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PERSONAL SERVICE | A PROMISE | DESIGN PERKS | FUTURE OF HOBART

SPECIAL  
SECTION

LNI'S 50TH COHORT

AUGUST / SEPTEMBER 2025

# Northwest Indiana Business Magazine

*Serving greater Northwest  
and North Central Indiana  
and surrounding counties*

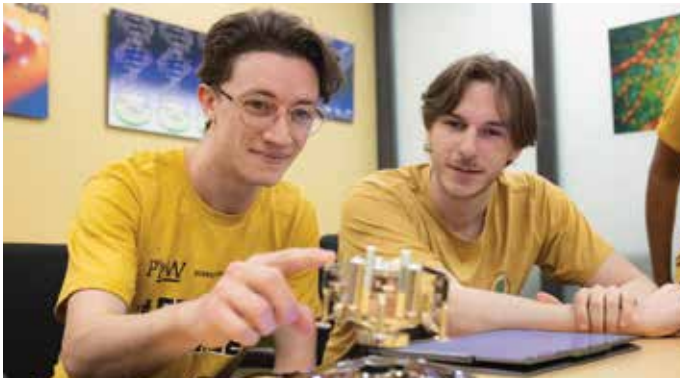
## Relationships still count

*Banks, credit unions offer latest technology  
— and good old-fashioned service*

*Jesse Hunt  
Northwest Indiana market president  
Notre Dame Federal Credit Union*

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# AUG-SEP 2025

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GOOD BIT

# 230,000

The number of people who visited the Crown Point Community Library in 2024, an increase of about 27,000 patrons. ► PAGE 40

IN THIS ISSUE

**W**hile artificial intelligence is all the talk, I keep hearing that personal relationships are still the keys to long-term success.

That business model also is a line from the 1996 movie "Jerry McGuire." The lead character has an epiphany that fewer clients leads to better returns. The revelation got him fired, but in the end, getting to know his clients better led to a better life.

Thirty years later, Northwest Indiana Business Magazine's readers still consider this way of doing business essential to building success and a sense of community. We are all in this work world together.

Our magazine plays a small part in that process. We offer opportunities to learn more about people and what drives them. We also foster connections with the individuals who collectively are growing the Region's economic development.

Several stories in this issue consider the importance of personal relationships, including our cover article. Community banks and credit unions make relationships count and are committed to staffing their local branches with employees who know their towns.

Our marketing story shares branding lessons, including the "living brand" — the employee who greets you when you walk in

and the company that creates an emotional bond with customers. These lessons can help businesses big and small.

Even our architecture/design story discusses the return to office as an opportunity to bring out the best in employees. Companies are rethinking their spaces to accommodate full-time and hybrid workers, and to foster relationships that improve creativity and productivity.

Relationships can be challenging when starting out. Internships help youth start that process early. Some of these experiences lead to full-time work, mentoring opportunities or the chance to figure out what they do best in life.

And then there's Hobart — a community that thrives on civic pride. Brickies, as they are called, are particularly proud of the education they provide their students — and the relationships that last a lifetime.

We also feature a special section on Leadership Northwest Indiana, which is celebrating its 50th cohort this fall. And our series on economic development focuses on business resources at libraries.

Also find features on rScan's growth in South Bend, IU Northwest Dean Cynthia Roberts and the Urban League of Northwest Indiana's efforts to help small business. Enjoy this issue!

— Heather Pfundstein, publisher/editor



Photo by Doug Ross

PICTURE PERFECT

Hobart High School has inspired Brickie pride throughout the community. The School City of Hobart district has received national attention for its achievements, including a spot on "60 Minutes." Over 44% of Hobart students graduated with either an associate degree, one year of college or an industry certification. ► PAGE 28

# Professional advancement



READ STORY ON PHONE

Businesses and organizations share good news about new hires, locations, promotions, accolades

HEATHER PFUNDSTEIN

## Banking

**Michelle Maravilla** was promoted to senior vice president, chief human resources director, after almost 20 years with Merrillville-based **Centier Bank**.

**James Wieser** retired from the board of directors of **Finward Bancorp**, the holding company of **Peoples Bank**.

**Brian Duba** was promoted to general counsel and secretary of **1st Source Corp.** and **1st Source Bank**. Duba will continue as senior vice president. **John Griffith** will retain his status of executive vice president and chief risk officer. Griffith previously was general counsel and secretary.

**Debrielle Lane** was hired as vice president, manager of credit counseling, at **Notre Dame Federal Credit Union**. **Michael Bogdan** was appointed director of retail membership growth. **Sommer Baum** was hired as vice president of retail sales and mission asset protection.

**Horizon Bank** gifted a year **Michigan City Chamber of Commerce** membership to **Capricorn Vacations** owner **Marcola Ruiz**. **Mary Land** was named vice president, senior treasury manager.

**Shawna Brown** was named branch manager of Goshen-based **Interra Credit Union**'s Plymouth office. **Juan Palacios** joined Interra's preferred

services private banking group as a preferred services specialist. Interra transitioned four employees to its mortgage loan adviser team: **Dan Coons** previously served as manager of member relations center; **Karen Hale** most recently was a HELOC specialist; **Jackie Powell** was formerly the branch manager at the Plymouth location; **Joey White** served as the branch manager in Shipshewana. **Eric Stoneburner** joined the agribusiness lending department as an agribusiness lender.

South Bend-based **Everwise Credit Union** named **Jason Gendics** its first chief banking officer.

**Brad Howell** and **Freddie Barnard**, both longtime members of the **First Farmers Bank & Trust** board of directors, retired. Howell, owner of **Brad Howell Ford** in Kokomo, joined the board in 1996. Barnard, a professor of agricultural economics at **Purdue University**, became a board member in 2007. **Shelby Bowen** was appointed to the board. In 2017, Bowen founded **Rebar Development**, an Indiana-based real estate firm focused on public-private partnerships.

**Carlton Zesch** was promoted to executive managing director and head of **Yellow Cardinal M&A Services**, a division of **First Financial Bank**.

**Matt Keen** was appointed chief information officer at **Old National Bancorp**. Most recently, he served as CIO for **Bremer Bank**, which became a division of Old National Bank on May 1. Keen succeeds retiring Chief Information Officer **Paul Kilroy**. **Katie Florig** was appointed a wealth adviser regional executive for the greater Chicago area.

**Sean Kelleher**, a Crown Point resident and managing director of **First Financial Bank**'s ESOP finance group, was appointed chair of the national **ESOP Association**'s advisory committee on finance issues for 2025-2027.

## Community

Deacons **Ivan Alatorre** and **Alex Kouris** were ordained to the priesthood June 7 at the **Cathedral of the Holy Angels** in Gary. Seminarian **William O'Donnell** also was ordained as a transitional deacon.

The **Valparaiso Family YMCA** recognized two longtime advocates with the 2025 Changemaker Award: staff member **CeCe Arocho** and board member **Annmarie Severson**.

## Construction

**Anthony Ladd** is **Wightman's** new municipal services manager, a new role



**BANKING**  
Michelle Maravilla



**BANKING**  
Brian Duba



**BANKING**  
Sommer Baum



**BANKING**  
Shawna Brown



**BANKING**  
Jason Gendics



**BANKING**  
Sean Kelleher



**CONSTRUCTION**  
Anthony Ladd



**CONSTRUCTION**  
Nathan Witte

for the civil engineering, architecture and surveying firm. Ladd is a licensed professional engineer.

**Nathan Witte** joined **Larson-Danielson Construction's** architectural division, **Facet Architecture**, as a project architect. Witte previously worked with the company from 2016 to 2022.

**Aashod Rogers**, a former **Gary/Chicago International Airport** employee, was accepted into the **International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 697**. Rogers worked as an **Indiana Plan** electrician at the airport for most of 2024 via **Midwestern Electric**. Indiana Plan is a pre-apprenticeship program endorsed by the **Indiana State Building Trades**.

### Economic development

Winners of the **Crossroads Chamber's** fifth annual Business Excellence Awards included Rising Star: **Spencer Summers, Northwest Indiana Forum**; Young Entrepreneur: **Chase Lowden, Lowden Financial Partners**; Minority Business: **Brown Family Ranch**; Community Volunteer: **Phil Griffith, The MAAC**

**Foundation**; Corporate Responsibility: **Hard Rock Casino Northern Indiana**; Non-Profit: **Franciscan Health Foundation**; Business Success: **NorthShore Health Centers**; Business Leader: **Bill Trowbridge, Regional Care Group**; and Legacy: **Franciscan Health**. The chamber also celebrated its 15th anniversary.

### Education

**Jenny Fisher**, a faculty member at **IU Northwest**, was named a 2025 E. Kika De La Garza Science Fellow by the **U.S. Department of Agriculture**.

**LeAnn Hughes** was appointed the senior vice president of enrollment and marketing at **Valparaiso University**. Three students from the university's College of Business were named Indiana State Champions in the Microsoft Office Suite Specialist Spring Qualifier: **Douglas Newton**, first place in the Excel competition; **Madeline Poppe** in Word, and **Julia Sullivan** in PowerPoint.

**Mark Peterson** of **Chesterton High School** won the Career Development Professional of the Year (High School)

at the Indiana Work-Based Learning Conference in Noblesville featuring **Work and Learn Indiana's** 19th annual Impact Awards.

**Bret Heller**, superintendent of the **School Town of Munster**, left his position at the end of June to become the superintendent at the Thompson School District in Colorado.

**University of Notre Dame** senior **James Reintjes** was named a 2025 Yenching Scholar. He is Notre Dame's 12th Yenching Scholar and its ninth since 2018. Junior **Alex Young** was named a 2025 Truman Scholar. He is the university's 13th Truman Scholar since 2010. **Thomas Burman**, the Robert M. Conway Director of the Medieval Institute and a professor of history, and **Karen Graubart**, a professor in the department of history, are two of the 198 scholars, scientists and artists awarded fellowships from the **John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation**. **Carmi** and **Chris Murphy** were presented with the 2025 Rev. Edward Frederick Sorin, C.S.C., Award in May at the Alumni Association's annual reunion.



**EDUCATION**  
LeAnn Hughes



**EDUCATION**  
Dee McDonald



**ENTERTAINMENT**  
Carl Thompson



**FINANCE**  
Jenn Remus

## AROUND THE REGION



**FINANCE**  
**Jennifer Sailor**



**GOVERNMENT**  
**William Lewter**



**HEALTH CARE**  
**Gerald Maloney**



**HEALTH CARE**  
**Sinan Simsir**

**Magesh Chandramouli**, a professor of computer graphics technology at **Purdue University Northwest**, was awarded second place in the 2025 GOLC Online Laboratory Award in the category virtual and augmented reality experiments for his project SPEXTRA — Specialized Process Equipment Training Using Extended Reality, which provides virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR) training modules for industrial manufacturing processes. Associate Professor of Nursing **Julia Rogers** was named a 2025 fellow of the **American Academy of Nursing**.

**Septo**, created by **Alexis Karahalios**, **Abby Mena** and **Jocelyn Aguirre** of **Munster High School**, earned second place in the **STARTedUP Foundation's** eighth annual Innovate WithIN State Finals. The team was awarded \$5,000 in funding. **Faith Spencer** earned Alumnus of the Year for her nonprofit work starting **IronWorkz** based in Gary.

**Jason Lewkowicz** was named Mishawaka-based **Bethel University's** athletic director. **Dee McDonald** is the university's ninth president. He succeeds **Barbara Bellefeuille**, who announced her retirement in December 2024.

### Entertainment

The **Midwest Museum of American Art** in downtown Elkhart hired **Emma Marsh** as the assistant curator of education, and **Marissa Turner** as the assistant curator of collections and exhibits.

**Carl Thompson** was appointed Elkhart-based **The Lerner Theatre's** general manager and **Robert Garcia** the director of events and finance.

Artist **Bernard Williams** is the Michigan City-based **Lubeznik Center for the Arts'** first artist in residence, which ends Aug. 31.

### Facilities

Merrillville-based **Performance Plus**, a commercial janitorial service company that also specializes in post-construction final cleaning, welcomed **Bridgette del Real** as an accounts payable clerk. **Carly Degard** was promoted to client service manager from payroll clerk. **Joe Horst** was promoted to sales manager.

### Finance

**Jayson Johnson**, a client relations manager at **Harvest Wealth Partners** passed his certified financial planner exam. **Rebecca Grubb**, a compliance manager, passed her Series 65 exam.

**Tessa Doll**, advisory team associate at **Howard Bailey Financial's** Mishawaka location, passed the Series 65 exam. **Jenn Remus** was hired as an impressions specialist. **Yunet Calderon** joined the team as a client relationship specialist.

Mishawaka-based **Indiana Trust Wealth Management** announced new team members: CPA **Jennifer Sailor**, chief financial and operating officer; CFP **Karen Nevorski**, vice president, wealth adviser; **Hunter Horan**, investment associate; **Bernard Cunningham**, operations application manager; and **Noelle Leszczynski**, office management.

### Government

Gov. **Mike Braun** appointed Lake County Circuit Court Referee and

former Lake County Deputy Prosecutor **Daniel Burke** to serve on the **Lake County Superior Court**. Burke is from Crown Point.

**William Lewter** was promoted to code enforcement commissioner for the city of **Hammond**.

State Rep. **Carolyn Jackson** (D-Hammond) was appointed to the **Council on State Governments'** midwestern legislative conference energy and environment committee for 2025 and 2026.

**Adam Tenbarge II** of **Chesterton High School** is the winner of the 2025 Congressional Art Competition for his artwork, "Journey Through Indiana," which captures the varied landscapes of Northwest Indiana.

The following nominees accepted their appointments to the **U.S. Military Service Academies** from Indiana's First Congressional District: **Talina Cisneros** of **Hammond Central High School** to the **U.S. Naval Academy Preparatory School**; **Shane Conroy** of **Portage High School** to the **U.S. Naval Academy**; **Luke Granzow** of **Hobart High School** to the **U.S. Air Force Academy**; **Maverick Markos** of **Westville High School** to the **U.S. Military Academy at West Point**; **Brayden Mercier** of **Chesterton High School** to the **U.S. Merchant Marine Academy**; and **Madalyn Richardson** of **Washington Township High School** in Valparaiso to the **U.S. Merchant Marine Academy**.

### Health care

The **Franciscan Physician Network** welcomed new staff, including Nurse Practitioner **Ashley Bell-Huseman**

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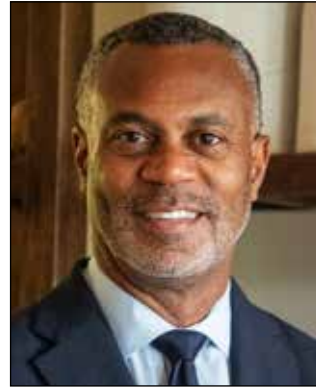
## AROUND THE REGION



**HEALTH CARE**  
**Carl Risk**



**HOSPITALITY**  
**Chris Anderson**



**LAW**  
**Andre Gammage**



**TECHNOLOGY**  
**Paul Miceli**

at the **Rensselaer Medical Center**; Dr. **Amit Kumar**, interventional cardiologist, in Dyer and Munster; and Dr. **Cynthia Grundy** and Dr. **Dominik Meyer**, both podiatrists, in Valparaiso.

**Franciscan Alliance** welcomed several leaders following recent retirements: Dr. **Gerald Maloney**, chief medical officer; **Michael Englehart**, senior vice president for Franciscan Physician Network/Specialty Physicians of Illinois and Franciscan Post-Acute Services; Dr. **Joseph Schneck**, chief medical information officer; and **Tim Murphy**, vice president of strategy.

**Northwest Medical Group** welcomed the following staff: Dr. **Sinan Simsir**, a cardiothoracic surgeon, in Valparaiso; Dr. **Saad Sikanderkhel**, a cardiologist in Valparaiso; Dr. **Timothy Husted**, general surgeon, in Valparaiso; and Dr. **Jeremy Luedtke**, a general surgeon in Valparaiso.

**Beacon Health System** appointed leaders after acquiring **Ascension Southwest Michigan**: **Carl Risk**, president of **Elkhart General Hospital** since 2016, is president of **Borgess Hospital** and integration executive for the Ascension Southwest Michigan facilities, including Borgess Hospital, **Borgess Allegan Hospital**, **Borgess-Lee Hospital** and **Borgess-Pipp Hospital**, along with 35 outpatient clinics and an ambulatory surgery center; and **Kari Snyder** is vice president of nursing of Borgess Hospital. Snyder served as executive director of nursing at Elkhart General Hospital since 2024. **Michael Johnson**, vice president of operations at Elkhart General Hospital, will serve as interim president.

### Hospitality

**Chris Anderson** was named executive vice president and chief operating officer of Merrillville-based **White Lodging**. He previously was vice president and chief commercial officer. He joined the company in 2015. **Joe Pagone**, regional vice president, was promoted to senior vice president of operations. He joined White Lodging in 2022. **Anne Tabakian** was promoted to vice president of food and beverage. She joined the company in 2016.

### Law

**Andre Gammage** joined South Bend-based **THK Law** as an of counsel. Gammage served as a magistrate judge for the St. Joseph Circuit Court for more than 12 years.

**Shelice** and **Michael Tolbert**, of **Tolbert and Tolbert LLC** in Gary, were honored for business leadership at the **Huami Magazine** Community Awards Gala in Charlotte, North Carolina.

### Logistics

**Mark Nuchurch** was appointed the manager of safety and compliance, a new position, at **Anacostia Rail Holdings**, which is the parent company of **Chicago South Shore & South Bend Railroad**.

### Manufacturing

**Seth Woolf** joined Elkhart-based **THOR Industries** as head of corporate development and investor relations. Woolf most recently was a portfolio manager with **J. Goldman & Co.**

**Tristan Scoble** was promoted from regional sales manager to director of

sales at **Urschel**, a manufacturer of industrial food cutting machinery based in Chesterton. He started at the company in 2015 in Midwest sales.

### Marketing

The **Barbauld Agency** in Valparaiso was one of seven finalists for a Shorty Award in the paid and amplification category for a campaign the agency completed for Porter-based **Trailer Transit**.

### Media

**Capital B Gary** won six awards from the **Indiana Society of Professional Journalists**: **Calvin Davis**, first place, government and politics coverage, and first place, election and campaign reporting; **Jenae Barnes**, first place, feature writing, and second place, coverage of racial and diversity issues; **Rayonna Burton-Jernigan**, second place, feature writing; and best newsletter, second place.

### Nonprofit

**Opportunity Enterprises**, based in Valparaiso, elected three board members: **Jonathan Hildebrand**, senior commercial loan officer at **Horizon Bank**; **Tonya Stanley**, senior director of real estate services and administration at **NiSource**; and **Matthew Wells**, president and CEO of **One Region** and chief engagement officer at **Purdue University Northwest**. Outgoing board members were **Alison Boissy**, **Valparaiso University** student and OE board intern through May; **Patrick Lyp**, attorney of the **city of Valparaiso**; and **John Freyek**, **Horizon Bank**,

former OE board chair. **Beth Casbon**, of **Komyatte & Casbon**, begins her second year as OE's board chair; **Denise Conlon**, who retired from **NIPSCO**, is board vice chair; **Erin Hawkins**, of Valparaiso Community Schools, is secretary; and **Shannon Lee** of **Shannon C. Lee & Associates** is treasurer.

The **Duneland Exchange Club** was named Club of the Year during the **Exchange Clubs of Indiana** convention in Fishers. **Wendy Haas** was named President of the Year; **Maria Bachuchin** received Secretary of the Year; and **Mary Talbutt** was honored for many years of service as state treasurer.

The **Valparaiso Family YMCA** inducted five new members to its board of directors: Realtor **Anna Kenney**, HR professional **Rachel Zulich Wallace**, Pastor **Jared Kendall**, **UnitedHealthcare** VP of Sales **Mike Telesky** and **Valparaiso University** student **Meagan Koutsopanos**.

**Craig Freyenberger** was appointed CEO of the nonprofit **Bringing Children Hope** based in Valparaiso.

### Real estate

Valparaiso-based **RE/MAX Lifestyles** announced sales performance awards: The **Gottleber Experience (Jay and Roxanne Gottleber)** earned the RE/MAX Executive Club Team Award and Top 100 Teams in the state; **Minakshi Ghuman** received the RE/MAX 100% Club Award and Office Top Contributor to Children's Memorial Hospital; **David Whitehead** earned the RE/MAX 100% Club Award and Top 100 in the State; and the **Matt Evans Team**, (broker/owner **Matt Evans**, general manager **Amy Mathews** and broker associate **Sarah Szczepanik**) received the RE/MAX Chairman's Club Award. The team placed third in commercial sales for the Indiana RE/MAX commercial network. They also placed among the Top 100 Teams in the state.

### Small business

Valparaiso's **EarthWise**, co-founded by **Scott** and **Annmarie Severson**, was named Innovative Small Business of the Year by the **Indiana Small Business Development Center** during Small

Business Week. It's Thriava system turns manure into fertilizer.

**Jackie Scarborough** opened **A Court of Ink**, a tattoo shop, in Michigan City.

### Technology

**Paul Miceli**, Pulse Technology's director of audio-visual, was named to the "Difference Maker" list by the national trade journal **ENX Magazine**. Miceli

has been working at the company for 25 years. Miceli leads the new division, which offers conference room and audio visual as a service. Pulse, which is celebrating its 70th year, has an office in Merrillville. ■

*Share good news about new hires, promotions and other company announcements for consideration in Around the Region and on our websites: [NWIndianaBusiness.com](http://NWIndianaBusiness.com) and [MichianaBusinessNews.com](http://MichianaBusinessNews.com). Email [news@nwindianabusiness.com](mailto:news@nwindianabusiness.com).*



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# RELATIONSHIPS *STILL* COUNT



## BANKS, CREDIT UNIONS OFFER LATEST TECHNOLOGY — AND GOOD OLD-FASHIONED SERVICE

BILL DOLAN

**S**ome things never change in Northern Indiana's banks, like spacious lobbies or pens chained to check writing counters.

But banking has progressed from dollars and cents to apps and Zelle and other ingenious online transaction systems. Pioneering consumers crave these online banking services that large financial institutions push — particularly tech-heavy banking

gateways to match their competitors. But they also have their own secret sauce: homegrown loan officers, branch managers, market directors and CEOs grounded in their communities' values.

Notre Dame Federal Credit Union opened its Whiting branch four years ago.

"Our leadership has ties to the area and knows how strong and tight-knit a community is, and so do I. I grew up here," said Jesse Hunt, the credit union's Northwest Indiana market director.

"Our team members live and work in the same communities as our clients, which allows us to provide local insights and responsive support that national or digital-only institutions simply can't match," said Joe DiNicolantonio, a senior partner at Centier Bank.

Steve Kring, the Northwest Indiana regional president for Horizon Bank, said this type of banking is the mission of the Michigan City-based bank.

"Relationship banking has been the foundation of our approach since 1873," Kring said. "We believe strongly in a team-based approach and regularly bring in experts from across the bank to ensure clients receive well-rounded, strategic guidance."

### Bricks and mortar

**L**ocal banks also find that having locations in the communities they serve pays off in the long run.

"Having a physical presence is relevant, particularly for our consumers, small business clients, our farmers," said Lawrence Mayers, senior vice president and business banking group head at 1st Source Bank.

"While some large financial institutions and fintech (financial technology) models rely on chatbots or overseas customer assistance lines, our bank has 78 centers in small communities where



**Notre Dame Federal Credit Union opened a branch in Whiting four years ago. Jesse Hunt, who grew up in Whiting, leads the Northwest Indiana market.**

Photo by Rick Bella

giants and internet-only neobanks that substitute automation for branch offices and manual labor.

Regional banking leaders say they have the keys to those financial technology

He also graduated from Whiting's George Rogers Clark High, which closed at the end of the 2020-2021 school year.

This kind of shared history allows bankers to connect with their clients.



our clients want to go to ask questions about charges on their accounts.”

Michael Schneider, senior vice president and commercial team lead for Wintrust Indiana, agrees that many of their customers still want to talk in person.

“There are always going to be those folks who prefer to do things on their phone, on their own,” he said, “but when you build a branch, open an office, it’s a way to say, we are investing in your community. We are here to stay.”

In 2024, Merrillville-based Centier Bank opened or expanded five branches, including one in Cedar Lake. They have 61 branches total in 12 Indiana counties.

The 125-year-old bank also promoted DiNicolantonio to senior partner and head of retail banking in March.

“Our client-facing professionals, including business bankers, commercial bankers and branch managers, are embedded in the communities we serve,” he said. “While digital banking continues to grow, our branches are more than just transaction centers. They are relationship hubs.”

Those interactions at branches can lead to meaningful discussions about financial decisions like buying a home, saving for college or retirement planning.

“Many of our clients value the ability to walk in, speak with someone they know and trust, and get personalized guidance,” DiNicolantonio said. “For small business clients, the branch is often a critical touchpoint. It’s where they can meet with their business banker, discuss lending needs, and access services that support their growth.”

At the 115-year-old American Community Bank, customer service is still the priority at its five branches.

“It’s nice to have the branches where people can walk in and have conversations, like a phone number where a person actually picks up the phone,” said Michael Mellon, president and CEO of the St. John-based bank. “We are relationship based, so the branches really work out well for us.”

### Integrating digital tools

**R**egional banks and credit unions also are aware that they must keep up with advancing technology.

“At Centier Bank, we recognize the rapid evolution of financial technology

and the rise of online-only banks and apps,” DiNicolantonio said. “And we also recognize that our clients are looking for more financial technology.”

Kring said his 152-year-old institution is embracing new technology too.

“We recognize that customers have more banking options than ever before, and the rise of nontraditional institutions has sparked innovation and transformation across our industry,” Kring said. “At Horizon, we continue to embrace this change by investing significantly in digital applications and mobile banking solutions that meet customers’ expectations for speed and convenience.”

Darrick Weeks, president and CEO of Purdue Federal Credit Union, is confident they are ready for advances in technology too. The credit union, which has headquarters in West Lafayette, has two bank branches in Northwest Indiana — Crown Point and La Porte.

“We have the best of both worlds, a local presence in addition to all the online bells and whistles you could imagine,” he said. “We’ve invested in a modern digital banking platform that rivals fintech capabilities, including treasury management solutions, sign on and secondary user accesses, downloading financial data to budgeting software and remote check deposit.”

Centier’s goal is to “thoughtfully integrate digital tools that enhance convenience without compromising the personal service,” DiNicolantonio said.

Real people still review loan applications — “someone who takes the time to understand the client’s unique situation, business model, and financial goals,” he said.

New technology will be used to strengthen personal relationships.

“As a family-owned bank, we’re not trying to automate away the human element,” DiNicolantonio said.

Kring agreed that new technology goes hand in hand with the personal touch.

“What sets us apart from fintechs is our commitment to combining the latest technology with personalized, human-centered service,” Kring said.

Kevin Kosek, chief marketing officer at Regional Federal Credit Union, also said technology is helping them streamline processes, but their mission stays the same.

“Everything we do is rooted in building relationships, whether it’s greeting a member by name when they walk

### BANKING PERSPECTIVE

**“Our preference is to meet clients at their place of business ... to build a stronger personal connection and gain a deeper understanding of their operations.”**

— Steve Kring, Horizon Bank



**“Online banks let you customize, but customers may not understand what options and packages they are asked to pick from. We can ... explain all the alternatives and tailor it to their situation.”**

— Dustin Gorelick, Peoples Bank



through our doors or taking the time to listen when they call,” Kosek said.

He said their use of financial technology has allowed them to deliver a loan decision within 24 hours in some cases and lets their traditional underwriting staff process more complex loans, reducing that processing time from months to weeks.

Mellon said that community banks must keep up with technological advances.

The next online disrupter could be stablecoin, a type of crypto currency that, if federally regulated and adopted by larger banks, could make traditional credit cards and wire transfers obsolete, he said.

“This is an issue for community banks,” Mellon said.

## BANKING

But he is optimistic about products that create community connections.

"We offer the Munster Mustang debit card to support the high school's athletic program," he said. "It's a free account. The proceeds go back to the school at the end of the year."

"So, if you can get clients to buy into a delivery system that helps the community, helps the school and consumer, that is what works for us and makes Northwest Indiana a stronger place."

### Personal relationships

**E**van Hoffmeyer, vice president of communications at the Indiana Bankers Association, said, "Community banks continue to be strong in the Hoosier state."

Personal relationships are the key to that success.

## BANKING PERSPECTIVE

**"I get to hear directly from the customer. We look people in the eye and give them answers and make decisions relatively quick."**

— Michael Mellon  
American Community Bank



**"We want our customers to succeed. We don't want to stick them with a huge loan they aren't able to pay back."**

— Samantha Van Duyn  
Peoples Bank



"Having a well-established presence leads most Hoosiers to still go to their local financial institution where they can speak with one of their neighbors at the bank about what works best for their specific financial situation in a way that filling out a fintech entity's online form does not allow," Hoffmeyer said.

Community bankers also often have a shared background.

"A financial institution that is well established in its community will know its customers to the extent that it can

consider family history and discretionary spending when making loans, while disembodied fintech firms have to rely solely on impersonal qualification criteria like credit scores, without regard to individual circumstances," Hoffmeyer said.

Chris Weishaar, owner of St. John's Ultimate Water Solutions, benefited from his relationship with his Regional Federal Credit Union of Hammond banker. His water purification business had a bumpy start, but advice from Kosek helped him expand into Arizona and Las Vegas. He now is considering further growth.

"When I started out, I was just scrapping by, trying to get my company off the ground," he said.

He needed a work truck three years ago but didn't have the money and his credit score was less than stellar. One big bank wouldn't even talk to him.

He said a friend suggested contacting Regional FCU where he met Kosek.

"I was a little down on my luck," Weishaar said. "Kevin shook my hand and said they believe in people and that's what got me."

Soon after, he had his truck and an "amazing" interest rate. He said their relationship has lasted.

"His whole organization just jumped in and helped me build a business," Weishaar said. "The personal touch was really amazing. I like convenience, the camaraderie and the expertise."

Samantha Van Duyn, vice president senior trea-

sury management officer at Peoples Bank, said there is another reason to choose a community bank.

"We want our customers to succeed," she said. "We don't want to stick them with a huge loan they aren't able to pay back."

### 'Competitive advantage'

**C**ommunity banks also have more leeway when it comes to approving loans.

Mellon said it helps that bank leaders are based here and not at some far-off headquarters.

"What gives us a competitive advantage is the local decision-making, the understanding of the needs of the community and not having to communicate that to someone in authority, somewhere else," he said. "I get to hear directly from the customer. We look people in the eye and give them answers and make decisions relatively quick."

Dustin Gorelick, vice president business banker at Peoples Bank, said the 138-year-old company also makes decisions locally.

"Loan decision making is very local and made by people here," he said. "We can pull a team together and get approval done quickly."

"We have had people come in for a loan, and on paper, it wouldn't make sense to approve, but because we know them and their character, we know this is something that can and will work."

The personal touch also is called for when an applicant's business plan doesn't support their loan request.

"We can tell them, 'work on it and come back in six to 12 months,'" Notre Dame FCU's Hunt said.

Mayers said 1st Source Bank has the advantage of speed — within reason.

"We can absolutely turn a loan request in 24 hours," he said. "But if they are asking to expand their (location), some commercial real estate loans or loan requests to buy out their partner; those are outside the box and the ones we really need to talk to someone about."

Several bankers said they like to see what they are investing in.

"Our preference is to meet clients at their place of business, as this allows us to build a stronger personal connection and gain a deeper understanding of their operations," Kring said.

Hunt of Notre Dame FCU said that sitting across the table from customers helps him get a sense of their commitment to their business plans.

Hunt said his analytics on loan requests include asking, "Where did you start? How did you get into this? What brings out the passion in this business for you?"

Van Duyn of Peoples Bank also likes to meet face-to-face with clients.

"Most of the time, when we have a new customer, I go meet with them at their business, shake hands and things are

smooth from the beginning,” she said. “Bigger banks don’t have that personal touch of someone available to go on site and troubleshoot for them. That’s where we stand out.”

Weeks added that Purdue FCU has another advantage.

“Mid-sized organizations like Purdue can do larger loans by finding other banks and credit unions to participate with us so we can rival many of the things other large banks offer,” he said.

### Not just about numbers

Gorelick said he is interested in making relationships that last.

“Once I close a real estate deal, I’m still talking to that individual for the next 10 to 15 years,” he said. “Online banks let you customize, but customers may not understand what options and packages they are asked to pick from. We can sit down and explain all the alternatives and tailor it to their situation.”

That comes in handy when getting in touch with a human seems impossible.

“When customers do go to online banks, they realize quickly they need to be talking to somebody to address specific needs that don’t have an automated answer to it,” he said.

Centier’s DiNicolantonio said employees make a big difference too.

“We don’t just train for technical expertise,” he said. “We cultivate a culture where genuine care, attentiveness, and responsiveness are at the heart of every client interaction. That’s why our clients often view us not just as bankers, but as trusted partners.”

Kring said Horizon Bank also values “people skills” when hiring.

“In addition to financial training, Horizon provides ongoing development in areas such as active listening, emotional intelligence and conflict resolution,” he said.

Kosek said soft skills must be continually reinforced. “Communication, empathy and active listening are not one-time lessons; they require ongoing development and reinforcement,” he said. “That’s why team members, regardless of their role, participate in regular training both in-person and online.

“We believe the most important aspect of commercial banking is understanding

the story and goals behind each business. That allows us to build a plan tailored to their needs. It’s not just about numbers.”

For 1st Source’s Mayers, “the personal touch is important.”

“Algorithms don’t answer the question of a small business owner needing help putting together a business plan,” he said.

Wintrust’s Schneider said relationship banking is so important they’ve written it into corporate structure by retaining

charters (government banking licenses) of networks Wintrust has absorbed.

“That is very unusual in the banking industry,” he said. “When most grow and acquire another bank, it all gets rolled into one big bank. We are like 16 community banks operating all together. “You lose efficiencies, but we kept those charters, cultures and local feel. It gets us closer to the community and our clients.” ■

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## MARKETING

# BRANDING LESSONS

MARKETING EXPERTS SAY EMOTIONAL CONNECTIONS, PERSONAL TOUCH KEYS TO LONG-TERM SUCCESS



WeCreate founder Wade Breitzke said the IN Indiana campaign is generating \$10 in revenue for every \$1 invested in the statewide campaign.

Photo by Michael Gonzalez

MICHAEL GONZALEZ

When you enter the very first Family Express store, you can't miss the numerous brands that dot the interiors of the now almost 100 stores across Indiana. Gus Olympidis opened that first store in Valparaiso on Christmas Day 50 years ago.

Brands run strong in the stores — from well-known brands to the Family Express logo in white and all caps backed with teal to the salads and juices, sandwiches and

salads in the Cravin's Market section or the Java Wave coffee products.

But the branding falls flat without the "living brand," Olympidis said. If customers aren't greeted warmly by smiling, eager employees, and if they don't feel even a little bit special, then the Family Express chain would be little more than a bunch of stores and gas stations, he said.

Instead, Family Express has won numerous customer service and convenience store awards.



"A brand is nothing more than a promise. It's just that simple," Olympidis said.

From well-known companies like Family Express to Sylvan Learning Centers to Indiana's tourism campaign, these brands use the combination of names, colors, logos and other design elements to differentiate one product from another. But to grow beyond the Region, these brands must make good on their promise.

That happens when a company generates emotional responses from consumers that result in good or lasting brands, area business leaders and marketing pros said time and time again.

"It's not good branding if people walk away indifferent because indifference doesn't get you anything but forgotten," business consultant Cynthia Williams said. "That emotional response is key."

## Learning curve

Williams, originally from Gary, owns Ideation Zone, a marketing consulting firm for businesses of all sizes. She also is teaching a four-week class on branding for small business owners for the Urban League of North-west Indiana.

In her classes, she even dives into psychologist Abraham Maslow's famous Hierarchy of Needs to demonstrate how critical it is to generate an emotional response in the marketplace.

"Everybody's idea of branding is not the same as mine, but the secret sauce is when you can demonstrate your 'why' for doing business," Williams said. "We inherently buy a 'why' that matters for us more than we buy a product or service."

That thought process has worked for Family Express. More stores are on the way, thanks to a \$100 million expansion plan.

"Our promise is to build relationships with the community, and in a way, that goes toward emotional connection," said Olympidis, who immigrated to the United States when he was 17 years old and is the company's president and CEO.

But don't call any of 90-plus Family Express stores a gas station around Olympidis. His managers hire and train employees to be "in the people business. Our secret sauce is building relationships."

Bahiyah Shabazz, business consultant and owner of Decimalytics Inc., who sits on the Urban League's advisory board, said local business owners need that type of branding training. That type of instruction was offered for free from the Urban League in June.

"Most people, when they think about branding, they think about, 'OK, what color should I have for my business and what have you?'" Shabazz said. "But,



**"A brand is nothing more than a promise. It's just that simple."**

— Gus Olympidis  
Family Express

it's more than just that. (Williams) is talking to us about the delivery, but she's also asking, how are we perceived? What does our brand really mean to the consumer?

"We're hitting every level there is, so we make sure we connect with our clients. What emotions do they generate?"

## Big ideas

Since opening its doors 23 years ago, MixDesign, which bills itself as offering "thoughtful brand solutions," has represented huge names and small brands nationally and throughout northern Indiana.

The Hebron-based agency's list of clients includes

White Lodging, Church's Chicken, Fair Oaks Farms, Von Tobel, U.S. Steel, the city of Whiting and many more, CEO and Executive Creative Director Michaline Tomich said.

For the past 10 years, her agency has specialized in marketing for agricultural companies, creating highly detailed, immersive experiences for clients. The agency recently landed a contract just outside of Dubai.

"Everything is a brand now. Branding is so all encompassing now, that, depending on the type of company you are, it's all about the touch, the feel, the digital," Tomich said. "Half of (the brand) is what you design, and half of it is the emotional connection you make with somebody, regardless of the product. You can do all the marketing you want, but if you're not emotionally connecting with people, it's not effective. You're not meeting them."

Tomich pointed to a small coffee shop in DeMotte that began hosting prayer groups in its store after a local young person was killed.

"That gesture at that shop grew until that emotional investment in the community became part of their brand," Tomich said.

A location can spark plenty of emotions, and that's partly why the statewide "IN Indiana" campaign has been a success, said Wade Breitzke, CEO of WeCreate, in Valparaiso.

The IN Indiana brand features a bright, red arrow with the word "IN" in large, white, block letters, pointing to the word, "Indiana" in black letters, with a white outline of the state of Indiana filling out the "D" in the state name.

The firm created the campaign after getting the nod from the Indiana



READ STORY ON PHONE



Java Wave is one of several sub-brands under the Family Express name, but founder and owner Gus Olympidis said the company's "secret sauce" is "building relationships" with customers.

Photo provided by Family Express

## MARKETING

Destination Development Corp., the state's tourism marketing arm, and launched the campaign in 2022.

Tourism is big business in Indiana. According to the IDDC's website, visitindiana.com, tourism generated \$16.2 billion in 2023, up from \$15.1 billion in 2022, and tourism supported 208,000 jobs in the state two years ago.

For every dollar the state invested in WeCreate's campaign, it received a \$10 return in just one year, said Breitzke, a Valparaiso resident. He credited growing up in the Hoosier state and internalizing its values, in part, with the campaign's success.

When people think of Indiana, they think of humility and confidence, a spiritedness and being neighborly, a pro-business and pro-family environment, Breitzke said. It's a vibe he called "Silicon soil," comparing it to the

"Silicon Valley," famous as the birthing ground for many tech companies.

"(Indiana) is a place where you can actually build something and be supported," Breitzke said.

The IN Indiana campaign also tested off the charts in research generated before the campaign's launch, Breitzke said. Now, Indiana-based companies and public entities can add the "IN Indiana" brand to their names, as long as they comply with a handful of rules. It's the first opensource in the entire United States, Breitzke said.

Along with posting dynamic action videos of things to see and do in Indiana, the IN Indiana website highlights all kinds of private companies throughout the state. The site also includes a banner headline, "There's a place for everyone IN Indiana."

The IN Indiana campaign is open to any private or public entity, including

links that promote Hammond, Fort Wayne, South Bend and Michigan City.

### Personal touch

**B**randing and an emotional touch also work for smaller companies looking for a larger market share.

In the highly competitive world of educational services, having a strong "why" has helped Mishawaka's Sarah Miller and her business partner Ken Tebow grow from owning a single Sylvan Learning Center in her hometown to owning 21 centers across Indiana, Florida and Maryland. They are Sylvan's largest multi-center operators.

Nationally, Sylvan hosts annual marketing campaigns, but Miller said what happens at the local level of each site grows the Sylvan brand in the face of national competitors, like Huntington Learning Centers, or the countless small tutoring services that meet a Google search for "tutoring services."

"It really is the personal touch, that local presence that works for us," Miller said. "We truly believe building

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**“Personal service is the differentiator for us. That’s what we’re becoming known as, as the company that actually takes care of and partners with your business to make sure you’re taken care of.”**

— Steve Spurlock, Payroll Vault



**“Everything is a brand now. Branding is so all encompassing now, that, depending on the type of company you are, it’s all about the touch, the feel, the digital.”**

— Michaline Tomich, MixDesign



a relationship is the key to helping a student, getting to know those students and their families. We invest quite a bit in those relationships, so it’s not just walk in and we’ll tutor them, and then you leave.

“We want families to say, ‘I brought our kids to Sylvan, and I feel good about the outcomes. We want you to experience that, too.’”

Crown Point resident Steve Spurlock has a similar philosophy for his Payroll Vault franchise. He said he hopes personal service and close attention to customer service will continue to grow demand for Payroll Vault, a national company with 60

franchises across the nation. Spurlock’s sales area covers Northwest Indiana.

He wears Polo shirts with the green-and-white Payroll Vault logo, which also adorn his Jeep, but the way to compete with the huge payroll companies like ADP and Paychex is to make small customers feel appreciated.

“It’s the personal connection,” Spurlock said. “We look at business holistically. We look at what do you need for your payroll or what services are you missing. We look at your compliance. We look outside of just payroll.”

Payroll Vault has “robust software and systems,” just like the biggest

players in the market, Spurlock said, but he shared several stories of clients and prospective customers calling or texting him on weekends or late afternoons, when he sensed urgency and confusion in their voices.

“It’s a highly saturated market,” Spurlock said. “There’s a lot of payroll options out there, including online and do-it-yourself products.

“Personal service is the differentiator for us. That’s what we’re becoming known as, as the company that actually takes care of and partners with your business to make sure you’re taken care of.” ■

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# WELCOME BACK TO THE OFFICE

Robin Witte, lead architect at Facet Architecture, a division of Larson-Danielson Construction, which is based in La Porte, said she is seeing more offices that provide shared workstations.

Photo provided by Facet Architecture

## EXPERTS SHARE DESIGN TRENDS THAT CAN HELP EMPLOYEES FEEL MORE AT HOME

MICHAEL PUENTE

**A**s calls for the return to the office continue, one thing is for sure: the nature of work has changed forever. Regional experts agree that the pandemic really threw a wrench into how work gets done and where it gets done.

"In very plain words, the pandemic upset our applecart," said Rita Bacevich, Northwest Indiana director of strategic initiatives for Office Interiors based in Granger.

"What we thought would be a short-lived quarantine turned into a long-term, life-changing event."

Now with five years in the collective rearview mirror, companies are rethinking work-from-home policies

and redesigning their office spaces to better accommodate hybrid and flexible work schedules.

Even if employees are required to be in the office, clients might not be. Quiet spaces for virtual meetings and confidential phone calls are working their way into traditional office design.

"Whether hybrid or full time, the workplace needs to shake off the cobwebs and become a more inviting, productive, healthy environment," Bacevich said.

That change includes coworking and alternative working spaces like

WeCreate's Lower Lincoln in Valparaiso.

"I think that the office of today has evolved quite a bit in the last five years," said Wade Breitzke, CEO of WeCreate Media LLC, in Valparaiso. "Obviously, I

think that we've become a society that is more or less about work-life balance and more about work-life integration."

Bacevich said that asking workers to return to the office full time is easier said than done because employees like the flexibility of working from home.

"For many of us, that prolonged shift resulted in an epiphany of what we value in our lives," she said.

### Change in thought

**F**or most that mindset is a direct result of the effects on offices and workplaces shutting down or shifting work to home during the pandemic.

"For many, this meant working on the living room sofa, while trying to keep an eye on a fourth-grade math lesson that we did not understand, while trying to quiet the golden retriever barking at squirrels," Bacevich said.

But this arrangement wasn't the best for employee health or productivity,

**"With the changing workplace, we find employers embracing the need to design for the individual's well-being as well as for enhanced group interactions."**

— Rita Bacevich, Office Interiors



she said. Some firms are now requiring workers to get back to the office the entire week or at least part of the time.

"For some, this mode of work transitioned into a hybrid arrangement, which meant establishing a more constructive workspace within the home, but it also meant returning to a now dusty cubicle for a few days each week —not ideal or attractive," she said.

That's where companies like HDW, an Office Interiors Inc. Co., in Merrillville, can help. Her firm designs office concepts and arrangements that make it more welcoming for individuals to want to come back to work.

"With the changing workplace, we find employers embracing the need to design for the individual's well-being as well as for enhanced group interactions," said Bacevich, who founded HDW Commercial Interiors in 1991. She joined forces with Office Interiors earlier this year.

For example, equipping individuals with height-adjustable desks or ergonomic seating can be simple, inexpensive retrofits, she said.

There are also rooms set aside for video meetings for those not on site.

"Zoom/Teams rooms are becoming commonplace in our need for team and client meetings," she said. "We're being asked to outfit small group Teams rooms (often private offices in a former life) with effective AV technology, sound masking and modern, reconfigurable furniture."

With more demand for these work tools, Bacevich said prices are decreasing due to product competition.

Also, on the rise are comfort zones, areas of inviting lounge furniture for collaboration interaction, as well as small acoustical, privacy pods for individual work and quiet phone calls.

While some may bristle at these accommodations for workers, Bacevich said today's competitive business environment requires perks beyond the norm.

"Excellent talent is out there, but employers need to be more aware of considerations and surroundings in their quest to compete for and to retain talent," Bacevich said. "The bottom line is recognizing and caring about our co-workers as individuals and surrounding them with tools to support their individual growth, the

growth of their teams and the growth of the organization."

Breitzke put his money where his mouth is when he opened his firm's work area as a space for others to use.

"The office of today is not your traditional 9 to 5, but more personal than ever, but at the same time, respecting those personal boundaries to elevate and have flexibility around certain expectations," Breitzke said. "I think in order to be competitive, this is what (companies) have to do."

But, he said, unique spaces should not be seen as the sole factor in keeping employees happy.

"I would say to employers: 'It is my hope that your environment is not one in which you need to motivate people but rather hire motivated people,'" he said.

and then open workstation areas," she said.

"And that really hasn't changed. I think the preference for individuals is a little bit more privacy."

Perhaps the biggest change Witte sees is designing open office areas with workstations.

"(Companies) are providing private breakout locations where employees can go and take a phone call or have a small meeting. It all depends on the client and some of the work they do," Witte said. "Some clients have more of a need for privacy. They have conversations that can't be leaked, and other people shouldn't be hearing them, so that really will reflect in how their project is designed whether they need more private spaces or open spaces are fine."



**HDW, an Office Interiors Inc. Co., in Merrillville, offers products from MillerKnoll, an office furniture company with headquarters in Michigan.**

Photo provided by MillerKnoll

### Conservative influence

Even post-pandemic, office design concepts can still be more conservative and traditional in Indiana, said Robin Witte, lead architect at Facet Architecture, a division of Larson-Danielson Construction, which is based in La Porte.

"I still design office spaces that have a mixture of enclosed private offices

Witte is seeing more offices have workstations that can be shared with others.

"Everyone essentially gets their own drawer to put their private stuff in that they can lock. But then, if they're not there that day, another person can use that workstation," Witte said. "Everyone has their own private, lockable area, but then the workstation is something that multiple people use."

## ARCHITECTURE/DESIGN

In the 1990s, more emphasis was placed on some managers and higher ups using private offices, with assistants in the open area.

Then came the era of everyone in the same space with no private offices, only open work areas.

"Everyone was all together. What it created was more of a democratic feeling in this space where everyone's on the same team," Witte said. "Now it's more of a combination of the two, where we have open office and private space as well."

### Coworking options

Other at-home businesses or entrepreneurs aren't ready or can't afford a return to the office. For them, long-term office space is out of reach. That doesn't mean they don't need a more professional setting for meetings with clients or space to get lost in work.

office is not only for our people, but it's for the community at large."

The concept fosters collaboration and an openness to ideas.

"We like to call it your neighborhood work club," he said.

"Imagine it like a hotel lobby or a nice coffee shop, but exclusively for ambitious people that are both neighborly, they're spirited, they're confident, they're the kind of people that you want to surround yourself with. And so, when it comes to the environment, I would say it's somewhat swanky, is what I'll say."

This "swanky" environment spurs innovation and unique thought, Breitzke said.

**"We actually turned our office into a coworking office (Lower Lincoln). Our office is not only for our people, but it's for the community at large."**

— Wade Breitzke, WeCreate

space," Breitzke said. "We kind of have all the bells and whistles to encourage people to be there, be their best version of themselves."

He isn't the only one hoping to catch the trend.

Joseph Thomas, of Schererville, is the owner of Suite Lux, a 5,000-square-foot coworking community space complete with offices for daily and long-term leases. The

grand opening was scheduled for August.

It comes with a studio for those wishing to delve into podcasting.

"Also, we're like three minutes from the new train station in Munster," he said. "I felt like as far as location, let me get ahead of that and get positioned for a quick commute back and forth from Chicago."

Thomas said he wants the space to be more than a place to work but a community of like-minded people.

"We want people to be able to benefit from the other people here in the community," he said. "For example, there's a guy that does business cards. There's a guy here that builds websites. We really want to string together our community. When you walk in, you start to see things that you can take advantage of and find value in you."

Thomas said the coworking office is great for people who may be running a business out of their home but don't want to meet clients there.

"If you're in East Chicago and you run a great business, and you only can register to your home address, I think you'd be better off down here in Munster registering your business if it was affordable for you to do. It's just the aesthetics," Thomas said.

For Thomas, who remembers the days of meeting clients at a local coffee shop, that's not always the best option. But neither is leasing a professional space for long-term use.

"Some people may only need it a couple days a week. We want to facilitate that," Thomas said. "You know, some people need something a little more serious and more quiet than a coffee shop." ■



Photo provided by WeCreate

**In 2022, Wade Breitzke opened his WeCreate office to others looking for more opportunities to collaborate. Lower Lincoln in Valparaiso now offers space for big ideas, he said.**

That's where coworking fits in. Although the concept was around well before the pandemic, shared space has been steadily on the rise, according to CoworkingCafe, a listing service for flexible workspaces.

In 2022, Breitzke opened Lower Lincoln, a work, club and event space in downtown Valparaiso.

"We actually turned our office into a coworking office," Breitzke said. "Our

"It's just an environment that's not typical, and it's breaking the mold. It's encouraging creativity," he said.

He also likes to offer amenities that keep people coming back, including local favorite Fluid Coffee Roasters cold brew on tap. Music and internet are always on too.

"We're really high-tech enabled, but at the same time, a big open, collaborative

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# PATHWAY TO BETTER CAREERS

A BOON TO EMPLOYERS AND STUDENTS ALIKE,  
INTERNSHIPS CAN LEAD TO FULL-TIME SUCCESS



Aubrey Isakson, Chesterton High School graduate and now junior at Purdue University, attributes her rapid success as a pilot to the CHS internship program.

Photo provided by Chesterton High School

LAUREN CAGGIANO

The modern internship has had a glow up over the past two decades or so. No longer are interns relegated to busywork like filing papers for little or no pay. Both employers and students have embraced the opportunities as meaningful and practical paid learning experiences.

## WORK AND LEARN INDIANA

► The Work and Learn Indiana program links employers, learners, high schools, colleges and universities through a searchable database, matching and reporting system. In the past 20 years, the program has placed more than 11,000 college interns around the state. **Learn more here:** [www.workandlearnindiana.com/faqs](http://www.workandlearnindiana.com/faqs)

Regionally, Interra Credit Union's Frida Farrera Velasco and VIA Marketing's Sarah Aurelio are two examples of students who turned internships into careers.

Both say those early experiences shaped the trajectory of their careers.

Chesterton High School also is making sure students have access to those early opportunities. Businesses involved in its internship program benefit as much as the students, gaining fresh perspectives and often discovering future employees.

On the employer side, internships can be a life-saver today because they can empower organizations to build a pipeline of talent and avoid hiring crunches down the road. At the same time, they can prepare interns for full-time positions

while being a cost-effective way for organizations to promote productivity, innovation and workforce development.

"Many interns continue working with us part time during the school year or

even accept full-time roles after graduation," said Gina Gervais, assistant vice president and employment manager at Merrillville-based Centier Bank.

Data from Work and Learn Indiana, a free platform that connects Indiana employers, community partners and candidates, frames the story around talent supply and demand. The marketplace, which is a program of the Indiana Chamber of Commerce, has more than 3,000 Indiana learners looking for work-based learning experiences. Over the past two decades, it has successfully placed more than 11,000 college interns around the state.

## Meeting real needs

Family-owned Centier Bank has benefited from signing on to Work and Learn Indiana as a host site for work-based learning. Company leaders have worked hard to develop and sustain a dynamic



READ STORY ON PHONE

and evolving internship program that's resulted in personal and professional development for students while benefiting the organization's culture.

Internships at Centier Bank aren't just about filling positions during the summer months. While the program has always existed in some capacity, Gervais said it took on a formalized structure four years ago. The goal was to ensure a more meaningful experience for both the interns and the departments they support.

"We really saw a need to create more of a structured program," Gervais said. "Today, it's a 12-week program where individuals take on roles that meet real business needs. They report to department heads, work on meaningful projects, and participate in activities designed to expose them to the full corporate setting here at Centier."

The program kicks off every May. However, significant preparation happens well before then.

According to Gervais, they start the hiring process in October or November for the following summer. By January or February, her team aims to have all the interns onboarded and ready to go.

In addition to relying on Workand Learn Indiana as a recruitment tool, Gervais said Centier partners with local colleges and universities, including Purdue Northwest, IU Northwest, Valparaiso University and Ball State, among others.

Joelynn Stephen, director of career services with Purdue University Northwest's Career Center, said PNW uses Handshake, an online platform, to connect students with potential internships.

"The university takes a personalized approach by meeting directly with employer partners to understand their specific staffing needs and internship requirements," she said. "Through these collaborative discussions, PNW can assess whether the employer's needs

align with the university's degree programs and student capabilities."

She said this process is beneficial for the university, students and companies.

"This strategic matching process typically results in strong alignment, creating mutually beneficial partnerships

where companies receive qualified candidates while students gain valuable industry experience in their field of study."

She said the partnership can also lead to long-term synergies.

"Internships create ongoing relationships between companies and universities, establishing the employer as a preferred destination

for top graduates," Stephen said.

Students also often return the favor by sharing their experiences.

"Students who have positive internship experiences often return as full-time employees and become advocates for the company on campus, helping to attract other high-quality candidates," she said. "This creates a self-reinforcing

cycle where the best students gravitate toward companies with strong internship programs, giving those employers first access to emerging talent before competitors."

## Fresh faces, fresh ideas

It's a thoughtful approach to talent development from the outset, Gervais said. Each year, Centier's senior leadership team identifies areas in the bank that could benefit from the fresh perspectives interns bring. This year, the program welcomed six interns across various departments, including enterprise risk management, small business banking, project management, the client solution center and retail leadership.

But these internships aren't just about gaining work experience.

"On the HR side, we're responsible for managing the overall experience of the interns," Gervais said. "From professional development workshops and leadership courses to networking sessions and capstone projects, we ensure they're learning and growing."

One standout feature is the capstone project, which pairs interns with real-world challenges. Senior leaders present the interns with a topic, such as exploring a new product or service. They then research it and present their findings to top executives.

## INTERN SUCCESS STORIES



► **Sarah Aurelio** made the transition from an internship to a full-time role with VIA Marketing in Merrillville.



► **Frida Farrera Velasco's** internship at Goshen-based Interra Credit Union became a stepping stone for her career.



Chesterton High School graduate Dylan Glines works at Sarver Family Dental as the result of a job shadowing program. He plans to attend IU Indianapolis in the fall.

Photo provided by Chesterton High School

"It's a chance for them to share ideas without bias," Gervais said. "Their fresh lens is incredibly valuable."

Additionally, Centier's program emphasizes building practical skills.

# 300

The number of student placements in the Chesterton High School work placement program.

Interns attend courses on leadership and presentations, as well as networking opportunities that offer insight into various banking careers.

Unlike some internships that don't provide compensation, Centier ensures their interns are fairly paid for their contributions from Day 1. With the bigger picture in mind, the goal of the program is not just to support interns for one summer.

"We approach each internship opportunity with the thought, 'If this person does really well, and they're interested, can we keep them?' And we've had great success with this," Gervais said.

This focus on building relationships has led to a strong word-of-mouth component of the program. Gervais attributes this success to creating a supportive, inclusive environment where interns feel valued and empowered. Interns are treated as a key part of their teams.

"They attend meetings, engage in collaborative projects and handle

meaningful work," she said. "It's not just busywork designed to fill time."

Feedback from the interns is also a priority. With touchpoints throughout the program, Centier regularly gathers input to refine and improve the experience.

"Every year, we tweak the program based on what worked and what didn't," she said. "It's vital that the program remains impactful for everyone involved."

## Betting on Interra

Velasco is an internship success story. Starting in a high school marketing class, she was initially uncertain about a career in marketing. However, her internship at Goshen-based Interra Credit Union, which coincided with her senior year schedule, quickly became a stepping stone for her career.

From creating account packages to managing a student teller line, she gained invaluable experience and insights into the retail side of banking that made her a well-rounded employee. Today, she serves as assistant vice president and manager of the retail branch at Interra's Ligonier location.

"What kept me around was really the people and the culture that the credit union gave me," she said.

Her career development post-internship involved roles as a member consultant

and member adviser before transitioning into a management role. Reflecting on her professional journey so far, she emphasized the importance of mentorship and seizing opportunities.

"Connecting with people that you would never connect with ... really helps you to see what you're looking for."

Velasco's story is a testament to the value of internships in providing practical skills and professional growth. For example, she has pursued further education at Ivy Tech Community College in business administration and balances part-time studies with her branch manager role.

Velasco's motivation is fueled by a desire for continuous learning. When offering career advice, she reflects on the words of her supervisor, "If you're being invited somewhere, it's because you're being welcomed to the table."

With over a decade at Interra, she cherishes the career growth opportunities and supportive culture that have nurtured her professional journey.

"I'm happy to be in this role, and I've always wanted to be in this role," she said.

## Learning by doing

Like Velasco, Aurelio's internship with VIA Marketing in Merrillville opened opportunities, helped her find her niche and ultimately shaped her professional path.

When she began her marketing internship while at Purdue University Northwest, she wasn't entirely sure which direction she wanted to take within the broad field of marketing.

"I knew I wanted to be in marketing, but I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to do," she said.

The flexibility of her internship had a significant impact. VIA Marketing founder and former president Julie Olthoff provided her with the freedom to explore various areas within the marketing team. This included working closely with graphic artists, developers and account executives.

"I got to see what everyone was doing, and I realized I was really drawn to what Julie (Olthoff) and Michelle (DiSanto) were doing as account executives," she said. "That's when I knew I wanted to pursue that side of marketing."

Throughout her internship, she gained invaluable hands-on experience, including



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participating in client meetings. In hindsight, her role wasn't just about watching from the sidelines. Instead, it was about actively learning and growing, so much that her development led to a full-time role fresh out of school.

"Two days after graduation, I started full time," she said. "I don't think many people can say that."

Reflecting on her experience, Aurelio offered advice to others navigating internships. "If there's something you want to explore, just ask your boss," she said. "Most of the time, they'll be happy to help you shadow or learn more about that area."

Aurelio attributes her success to an openness to asking questions and seizing opportunities. All of these experiences have helped her carve out a career she loves. Today, as an account executive, she continues to build upon the skills and experiences she gained during that pivotal internship year.

"Internships allow employers to evaluate potential full-time hires in a real work environment, essentially serving as extended job interviews," Stephen said. "Companies can assess students' technical skills, work ethic, cultural fit, and ability to contribute to projects without the commitment of permanent employment. This 'try before you buy' approach significantly reduces hiring risks and costs associated with recruiting unknown candidates from the general job market."

## Opening doors

For some, the gap between classroom learning and real-world career demands can feel daunting. Recognizing this disconnect, leaders at Chesterton High School launched an ambitious program designed to bridge the gap.

According to Associate Principal Kristen Peterson, the initiative is now a model of success, offering innovative career preparation and opening pathways for students to discover their passions early.

"About five years ago, Dr. (Chip) Pettit set a goal to get approximately half of our senior class out into real-world

work-related experiences," she said. What began with just 24 students in work-study roles has now expanded to nearly 185 participants. The program provides two

distinct opportunities: work-study roles and internship placements.

Because no two students' paths are the same, Peterson shared examples of diverse students' experiences.

Aubrey Isakson, a Chesterton High School graduate and now junior at Purdue University, sought internship flexibility to complete her pilot's license. Now, just two years after graduating, she's earned her commercial pilot's license and entered professional aviation.

Dylan Glines shadowed at Sarver Family Dental and is now a paid employee. He plans to attend IU Indianapolis in the fall with the goal of pursuing dental school to become an oral surgeon.

**Internships create ongoing relationships between companies and universities, establishing the employer as a preferred destination for top graduates."**

— Joelynn Stephen  
Purdue University  
Northwest

Peterson contends that the program emphasizes that career discovery starts early and can evolve along the way.

"It's amazing to see students confirm their career choices or even realize that a specific path isn't right for them," she said.

As Peterson is quick to point out, behind the program's robust network of opportunities lies the effort of Mark Peterson, internship director. He's cultivated relationships with more than 200 business partners, offering more than 300 unique placements for students.

Another factor in the mix, the dual-credit course offered through Ivy Tech Community College gives interns a formal academic reinforcement of these skills. This is a means to boost students' readiness for both higher education and the workforce.

Ultimately, Kristen Peterson is confident that the program provides an outlet for students to dream big while gaining clarity on their passions.

"We're not just creating opportunities; we're helping students identify their purpose and passion in life." ■



**20<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY**

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Downtown Hobart is becoming more popular as one of the city's walkable areas with a variety of shops and attractions that include the Art Theater, a concert venue.

Photo by Doug Ross

# BRICKIES FOREVER

## HOBART'S LEADERS PLAN CITY'S FUTURE — CELEBRATE VICTORIES OF TODAY

DOUG ROSS

**H**obart has a rock-solid foundation for civic pride. Brickies, as the residents are known, are loyal to their hometown.

Valentine Torres, a parent as well as a business department chair at Hobart High School, is a transplant to the city. She loves Hobart.

"There's a lot of pride in this town. Someone from the outside in might look at us and say we're a little vain," she said.

School City of Hobart Superintendent Peggy Buffington sees that pride often.

On a trip into a McDonald's in Lebanon, Indiana, out walked a man wearing a Brickies shirt. He was an athletic trainer in Florida, heading home to Hobart to visit his mother.

"I've had people on Mount Rushmore, and they sent me a picture. They ran into a Brickie out there," she said.

Mayor Josh Huddlestun understands that pride and friendliness.

He's glad to see newcomers embrace life in Hobart.

"What we do today — it isn't for us. You're planning for the future."

At age 35, his kids are still young, but he anticipates grandkids someday and wonders what the world — and Hobart — will look like then.

"I say we're 20 minutes from everything," Huddlestun said.

The city has a lot to celebrate, and not just Festival Park in which to do so.

# \$203,400

Median value of owner-occupied housing units, July 2019-2023

# \$71,680

Estimated median household income, 2019-2023

# 28.4

Median travel time to work in minutes, 2019-2023



SCAN WITH YOUR PHONE

Understanding Hobart begins with knowing its downtown, while vibrant, isn't its only commercial district. It's a city with four of them, as Huddlestun explained.

Southlake Mall might seem like Merrillville to a lot of people. It even has a Merrillville mailing address. But it's actually in Hobart, part of the city's U.S. 30 commercial corridor. Hobart Chamber of Commerce Director Susan Thompson carries a map of the city with her to show potential members where their business truly sits.

There's also the U.S. 6 corridor, 37th Avenue in Hobart but Ridge Road to the west.

The medical district is along the 61st Avenue corridor, along a route that follows improvements made during previous Mayor Brian Snedecor's tenure.

Snedecor is pleased with Huddlestun as his successor.

Like Huddlestun, Snedecor is a lifelong resident. Both were city employees before being elected mayor. Snedecor, who served as mayor from 2008 to 2023, was with the police department for 27 years, including more than four years as police chief.

## Clear vision

Economic development is an area where Snedecor saw room for growth.

"We saw the growth with the light industrial, a lot of jobs created, good-paying jobs," he said, along the 61st Avenue corridor, where the Northwinds Crossing complex is bustling.

The city put roundabouts on 61st heading east from I-65 to St. Mary Medical Center, which has greatly expanded. "We look at that as being the gateway to our medical district," Snedecor said. "Our redevelopment commission played

a major, major role in that. Without the RDC's funding, we would not have been able to finish that."

Along U.S. 30, Huddlestun's vision is clear. Like his predecessor, he is looking to address a need.



**"What we do today – it isn't for us. You're planning for the future."**

— Mayor Josh Huddlestun

Hobart was one of the potential locations for a new Lake County convention center before the Hard Rock Casino site in Gary was chosen. But that doesn't bother Huddlestun. He had another plan for the 280-acre site where White Lodging's Star Plaza once stood.

The site was once eyed for industrial warehousing. Huddlestun wanted something different. "Can we pause? What kind of development can we create here?" he asked the developer.

The developer donated 80 acres to the city for a youth sports complex.

"Youth sports is a huge tourism industry. You won't pay your mortgage, but you'll get your kid to the baseball game," Huddlestun said.

The remainder of the site would be for mixed-use development, Huddlestun explained while pointing out details on

the large concept plan sprawled across the conference table in his office at City Hall. Buildings would have commercial space on the ground floor and residential space above.

There would be pathways winding around for pedestrians and bike riders, meeting a popular demand for transportation nearby. A golf course, concert venue, hotels and more could be added. Some parcels have been left open for future use.

The sports complex's location just off U.S. 30 would be ideal for tourists, Huddlestun said. The kids could play games there, then seek recreation at other venues, including nearby Deep River Waterpark; satisfy their sweet tooth at Albanese, where gummi bears and other confections are made; spend the night at a hotel; and enjoy meals at the many restaurants in town.

The Olive Garden on a Southlake Mall out lot is one of the chain's busiest, Huddlestun said. "That place is always packed."

Big box retailers, hotels and other businesses are attracted to the U.S. 30 corridor off the I-65 interchange. It would be a boon to the sports complex, too.

"We're super bullish on this," Huddlestun said.

Approvals have already been granted. "The developer just has to get shovels in the ground," he said.



Photo provided by South Shore Convention and Visitors Authority

The Lakefront Festival in Hobart celebrated its 34th annual year in June.

"I'm not very patient. That's been my kryptonite," Huddlestun said.

The city applied for an Indiana Regional Acceleration and Development Initiative grant to help with funding for the city's 80-acre parcel. Gov. Eric Holcomb launched READI in 2021, which is in its second phase. The Northwest Indiana Forum received \$250 million through Lilly Endowment Inc. to allocate toward redevelopment and arts initiatives.

Huddlestun expects the attention and additional residents filling the high-end apartments at that site will benefit some big box stores that now sit empty.

Southlake Mall is on the other side of U.S. 30. In the mall's heyday, the average was 2.6 visits per purchase. Now it's one visit per purchase, he said. Shoppers do their homework online instead of at the mall and know what they want before they get there. That reduces the number of visits, but don't let the increased availability of parking spaces fool you. "A sea of concrete parking isn't a thing anymore," he said.

"The mall is stable. They've got constant investments," Huddlestun said.

Downtown, Lake George is a big attraction. Snedecor wanted the city to capitalize on the lakefront more, so the city replaced the Third Street bridge.

The city went below the surface to make other improvements downtown.

"We had an aging, failing sanitary delivery system downtown. We had to do some major, major investment in our downtown," he said.

"The utilities are there, the infrastructure that they need. I think that was a big turning point," Snedecor said.

### Valuable attraction

Shane Evans, co-owner and operator of Brick House Entertainment Group and the Art Theater downtown, knows the value of the lakefront to his business.

Evans was a store manager for Lowe's when he had a bad week at the end of 2018. He was at an Alice in Chains concert with a friend who is a real estate agent. That friend mentioned the theater was up for sale and suggested Evans turn it into a concert venue. With his business partner, he purchased the building in January 2019.

"We ran for six months, and then COVID hit," Evans said. "Venues like ours were the first ones to close and the last ones to reopen."

Indiana allowed venues like his to reopen several months before Illinois did, so the Art Theater successfully reached out to the border state market to attract new fans who have continued to attend concerts in Hobart.

The Illinoisans were blown away by \$6 drinks, free parking and other low-cost features they wouldn't see in Chicago. "It's really a unique experience and giving the big-city vibe without big-city costs," Evans said.

Other downtown businesses appreciate that the theater brings 300 to 500 people a night when concerts are scheduled. "It really brings a lot of that extra income to the town," he said.

Over the past year, Evans and his partner have developed designs and plan to expand the theater, including a balcony to accommodate 100 additional people, and update facilities. "It's a huge undertaking, but we've really crossed some of those big hurdles already."

Evans, a Hobart resident for 45 of his 47 years, is proud of his city.

"Hobart has always been a blue-collar town. We've been really embraced by the people in the town," he said. "We try to give back by hiring local people, local youth, doing some free events."

"The city has been great as far as supporting us," he said.

Huddlestun, Snedecor and Thompson singled out the Art Theater as instrumental in helping build cohesion among downtown businesses.

"Hobart has invested a lot into its lakefront, into the downtown area," Evans said.

Plans to build an outdoor concert area have made him eager to help bring even bigger crowds for those concerts.

### Hometown pride

Torres grew up in south Hobart. She enjoys outdoor recreation. When she moved, she quickly began taking her kids to the parks, the pool, the YMCA, library and other areas.

"It's beautiful. What you put into it is what you get out of it," she said. "If you give 100%, this town is going to give you back 200%."

Longtime residents have a lot of pride about the city's past. "The



**PEGGY  
BUFFINGTON**

SCHOOL CITY OF HOBART

*She sees Brickie pride wherever she goes — even other states.*



**SHANE EVANS**

THE ART THEATER

*The 45-year resident is proud of his city and the support they have given his business.*



**MARCOS  
RODRIGUEZ**

CITY OF HOBART

*Hobart is on track for responsible growth in the years to come.*



**BRIAN SNEDECOR**

CITY OF HOBART

*The former mayor is pleased with his successor and the plans in the works.*



**VALENTINE  
TORRES**

HOBART HIGH SCHOOL

*"If you give 100%, this town is going to give you back 200%."*



The School City of Hobart (SCOH) is a standout district leading the way in educational excellence and innovation. As one of only 27 districts in the nation to earn the prestigious title of Distinguished Project Lead The Way District for STEM education, SCOH is preparing students to thrive in a rapidly evolving world.

The endorsed Early College program is a game-changer: 21% of the Class of 2025 graduated with an associate degree, 28% completed one year of college, & 44% earned a credential. SCOH serves as 1 of 4 Urban College Acceleration Network Mentor Schools in Indiana, guiding other high schools in accelerating student success with Early College.

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Hobart, IN 46342

### Joan Martin Elementary School

301 East 10<sup>th</sup> St.  
Hobart, IN 46342

### Liberty Elementary School

130 North Liberty St.  
Hobart, IN 46342

### Veterans Elementary School at Mundell

52 North Wisconsin St.  
Hobart, IN 46342

### Hobart Middle School

36 East 8<sup>th</sup> St.  
Hobart, IN 46342

### Hobart High School

2211 East 10<sup>th</sup> St.  
Hobart, IN 46342



# HOBART UNIVERSITY

**BUILDING COLLEGE & CAREER READY  
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**HOBART UNIVERSITY TOTALS  
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**COLLEGE CREDITS EARNED**

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residents here all have roots in this town," she said.

People will talk about their ancestors and other details about their family's history in Hobart. When you meet others who move to Hobart later in life, "they're culture-shocked by the community," Torres said.

"When you're on the inside, it feels good that you have a whole community behind you," she said.

"I was not born a Brickie, I chose to be a Brickie."

To be welcomed, just be ready for someone to give you your first purple

the community is out to support them, whether it be in a sport or performance or in times of sadness.

"Brickies are for Brickies," Buffington said. "There's just lesson after lesson."

### Lifelong learners

The Brickies from the Start program helps parents from the time they give birth to when the children start kindergarten, guiding parents in such things as literacy and other skills.

"Children, they all come in different sizes, they all come in different abilities. I hope in the future everyone just understands that," Buffington said.



**The Art Theater is a popular spot for live music in downtown Hobart. The building was built in 1941 as a single-screen theater.**

and gold shirt and say you're now a Brickie, she said. Thompson got one of those soon after becoming executive director at the chamber of commerce.

Buffington has been a Brickie for decades, including her tenure as school superintendent.

She's focused on giving students a strong head starts in life.

"We have to teach kids to continue to be responsible, kind and pursuing some sort of career that makes them happy," she said.

Her podcast, "The Brickie Experience," explores the core values and character traits that define the Brickie spirit, such as hard work, resilience, kindness and ambition.

On the podcast, graduates talk about the sense of community, where

That's all part of the school district's "cradle to career" concept.

Buffington, going into her 19th year as superintendent, embraced technology and innovation early on.

In the 1999-2000 academic year, the U.S. Department of Education was asking what the high school experience should look like. Buffington, who went from teacher to director of technology and assistant superintendent to superintendent, and her team have been building career pathways ever since.

"We have mentored other schools to accomplish that," she said. Hobart has drawn national attention for its achievements.

Over 44% of Hobart students graduated with either an associate degree, one

year of college or an industry certification, Buffington said.

Students are put into various academies to prepare for careers. One of the first was the Cisco Academy to learn computer networking, then came engineering, then biomedical and others. "It just offered kids so many opportunities," she said.

The dual credit model with Ivy Tech Community College has been helpful. It has resulted in \$9.5 million in savings to families, she said.

"We call it Hobart University," that early college experience in the high school, Buffington said. "We don't want kids to not be eligible for it," so it's marketed heavily. "You can do early college, or you do a career."

Hobart schools also embraced artificial intelligence early on while other districts discouraged it.

"We've never been a district that's shied away from technology. We've always been heavy users of technology as a tool," Buffington said. "We have to learn how to use AI appropriately."

The TV show "60 Minutes" featured Hobart after Sal Kahn, of Kahn Academy, asked the district in 2022 to use a version of ChatGPT for students.

Kahn worked with ChatGPT's creators, putting guardrails on it for student use.

"The researchers and developers were at our high school," adapting the bot based on experience there, Buffington said.

The program helped kids get tutoring help, asking how to make their papers better. A writing coach bot walks them through the process. "It's prompting you to make the paper better. It's giving you lessons," not giving answers, Buffington said.

When "60 Minutes" wanted to learn about it, Anderson Cooper visited Hobart High School.

"We have school districts all over contacting us about it because they see value in it (AI) now," Buffington said. "All of our students have to use AI and use it ethically and with integrity. We're better for it. We just are."

"We've learned how to question. We've learned how to be critical thinkers. We've learned how to get help when our teacher is unavailable," Buffington said.

Young people aren't the only priority in Hobart.

"I tried to make our community attractive to all ages," Snedecor said.

When the Maria Reiner Center, which serves senior citizens, first opened, a recently widowed woman said the center gave her a reason to be joyful again.

"Our senior center almost doesn't need to be called a senior center. It almost needs to be called an activity center because they're so active," Snedecor said, offering fitness classes, Zumba, pickleball and more. "They have a workout area, they have art classes, they have all kinds of stuff."

Along with that building, the police department's CAPS after-school program allows kids to do homework or exercise in a safe environment. "We have policemen interacting with them," a really nice program, Snedecor said. "There's a lot you can do with two gyms."

### Room for improvement

The city has its challenges. Huddlestun and Snedecor cite fiscal constraints brought about by the Indiana General Assembly and Gov. Mike Braun this year

that shrink property tax revenue for local government.

But Hobart's future looks bright.

Marcos Rodriguez, the city's new economic development director, is tasked with helping make sure the city is on the right track. "The mayor's been working hard to make sure there's responsible growth here," Rodriguez said.

Year after year, assessed value is up. Median household value and income are up, too, he said.

Rodriguez has watched what has happened across the county line, where proposed data centers have been rejected in Chesterton, Burns Harbor and Valparaiso, and residents have been vocal against one proposed for Union Township.

"I'm all in for data centers," Huddlestun said, provided they're in the right location.

"They don't have truck traffic. They have none," he said. "I don't really see the problem in these things. They're building them because there's a demand."

Like Buffington, Huddlestun is bullish about technology, used appropriately, and about Hobart's future.

"I think it's strong. Our mayor is amazing. I don't think I've ever met a mayor with more vision than Mayor Josh," Thompson said. "He's gung-ho, and I love every second of it." ■

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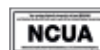
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Leadership Institute  
at **PURDUE NORTHWEST**

# ONE LEADER AT A

## LEADERSHIP NORTHWEST INDIANA CELEB



A total of 38 regional professionals completed the Leadership Northwest Indiana program's 49th cohort in 2024-2025. This cohort's graduates received certificates May 8.

Photo provided by PNW

KERRY SAPET

In an era defined by rapid change and complex interdependencies, strong leadership is nonnegotiable.

Across Northwest Indiana, where economies are evolving and communities are redefining their futures, the Leadership Northwest Indiana program at Purdue Northwest is answering that call. The program is emerging as a linchpin in the Region's development.

Strong leadership is a powerful catalyst for regional growth. LNI is equipping a diverse network of professionals with the skills, connections and vision to drive meaningful progress. From municipal government to small businesses, health care to education, its graduates are not only better leaders — they are change agents.

"You don't have to be a CEO to be a

leader," said Mekisha Richardson, PNW Leadership Institute director of professional education. "This program is for anyone at any stage of their leadership journey. We help them reframe leadership and their ability to be leaders. People leave the program empowered to take on leadership roles in their businesses, communities and families."

As graduates return to their organizations and communities, they are bringing new competencies and a shared commitment to Northwest Indiana's

collective success. Many apply their learning directly, launching initiatives that strengthen the workforce, boost job creation and enhance the vibrancy of local communities.

The program's collaborative structure cross-pollinates partnerships across sectors, building economic resilience. A

small business owner might work with a municipal planner on a downtown revitalization plan. An educator could team up with a manufacturing executive to design apprenticeship pipelines. These alliances help Northwest Indiana respond nimbly to shifting economic demands and technological trends.

The program's history underscores its deep roots. Founded in 1982 under a national model for community leadership programs, the initiative grew into the South Shore Leadership Center. In 2019, the organization was restructured and rebooted as the Leadership Institute at Purdue Northwest.

More than a name change, the move signaled a renewed commitment to addressing the real-world needs of the communities it serves, with participants learning research-based, training-focused leadership skills. The program continues to grow and evolve.

"We see the demand and needs of people who are looking for higher education options beyond the

**"LNI is like getting an MBA without getting an MBA. When they're done taking LNI, they always ask for more."**

— Mekisha Richardson  
PNW Leadership Institute

# TIME

## RATES 50<sup>TH</sup> COHORT



# 1,500

The number of graduates throughout the Leadership Northwest Indiana program's history.

# 50

The number of LNI cohorts the Leadership Institute at PNW is celebrating.

traditional degree,” Richardson said. “LNI is like getting an MBA without getting an MBA. When they’re done taking LNI, they always ask for more.”

Richardson highlights the hunger for continued growth among participants as the impetus for additional programming.

“In response to market demand for concise, actionable content, we’re rolling out micro-courses and on-demand workshops that zero in on specific skills within various business verticals,” said Matt Hanson, Purdue Northwest executive director of graduate and external programming. “Our goal is to ensure busy professionals can access the right development at the right time with the least amount of friction in their daily lives. Education is changing, and we’re making sure both sides of the market — academia and professionals — have equal opportunities for growth.”

This year, the Leadership Northwest Indiana program is celebrating its milestone 50th cohort. Thirty-eight professionals representing various industries and organizations completed the 49th cohort in May.

The following profiles highlight five program graduates who are putting their leadership skills into action to shape the Region’s future. They are among the more than 1,500 graduates throughout the program’s history.

### Orlando Drummond

*LNI cohort 47*

► Senior director, program quality and development, Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Northwest Indiana

Participating in the Leadership Northwest Indiana program was more than a professional milestone — it was a transformational experience for Orlando Drummond.

“The LNI program has significantly enhanced my leadership growth,” Drummond said. “It has helped me deepen my ability to lead across

different domains with clarity, adaptability and purpose.”

With new tools and insight, Drummond has embraced a holistic leadership approach — one rooted in empathy, strategic thinking and personal contemplation.

“I now approach every situation with reflection, allowing past experiences and thoughtful insight to guide my decisions,” he said.

That growth has translated into real-world success. Following his LNI experience, Drummond



was promoted to senior director, elected board chair of the SAFE Coalition for Lake County and

tapped to co-lead a Lilly Foundation Youth Impact Network Grant.

“My LNI experience deepened my passion for leading across boundaries and inspiring others to lean into discomfort,” Drummond said. “LNI taught me how to strategically align that discomfort with goals and objectives that not only fuel my personal growth but also resonate with, support and develop my team.”

The human connection resonated with Drummond.

“It’s not just about learning leadership theories; it’s about discovering your style, expanding your perspective and growing alongside people who share your passion for making a difference.”

To Drummond, LNI stands out because it blends personal development with real-world exposure to the Region.

“You’re not just sitting in sessions; you’re actively engaging with the issues, people and opportunities that shape Northwest Indiana,” Drummond said. “The program provided me with tools that I can apply in both my professional and personal life, expanded my understanding of the Region’s dynamics and, most importantly, connected me

to a network of inspiring, supportive leaders who truly understand the value of service and community.”

### Juan J. Moreno

*LNI cohort 48*

► Director of economic development, City of Hammond

Attending the LNI program elevated Juan J. Moreno’s leadership approach.

“PNW LNI was an invaluable experience that has significantly contributed to my effectiveness in my current role,” Moreno said. “The program provided a much deeper understanding of the landscape, challenges and opportunities across Northwest Indiana.”

In Moreno’s work advancing economic development in Hammond, this regional perspective is crucial. Gaining insight into workforce trends, industry strengths and the interconnectedness of local economies has helped Moreno navigate his role more effectively.

“PNW LNI brought together a diverse group of leaders from various sectors — business, government, nonprofit and education. This fostered a robust

network of colleagues and contacts,” Moreno said. “These connections have been instrumental in facilitating part-

nerships, sharing best practices and identifying resources that benefit economic development initiatives in Hammond.”

The program also sharpened Moreno’s problem-solving skills.

“The curriculum, which covered topics like leading high-performing teams, managing change and fostering a winning culture, equipped me with practical strategies that I can immediately apply in my professional and personal life,” Moreno said.

Feedback from multiple perspectives gave Moreno an honest look at





his leadership behaviors, helping him refine his approach.

“Exposure to different leadership styles and approaches, as well as discussions on regional innovation and development, encouraged me to think more creatively about solutions for Hammond’s economic future,” Moreno said. “It broadened my perspective on what’s possible.”

Unpacking the definition of leadership was a valuable takeaway for Moreno.

“LNI reinforced the understanding that leadership is not just about a title but about making a positive impact wherever you are — at work,



at home and in the community,” Moreno said. “It has strengthened my leadership identity and instilled a

greater sense of responsibility and confidence in my ability to drive change and contribute to the vitality of our Region.”

## Katie Holderby

LNI cohort 48

► Director of alumni engagement  
Purdue University Northwest

Participating in the Leadership Northwest Indiana program was a pivotal experience that deepened Katie Holderby’s leadership abilities and expanded her regional perspective.

“LNI emphasizes how to be a better listener, make strategic decisions and improve communications,” Holderby said. “I try every day to apply these exercises in my daily interactions.”

Through hands-on learning, thoughtful reflection and collaborative projects, Holderby strengthened the skills she relies on in her current role. LNI made a lasting impact on her professional development.

“The experience significantly strengthened my leadership skills, broadened my network and enhanced my professional growth,” she said.

A transformative aspect of the program was the combination of

group projects and self-assessment exercises.

“I identified my strengths and weaknesses and areas for growth as a leader,” Holderby said. “This self-awareness has helped me become more intentional in how I lead, delegate, and support my peers internally and externally.”

Holderby also credited the program with helping her become a more confident and adaptive leader.

“I gained a deeper understanding of leadership styles and learned to adapt those approaches to become a better leader, motivating and engaging my staff and colleagues.”

What stood out the most to Holderby was the sense of connection and community the LNI program fostered.

“What I liked best about Leadership Northwest Indiana was the opportunity to build genuine connections with a diverse group of leaders from across the Region,” Holderby said. “The program inspired collaboration and community impact in ways I hadn’t experienced before.”

## Jimmy Scott

LNI cohort 47

► Vice president of operations  
Summers Plumbing Heating & Cooling

Participating in the LNI program helped Jimmy Scott discover new ways to approach the everyday challenges of leading people.



Scott understands the weight of leadership. His company’s footprint spans Indiana, Illinois and Ohio. Scott

attended the program with Dan Leensvaart, the company’s general manager. For Scott, the program was more than professional development — it was a personal shift.

“It was great being around other leaders — whether young, old, new or those who have been there and done that,” Scott said. “It also helped me realize I’m not alone in the everyday struggle of being a leader and manager in business.”

One aspect Scott enjoyed was networking and learning from peers.



From the staff at Northwest Indiana Business Magazine,

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## *Bridging Experience with Education:* **The PNW Pathway Program**



Purdue University Northwest, in collaboration with Tonn and Blank Construction, has launched the *PNW Pathway Program*. This initiative allows skilled tradespeople to transfer credits earned through their apprenticeship program toward a bachelor's degree in Organizational Leadership and Supervision. By combining hands-on experience with academic advancement, participants enhance their career prospects and gain a competitive edge in the workforce.



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Like many LNI cohorts, Scott's included participants of different ages, demographics and levels of business leadership experience. Attendees hailed from banks, hospitals, police departments, nonprofits, construction and design firms, insurance companies and manufacturing facilities.

Scott appreciated the candid, inclusive class environment and format of the program.

"The open forum was one of the best parts," he said. "You can always learn. There were no dumb ideas. They accepted all input with an open mind. It was very user-friendly."

The hands-on structure of the program inspired Scott to revamp his company's quarterly meetings.

"The coolest thing about that program was a breakout session where they split us into teams, and

**"Our goal is to ensure busy professionals can access the right development at the right time with the least amount of friction in their daily lives."**

— Matt Hanson  
Purdue Northwest

we did a team-building event," Scott said. "I still use that exercise to this day — it was a game-changer for how we do meetings. It has really built morale."

LNI also pushed Scott to reflect on leadership itself.

"One session focused on identifying leaders throughout history. You realize there are good leaders and bad leaders," Scott said. "Just

because you're a leader doesn't mean you're a good person. That really made me think more intentionally about the kind of leader I want to be."

## Nila Williams

LNI cohort 49

► Community health improvement coordinator  
Franciscan Health Michigan City

Attending the LNI program was a catalyst for personal growth and professional confidence for Nila Williams.

The Leadership Northwest Indiana program also gave Williams a deeper understanding of what it truly means to lead.

"It opened my eyes to see that it's not a perfect science to leading — that anyone can be a leader," Williams said. "Every group or job is different, and you have to stay open and willing to work with others. Leadership is not a one-person mentality."

By participating in the program, Williams also illustrated to Franciscan Health that she is committed to having a



professional and personal growth mindset.

"LNI showed leadership that I am willing to

grow and learn, and that they can depend on me to step up if needed," Williams said. "It also helped me to understand how they make their decisions when it comes to leading our team."

By stepping into the program, Williams gained insights into leadership from both a strategic and a human perspective, recognizing the complexities behind decision-making and team dynamics.

For Williams, the program changed her mindset and provided a powerful lesson about empathy. "The skills and education I learned taught me to be a person who is approachable, because you are not alone in this," she said.

"People need to know that they are supported — it takes a team, and the end goal is to be successful."

Perhaps what Williams appreciated most about LNI was the atmosphere of shared growth among participants.

"It was a safe space to explore, express and share your thoughts without judgment. It was nice to have that community engagement," Williams said. "Learning different ways to lead from hearing everyone's experiences was so valuable." ●

**VIEWPOINT:** Cassie Carlson of Tonn and Blank Construction shares her experience with LNI and how it helped her career. **PAGE 48**

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## Pathway to leadership: Take the first step

**Applications** are now open for the 2025-2026 Leadership Northwest Indiana program at Purdue Northwest.

**LNI program** graduates tout its benefits and encourage others to attend. The program consists of eight in-person sessions of instruction and activities. Participants will meet monthly September 2025 to May 2026.

Faculty members from PNW's **College of Business** and leadership practitioners facilitate the program. The team provides research-based leadership content and skill-building for effective leadership. Participants learn strategies to become better leaders in their careers, communities and personal lives.

The program includes a **360-leadership assessment** and custom one-on-one coaching by a College of Business staff or faculty member. Participants earn a certificate from Purdue Northwest upon completion.

The program is especially suited to mid-level managers and developing management professionals, high potential employees identified as prospects for increased leadership responsibilities, professionals interested in personal development and executives and managers seeking to become more charismatic and authentic leaders.

LNI graduate **Juan J. Moreno** recommends that future participants define what they hope to gain from the program before committing.

"Having clear objectives will help you maximize your experience. Are you looking to enhance specific leadership skills? Expand your professional network? Gain a deeper understanding of issues?" Moreno said. "Carefully review the program's curriculum and structure. Does it cover the topics that are most relevant to your needs? Does the format (workshops, seminars, projects) suit your learning style? Be prepared to actively participate in discussions, network with fellow leaders across NWI and build relationships."

**Sessions** take place at PNW's White Lodging School for Hospitality and Tourism Management in Hammond.

**To learn more** about the program and register, visit [pnw.edu/lni](http://pnw.edu/lni). Interested attendees can also contact the Leadership Institute at 219-989-2801 or email [leadershipinstitute@pnw.edu](mailto:leadershipinstitute@pnw.edu). The **deadline** to apply is Sept. 1, 2025.



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Patrons participate in a design-to-build camp using design software, 3D printing and wood cutting and engraving tools to build a squirrel house at the La Porte County Public Library.

Photo provided by the La Porte County Public Library

# MORE THAN BOOKS

## REGIONAL LIBRARIES OPEN DOORS TO LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES, ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTIVITY

*Editor's note: The Indiana University Northwest Center for Economic Education & Research is partnering with Northwest Indiana Business Magazine to present this six-part series on economic development in the Region. This article is fourth in the series.*

KERRY SAPET

**N**estled along the southern shore of Lake Michigan, Northwest Indiana's public libraries are undergoing a profound transformation.

No longer merely quiet repositories of books, the Region's libraries are emerging as dynamic, strategic information centers key to the social, educational and economic vitality of

their communities. Spurred by the seismic shifts of the digital age, libraries are evolving into indispensable information anchors. They are technology hubs, small business incubators, civic engagement centers, cultural venues and bridges across the digital divide.

"A common misconception is that libraries are no longer relevant in the digital age," said Julie Wendorf, Indiana Library Federation president

and Crown Point Community Library director. "Libraries have long been experts at adapting to meet the evolving needs of their communities. Embracing our role as lifelong learning institutions, libraries continue to develop programs and resources that grow and change to match the communities we serve."

Numbers show that public libraries remain vital and valued resources in their communities. Over 230,000 people visited the Crown Point library in 2024, an increase of about 27,000 — and program attendance grew by

**“One of the wonderful aspects of libraries is their ongoing evolution, shaped significantly by the interests of our patrons. A well-rounded public library should strive to offer something for everyone.”**

— Carol Daumer Gutjahr, Lake County Public Library



SCAN WITH YOUR PHONE

over 10,000. The library also saw the number of cardholders jump by nearly 10%. The numbers reflect strategic efforts across the Region to align services with community needs.

“Libraries are more closely examining the services they offer to be sure that they are staying relevant to the communities,” said Fonda Owens, La Porte County Public Library director. “We ask our community about their expectations for library services in the community. We attend city and county meetings to stay in touch with what other entities are doing and think about how that could potentially impact library services. We interact with economic development organizations and local businesses.”

Libraries are key partners in placemaking and economic development initiatives. By serving as a welcoming hub for learning, connection and culture, a strong community library can create a sense of place and belonging. By offering resources, programs and support for workforce development and small businesses, libraries are also laying the groundwork for local economic growth and resilience.

“Public libraries have the power to transform lives in profound ways,” said Carol Daumer Gutjahr, CEO of the Lake County Public Library. “When someone walks out of the Lake County Public Library with what they sought, it’s a testament to our shared success.”

## Community bridges

**N**orthwest Indiana communities are richly diverse — multigenerational, multicultural and economically varied. Libraries are responding with deliberately inclusive and accessible programming.

“One of the wonderful aspects of libraries is their ongoing evolution, shaped significantly by the interests of our patrons,” Gutjahr said. “A well-rounded public library should strive to offer something for everyone.”

For some residents, this means room after room of well-stocked

bookshelves. For others, it means a deep catalog of digital books. Library members are also seeking a range of programming and experiences beyond the pages of books.

“Folks need a ‘third space’ that isn’t work or their homes to connect with their community, relax and enjoy their free time,” said Heather Chaddock, Westchester Public Library executive director. “I feel very strongly about providing opportunities for people of all ages to remain tethered to ‘the real world’ when so much of our lives are now spent in front of a screen.

“It’s good for our brains to turn the pages of a newspaper, talk about a book you enjoyed with a friendly library clerk or enjoy a cup of coffee while watching your children play.”

Genealogy and local history rooms at libraries are anchoring older adults and lifelong learners, nurturing local pride. Kids and teens areas filled with STEM toys; media tools and video games are engaging youth on their

Makerspaces are an increasingly common feature in public libraries across the Region. These creative, hands-on learning areas give library users the opportunity to explore, invent and build using a variety of tools and materials. Makerspaces often include equipment like 3D printers, laser cutters, sewing machines, robotics kits and design software — available for public use. These spaces support learning through doing, encouraging innovation, collaboration and skill development in areas like science, technology, art and entrepreneurship.

“Libraries are always dreaming up new ways to welcome people to come in and stay a while,” Chaddock said.

The approach reflects a growing recognition: libraries are foundational infrastructure and must engage multiple age groups and life situations. Mission-driven interventions are meeting people where they live, learn and play. To fill transportation gaps in urban and rural Northwest Indiana



► **Julie Wendorf**,  
Crown Point  
Community  
Library director



► **Fonda Owens**,  
La Porte County  
Public Library  
director



► **Carol Daumer  
Gutjahr**, Lake  
County Public  
Library CEO



► **Heather Chaddock**,  
Westchester Public  
Library execu-  
tive director

turf. Multi-use rooms provide space for workshops to help adults write their resumes, look for jobs, prepare their taxes and gain financial literacy.

Libraries are also pivoting into lending outlets for life’s tangible needs. La Porte County Public Library has a Library of Things, with items such as tools, video game consoles, yoga kits and memory kits for caregivers. All it takes to borrow an Instant Pot is a library card.

communities, mobile libraries are unlocking resources across neighborhoods by providing books, programs and digital access.

Libraries are also addressing needs in areas confronting pockets of digital inequality where internet access isn’t universal. La Porte’s Library of Things also includes hot spots and tech packs to help people access the internet from anywhere. Hot spots, complete with

instructions and charging cords, can be checked out for 30 days. Tech packs include a Chromebook, Wi-Fi hot spot and mouse. Visitors to La Porte County Public Library logged over 40,000 Wi-Fi sessions and nearly 21,000 public computer sessions last year.

Public libraries act as equalizers, providing high-speed internet access, systems literacy and free devices — empowering job seekers, students, entrepreneurs and seniors fluent in offline life to fully participate in a connected economy.



Photo provided by Lake County Public Library

**A patron uses the WhisperRoom at the Lake County Public Library — a sound booth with equipment for recording podcasts, music, family stories and other audio.**

## Catalyzing economies

**P**ublic libraries are emerging as hubs of entrepreneurial activity in the Region.

“Libraries are often a first stop for entrepreneurs as they explore business ideas and begin gathering resources,” Wendorf said.

Access to economic databases, research tools and quiet meeting rooms gives small businesses and nonprofits a vital boost. Small business owners and local nonprofits often lack the resources to subscribe to databases that can be used to create marketing plans, conduct competitive analyses, raise funds and locate contacts.

“Libraries provide support for groups often underrepresented in the business world, including those in low-income or rural locations. These are valuable, diversifying voices,” Chaddock said. “There are more than 200 public libraries in the state of Indiana, and they are

a critical place for small businesses to perform research, networking and gain technological access.”

Recognizing this, libraries are expanding their business services — providing resources, offering grant guidance and hosting workshops and fairs that connect creators, employers and civic groups.

“I think the amount of information available at the library to small and emerging businesses is a hidden gem,” said Stephanie Murphy, St. Joe County Public Library executive

director. “Social media allows us the opportunity to get the word out in new ways. Our partnerships with other business supporting organizations, like the Small Business Development Center, are key to people finding out how we can help.”

As a librarian at St. Joe County Public Library, Scott Sandberg helps lay the foundation for small businesses to grow and succeed. He has cultivated relationships with regional agencies such as the Indiana Small Business Development Center, SCORE North Central Indiana, South Bend Vet Center and the South Bend-Elkhart Regional Partnership.

“I have learned starting a business requires you to ask tough questions about the nature of any particular business venture,” Sandberg said. “The relationships have provided me the opportunity to bring the small business experts to the library to

educate our patrons on their small business potential.”

Each year, the St. Joe County Public Library schedules a series of workshops in partnership with the ISBDC. Topics include launching a business, legal basics and finding funds for businesses. The library also hosts an entrepreneur hour featuring a panel of local entrepreneurs discussing various aspects of business ownership. The last entrepreneur hour had 63 attendees.

“Local business owners and entrepreneurs ask questions, make connections and develop relationships with those in the community who are there to help them make their dreams a reality,” Sandberg said.

Interaction with economic development organizations was helpful in developing the business center services at La Porte County Public Library, Owens said. The library’s business center gives users the ability to make copies, send faxes, laminate items, print business cards and posters, and have documents notarized.

“We also have a large makerspace that provides equipment and instruction on small scale machines that are used in local industry,” Owens said.

Libraries also support job seekers — providing resources and tools to build skills, explore careers and find employment. The Chesterton Adult Learning Center at the Westchester Public Library offers a variety of free, customized classes for adult learners 16 and older not enrolled in school. The center teaches basic reading, writing and mathematics, high school equivalency and college entrance preparation and English language learning. It also offers vocational testing and online training programs.

Library support for small businesses, entrepreneurs and job seekers delivers meaningful outcomes — from a more skilled workforce and increased tax revenue to thriving local enterprises and stronger, healthier communities.

“With a strong return on every tax dollar invested, libraries need continued support and advocacy to ensure they can keep empowering individuals and strengthening communities,” Wendorf said.

## Human infrastructure

**A**t the heart of it all are the people who make it work.

The librarians and technologists who build digital literacy programs one day and source enterprise-grade business databases the next are the unsung superpowers behind the transformation.

"In any age, I think one way libraries have always gauged their success is by making connections. These days, we work hard to connect our patrons to digital resources," Chaddock said. "Technological devices keep changing, so our staff needs to stay on top of current trends in order to be able to assist our patrons with navigating their new phones, e-readers or laptops ... these are the types of questions we are trusted to help with every day."

Libraries have doubled down on staff development. To best support their patrons, staff members are



► **Stephanie Murphy**, St. Joe County Public Library executive director

attending conferences and webinars, reading tech journals and engaging with online communities.

"While we may not master every new tool or product available, we embrace the mindset of lifelong learners," Gutjahr said.

Like a river that flows through evolving terrain, the Region's public libraries have adapted to the changes of the 21st century. Their role in anchoring informa-

tion equity, local entrepreneurship, digital literacy and cultural engagement is vital. The Region's libraries stand as mission-driven information resources — capable of shaping community resilience and opportunity in ways previously unimagined.

"As the workforce continues to evolve, libraries support Hoosiers through job training, entrepreneurship resources and lifelong learning, especially in rural areas where they help close digital and

economic gaps," Wendorf said. "Public libraries do invaluable work that helps Hoosiers not only meet challenges but build better futures and thrive." ■

*This article is published by Northwest Indiana Business Magazine with the support of the IU Northwest Center for Economic Education & Research. The magazine maintains its editorial independence.*

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ACADEMY

The Economic Development Academy at IU Northwest is a seven-week in-person and online program that addresses regional economic development. The four-module curriculum will focus on connecting economic development approaches with practice, using current research, case studies, guest speakers and lively discussion. The Center for Economic Education & Research and the School of Business & Economics at Indiana University Northwest are presenting the program. Learn more by scanning the QR code with your phone. ►



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# rScan app brings big returns



South Bend startup's software makes reselling easy for companies big and small

PATRICIA SZPEKOWSKI

In three short years, Rod Baradaran's business idea for returning merchandise has hit the ground running. Since winning the 2023 Crossroads Collegiate Pitch Competition from The Mill, Bloomington's hub for coworking and entrepreneurship, rScan has been on a fast-paced trajectory, said Baradaran, CEO and co-founder of the South Bend-based company.

At the time, he was a graduate student in the MBA program at Indiana University Kelley School of Business. The prized pitch was for Baradaran's rScan app software,

said. "Statistics show that retailers accumulate pallets of returns and sell 75% of it back for pennies on the dollar. Our goal was to fill a critical need, make a difference in easily reselling this merchandise, and being ecologically friendly by saving the landfills of so much waste."

The rScan founders have established strong relationships with major retailers such as Walmart, Home Depot, eBay, Spotify and Amazon, to name a few. The rScan app helps them optimize inventory management, pricing and logistics. The technology scans UPC codes, then uses a reverse lookup algorithm to gather detailed product information.

To fine tune and test the rScan app, Baradaran participated in gBETA Indiana's Industry 4.0 acceleration program in 2024. Davide Dantonio, the director of gBETA's - gener8or, led the program.

"Davide's mentorship and strategic guidance have been instrumental in our company's significant achievements," Baradaran said. "With his investor connections, rScan has refined its business model, expanded its technology, and built a sustainable growth strategy."

"Davide's expertise in smart manufacturing and sustainability has been pivotal in refining our technological solutions and expanding market reach."

Dantonio said that, from the beginning of the process, he knew Baradaran was one to watch. "I really saw a star factor in Rod, and beyond working with him, he has become a friend," Dantonio said.

At the beginning of the gBETA program, rScan hired four full-time and two part-time employees. The company expects to create 152 jobs over the next four years. rScan also has moved to a larger space — from 15,000 square feet to 53,000 square feet. The space was formerly the South Bend Chocolate Co.'s production facility.

"Our new South Bend location is in the same building we began but now occupies the largest suite," Baradaran said.

Baradaran since has changed roles to COO and relocated to Indianapolis.

"We plan to hire most of our employees in South Bend, although we will establish a satellite office later this year in Indianapolis to focus on expanding our tech and finance teams," Baradaran said.

Ryker, who is CEO, will stay in South Bend where most of their employees are.

"That's where we check returns, hold inventory, and run our own resale lab of selling returned products directly to the public on eBay, Amazon and other sites."

The success and growth of rScan also comes from the member partners who start their own entrepreneurial e-commerce resell businesses of returned merchandise. Prospective partners are guided through a two-week program consisting of educational videos and training about the rScan app.

"With the use of rScan, our partners purchase the inventory they choose from several categories, such as home improvement, toys, electronics and appliances, depending on their interests or focus," Baradaran said, "and through our app, it is shipped directly to their location."

While member partners are not franchisees, rScan does offer "a huge opportunity to encourage and establish independent entrepreneur businesses," he said. "They stock their own merchandise, sell it on their own online store for a profit and ship it."

The model is paying off. Earlier this year, TechPoint, the industry-led growth initiative for Indiana's digital innovation economy, named rScan the Startup of the Year during its 2025 Mira Awards gala. rScan was recognized for addressing inefficiencies and sustainability challenges associated with product returns.

A report from the National Retail Federation and Happy Returns, a UPS company, noted that, in 2024, total returns were projected to reach \$890 billion.

"We are grateful for the high profile rScan has received," Baradaran said, "and hope to make a lasting impact on both the economy and sustainability efforts in Indiana." ■



► **Rod Baradaran,**  
CEO and co-founder,  
rScan



► **Davide Dantonio,**  
the director of  
gBETA's - gener8or

which simplifies the process of selling returned merchandise online.

Baradaran grew up in South Bend and was living in Massachusetts when his childhood friend Ryan Ryker told him about the environmental issues caused by discarded retail returns. Ryker had been working for a national apparel supply company.

"Ryan and I continued talking regularly even after I moved away for college," Baradaran said. "I decided to move back to South Bend, funded our initial startup costs, and started the business alongside Julian Marquez and Michael Altenburger, who provided the expertise necessary to launch and grow the company."

Marquez's background is in manufacturing and logistics; Altenburger in marketing and project management.

"Reselling returned merchandise is a tremendous untapped market," Baradaran

# Love for learning, leading



IUN leader turns from medical career to educating next generation

JANE BOKUN

Cynthia Roberts has always had a thirst for knowledge.

That drive to learn more has led to two big titles at Indiana University Northwest: interim executive vice chancellor for academic affairs and the dean of the School of Business and Economics.

With a doctorate in hand, Roberts has taken her smarts to the next level.

"I'm a first-generation student," Roberts said. No one else in her family had gone to college. All hopes were pinned on her graduating — and then some.



Roberts is acutely aware of falling in love with studying.

She first earned a bachelor of science in medical technology at Northern Illinois University. She also earned a specialist in blood banking certification at the former Michael Reese Medical Center in Chicago.

She began her career as a clinical laboratory program

director in Michigan City but then changed careers from her original focus on the medical field.

"We are typically very good in our clinical area but don't necessarily have the skill set or experience when we have to step up and manage," Roberts said. "It was a steep learning curve for me, and I changed my focus to help others develop as leaders."

She then founded Strategic Learning Partners Inc., a consulting practice dedicated to improving the effectiveness of leadership through staff and systems development.

That mindset led to two master's degrees from Loyola University in training and development, and organization

development. Then she earned a doctorate in organization development from Benedictine University in Lisle, Illinois.

Roberts is using those advanced degrees in organization development to educate the next generation. But, she said, the two careers, medical and educational, have proven to have the same roots.

"It kind of connects, as both rely on processes that try to improve health — one human and one organizational," she said.

But she didn't just go from one career to the next. "There was a break in between each level where I thought about which direction to go," Roberts said.

Her background in learning might be extensive, but she also has a reputation for being relatable and always taking the time to help her students with a humble, yet wry, sense of humor.

## ABOUT CYNTHIA ROBERTS

► **EDUCATION:** Loyola, Benedictine, Northern Illinois universities

► **HOBBIES:** Gardening (Roberts' backyard has a koi pond), and traveling to Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Santiago, Chile

► **BOOKS:** "The Women," by Kristin Hannah

► **MOVIES/TELEVISION:** Netflix and its movies

IUN staff members say they are lucky to work with her.

"Her quality stands out in her leadership," said Micah Pollak, associate dean of the IUN School of Business and Economics.

Roberts does everything she can to support her team and make sure they succeed, he said. ■

**"I changed my focus to help others develop as leaders."**

— Cynthia Roberts  
IU Northwest

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 **LIGHTBOX**

# MAKING A DIFFERENCE

# Business resource



## Urban League of NWI celebrates 80 years of human services programming



Freelance writer and nonprofit consultant Janell Harvey facilitates a workshop through the Urban League of Northwest Indiana's entrepreneurship program about how to start a business.

Photos provided by the Urban League of NWI

MARIE WILSON

Since the Urban League of Northwest Indiana launched its entrepreneurship program, leaders have heard 4,257 times how much small businesses across the Region need this service.

That's the precise number of inquiries tallied by entrepreneurship program leader Bahiyah Shabazz from small business operators with questions that run the gamut from financial to legal to marketing, branding, leadership or planning.

The Urban League has responded with a program that offers frequent — and free — entrepreneurship workshops and a resource list providing direction to common services small businesses need. This summer, the entrepreneurship program offered its first small business training, in which a 14-person cohort learned the ins and outs of forming a business

identity in a monthlong series called “Becoming a Brand.”

“We’re here to educate and make sure that small businesses are thriving,” said Shabazz, an entrepreneur who runs the Merrillville-based financial and advisory firm Decimalytics. “We want to make sure that all the businesses that interact with us are able to sustain past 10 years.”

The work of the entrepreneurship committee is part of the Urban League’s mission to enhance communities in Lake, Porter and La Porte counties, with services to improve education, financial literacy, health, wellness and leadership for African Americans

and other underrepresented groups.

“We are a resource center to support the community,” said Vanessa Allen-McCloud, president and CEO of the Gary-based Urban League. “Supporting businesses fits into the bigger picture, because we’re

teaching organizations how to maintain and sustain their businesses.”

The entrepreneurship program falls under the financial literacy arm of what the Urban League offers. Shabazz said the effort has reached 175 participants who have attended workshops about topics, including how to start a business, how to apply for grants, understanding the effects of AI and succeeding as a woman in business.

Last year, businesses across the Region hosted the workshops, providing a chance for entrepreneurs to see each other’s stores and offices as they networked and learned, Shabazz said. This year’s events, including the branding series instructed by Cynthia Williams, founder of StartUP Gary, are all taking place at Ivy Tech Community College in Gary.

“We want to ensure that we’re not coming in to monopolize helping businesses in this area,” Shabazz said, “but to partner and collaborate with other organizations who are also assisting small business owners.”

Partnering, collaborating and providing resources is what the Urban League

### URBAN LEAGUE OF NW INDIANA

► The Urban League of Northwest Indiana works to promote, encourage and enhance services to improve social, educational, and economic conditions of African Americans and other minority groups in Lake, Porter, and La Porte Counties. Learn more at [www.urbanleagueofnwi.org](http://www.urbanleagueofnwi.org)

**“Supporting businesses fits into the bigger picture, because we’re teaching organizations how to maintain and sustain their businesses.”**

— Vanessa Allen-McCloud,  
Urban League of Northwest Indiana



**“(The Urban League is) here to educate and make sure that small businesses are thriving. We want to make sure that all the businesses that interact with us are able to sustain past 10 years.”**

— Bahiyah Shabazz, Decimalytics



is all about, as a human services agency that’s now celebrating its 80th year, Allen-McCloud said. Partnerships allow the organization to support a variety of businesses, even beyond those taking advantage of entrepreneurship resources.

The businesses involved with Northwest Learning Labs are one example. While designed to offer summer education to students entering first through ninth grades — with 800 participating this year — the Learning Labs also provide stipends to local businesses that offer enrichment opportunities. After morning classes, students go on excursions, often visiting businesses that offer swimming, outdoor recreation or animal-focused experiences.

Learning Labs may be “more for kids in a sense,” said Yolanda Davis, Urban League board vice chairwoman. But the positive effects spread beyond a short-term boost for students.

“I do think that’s helping enrich their lives for business,” said Davis, who also is the community reinvestment act officer at Centier Bank.

Moving forward, the Urban League plans to increase its focus on young professionals ages 21 to 40, Allen-McCloud said, to ensure more mentorship and passing down of skills in leadership and professionalism.

The organization also is rebranding its annual symposium. The focus — and name — of the event now will center on leadership.

“Because of the national and state mandates to dismantle diversity equity and inclusion (programs), we don’t want any of those words to deter organizations from attending and learning how to better resolve conflict, develop leadership and provide opportunities,” Allen-McCloud said.

The rebrand is intended to improve understanding of the Urban League’s mission, which goes beyond those three words, to focus on leadership, development and community, Davis said.

“We want to make sure that we align with the climate that we’re in,” she said. “The most important part is to make sure that we’re connected and continue to be connected with our partners.” ■

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# LNI's lasting impact



Purdue University Northwest's Leadership Institute offers opportunity to grow skills, develop relationships

CASSIE CARLSON

Leadership is not something you arrive at one day and say, "I've made it." It is an ongoing journey of self-awareness and intentional practice.



► **Cassie Carlson** is the marketing manager at Tonn and Blank Construction. With a drummer's knack for rhythm and multitasking, she thrives in fast-paced environments and keeps the marketing beat steady and strong.

That's why programs like the Purdue University Northwest Leadership Institute are so valuable. They provide the structure, insight and support needed to build confident, effective leaders at every level of their career. I had the privilege of participating in the Leadership Northwest Indiana program, and it has had a lasting impact on how I show up as a leader in my organization.

The mission of the PNW Leadership Institute is simple but powerful: to train leaders to grow their leadership capacity and add value to the communities and teams they serve. The LNI program is designed to help participants become more confident, not by offering shortcuts or quick fixes, but by building a foundation of self-awareness and practical skills that can be applied in real-world situations.

The program runs from September through May and is facilitated by a diverse and experienced team made up of College of Business faculty and real-world leadership practitioners. This blend of academic research and professional insight gives the program a unique depth. Monthly sessions are structured to build progressively on key concepts in leadership,

communication and team dynamics. But what truly sets the program apart is its focus on both personal and professional growth.

One of the most valuable elements of the program was the 360-degree assessment and custom coaching component. Receiving feedback from peers, supervisors and direct reports helped me understand not just how I see myself as a leader, but how others experience my leadership. That kind of honest reflection isn't always easy, but it's absolutely essential. The coaching that followed the assessment gave me practical strategies to work on areas of improvement and sharpen the strengths I already had.

Another major highlight of the program was the opportunity to connect with professionals from across the Region. It's easy to get stuck in the day-to-day of your own organization, but being in a room with other leaders from different industries and backgrounds sparked a lot of meaningful conversation.

We tackled real-world challenges together, shared lessons from our unique experiences, and built relationships that extended well beyond the classroom. In fact, some of the most valuable lessons I learned came from listening to how others navigated difficult decisions or fostered growth in their own teams.

I also appreciated how the program helped strengthen internal relationships within my own company. Attending with a few coworkers allowed us to see one another in a new light and better understand each other's leadership styles. It improved our collaboration, trust and communication — all

## LNI 50TH COHORT

► The Leadership Institute at Purdue University Northwest is celebrating its 50th cohort this fall. Learn more about the program in a special section, sponsored by Tonn & Blank Construction, on **PAGES 34-39**.



of which translate into a more cohesive and effective team.

The PNW Leadership Institute does more than train individual leaders. It raises the overall bar for leadership in our Region. As the saying goes, "a rising tide lifts all ships," and that's exactly what this program aims to do. By equipping more people with the skills and confidence to lead well, we create stronger organizations, more resilient communities and a shared culture of growth.

Leadership is not static. It evolves with every challenge, every success and every team we serve. The PNW Leadership Institute gave me tools that I continue to use in my everyday work and personal life. It reminded me that leadership is about being intentional, listening well and committing

to the ongoing work of becoming better for those around you.

I highly recommend the LNI program to anyone who wants to grow as a leader — whether you are just starting out or looking to refine and elevate the skills you've already built. It's a powerful investment in yourself, your team and the broader community we all share. ■

**“The PNW Leadership Institute does more than train individual leaders. It raises the overall bar for leadership in our Region.”**

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