivy Tech Community College.

Those who developed this year's innovations also earned their "wings."

Here we share the stories of this year's winners — how they took their ideas from concept to reality.

Stronger economy

Northwest Indiana features a lakeshore national park, sprawling cities and rich farmlands. Known for its higher education and health care institutions,

the Region boasts the second largest economy in Indiana.

In 2017, however, the Northwest Indiana Forum identified a worrisome problem. Like many areas across the country, the Region was at a crossroads. Northwest Indiana faced stagnant job growth, job creation primarily in lower-wage service sectors and communities mired in persistent poverty. Despite all it had to offer, the Region was losing population.

The Northwest Indiana Forum, an economic development organization in Portage, made its mission to overcome those obstacles.

"We want to create the most vibrant economy in the Midwest through innovation, inclusivity and talent," said Heather Ennis, president and CEO of the Forum.

With that goal in mind, they developed an initiative unlike any Northwest Indiana had seen before. They called it Ignite the Region: A Regional Strategy for Economic Transformation.





Ignite the Region is an economic development plan guided by five pillars: entrepreneurship and innovation, business development and marketing, infrastructure, placemaking and talent. The initiative brings together a coalition of partners from organizations and communities across the Region with the goal of revitalizing growth and building prosperity.

"Economic development is a team sport. It's of interest to all of us," Ennis said. "Previously we were working in cylinders of excellence — all doing great things but not all together. Now we're doing it in concert. We can go so much farther together than we could on our own."

The Northwest Indiana Forum sees change on the horizon as the Region moves beyond its traditional strengths for economic vitality.

"Someone asked the question 'which came first, the chicken or the egg?' Actually, the nest came first," Ennis said. "This plan is to craft the nest."

Community partnerships have laid groundwork for the initiative's success and enabled their transformative vision.

"This is a great honor. We are lucky to have great leadership across the Region as partners to help us do the work," Ennis said. "These leaders help to keep the flame of Ignite the Region alive. All these folks at the table

continue to work hard day in and day out to move the needle."

Ennis has been the champion of the movement, and she was rewarded for her efforts at the Ignite the Region luncheon Oct. 24. Gov. Eric Holcomb surprised her with a Sagamore of the Wabash award, which is one of the highest distinctions in the state.

Innovative painting

At times, Robert McShane felt like Sisyphus, a figure in Greek mythology sentenced to spend eternity rolling a boulder up a hill, only for it to roll back down as soon as he reached the top.

"I've had it roll back on me numerous times," said McShane, founder and CEO of PowderCoil Technologies LLC in Crown Point.

McShane and his team faced multiple challenges while trying to develop a better method for painting metal in the manufacturing process.

Since the 1940s, companies have used liquid paint on metal. Approximately 6 million tons of metal are coated in the U.S. every year. Every pound is coated using liquid paint.

Liquid paint technology poses problems though. After being painted, the metal is dried in an industrial oven, releasing a volatile organic compound. When that substance is burned off, it

emits about 2,500 pounds of carbon dioxide per hour into the atmosphere.

"Industrial companies have to report what is coming out of their stacks and how much," McShane said. "In some cases, companies have met their environmental limit. They can take all the orders in the world, but they can't make anymore. Powder paint is the answer because it emits zero."

The dilemma with powder paint was how to apply it.

"Think of putting flour onto a moving strip of metal," McShane said. "How do you put it on a piece of steel moving 100 feet per minute?"

McShane and his team eventually cracked the problem. By applying electrostatics to the powder paint, it becomes negatively charged. When the charged powder hits the surface of the metal, it sticks. The result is a uniform, scratch-resistant surface that doesn't get damaged when the metal is formed into a shape.

They called the innovative technology "PowderCoil." Their process saves time and money and is better for the environment.

"This is the future of pre-painted metals," McShane said. "It's the first of its kind on the planet."



NWI FORUM

"We want to create the most vibrant economy in the Midwest through innovation, inclusivity and talent."

— Heather Ennis



POWDERCOIL TECHNOLOGIES

"This is the future of pre-painted metals. It's the first of its kind on the planet."

— Robert McShane



COATES INC.

"Our main mission ... is to create a scaffolded approach to help young people successfully set goals beyond high school."

— Catisha Toney



HAMMOND GROUP

"It is important to celebrate our successes and ... to encourage one another even when we fail."

— Thomas Wojcinski



TRACKTABLE LIFESTYLE

"I woke up at 2 ... and had a vision of ... using the retractor belt. I looked all over the internet ... and it didn't exist."

— Alejandra Alaniz

SOCIETY OF INNOVATORS

For McShane and his team, seeing their idea come to fruition is a testament to their teamwork and dedication to innovation.

"For a time, there was more steel made in the heart of Northwest Indiana than any place in America. We like that we're in steel and aluminum because it's native to the neighborhood," McShane said. "Winning the award is just over the top."

Mobile student support

Indiana has the nation's highest student-to-counselor ratio — 694:1.

"Students in Northwest Indiana face significant challenges when it comes

families needing to seek out those services, the CCM can come to them.

The CCM provides high school transition planning, support for financial aid applications, college admissions assistance, and academic and career counseling for learners of all ages. Even adults looking to go back to school or to change career paths can use the service. Through the innovative CCM initiative, Coates hopes to help students achieve their goals and understand the different paths that can lead to success, whether through college or career.

"Because we are able to pull up to any location, we are able to impact multiple

something that no one else is doing," Toney said.

Better batteries

The first known battery, the Parthian Battery, is believed to be more than 2,000 years old. It involved a clay jar, vinegar, iron and copper. People have been improving batteries ever since.

In 1859, a French physicist invented the lead acid battery, the first rechargeable battery. When lead is submerged into sulfuric acid, the resulting chemical reaction produces electricity. The reaction is reversed to recharge the battery.

People want powerful, long-lasting batteries that can be recharged numerous times. They also want batteries that don't drain when devices are turned off but plugged in still.

The race has been on to build a better battery for years, spurred on by demand for renewable energy and electric automobiles. Hammond Group, in Hammond, is a chemical company in the battery and energy storage industry. They have developed an innovative electrode additive that improves reactions within the lead acid battery chemistry.

"Idle load electricity consumption wastes over 150 billion kilowatt hours of electricity each year at a cost of over \$19 billion," said Thomas Wojcinski, senior chemist at the Hammond Group. "These inefficiencies cause over 100 million metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions annually. Due to this waste, and the increased demand for rapid charging in energy storage systems, batteries are under constant need to improve their ability to accept charge quickly and more efficiently."

Dubbed Treated SureCure, Hammond Group's additive is the first of its kind, enhancing the life and performance of lead acid batteries with little increase in battery production cost and, in some cases, savings.

"This new additive product provides the potential to greatly improve partial state of charge battery performance, reduce energy consumption during the battery manufacturing process and help produce better energy storage solutions for the battery manufacturer, the consumer, our country and the world," Wojcinski said.



Photo provided by Tracktable Lifestyle

The Tracktable Lifestyle Retractor Box and Belt are designed to allow people to have easy access to their phones, while preventing possible loss and damage.

to determining solid post-high school career options due to high student-to-counselor ratios, limited college and career supports, and the effects of COVID-19 learning loss," said Catisha Toney, founder and executive director of Coates Inc. in Merrillville.

Toney's organization sees the gaps in educational equity for under served communities and aims to bridge them. Lake County, their core service area, has four cities with some of the highest poverty rates in Indiana. Technology barriers and 9-to-5 work schedules make it difficult for students and families in these communities to receive college and career readiness support.

To address the issue, Coates created the College and Career Mobile (CCM) — a resource center on wheels. It's the only mobile college and career office in Indiana. Instead of students and

students, school districts and communities in a way that a stationary location cannot," Toney said. "Our impact is high, and we are growing our partnerships daily. Our main mission through the CCM is to create a scaffolded approach to help young people successfully set goals beyond high school."

Through the CCM, students and families can receive support no matter the time of day or location. The CCM has Wi-Fi and laptops, eliminating the technology barrier that some experience when they are out of school or without consistent technology resources.

"We are introducing a new way to bring college and career to the community," Toney said. "We are literally meeting students where they are, and we are making a direct impact on how they plan for their futures."

Being recognized by the Society of Innovators "means that we are doing

Treated SureCure products are in production at Hammond Group's new manufacturing facility.

"It is very gratifying to see an idea take shape, be tested and become successful. This is even more true when that success is recognized by others," Wojcinski said. "We as innovators face many setbacks, which is why it is important to celebrate our successes and the success of others and to encourage one another even when we fail. All innovators are working toward the same goal, a better way to do things."

Imaginative solutions

About 1.5 mobile phones are broken, lost or stolen every second, according to an AT&T survey. People drop them, dive into pools with them and leave them at restaurants. They can even become a dog's expensive chew toy. Then comes the inevitable hassle and frustration of recovering lost phone numbers, messages and apps.

According to Forbes, 77% of people have lost or broken a cellphone in the last 10 years. Alejandra Alaniz's invention provides a solution to the problem: a belt with a retractable tether that keeps phones and important personal

possessions securely within reach.

Alaniz, owner of Tracktable Lifestyle in Valparaiso, invented the product of her dreams.

"I woke up at 2 in the morning and had a vision of myself using the retractor belt," Alaniz said. "I looked all over the internet to buy the product that I dreamed of, and it didn't exist."

Alaniz told her husband what she saw in her dream, and he made her a prototype. A few days later they met with a patent attorney. Soon after, they had determined there was a good reason Alaniz hadn't been able to find the product she'd envisioned — there was nothing like it on the market. Alaniz met with a retractor company to test different retractor strengths and materials before finalizing the product.

Alaniz's innovative product features an adjustable spandex belt with a retractor box. The box holds a retractable leash that can be attached to a phone case. It also features a

"We are changing the historical narrative about our Region. These awards shine a light on some of the folks in Northwest Indiana who are doing that."

— Jason Williams, Society of Innovators



waterproof pouch that holds an ID card, a credit card, cash and keys. The Tracktable Lifestyle Retractor Box and Belt are designed to allow people to have easy access to their phones, while preventing possible loss and damage.

"Our products give our customers peace of mind," Alaniz said. "It saves them time and gives them accessibility and functionality. When our customers start using our products, they become more productive because they no longer have to worry about misplacing or losing their smartphones."

Alaniz is an individual inductee. Her story is quite literally a dream come true.

"It's a great honor and a blessing to be inducted to the Society of Innovators," she said. ■



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MORE THAN > NUMBERS

EXPERTS WORK TO DIVERSIFY INDUSTRY,
CHANGE STEREOTYPES ABOUT CPAs



CHAS REILLY

Ask any certified public accountant. They've likely heard all the misconceptions about their profession.

The job is boring.

It only involves math.

They only work in a back room with an adding machine.

Hollywood doesn't help much either. Movies like the "The Royal Tenenbaums" and "Ghostbusters" portray accountants as either geeks or anti-social.

But those stereotypes couldn't be further from the truth.

Courtney Kincaid, president and CEO of the Indiana CPA Society, said CPAs know the language of business, which is why they're associated with all businesses.

"And they're doing really sophisticated things like cyber security and some of these more sexy titles that are coming into the business schools, like how artificial intelligence is playing a role in the profession, what they're doing for data analytics and really positioning CPAs as trusted business advisers more so than simply a compliance function, which is certainly what the stereotype fits," Kincaid said.

Kylee Frazee Norman, a partner at CLH, CPAs & Consultants, said she's heard many call CPAs "nerds."

"We're actually a lot of fun," Frazee Norman said.

Gretchen Kalk-Castro, another partner at CLH, CPAs & Consultants, said unlike the stereotypes, CPAs don't spend all their time doing math.

"I think they don't realize how much we interact with clients," Kalk-Castro said.

When it's not tax-crunch season, most of their time is devoted to emailing, calling or meeting directly with clients.



"We help businesses from start to end, and we do a lot of consulting with that and helping them out with transitions, so it's a lot more than just crunching numbers," Kalk-Castro said.

Busting stereotypes

Part of the mission at INCPAS is "to promote a better understanding of services rendered by CPAs."

INCPAS does that in a variety of ways, including when working to attract professionals to careers as CPAs. Those efforts involve meeting with high school and college students about accounting and the many opportunities the profession provides.

"Overcoming this misperception and stereotype is our No. 1 goal," Kincaid said. "We spend a lot of time trying to dispel what CPAs do."

Two of the biggest things that resonate with students are the ability to be an entrepreneur and an increased focus on giving back to the community through their work.

"CPAs are community builders, whether that is assisting a small business or working in a nonprofit," Kincaid said. "We have tons of CPAs who do really meaningful work in nonprofits. It's one of our largest areas of corporate finance that our members work in."

Fraze Norman said she works with many small businesses at CLH, and she enjoys the opportunity to help them grow and thrive.

"We can make an impact not only on the business but also on the individual who owns the business," she said. "And you actually grow to care about you clients."

Many times, CPAs are helping small businesses as they transition ownership from a parent to their children. Being a part of that experience is rewarding for CPAs.

"To see them succeed, it's really nice," Fraze Norman said.

Building relationships

Kincaid said being a CPA is much more than a job for many. They get satisfaction from helping clients achieve their goals. She said CPAs are relationship builders, and they serve in an advisory role.

Building that relationship is instrumental because a lot of work CPAs are doing involves complicated information that can be confusing to the average person.

"There's a great relationship built in trust that this person has their best interest at heart," Kincaid said.

She said those relationships are key as artificial intelligence becomes more prevalent across the world. There's often speculation that AI could replace jobs, and that's no different in the CPA industry.

"Some of the functions that a CPA does will be automated or made a lot easier or commoditized through artificial intelligence, but what we're really trying to tell people, and we really believe, is that you can't replace relationships with AI," Kincaid said. "And so, it's that interpretation, that analysis, those critical thinking skills that allow you to build trust and a true relationship."

With an abundance of accounting job openings, building those relationships is still key to success.

"There are tons of availability, I think that's probably true with a lot of learned professions right now," Kincaid said. Accounting is "one

of the few professions that's truly recession proof because what they do is always needed."

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, job openings in the industry will grow by 6% between 2021

and 2031 — that's about 136,000 job openings a year.

A survey launched by INCPAS showed some students considered becoming a CPA because they realized that in times

of uncertainty, the relationship between the CPA and client is even more necessary, and there's always compliance work that must be completed. That compliance work has grown more than ever with federal regulations that stem from COVID relief.

"It's a new world in how we operate," Kincaid said.

Kalk-Castro agrees there are many employment opportunities for CPAs.

"We're looking all the time," she said.

CLH has many internships that often lead to building their staff.



"(Accountants are) actually a lot of fun."

— Kylee Fraze Norman,
CLH, CPAs & Consultants

Diversifying workforce

As many accounting firms are looking for employees, there's a push to ensure opportunities for women and minorities.

Fraze Norman said accounting was once a male-dominated field.

"I have seen a shift," she said.

Kalk-Castro said she recently attended an accountant conference in Indianapolis. She noticed half the participants were women.

"Which was good to see," she said.

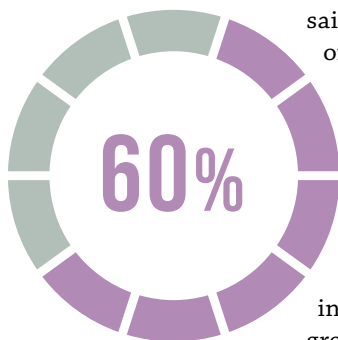
That observation is in line with national statistics. According to Statista, women make up almost 60% of accountants and auditors in the U.S. as of 2022.

Fraze Norman and Kalk-Castro, who recently became the newest partners at CLH, pointed out that women have always been welcomed and empowered at CLH. It's one of the reasons that attracted them to the company.

"It was nice to see the women in leadership here," Fraze Norman said. "Women are in leadership roles throughout the company."

As women become more involved in the CPA world, Kalk-Castro said she hasn't noticed as many minorities turning toward careers in accounting.

↑ WOMEN IN ACCOUNTING
According to Statista, women make up almost 60% of accountants and auditors in the U.S. as of 2022.



ACCOUNTING

According to the Journal of Accountancy, only 2% of accountants are Black.

Groups like the Center for Audit Quality are working to change that.

Last year, the CAQ launched an initiative focusing on diversity, equity and inclusion efforts. Among the goals is increasing a diverse talent pipeline in accounting.

“The audit profession has been focused on (diversity, equity and inclusion) for many years, yet there clearly remains room for more growth, specifically with diverse talent entering the profession, and with retention and advancement of people of all races, ethnicities and backgrounds,” said Julie Bell Lindsay, CEO

at the CAQ, in a statement when the initiative launched. “Our Bold Ambition

other professions. That process includes an experience requirement, education requirement and a four-part examination.

“We’ve been dedicated at the society for the last several years of making sure that those different checkpoints are appropriate, that they’re not overly burdensome and they’re not burdensome for certain demographics,” Kincaid said. “As the population of Indiana changes, we want to make sure that we are responsive to that as well.”

She said there are three rule changes in play for a CPA license.

Last year, Indiana became a “120 to sit state.” Kincaid said the average undergraduate degree requires 120 hours of college education, but to obtain a CPA license, a person must have 150 hours of education.

“There’s an additional 30 hours there,” she said.

Following legislation and a rule change, people can begin sitting for their four-part exam as soon as they earn 120 hours of college education. Although they can begin the exam process, they

17%

The percent decline in new candidates for the CPA exam, according to the latest American Institute of CPA Trends report

The CAQ sets out to do that with its Accounting+ campaign. That multi-year program involves engaging with high school and college students. They will learn about opportunities available in the CPA profession, including entrepreneurship and helping to shape communities.

The CAQ also has a “Bold Ambition” website — www.boldambition.org — which sets out to increase transparency involving efforts to build diversity, equity and inclusion in the CPA profession. It also features examples of work done by CPA professionals.

is to advance equity and opportunity within the profession, which will help us better live up to our public mission and, ultimately, improve audit quality.”

Changing laws

While efforts continue to attract more women and minorities to accounting, the INCPAS is working to ensure the process to become a CPA isn’t too excessive.

Kincaid said people must accomplish several tasks to become a CPA, and it can be more than what’s needed for



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won't be eligible for licensure until they reach 150 hours of education.

Kincaid said legislation has passed for two other changes, but they are still going through the rule-making process.

One of them involves the experience requirement associated with the CPA license. Kincaid said most states mandate one year of experience to become licensed, but Indiana requires two years.

"We're aligning with the rest of the country and changing that to one year of experience," Kincaid said. "So, we did officially get that legislation passed in the 2023 session, and now we're just promulgating the rule around that."

The other change involves the four-part exam and how long people have to pass each part.

In Indiana, people must pass all four sections within an 18-month window. If a person passes one or more sections but doesn't pass all of them in those 18 months, the person loses credit for the passed sections, and the exam has to start over.

Kincaid said most states follow the uniform accountancy act, which

CPAs are community builders, whether that is assisting a small business or working in a nonprofit. We have tons of CPAs who do really meaningful work in nonprofits. It's one of our largest areas of corporate finance that our members work in."

— Courtney Kincaid, Indiana CPA Society



was amended to a 30-month window. Indiana and a couple other states are pursuing 36 months, she said.

Kincaid said INCPAS is focused on ensuring the rules and regulations in place make sense and aren't unnecessarily burdensome for CPA candidates.

"We kind of have those three rules that we feel change some of those benchmarks but don't change the quality of candidates in the end," Kincaid said.

She and other experts hope the changes will help the downward trend in the number of accountants. The industry peaked in 2019 but dropped by 17% by 2021, according to Financial Executives International.

Plus, the latest American Institute of CPA Trends report showed a 2.8% decrease in accounting graduates with bachelor's degrees, an 8.4% decline in master's degrees and a 17% decline in new candidates for the CPA exam.

The Center for Accounting Transformation is working to find out exactly why that trend continues.

"We are at a challenging juncture in the accounting profession," said Kiera Speed, a project manager at the organization, in a statement.

"And our latest research seeks to provide answers to the staffing needs of accounting firms, businesses and organizations." ■

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LEGACY OF DAUGHTERS

REGION WOMEN LEAD THEIR FAMILIES' BUSINESSES



Lynn Eplawy took over as president of Gary Jet Center 10 years ago. Her father, Wil Davis, is still chairman.

Photo provided by Gary Jet Center

PATRICIA SZPEKOWSKI

Twenty years ago, Lynn Eplawy, now president of Gary Jet Center, was living in Chicago. She had a finance degree and was happy working for a graphic design firm.

"Then one day as I was reflecting, I just asked myself what I wanted to do with my career," Eplawy said.

She counseled with her father, Wil Davis, a former U.S. Navy pilot captain and president of Gary Jet Center, an independently owned and operated aviation firm.

"Since I was unsure of what I wanted to do next, he asked me to come and work here with him at Gary Jet Center and stay for a year," she said.

Eplawy did stay and learned the business from the inside out.

"I did a number of administrative duties and did whatever was necessary over the years from payroll, shipping, receiving, filing and more," Eplawy said. "It was wonderful to do what needed to be done while learning all about the business without any pressure."

Then, 10 years ago, she took over as president while her father remains chairman of Gary Jet Center.

Eplawy's story is an example of the changing face of business throughout Northwest Indiana. Company leaders are passing on their legacies, more and more, to their daughters in traditionally male-dominated industries.

Jeanne Robbins, of Munster Steel Co., has a similar story, but when she approached her father, she sent her resume for an open position.

"Thankfully, he decided to offer me the position," she said.

She had just finished her undergraduate degree in business when she started working at the company, which fabricates structural steel for buildings and bridges.

"So, in January 1993, I found myself working for the family business, as the third generation, while attending

↑10%

The percentage of women this year who are CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, according to Forbes.

Indiana University Northwest to complete my Master of Business Administration degree,” she said.

Family-owned businesses, such as Gary Jet Center and Munster Steel, are the heartbeat of commerce in the U.S. They make up nearly 90 percent of business enterprises in the U.S. and about two-thirds of employment, according to America’s Entrepreneurs, a Next Avenue initiative.

Their influence, value and impact on the economy and society are significant, including who they choose to lead their futures. For the first time, according to Forbes, 10% of Fortune 500 CEOs are women this year — a significant milestone. That statistic can only lead to opportunities for women in the Region.

“Having a strong female role model is incredibly important,” Robbins said. “They inspire women to be more ambitious and aim higher — because they see it is possible.”

The Northwest Indiana business community is replete with thriving family enterprises. Several of them have successfully made the transition to daughters who embrace the challenges of their fathers with the same energy and dedication.

That’s exactly what happened when Robbins’ dad started his succession process in 2002.

“When my dad decided that he wanted to start easing his way into retirement, I was promoted to president, while he stayed on as president emeritus, so he could continue to share his 43 years of knowledge and experience,” Robbins said. “It allowed me to take on the new responsibilities while still having his support and guidance.”

Times are changing

Like Eplawy and Robbins, Megan Applegate of Applegate & Company CPAs in Michigan City and Leah Konrady of Konrady Plastics Inc. in Portage are leading their long-standing family businesses.

Applegate & Company CPAs offers a variety of public accounting services,

including business tax compliance, audit and attestation, and consulting. It was founded in 1984 by Megan’s father, Paul Applegate.

“He worked alongside his father, John Applegate CPA and grew the business,” Megan said, “and in 2014, my brother Blake and I joined the firm. It feels like I’ve been working at the firm my entire life. When I came back here after my time at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I was thrilled to be back in the community where I was raised, and I started the process of gaining as much knowledge as I could from my dad.”



Photo provided by Konrady Plastics Inc.

Leah Konrady, CEO of Konrady Plastics Inc., runs the family business with brother Paul (left), who is president and COO. Konrady Plastics was founded in 1981 by their father Bernie Konrady (center).

Applegate notes that until she and Blake decided to come back, there was no formal succession plan in place.

“However, my dad always had in the back of his mind that we’d eventually come back to work alongside him,” she said.

Konrady, CEO of Konrady Plastics Inc., took an entirely different path in her career before she came to the family business in January 2020.

“We were undergoing a leadership transition,” she said. “I stepped back into the family business and stayed.”

Her professional experience includes working in the public policy

sector in Washington, D.C., and at a private engineering firm in

California. Before Konrady Plastics, she served as president and CEO of One Region, a network of executive leaders focused on attracting new talent, ideas and change for regional development in Northwest Indiana.

Konrady Plastics was founded in 1981 in Gary as a plastics distributor by Bernie Konrady. Through his tireless efforts with his wife, Sue, the company successfully grew and moved to a more strategic location in Portage. Today the company is one of the leading plastic machine companies in the U.S.

In addition to distribution services, the company offers comprehensive plas-





Photo by Joel Alderson

(From left) Patricia Martin, senior vice president of Munster Steel Co.; Allison Demeter, shipping/safety manager; and Jeanne Robbins, president, are part of a growing trend that shows women taking on leadership roles at industrial companies. Demeter is Robbins' daughter.

"He handles our business development, sales and client relationships, while I focus on the day-to-day responsibilities, such as financials and employees and overseeing our sales and marketing efforts," Leah said.

Eplawy, Robbins, Applegate and Konrady moved into their roles as part of natural attrition and commitment without a formal family business succession plan. They were eager to get involved, and their stories show

how families can succeed when they work together.

"If you put in the hard work and believe in yourself, it is extremely rewarding and an honor to continue growing your family's business," Robbins said.

Advance preparation

But not all family-owned businesses have a clear-cut vision for smooth transitions. Experts, such as Gregory Ward of Swartz Retson & Co. in

Merrillville, highly recommend formalizing a family business succession plan.

"Start a dialogue early with the individuals you are considering to be future leaders," Ward said. "This will help you find out if their goals are aligned with your succession planning goals."

He said many business owners wait too long to come up with a plan.

"We see a lot of business owners ... (who) are sometimes surprised when there is no one interested in taking over the business," Ward said. "Starting the process of succession planning before you are ready to retire doesn't mean you are going to get pushed out the door sooner than you would like. It just gives you more time to see who is interested in the business and to identify the best potential candidates to fill leadership roles."

He said preparing in advance also allows for a smoother transition.

"It also provides more time to properly transition customer relationships to the next leaders," Ward said. "Since a lot of buyouts are priced based on customer retention, it can help you get the best return on your investment."

Succession planning ensures less drama and provides strategies for the transfer of the business to the next and future generations.

"As an entire family, we are very transparent with each other about our business," Konrady said. "I am very fortunate and grateful to have a loving and trusting relationship with my family. We have fun working together."

Looking ahead

The North American Family Business Report 2023," issued by Brightstar Capital Partners and Camden Wealth, highlighted the many opportunities and challenges of family businesses today. The report surveyed 100 family-owned businesses and noted that 61% do not have a written, formal succession plan.

The report also emphasized that family businesses can adapt to and evolve with innovation, including the addition of artificial intelligence — 84% of respondents declared that their family businesses are embracing new technology.

Eplawy, Robbins, Konrady and Applegate have their eyes set on the

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future, continued growth of their businesses and how to take advantage of new opportunities.

Konrady is looking at the growing demand of her industry, future technology transformation and the machines available to help them become more efficient.

Eplawy foresees many possibilities for future business operations such as aviation space, more hangars and aircraft, maintenance opportunities and sustainable aviation fuel.

"There are also changes with the new hybrid-electric vertical takeoff and landing vehicles that have the power to transform our industry."

Her facility provides comprehensive services that can accommodate any size of aircraft for all Chicago-metro traffic.

In 2017, Gary Jet Center opened a new Corporate Flight Center. The 8,300-square-foot building features seating for over 45 people and a glass-walled lobby that overlooks a 9,000-foot runway.

"Our entire facility is coupled with an exceptional customer-focused experience that ensures the absolute best private aviation experience in the entire Chicagoland area, right here at the Gary Jet Center," Eplawy said.

Robbins' company also expanded. In 2014, Munster Steel moved to a new, state-of-the-art facility in Hammond.

Applegate noted the importance of continuing to grow her family's firm with the help of their team by providing exceptional services to clients.

"On a long-term basis, our goal is to continue to develop our tax and audit and accounting department within the firm," she said.

It is apparent that the strong family and business core values embodied by these Region family businesses have been deeply embedded.

"I was raised believing that you should always work hard and do the best job you are capable of," Robbins said.

She also credits her mother with instilling confidence in her.

"I was blessed to be raised by an incredibly independent woman, who always reminded me I could do anything I set my mind to," Robbins said. ■

"It feels like I've been working at the firm my entire life. When I came back here after my time at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I was thrilled to be back in the community where I was raised, and I started the process of gaining as much knowledge as I could from my dad."

— Megan Applegate, Applegate & Company CPAs



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Business and community leaders have big plans for Gary as they consider a vision for the future that includes a more vibrant downtown.

VISION FOR STEEL CITY

ACADEMICS, ADVOCATES, PUBLIC OFFICIALS REIMAGINE WHAT'S POSSIBLE FOR GARY

BILL DOLAN

Gary is a long way from being one of those charming Midwest burbs social media gushes about — but supporters can't help imagining it will be someday.

"I believe in the Gary of the future," said Vanessa Allen-McCloud, president of the Urban League of Northwest Indiana and a longtime city resident.

"It will have nice beaches, a marina full of boats, an airport with lots of passenger and cargo air traffic, new apartments for young professionals and crowds arriving for a local festival, as well as downtown shops and restaurants," she said.

Micah Pollak, associate professor of economics at IU Northwest, said that dream is not out of reach. "Of all the cities in Northwest Indiana, Gary has

the most potential for positive change," he said. "The list of what Gary has to offer is just staggering.

"We are close to Chicago, and major interstates and railroads converge on Gary. We are on Lake Michigan where you have Port of Indiana-Burns Harbor and the Indiana Dunes National Park."

He is sure these positives will lead to better opportunities.

\$70,600

Median value of owner-occupied housing units, July 2017-2021

\$34,085

Estimated median household income, 2017-2021



Photo by Matt Gush

“Many rural communities of the Midwest would greatly enjoy these kinds of amenities,” he said.

Upcoming enhancements

Pollak said local government leaders now need to make hundreds of millions of dollars in public development initiatives work.

Those projects include:

- South Shore Line expansion, a second set of tracks permitting eastbound and westbound passenger trains to pass each other and shorten commuting time.
- Transportation Development Districts, rebuilding the Gary Metro and Miller South Shore stations to prime commercial development around them.

- Fiber Smart House, repurposing the historic Union Station on Broadway into a state-of-the-art training hub for a technology workforce.
- Gary/Chicago International Airport expansion, extending runways and building infrastructure to attract new cargo-related businesses.
- Tolleston Opportunity Campus, a hub featuring affordable childcare, quality-of-life programming, urban gardens, physical therapy, urgent care services and job training.

“As soon as Midwest investors recognize that potential, you will create a critical mass,” Pollak said.

Galvanizing the community will be another catalyst.

Diana Morrow, director of the Gary Public Library and Cultural Center, also is hopeful about Gary’s future. She believes her system will eventually consolidate to a single building — the cultural center of the downtown renewal district near bus and South Shore routes.

Groups like Brown Skin and IronWorkz Corp. are creating opportunities to bridge the gap between equitable development and community investment.

IronWorkz, a nonprofit run by three young Hoosiers who grew up in and around Gary, wants to boost the city’s economy by offering networking space for Gary residents starting out on their entrepreneurial journeys.

The Steel Studio Foundation has plans for turning 10,000 square feet of the historic Gary State Bank building into a creative incubator downtown.

In August, officials announced the development of an \$8 million Fiber

Smart House that will open in fall 2024. The iconic Gary Union Station will house the 10,000-square-foot state-of-the-art technology workforce and educational training hub.

“Our city has a proud history and a bright future, and this development is as symbolic as it is significant,” said Mayor Jerome Prince in a press release. “Choosing the iconic Gary Union Station as the home for this project is emblematic of where we have been and our vision for where we will go next.”

Projects and organizations like these, Prince said, will level the playing field for Gary.

Boom town interrupted

Rising from little-used swamp and sand barrens a century ago, Gary became a Midwest workshop with construction of the world’s largest integrated steel mill. It became home to immigrants from

50 nationalities and African Americans from the South.

Gary peaked at 178,000 residents six decades ago. Since then, industrial automation that eliminated blue-collar jobs, racial tensions and disinvestment by private business have pushed most of its population elsewhere, leaving behind a city of fewer than 69,000.

U.S. Steel’s Gary Works still employs more than 4,300 people. Dan Killeen, its vice president, said recently that, “U. S. Steel has made significant investments in its facilities at Gary Works, and in the local community, to ensure that we remain part of the fabric of Gary.”

Gary’s Indiana University Northwest campus, RailCats baseball stadium, Marquette Park Pavilion and ArtHouse:

A Social Kitchen stand in sharp contrast to abandoned schools, derelict houses, and vacant and collapsing storefronts.



“Choosing the iconic Gary Union Station as the home for (the Fiber Smart House) is emblematic of where we have been and our vision for where we will go next.”

— Mayor Jerome Prince



Rendering provided by the Regional Development Authority

The Regional Development Authority has a vision for Gary's future Transportation Development District around the South Shore Line Metro Center station.

But Joslyn Kelly, who was born and raised in Gary, saw the lack of businesses as an opportunity. Instead of complaining about not having restaurants that serve quality, balanced meals, she opened one.

"We embarked upon a mission," she said, opening a small carryout restaurant that has grown into J's Breakfast Club at Interstate 94 and Broadway.

"A lot of people focus on Gary's poverty level, which is less than 30 percent," she said. "That gives 70 percent with enough disposable income to meet the needs of businesses."

Gary's next mayor

Gary residents have shown their impatience for a better future at the voting booths, having replaced two incumbent mayors in the last four years.

State Sen. Eddie Melton will take over the reins of City Hall this January, upsetting Mayor Prince with a campaign promising bold changes.

"We have to make sure every neighborhood has access to quality parks," Melton said.

He will strive to give city police and fire departments up-to-date equipment and technology as well as work with local vocational schools to recruit new public safety workers.

"The Gary/Chicago International Airport is primed for success," he said. "I've already spoken with Chicago Mayor

Brandon Johnson, and we hope to work together to get the best impact with the (airport) compact we have with them."

He also would like to develop Gary's Buffington Harbor on Lake Michigan for warehousing, distribution and logistics centers.

He is lobbying the state to build a convention center on Interstate 80/94.

"There is no reason we shouldn't be able to attract more revenue around the Hard Rock Casino," he said. The casino is the state's most popular, according to reports from the Indiana Gaming Commission.

Melton said he also has been working closely with the Regional Development Authority to develop downtown in conjunction with the Transportation Development District around the South Shore's Metro Center.

"We have robust plans to grow the downtown's population," Melton said.

Infrastructure plans

Sherri Ziller, president and CEO of the Regional Development Authority, said Gary will "definitely benefit" from the \$649 million double-track project.

The 16.9 miles of a second track along the South Shore Line between Gary and Michigan City is projected to bring \$2.5 billion in development to the Region.

The first phase between Michigan City and Dune Park station was completed in October. Trains should start running along Gary's section in May 2024.

Ziller said the project also will help create 6,000 more jobs in the next 20 years.

"We are pivoting to Chicago, to enable Northwest Indiana to claim our rightful place as a suburb of Chicagoland — giving access to permanent higher-paying jobs in Chicago and make Northwest Indiana a good place to raise a family and do business," she said.

The project also makes room for a new Miller Station with more than 500 parking spaces.

U.S. Rep. Frank Mrvan said the federal subsidy to double track the South Shore Line "will cut the travel time to one of the largest economies in the Midwest."

Estimated travel times from Miller Station to Chicago should decrease to less than an hour during peak times.

Mrvan also pointed out that funds

have been earmarked to lay quantum computer fiber through Gary to form a Computing Super Highway. It will offer affordable high-speed internet to connect city households with school eLearning and commercial connectivity for businesses.

"This puts the city on track to tell the world Gary is open for business," he said.

The airport is ready too. "We've worked with the airport to bring \$8 million in the last three years that will extend the (runways') heavy air cargo apron," Mrvan said.

The return of the air show this summer also pointed to good things to come. Airport officials said the 2015 runway extension and other infrastructure investments were on display for all to see.

The airport also served as a staging area for the 2023 Chicago Air and Water Show.



"We have robust plans to grow the downtown's population."

— State Sen. Eddie Melton, next Gary mayor

“This is just one example of how the airport continues to support various Chicagoland area events, servicing an incredibly important cog in Chicago’s air traffic system as Chicago’s third official airport,” said Executive Director Dan Vicari in a press release.

Green regeneration

The city also hosted the Climate Leadership Summit in September at IUN. The statewide conference brought together mayors, city, town and county leaders, and community partners to discuss climate change. It was a big win for the city.

Gary has another environmental advantage, according to Joseph Schilling, a senior research associate for the Washington, D.C.-based Urban Institute. He said a “green regeneration” is needed across the country to help buffer cities from climate change. Gary has large tracts of trees on land once platted for now phantom subdivisions.

“All its vacant spaces give it, in some way, a leg up compared to other cities



Provided by South Shore Line

As of Nov. 17, the new Miller station building in Gary was still under construction but was expected to be completed late in 2023, according to the latest double-track update.

to have a more sustainable future,” Schilling said.

Mrvan also pointed to the Environmental Protection Agency’s commitment to restore the Grand Calumet River and Lake Michigan after

decades of industrial pollution. However, Schilling cautioned that the city should not repeat the errors of the past.

“Green regeneration must be done with equity,” he said. “Gary once had segregated neighborhoods and a legacy

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Photo provided by South Shore Convention and Visitors Authority

Last summer, the Gary/Chicago International Airport served as a staging area for the 2023 Chicago Air and Water Show. The airport has been a partner to the show since 1999.

of environmental injustice. It will be important to make sure all neighborhoods benefit.”

Prince, who spent most of his life in Gary and plans to stay, said he understands concerns about how gentrification could disadvantage current residents. But he also is realistic about what it will take to rebuild Gary.

“It is going to take a significant investment from folks outside the city,” he said.

That kind of investment also will require Gary’s crime rate to continue falling. It has significantly decreased from a recent high in 2013. According to City-Data.com, the crime rate in Gary also fell by 14% from 2019 to 2020.

The Gary Police Department credits its automated license plate readers program with helping in 375 investigations during its two years of implementation.

“The Gary Police Department has taken significant strides through procurements of technology, and the advancements that have occurred are nothing short of amazing,” according to a recent announcement.

Schools on the brink

The Gary Community School Corp.’s viability plummeted in recent decades with the rise of private charter schools. The public school district’s enrollment

declined from over 40,000 students in the 1960s to 4,770 today, according to U.S. News and World Report.

“We also have to address our schools,” Prince said. “They are making some strides now, but academically we continue to suffer. You just can’t dismiss that.”

State officials took over the school district six years ago to impose fiscal responsibility after it ran multi-million-dollar budget deficits. Conditions have improved enough to transition back to local school control.

Danita Johnson, president and CEO of Gary’s Edgewater Health, is one of five new appointed school board members who took office in July.

“I hope we can create an environment to provide our students with improved reading skills and relevant curriculum that address new opportunities and create a new wave for our community,” she said. “That is how we are going to grow.”

Shontrai Irving, a clinical associate professor of business law at Purdue University Northwest, is another new Gary school board member.

“There are a lot of people pulling for our city,” he said. “We just need to come together and focus on what we can do now to make a difference.”

But, he said, implementing the plan will take a little faith.

“Our political leaders, residents and children need to buy into it,” he said. “Local government has to ask the community how they can be a part of it and decide what the priorities are.”



VANESSA ALLEN-MCCLOUD

URBAN LEAGUE OF NWI
Gary will fulfill its destiny as a destination for work and play.



MARK SPERLING

IUN SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
Gary schools are on the right track to improve academics and build curriculum.



SHONTRAI IRVING

BUSINESS LAW AT PNW
Community stakeholders need to come together to make a difference in Gary.



JOSLYN KELLY

J’S BREAKFAST CLUB
Opportunities abound for those who are willing to take a chance on future development.



DANITA JOHNSON

EDGEWATER HEALTH
Education is the key for creating a new wave of growth for those who believe in the city.

Indiana University Northwest is buying into the recovery of the public school system, said Mark Sperling, interim dean of Indiana University Northwest's School of Education.

IUN has been working for years with the school administration to provide some Gary school instructors with professional development needed to win full state teaching licenses.

"I come out of Detroit, so I know what must be done, and I know Gary can do it," Sperling said.

Sperling said the new school board appears focused on improving academics, and he expects it to develop a strong and updated curriculum.

"We have been working with parents to see that it's important for their children to go to school."

Bold future

UN Chancellor Ken Iwama said that Indiana University Northwest has been a part of educating Gary for almost 65 years and will continue to do so.

That includes partnering with the city on programs like the Start UP Business Success Program, a bootcamp program for entrepreneurs. Some of the about 50 participants who proposed businesses, include:

- Elyssa Lampton — EDL Designs, an epoxy countertops and flooring company
- J'Kia Tatum — Transparent Progression, offering life coaching
- Emmani Ellis — No Limit Living LLC, real estate development and woman empowerment
- Tieanna Walker — Walker P&E Services, youth empowerment and life skills development for foster care youth

The city is using American Rescue Plan Act funds to offer the program's entrepreneurs a chance at grants to make their dreams a reality. The courses were taught by faculty at the School of Business and Economics through the Business Academy.

Energy filled the room at one session where participants agreed that "Gary is coming back!"

Centier Bank also is investing in the education of youth in Gary. The Merrillville-based company launched

a financial literacy program in partnership with the John W. Anderson Boys & Girls Club of Gary.

"By providing financial education and literacy to our youth, we are handing them the keys to unlock a poverty-free future," said Yolanda Davis, community reinvestment act officer at Centier Bank.

Iwama pointed out that educational programs will lead to a better tomorrow.

"When our students thrive, so does the Region," he said. "We will fulfill our mission in driving talent, expertise and economic development by working together in realizing the promise of our collective future."

Kelly, whose restaurant is just off the highway, has known Gary's future is bright from the start.

"The opportunities are limitless," she said. ■

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How to decide to sell your business or expand?

DEREK ZACARIAS

In today's business climate, standing still is rarely a recipe for success. This reality has spurred considerable mergers and acquisitions activity across the Region. More than 155 business owners here opted to sell since 2020, representing almost 20% of Indiana's total transaction volume. A notable 75% of this occurred within three counties: Elkhart, St. Joseph and Lake.



► **Derek Zacarias** is director at The DAK Group, which has an office in Chicago. He is a proud Region native, and is a graduate of Indiana University's Kelley School of Business.

In this period, Northwest Indiana paralleled broader M&A trends, experiencing the 2020 slowdown due to the pandemic, followed by a robust 45% surge in 2021.

Despite a sluggish start in 2023 (down 25% year over year), a substantial uptick is anticipated in the next 12 months as market tranquility entices buyers and sellers.

This resurgent mergers and acquisitions setting confronts entrepreneurs with a familiar quandary: to sell or to expand? Both options entail pros and cons, demanding a methodical process for informed choices.

Hence, we formulated a three-part framework for addressing this dilemma.

Assessing market, managing risk

Having a grasp on your place in the wider competitive marketplace is not only a crucial step to understanding the risks associated with growing and investing in your business, but also helps to understand how outsiders will view your business.

Factors to consider include your industry's growth trajectory, customer demand and the economic trends affecting your business. The most common issues we see impacting our clients today include raw material costs, labor shortages and wage pressures. Other factors, like technological advancements and regulatory changes can also help you anticipate potential challenges or opportunities for growth.

Can your business meet the challenges, and do you want to continue to make the investment? Are you on a growth trend or do you want to get out before the tide turns? Understanding these risks and opportunities is the hallmark of any successful entrepreneur.

Understanding financials, value

Understanding your business's financial health and performance is paramount. Evaluate your current revenue trends, profit margins, cash flow and debt obligations. Compare these metrics to industry benchmarks and assess whether the business can continue to fund and sustain an attractive level of growth. This will help you to create realistic financial projections for the future and guide your decision-making process.

These projections should factor in growth initiatives, potential market changes and economic uncertainties to give you a clear picture of potential outcomes for your business.

With your projections in hand, you can begin to understand how a buyer might value your business. While ultimate value varies wildly depending on the buyer's goals, your projections can

be a start. This is where a good mergers and acquisitions adviser can really shine, as they position your business with buyers to see past simple EBITDA multiples and uncover hidden value, including factors such as cost savings, revenue synergies and intellectual property. Depending on where these value expectations shake out, you can evaluate whether it's worth cashing in today or continuing to operate and grow your business.

Personalizing your goals

Ultimately, making the decision to sell your business is deeply personal. That is why it is important to consider how your personal goals align with the trajectory of your business.

Are you excited by the prospect of committing additional time, effort and resources to propel your business to the next level? Or are you seeking a change of pace or the opportunity to pursue other passions? Or reduce your financial risk and enjoy some of the wealth you have accumulated? Reflect on whether you are prepared to let go emotionally and mentally if you choose to sell.

Deciding whether to sell or continue growing your business is no easy task. Take your time. Consult experts and carefully evaluate your strategic options. Both decisions hold the potential for success, but they also come with challenges that you must be prepared to address.

By considering these three factors and seeking advice from qualified professionals, you can rest assured that your choice aligns with your vision for the future. ■

Ultimately, making the decision to sell your business is deeply personal. That is why it is important to consider how your personal goals align with the trajectory of your business."

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Culture of giving



Legacy Foundation connects people with knowledge, funding

LAUREN CAGGIANO

Today's investments determine a brighter future. That is exactly what Lake County-based Legacy Foundation does through its grant making and programming to support students, nonprofits and changemakers.

The Legacy Foundation is a community foundation, a distinction that matters in terms of the nature of its impact. According to the Council on Foundations, about 900 of these organizations serve every state. Of those, about 350 are accredited by the council, including the Legacy Foundation.

A community foundation typically focuses on supporting a geographical area, primarily by securing funds to address community needs and support local nonprofits. Community foundations offer numerous types of grant-making programs and are funded by donations from individuals, families, businesses and sometimes government grants.

More important than the definition, however, is being part of a culture of giving in the state, according to Legacy Foundation President and CEO Kelly Anoe.

"In Indiana, we're really fortunate to have so many strong and active community foundations," Anoe said.

Institutions like hers reflect the area's values and commitment to bolstering people and organizations.

"In 2022, we gave out just over \$3 million in grants, and we awarded \$1.36 million in scholarships," she said.

While both types of gifts contribute to the vitality of Lake County, Anoe said that scholarships help on the individual level. Students who wish to pursue various areas of study and career paths are urged to apply. Eligible students may be awarded a scholarship from one or more funds.

She said that in 2022, they had more than 30 scholarship funds and awarded scholarships to more than 100 students. Volunteers help review the applications and make determinations on selection. This process can be a tall order at times.

"We get over 500 applicants each year," she said. "And it's a really difficult decision because we have so many amazing young people in our communities. And we're really excited to be able to help support them in their educational achievement and future of our community."

Anoe said their five-year strategic plan, released in August, serves as a guidepost in setting and honoring the foundation's priorities. One focus area is strengthening nonprofits and helping them build capacity. A second is helping to facilitate giving locally.

"We're looking at how we can foster the well-being of our communities and support community groups and residents," she said. "So that could be through resident leadership development and helping our local communities build capacities."

Beyond the philanthropic angle, Anoe said they have also identified other opportunities to fill gaps. For instance, Rise NWI is a nonpartisan program focused on community and civic engagement. According to Anoe, its purpose is to encourage residents to be able to become engaged in their local communities in terms of voting and advocacy. Foundation leaders determined there was a need for such an initiative, especially after seeing recent voter turnout data.

"When (we) looked at Indiana, Lake County was toward the bottom of the state for voter turnout," she said. "That number was really low, especially when it came to local elections. And so, we wanted to do something to get people more involved and engaged in local civics and understand why it's important that they become involved in their community."

The organization's leaders also are looking at how they can help their grant dollars have the most significant impact. In 2022, the organization reflected on 30 years of service, including the retirement of longtime board chair Greg Gordon and leader Carolyn Saxton. This year's theme was "building community" and a challenge to "think local" by current leaders Carey Yukich, new board chair, and Anoe.



"We're looking at how we can foster the well-being of our communities and support community groups and residents."

— Kelly Anoe
Legacy Foundation

One organization that has benefited from the Legacy Foundation's grants is the St. Jude House, a violence prevention center and shelter in Crown Point. Executive Director Ryan Elinkowski said he is grateful for the grant, which has helped them advance a culture of what he calls "trauma-informed care."

"We had very old small lockers for our clients that had kind of like the high school combination locks that were challenging sometimes when clients are coming from highly traumatic situations," he said. "So, we wrote a grant for these really nice lockers that are now in the client's bedrooms in the closet. Clients now have the

autonomy to set their own passwords by numbers. That gives them a sense of security and dignity."

Other grants, Elinkowski said, were earmarked for walk-in coolers for food storage. He also acknowledges another type of support his organization has received, outside of the monetary kind. The Legacy Foundation has forged connections with other nonprofit leaders who have helped the organization and others unite around common causes.

"When we work together collaboratively, we're more impactful for all those who need us," he said. ■

OFF HOURS

Know the ropes



In life and in business, these Region sailors cast off with the waves



Maggi Spartz says the lessons learned from sailing served her well in the business world, teaching her resilience and perseverance.

Provided by Lori Tubbs

STEVE ZALUSKY

Several Northwest Indiana businesspeople have turned to sailing not only as a relief from navigating the commercial waters but also as a fresh channel for their competitive instincts.

“(Sailing) just kind of breaks up your week. ... You get back to the office the next day, and you have a fresh perspective on the tasks at hand.”

— Michael Lunn, NWI Commercial Property Solutions

Michael Lunn looks forward to leaving the office a little early and getting together with his buddies for Wednesday evening races. He is a commercial real estate broker who owns Crown Point-based NWI Commercial Property Solutions.

“It just kind of breaks up your week,” said Lunn, whose company has been serving Lake, Porter and La Porte counties for the past 20 years. “The variety is what keeps it exciting and creates a sort of a mid-week mind eraser. You get back to the office the next day, and you have a fresh perspective on the tasks at hand.”

He’s not alone in that perspective.

Lori Tubbs, an advantage partner with Schererville-

based McColly Bennett Commercial, has been “intensely involved” in commercial real estate in Northwest Indiana for 25 years. She said sailing helps her unplug.

“You’re out in the water. You can’t really answer phone calls. You don’t really have

reception all the time. No emails. It’s just you and the wind,” she said.

The commercial real estate field allows her just the right balance between work and sailing time. Nights are open for her, “so I don’t have to necessarily juggle my sailing hours with work.”

For Maggi Spartz, sailing is part of a family tradition. She runs the Unity Foundation of La Porte County, a philanthropic foundation that addresses educational, health, cultural and environmental needs of residents. She began sailing as a child.

The lessons from sailing served her well in the business world, teaching her resilience and perseverance.

“I learned from those experiences (that) no matter how bad the storm was

or how uncomfortable or cold or wet or whatever that it's only temporary," she said. "The sun's going to come out. The waves are going to go away."

For this group of Northwest Indiana sailors, the competitive racing season can include a race from Chicago to Waukegan, Illinois, and the Tri-State regatta, which runs from Chicago to St. Joseph, Michigan, to Michigan, City, Indiana. But the big one is the 333-mile Chicago to Mackinac race.

The Tri-State race, Lunn said, "was gorgeous. There was an orange full moon rising. There is no night pollution, so you can really see the stars a lot closer."

For him, this year's Mackinac race was special because he gained membership in the Island Goats Sailing Society, which honors those who have been to at least 25 Mackinac races.

This particular race also is special for another reason — he met his wife, Kate, "the first mate," after one. He was invited for drinks by one of the skippers after finishing the race in Chicago. He then struck up a conversation with a "cute little redhead." The two wound up getting married on Mackinac Island and sailed off into the sunset the next year.

Tubbs, who received her captain's license over the winter, will be competing in her eighth Mackinac race.

As for Spartz, her father, Ted Amberg, ended up in the Beverly Shores/Michigan City area because he grew up in Chicago and wanted to sail. He built boats and involved his four daughters

and a son in sailing.

"So, we were expected to throw lines expertly, tie knots expertly, even from a very young age," she said.

Around 1979, one of her father's crew members for the Mackinac race got sick, and he chose his daughter as a substitute.

"One of his crew members was so upset that there was going to be a broad on board," she said. "I mean, he wouldn't even look at me or talk to me."

After her father's death, she carried on the family tradition and joined the crew of the Spirit Walker, which won the Mackinac race in 2015.

"It's really hard to actually win overall, but we did it by 13.5 minutes," she said.

On the boat she is sailing, the Ghost, owned by Valparaiso resident Mike Jones, her role is trimming the mainsail, the biggest sail and the one that acts as the engine for the boat.

She likes the Mackinac race because, "It tests all of your skill plus your physical stamina," she said. "Sometimes that involves being buffeted by 6-foot waves and confronted (with) cold and wet conditions. You also need to keep your mind sharp while being sleep deprived."

During the offseason, Spartz continues to train.

"You've got to keep your core strong," she said. "Because, even if you're just a person



Provided by Lori Tubbs

that sits on the rail, to sit for hours or even days on the rail like that you need a strong core because otherwise your back is just going to be killing you."

Tubbs' athletic background serves her well. Being athletic is important if you're going to race, she said, because "you've got to do a lot of jumping and moving."

"When you're racing, you've got to make maneuvers, and you've got to make them very quickly, and you've got to pull things and tug things and shift things very fast and very delicately," she said.

While she enjoys competitive sailing, she also likes noncompetitive day sailing.

"Obviously, being in sales, clearly I like the challenges," Tubbs said. But on some days, "you just don't want to fight Mother Nature. You just want to get on the boat and sail whatever direction the wind takes you." ■



Provided by Lori Tubbs

Lori Tubbs, an advantage partner with McColly Bennett Commercial, says she sails to unplug.



Provided by Maggi Spartz

Maggi Spartz, president of the Unity Foundation of La Porte County, says sailing is part of a family tradition.

VIEWPOINT

Level Up for a better tomorrow



United Way Northwest Indiana program key to financial freedom for participants

RICH SHIELDS

United Way Northwest Indiana has always been a beacon of hope for those in need, and its Level Up Program has only added another feather to its already extensive cap.

The Level Up Program, by its very focus, is an embodiment of United Way Northwest Indiana's dedication to the community. Designed to support adults, 18 years and older, in their pursuit of financial independence, education and training, the program addresses a crucial need in today's landscape that affects over 40 percent of local Northwest Indiana residents.



► **Rich Shields** is the chief marketing officer at the United Way Northwest Indiana. He joined the nonprofit in March.

In a world where skill development and continuous education are paramount, the provision of this program is indeed noteworthy.

By helping adults gain essential skills for better job opportunities, the Level Up Program is essentially a key that unlocks the doors to improved socio-economic statuses. It also delivers unprecedented mindset changes. Not only does this program provide the means to gain a better income, but it also instills a sense of self-awareness and empowerment.

By helping individuals become more self-reliant and confident, United Way Northwest Indiana is not just making a difference in individual lives, but fostering a ripple effect that benefits the community.

Individuals who are equipped with the skills to secure better employment

can contribute more to their families and communities, thus strengthening the fabric of society.

Moreover, the Level Up Program also provides an opportunity for those who may have faced barriers in accessing education and training due to financial constraints or other reasons by offering financial support for tuition, fees, books and supplies, and transportation costs.

The positive impact of the Level Up Program extends beyond individuals and families, however, permeating the local business landscape and economy.

As program participants gain valuable skills and education, local businesses benefit from a more qualified and competent workforce. This, in turn, can lead to increased productivity, innovative solutions and overall business growth.

Furthermore, as individuals secure better-paying jobs, their increased disposable income can stimulate the local economy.

They are likely to spend more on goods and services, supporting local businesses and fostering economic development. Hence, the ripple effect

of the Level Up Program can be seen in the bolstering of the local economy and fostering of a thriving business environment.

According to recipients of the Level Up Program, the support provided doesn't stop at financial aid and direction. The program provides a comprehensive support system that includes financial literacy, career guidance, academic support, and even emotional support, all aimed at ensuring



MAKE A DONATION

What is the Level Up Program? The United Way Northwest Indiana Level Up Program is designed to break the cycle of poverty by providing skills development, financial literacy and mentoring.

To make donations to the program, visit unitedwaynwi.org/donate or send a check to United Way Northwest Indiana, 951 Eastport Centre Dr., Valparaiso, IN 46383.



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participants' success. This holistic approach to empowerment truly sets United Way Northwest Indiana and the Level Up Program apart.

The Level Up Program is a testament to United Way Northwest Indiana's unwavering dedication to creating lasting positive change in the community. Through this program, they are not just providing individuals with essential

skills and resources, but also giving them hope for a brighter future. As we continue to navigate these uncertain times, programs like the Level Up Program are crucial in ensuring that we emerge stronger and more resilient as a community.

So, let's join hands with United Way Northwest Indiana and support

their efforts in uplifting individuals and communities toward a better tomorrow. ■

“The (Level Up) Program addresses a crucial need in today's landscape that affects over 40 percent of local Northwest Indiana residents.”

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