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OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2026

Northwest Indiana Business Magazine

*Serving greater Northwest
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and surrounding counties*

Growing legal opportunities

*Firms provide talent incentives; experts consider
alternative pathways in underserved areas*

*Joshua Hague
Partner
Krieg DeVault*

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Franciscan *EXPRESS*CARE

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Photo, Envel Facade

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BIG NUMBER

11%

The percentage of all paid employment in the Region at nonprofit organizations in 2019, according to the Indiana Nonprofits Project. ► **PAGE 24**

IN THIS ISSUE

The past few months haven't been easy. This summer brought storms that tested infrastructure, property, and basics like food, water and power. Suddenly, politics and bottom lines weren't as important as helping neighbors, cleaning up and restoring life to normal.

That process will take time as grants, government programs, donations and insurance claims are awarded and received.

But one thing happened quickly, the Northwest Indiana community stepped up to help cut down trees, provide food and shelter, and worked together to make sure everyone was safe. The outpouring of monetary and other donations was overwhelming and inspiring.

This issue was in production during the aftermath of the storm. Reporters were calling on sources for their stories and collecting photos for these pages. Some of our writers went without power, too. We thank them and the many sources in this issue's stories for participating despite hardships.

This issue is packed with good news, starting with young lawyer Stefan May who recently graduated from Purdue Global Law School. He is leading the charge against Indiana's lawyer shortage and proving that students educated online can pass the bar exam.

Northwest Indiana is known as the country's steel leader, but it also is home

to many businesses that support the industry. From warehousing to transportation, these companies contribute jobs and economic prosperity to their communities.

We also looked into the tax policies that compel companies like Uesco to move to the Region. These tax tips also might apply to businesses that already call Northwest and North Central Indiana home.

Nonprofits play a big role in helping residents who often feel marginalized, but they also offer jobs for 11% of all paid employment in the Region. The creative economy creates jobs too, and a return on investment that is tangible in event participation and other factors. Both drive economic growth, and create communities where employees want to live, work and play.

Some projects are once-in-a-lifetime, and Envel Facade in South Bend completed one of them. They used their proprietary blend of concrete to build the letters that top the Obama center's building.

Michael Heinold started a Seniors Helping Seniors franchise in Northwest Indiana. And the Gary Literacy Coalition makes reading a priority.

Finally, Violet Sistovaris, a retired NiSource executive, shares how a long-ago donation helped her grandchild in the Franciscan Health Crown Point NICU.

Enjoy this issue!

— Heather Pfundstein, publisher/editor



Photo, Gary Literacy Coalition

READING MATTERS

Volunteers bring stories to life in classrooms across Gary several times a year through the efforts of the Gary Literacy Coalition.

► **PAGE 35**

Professional advancement

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

HEATHER PFUNDSTEIN

Accounting

Allison Allman, a CPA and senior assurance manager in **Kruggel Lawton CPA's** St. Joseph, Michigan, office, was honored with the 2026 **Michigan Association of Certified Public Accountants** Women to Watch Emerging Leader Award. The firm also promoted 18 team members, including in the Elkhart office: **Tyler Beasy** to a senior staff accountant, CPA **Jarah Byler** to senior staff accountant on the employee benefit plan audit team, CPA **Cambria Comer** to assurance manager, **Rebecca Penrod** to a senior staff accountant and CPA **Katherine Riffell** to senior staff accountant; South Bend office: **Courtney Haynes** to a senior staff accountant, CPA **Anna Hulstedt** to a senior staff accountant, **Eddie Murphy** to a senior staff accountant and CPA **Kyleigh Otwinowski** to tax manager; Goshen office: CPA **Marcus Housholder** to assurance manager; and in the St. Joseph, Michigan, office: **Jeremy Flagel** to tax manager, **Kaylee Jordan** to a senior staff accountant and **Hannah Petty** as a senior staff accountant.

CLH, CPAs & Consultants based in Michigan City hosted interns this summer, including **Yongshi Huang**, and **Naturelle Buikema** in the

Valparaiso office; **Lila Gillisse** and **Brianne Norman**, in the La Porte office; and **Brooklynn Hough** in administration. **Kayla Kranc**, senior accountant, and **Lisa Bedwell**, internal accounting, were recognized with the firm's 2026 R.I.K.I. Spotlight Awards. **Allison Leffert** was promoted to senior manager, **Seth Bedwell** to manager, and **Ashley Boyan** to client service team assistant manager.

Agribusiness

Rajdeep Deka joined **FiberX** based in Merrillville as director of technology and process engineering. Rajdeep plays a critical role in advancing the jointly developed biorefinery in a partnership between FiberX and **Purdue University**, where Deka received his doctoral degree.

Banking

Joe DiNicolantonio was promoted to chief banking officer at Merrillville-based **Centier Bank**. **Brian O'Meara** was named an executive vice president and chief administrative officer. **Donald Rome** was promoted to executive vice president, chief risk officer. **Lupita Nunez** was promoted to community lender at the Gary Glen Park branch. **Amy Varga** was promoted to market president

and senior vice president of the Michiana market. **Lisa Marek**, senior investment executive of investment services, earned a Diamond Level at **Cetera Financial Group's** annual awards conference, Circle of Excellence. **Katelyn Fronck** joined the bank as a mortgage loan officer based in Portage, **Johnathon Jorgensen** as an assistant vice president and commercial banking officer based in Mishawaka and **Alison Tusing** as compliance manager, monitoring.

Chris Sibila was hired as chief strategy and experience officer at **Purdue Federal Credit Union**. He most recently was senior vice president and chief information officer at **Financial Center First Credit Union** based in Indianapolis.

Matthew Verhamme was promoted to vice president at **1st Source Bank**, based in South Bend. He was hired in June as a central region business banker, serving St. Joseph County.

Melinda McPherson was named a marketing operations specialist at **Notre Dame Federal Credit Union**. **Kristin McCarthy** was appointed senior vice president of retail. **Heather Alerding** was appointed assistant vice president and branch manager of its downtown branch.

Bill Gertner joined **Wintrust Financial Corp.** as senior vice



Photo, Kruggel Lawton CPA

ACCOUNTING
Allison Allman



Photo, CLH, CPAs & Consultants

ACCOUNTING
Allison Leffert



Photo, FiberX

AGRIBUSINESS
Rajdeep Deka



Photo, Centier Bank

BANKING
Joe DiNicolantonio



READ ON PHONE

president-market executive La Porte County. Gertner brings more than 22 years of business and community development experience in the Michigan City and La Porte County areas.

Converse-based **First Farmers Bank & Trust** began the succession planning process by naming **Matthew Maher** president, effective Jan. 1. It has branches in Knox and North Judson.

Nicholas Ritter and **Charles Sulerzyski** were appointed independent directors on the **Horizon Bancorp** and **Horizon Bank** boards. Ritter retired this year as executive vice president and chief information security officer of **WorldPay**, a global payments technology company based in Cincinnati, Ohio. Sulerzyski retired in 2024 as president and CEO of **Peoples Bancorp Inc.**, which has headquarters in Marietta, Ohio. **Drew Zromkoski** was promoted to assistant vice president and commercial loan officer. He also is the announcer for Valparaiso's Popcorn Parade.

Clayton Sheets was promoted to vice president and regional manager of agribusiness lending at **Interra Credit Union** based in Goshen. **Brian Ufkin** was promoted to vice president and manager of small business banking.

John Thurston was promoted to president of corporate bank at Chicago-based **Old National Bank**, which has locations in Northwest Indiana. Other promotions include: **Anne-Christine Day** to head of capital markets, **James Goody** to head of capital markets and specialty banking, **Kristen Heron** to portfolio banking and healthcare manager, **Marty Koutsky** to national head of healthcare and **Elizabeth Vosnos** to head of corporate banking.

Economic development

Yvonne Lopez joined the **Northwest Indiana Forum** team as the executive assistant to the CEO. **Erik Nelson** was appointed operations director. He most recently was the business development manager at the **La Porte Economic Advancement Partnership**.

Education

Indiana University Northwest approved tenure for **Andrae Marak**. **Jessica Warren** was promoted to senior lecturer, **Eunjoo Kim** to associate professor and **Ming Gao** to professor. All four serve in the College of Arts, Sciences and Education. **Nicholas Casas** was promoted to associate librarian. **Brandon Lee**, of the College of Business and Public Affairs, was promoted to professor.

Shontrai Irving began his term as chair of the **Indiana University Alumni Association** board of managers on July 1. Irving is a clinical professor of business law at **Purdue University Northwest**. He also is a practicing attorney in Gary.

Kyle Doudrick, associate professor of environmental engineering at the **University of Notre Dame**, was selected to serve on the Science Advisory Board of the **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency**. **Holly Kuzmich** was named managing director of the **Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities**. **David Campbell**, the Packey J. Dee Professor of American Democracy, was appointed by the **Library of Congress** to the Kluge Chair in American Law and Governance. **Pope Leo XIV** appointed two faculty

members, **Emmanuel Katongole** and **Clemens Sedmak**, as consultant to the **Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development**. University Trustee **Kathryn Koch**, president and CEO of **TCW**, a global investment management firm, also was named a consultant. **James Schmiedeler**, a professor of aerospace and mechanical engineering and associate dean for faculty advancement and inclusion in the College of Engineering, was named vice president and associate provost for faculty recruitment support.

Jennie Sanders was appointed **Purdue Global's** chief academic officer and senior vice president.

Eric Bowers, a history teacher at **Penn High School** in Mishawaka, attended **C-SPAN's** Summer Educators' Conference in Washington, D.C. Bowers was one of 31 middle- and high-school educators around the country chosen to participate in the program.

Valparaiso University student **Lucas Opiola** spent his summer interning with the **U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission**. **Ed Finn** was appointed director of **Valparaiso University's** new online Master of Organizational Leadership program.

The **Saint Mary's College** board of trustees approved a two-year extension of President **Katie Conboy's** contract through 2030. She became the 14th president in 2020.

Vincent D'Angelo, a **Hillsdale College** graduate student from Munster, received a \$15,000 Weaver Fellowship from the **Intercollegiate Studies Institute**. Hillsdale is in Michigan.



Photo, Centier Bank

BANKING
Donald Rome



Photo, Purdue Federal Credit Union

BANKING
Chris Sibila



Photo, 1st Source Bank

BANKING
Matthew Verhamme



Photo, Notre Dame Federal Credit Union

BANKING
Melinda McPherson

AROUND THE REGION



Photo, Wintrust Financial

BANKING
Bill Gertner



Photo, Horizon Bank

BANKING
Drew Zromkoski



Photo, Northwest Indiana Forum

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
Yvonne Lopez



Photo, Northwest Indiana Forum

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
Erik Nelson

Ron Tulley, president of **Calumet College of St. Joseph**, was elected president-elect of the **Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi**. He was appointed the Whiting College's president on July 1. He replaces **Amy McCormack**, who retired after nine years of leadership.

Engineering

Allen Stevens was welcomed as a project supervisor in the Valparaiso office of **A&Z Engineering**.

Pat Nejman was welcomed to **Falk PLI's** Portage office as the survey department manager. **Jim Jabo** was promoted to industrial department manager.

Troy Eutsler and **Kathy Wolf** were appointed vice presidents at **American Structurepoint** based in Indianapolis. The national architecture and engineering consulting firm has offices in Merrillville and South Bend.

Finance

Alec Sanderson will become a financial adviser at **Howard Bailey Financial** after completing the Uniform

Investment Adviser Law Examination. The firm has an office in Mishawaka.

Government

Joshua Bain was appointed to the **Indiana Utility Regulatory Commission**. Bain most recently was the executive director of legislative and intergovernmental affairs for the **Indiana Department of Environmental Management**. He also was the Midwest director for the **Center for Energy Education**.

James Markle of the **Northern Indiana Law Enforcement Academy** was reappointed to the **Indiana Law Enforcement Training Board**, representing Porter County.

Mike Simpson of **M.E. Simpson Co. Inc.** was appointed to the **Indiana Natural Resources Commission**, representing Porter County.

Katie Hobgood of **Save the Dunes Conservation Fund** was appointed to the **President Benjamin Harrison Conservation Trust Project Commission**, representing Porter County.

Keith Slater of **Family Express** was reappointed to the state's **Petroleum Storage Tank Financial Assurance Board**. **Michael Kane** of Porter County was appointed to the **Governor's Council for People with Disabilities**.

James Sarkisian was reappointed to **Indiana's Worker's Compensation Board**. **John Ivory** of Elkhart County was reappointed to the **State Police Board**.

Marie Forszt and **Carly Brandenburg** of Lake County were appointed to the **Little Calumet River Basin Development Commission**.

Barbara Calhoun of St. Joseph County was reappointed to the **Rare Disease Advisory Council**.

David Tompos of Elkhart County was reappointed to the **Manufactured Home Installer Licensing Board**.

Dr. **Nicole Albright** of Lake County and Dr. **Kyle Hoskins** of St. Joseph County were appointed to the **Indiana Optometry Board**.

Jennifer Homan of Starke County was appointed to the **Trauma Care Commission**.



Photo, Shontrai Irving

EDUCATION
Shontrai Irving



Photo, University of Notre Dame

EDUCATION
James Schmiedeler



Photo, C-Span

EDUCATION
Eric Bowers



Photo, Eye Wander Photo/Phi Kappa Phi

EDUCATION
Ron Tulley

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AROUND THE REGION



Photo, A&Z Engineering

ENGINEERING
Allen Stevens

Mick Pawlik, chief of the **Coolspring Township Volunteer Fire Department** for over 30 years, received the Circle of Corydon award from **State Rep. Randy Novak**.

Dan Reyes, assistant town manager for the **Town of Munster**, was awarded the Strength & Resilience Award by the **Indiana Municipal Management Association**, a state affiliate of the International City/County Management Association. **Brad Baxter** was hired by the Town of Munster as director of public works. He will lead a department of 47 employees.

Healthcare

The **Franciscan Alliance** named **Michael Englehart** president and chief executive officer. Englehart succeeds **Kevin Leahy**, who is stepping down after 30 years as CEO.

The **Franciscan Physician Network** welcomed new healthcare professionals: endocrinologist and internal medicine Dr. **Hasan Qutob** and obstetrician and gynecologist Dr. **David Preskill** in Michigan City; internal medicine Drs.



Photo, Pat Nejman

ENGINEERING
Pat Nejman

Lance Wallace and Dr. **Dorothy Jones** in Dyer; and nurse practitioner **Ann Waldron** in Dyer.

Bridgette LaShawn Peppers of Hobart, **Tyler Lucas Rodriguez** of Schererville, **Lexi Nicole Taylor** of Orland Park, Illinois, and **Angelique Gray Thompson** of Gary were sworn in as **Volunteer Advocates for Seniors and Incapacitated Adults** through a **Franciscan Health** partnership with the **Lake County Courts**.

Edgewater Health President and CEO Dr. **Danita Johnson Woods** released her fifth book, "It's in the Details: Small Things That Change Everything," in July.

Suchita Shah and **Sarah Pomponi** were appointed to the **Methodist Hospitals Foundation** board of directors. Shah has been a licensed real estate broker with McColly Real Estate since 1996. Pomponi is a business owner and healthcare practice administrator

Manufacturing

THOR Industries in Elkhart promoted **Jayco** President **Ken Walters**



Photo, Town of Munster

GOVERNMENT
Brad Baxter



Photo, Franciscan Alliance

HEALTHCARE
Michael Englehart

to president of North American RV operations, a new consolidated division. Jayco Vice President **Nic Martin** was promoted to president of that subsidiary. **Mike Ritchie**, vice president of finance at Jayco, is now CFO of North American RV operations. **Trey Miller**, vice president of marketing at Jayco, was promoted to chief marketing officer of North American RV operations. **Troy James**, chief operating officer of the **Thor Motor Coach** and **Keystone** group, moved to president of Keystone.

Robert Hureau, president and chief executive officer of **Alamo Group Inc.**, was appointed to the **LCI Industries'** board of directors.

Celso Goncalves, the executive vice president and chief financial officer at **Cleveland-Cliffs Inc.**, was appointed president chief financial officer and to the board of directors.

P. Scott Bening, former president and CEO of Merrillville-based **MonoSol**, released the book "The Back Nine: Inspiration and Insights on Retaining Relevance, Purpose, and Integrity in Retirement."



Photo, Jayco

MANUFACTURING
Ken Walters



Photo, Goodwill Industries of Michiana

PHILANTHROPY
Jennifer Swisher-Carroll



Photo, YMCA of Greater Michiana

PHILANTHROPY
Kelly Doherty



Photo, Comcast

TECHNOLOGY
Steven Keller

Philanthropy

Goodwill Industries of Michiana hired support staff in South Bend, including **Jennifer Swisher-Carroll** as director at **The Excel Center South Bend**; **Justin Zobrosky** as senior director of academics and operations for The Excel Center; **Dean Barnes** as an automotive instructor at **The Academy**; and **Siscilia McClurken** as hospitality instructor at The Academy.

Kimberly Smith was named **Dunebrook Inc.**'s new executive director. The nonprofit is a family resource and child advocacy center based in Michigan City.

Kelly Doherty was named the director of the **YMCA of Greater Michiana**'s downtown South Bend early learning center, which is scheduled to open in January 2027.

Rita Koehler was named the first executive director of the **South Bend Lyric Opera**, which is celebrating its 10th anniversary.

Sarah Brown, a financial adviser with Edward Jones in La Porte, and **Nolah Nasser-Gertner**, a retired director of project development with **BLDD Architects**, joined the **La Porte County Symphony Orchestra**'s board of directors.

Technology

Grant Kuligowski joined **Pulse Technology** as a sales development representative. **Andy Nielsen**, a business analyst, was named on the Difference Maker list by the national trade journal **ENX Magazine**.

Steven Keller was appointed senior vice president of **Comcast**'s greater Chicago region, serving **Xfinity** and Comcast Business customers across Central and Northern Illinois, Northern Indiana and Southwest Michigan.

Transportation

Matthew Sanderson purchased the **Auto Park Ford of La Porte** from **Ken Norris**, who also owns a Ford and Chrysler, Dodge, Jeep, Ram dealership in Bremen, and a Ford dealership in Sturgis, Michigan. Sanderson, who plans to move from Michigan to La Porte, will operate the business as **La Porte Ford**. **Jonathon O'Dell** will continue as general manager. ■

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Growing legal opportunities

Firms provide talent incentives; experts consider alternative pathways in underserved areas



Photo, Purdue Global

Stefan May, a Purdue Global Law School graduate who passed the February 2026 Indiana bar exam, is admitted to the Indiana bar during a May 12 ceremony.

BILL DOLAN

Many baby boomer generation attorneys are in the closing arguments of their careers.

But during a statewide draw-down in the profession, Michigan City's Stefan May just made his entrance.

Recently graduated from the Purdue Global Law School, May joined Crown Point's Robbins and Seville law firm as an associate attorney this summer.

"I have a full caseload of clients, and I love practicing in Indiana," he said. "It's the right time to do it, because there is a lawyer shortage."

Indiana ranks in the bottom 10 states nationally with only 2.3 attorneys per 1,000 residents and over half of its counties qualify as legal

deserts, according to the American Bar Association.

The Indiana Supreme Court is considering reforms to meet the growing demand for affordable legal assistance. It already approved an amendment in 2024 that allows online law school graduates like May to take the bar exam if they submit a waiver.

That decision is good news for the Region's law firms, which make recruiting and retaining fresh talent a priority.

Joshua Hague, a partner at Krieg DeVault, said his firm offers summer interns more than \$2,500 a week and new associate attorneys \$150,000 a year. But he said those paychecks represent the normal course of inflation and are not a response to a labor market shortfall.

Shelice Tolbert, a partner at Tolbert & Tolbert in Gary, said another hiring trend is developing.

"The request to work remotely seems to be more common and expected in attracting new hires," she said. Her firm hired a new attorney in 2025.

Firms are counting on perks like these to replace the roughly 200 names that have dropped off the official count of active practitioners across Lake, Porter, La Porte, St. Joseph and Elkhart counties since 2020.

Other firms find support services a key to addressing the growing demand for counsel in Indiana.

"As demand for legal services continues to grow statewide, we expect that model — pairing our attorneys with



READ ON PHONE

skilled allied professionals — to keep playing a role in how we scale to meet it,” said Timothy Emerick, managing partner in Barnes & Thornburg’s South Bend office.

Legal deserts

Indiana faces another legal problem: legal deserts. Newton, Jasper, Starke and Pulaski counties are among the 49 rural Indiana counties with fewer than one lawyer per 1,000 residents, the American Bar Association’s threshold for a legal desert.

Tolbert would argue that areas of Gary also fit that definition.

“We have some outstanding attorneys in Gary and communities like Gary, but there are also gaps in practice areas because those attorneys do not handle every area of the law, which leads to citizens going outside of their own community to find a lawyer,” she said. “That indicates a need for more lawyers in Gary.”

The shortage has been most keenly felt in the Region since declining enrollment forced the 2020 closure of Valparaiso University’s law school, once accounting for 20% of the state’s law school graduates.

Hague said the closure impacted Krieg DeVault, which opened its Crown Point office in 2025. It also has a Mishawaka location.

“You could recruit (Valparaiso) graduates with a high chance they would stay with the Region,” Hague said. “Now, we fish for talent a little farther out in the pond.”

Tolbert said that closure also is affecting their ability to build a talent pipeline.

“We look to our bar associations that have law student memberships and the local universities with prelaw programs,” she said. “We know that students who attend IU in Indianapolis or Bloomington most likely have Northwest Indiana roots and could be looking to come back to the area to work. We also explore some of the law schools in the Chicagoland area with the same thought of NWI ties.”

Another training ground, the Indiana Tech Law School in Fort Wayne,

folded three years before Valparaiso University’s law school, and only graduated two classes.

Notre Dame Law School near South Bend and Indiana University’s two schools of law (McKinney in Indianapolis and Maurer in Bloomington) remain prestigious training grounds. But fewer than half of their annual classes, of about 600, take the bar exam, a rigorous two-day test that applicants must pass to be licensed to practice in the Hoosier state.



Photo, Gittings

► Timothy Emerick is managing partner in Barnes & Thornburg’s South Bend office.

Joe Skeel, executive director of the Indiana State Bar Association, said that, when law students go away to college, they don’t return home like they used to.

“It’s easier to find a job in a metro area,” he said. “There are just more law firms, clients and opportunity.”

But for Tolbert and her husband, Michael Tolbert, staying in the Region is a priority. They plan to attract new talent especially in underserved areas. They also are looking for a new office.

“In our quest for new space, we plan to stay in the community that raised us,” Shelice Tolbert said. “As far as future growth goes, we hope to provide legal services for other communities like Gary.”

New route to bar exam

Getting an invitation to the bar exam room was once almost exclusively available to degree holders from the ivy halls of traditional brick-and-mortar law schools.

To address the decline in the number of lawyers, the Indiana Supreme Court opened the door to fully online law schools in 2024.

That includes Purdue Global, which was founded in California in 1998 as Concord Law School. In 2018, it began operating under West Lafayette’s Purdue University banner.

Of the 16 Indiana-based Purdue Global Law School graduates last

year, 11, including May, passed the bar.

Now, more than 140 Indiana students are studying law online at Purdue Global, a 900% increase.

Born in Merrillville, May’s family moved from Indiana to Florida.

“I came back to Indiana, got my undergraduate degree, majoring in criminal justice,” he said. “I wanted to be a cop, but that didn’t work out.”

He was stuck in a security job in La Porte County when he made a farsighted decision at what then appeared to be an inopportune moment.

He pivoted to a law career, but the Valparaiso law school had already closed.

“The closest other law school was in the South Bend area, but I wouldn’t have been able to hold down a job and maintain a class schedule,” May said. “I would have had to choose between law school or raising a family.”

“Purdue Global’s online platform was about the only option.”

He enrolled, putting aside the problem of circumventing Indiana’s online law school restrictions. Fortunately,

Indiana unlocked the bar exam door in time for May to pass it and look for a job.

Kim Kass, Purdue Global Law School director of employment and community outreach, helped May find his first job.

“Stefan was one of my first employment placements,” she said. “I had previously worked at the Valparaiso University Law School, and through those connections, I knew lawyers at Robbins and Seville who asked if I knew of anybody to recruit.

Stefan interviewed and got hired.”

Second- and third-year Purdue Global students are landing internships and externships, building entry-level skills and receiving academic credits as judicial law clerks and volunteers who aid low-income Hoosiers.

“Law firms are eager to recruit our students,” Kass said.

Martin Pritikin, dean of the Purdue Global Law School, said this opens a new chapter for both his school and the state.



Photo, Purdue Global

► Kim Kass is Purdue Global Law School director of community outreach.

"Before, there was a lot of uncertainty outside the school as to whether our graduates could pass the Indiana bar exam," he said. "Now our graduates are passing the bar exam at a higher rate than the statewide average. It proves online doesn't mean inferior."

That realization is an important one for the state of Indiana.

"The existing law schools, while all fine institutions, are confined by geography in their ability to serve certain parts of the state," Pritikin said. "As an online

"In fact, we've seen a recent surge of new lawyers bringing fresh energy, skills and contributions to our firm," he said. "Last fall, we welcomed our largest-ever associate attorney class, including 11 in our Indiana offices."

It helps that Notre Dame is close by his office.

"South Bend has been a big part of that story, as one of the largest law offices in Northern Indiana," he said.

But, he attributes the firm's recruiting success to much more than proximity.

just wrapped up, is starting law school at IU right now. The program is another way we're building relationships with Indiana talent early."

He said young lawyers are drawn to Barnes & Thornburg's parental leave benefits, and the chance to work closely with seasoned litigators and dealmakers on complex, nationally significant matters, while living in a smaller market with a lower cost of living.

"That combination of substantive early-career experience and quality of life is a real differentiator for Northwest and North Central Indiana specifically," Emerick said.

Legal service alternatives

The authors of the Commission on Indiana's Legal Future final report concluded that the state must find not only more lawyers, but also better business models for rendering legal assistance.

The commission outlined a "legal regulatory sandbox" of nontraditional legal service methods.

William Henderson, an Indiana University Bloomington law professor, advocates the creation of nonprofit law firms employing allied legal professionals and technology to serve up high-volume, basic legal work — like fast-food outlets.

Henderson worked with the Commission on Indiana's Legal Future and undergraduate IU law students to research the challenges of legal services in rural and depressed communities.

"We found virtually all the lawyers in Bloomington and adjacent rural counties swamped with work and struggling to recruit entry-level lawyers and professional staff," he said.

That workload is why rural practices turn away volumes of low-value cases in high need areas such as family law, debt collection and consumer bankruptcy cases, he said.

"A nonprofit law firm could focus on volume and low cost, like the McDonald's of law service, which is not a bad thing," Henderson said.

"Let allied legal professionals focus on low-complexity, low-cost service under the supervision of lawyers. Then the



Photo, Rick Bella

Michael and Shelice Tolbert hired a lawyer in 2025 at Tolbert & Tolbert in Gary.

school, we don't have those limitations. Our students are drawn from those underserved areas. About one in eight come from Northwest Indiana."

He said Purdue Global is also more affordable, especially since you don't have to live on campus.

"IU McKinney's tuition is about two times as much as ours," he said. "Maurer is about 2.5 times as much, and Notre Dame is almost 4 times as much."

Pritikin said Purdue Global is more accessible to the 70 percent of his students who must remain employed while studying remotely because they have to be the bread winners for their dependents at home.

Building pipeline

Emerick of Barnes & Thornburg said there is no talent deficit at his firm, which employs more than 900 lawyers in offices around the country.

"We've leaned into building a pipeline rather than just competing for lawyers already in the market," he said. "We have an active summer associate program we use to recruit top talent from throughout the Region to join our team in South Bend."

The law firm that was formed in 1982 also invests internally.

"We also have a robust talent recruiting team, including a top-tier in-house recruiter, dedicated to identifying and developing that talent early," Emerick said.

Barnes & Thornburg's undergraduate internship program for aspiring business professionals interested in a legal industry career is actively recruiting regional talent across Purdue, Butler and DePauw university campuses.

"It's a 10-week summer program that gives students a real look at the business of law," he said. "One of our interns, who

lawyers would now be free to practice law at the top of their licenses.”

Shontrai Irving, clinical professor of business law at Purdue University Northwest, said resources already are available for people who don’t have legal counsel, including websites like Indiana Legal Help, the Lake County Bar Association and the Indiana State Bar Association.

Barnes & Thornburg uses paralegals and other allied legal professionals throughout its South Bend and Elkhart offices, Emerick said.

“It creates efficiencies and benefits for clients without sacrificing service or quality,” Emerick said. “That’s not a workaround for a shortage we’re not experiencing; it’s simply smart practice.”

Professionals without a law degree provide support services like client intake and case management.

“All of that work is reviewed by our lawyers, so clients get the benefit of a broader, more efficient team without any change in the quality or oversight of the legal advice they’re getting,” he said.

Cultivating rural practices

Kathryn Dolan, deputy chief for the Indiana Office of Judicial Administration, said state officials have yet to release money to fund law school scholarships or other incentives for lawyers to practice in rural areas. But she said the work to secure future funding continues.

Skeel of the Indiana State Bar Association said the state legislature passed a bill supporting scholarships to law students who agree to serve as a deputy prosecutor or public defender in rural communities.

“Everybody supports that idea, but there is no money backing that up,” Skeel said, “It’s really tough to start practicing in a rural community, unless you know someone, like a family member.”

Skeel said the state bar started a Rural Practice Academy this summer to train attorneys in the business of starting a solo or small law firm.

About 15 attorneys around the state, including one from Mishawaka, have been taking part.

He also wants state bar association members to sit down with chambers of commerce and local nonprofit founda-

“A nonprofit law firm could focus on volume and low cost, like the McDonald’s of law service, which is not a bad thing.”

— William Henderson, Indiana University Bloomington



Photo: IU Photo, Purdue Global

tions of underserved communities to brainstorm ways to draw people in.

“The prime group to return to rural communities are the people who have been practicing law for enough years to be confident with their legal skills, they’ve figured out how to deal with their student debt, and they are ready to take that next step,” Skeel said. ■



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MANUFACTURING

Steel support system

Local firms benefit from proximity to 3 of nation's largest steel producers



Photo, American Precision Services

American Precision Services of Gary provides repair and rebuilding services and employs 60 people. Robert Migliorini started the company in 2003.

MICHAEL PUENTE

In the early 2000s, Miguel Estrada started his first trucking company. The company consisted of Estrada, one truck and one driver.

The company lasted nearly a decade but eventually failed.

"I was pretty convinced that I would never get into trucking, but my kid changed my mind," Estrada said.

In 2012, Estrada started a new company, Indiana Steel Carriers, a family-owned business.

From its home base in Valparaiso, the company transports steel and other products to and from all 48 states and Mexico.

He is part of a network of companies that support some of the largest steel plants in the nation. From handling raw processing, high-definition fabrication and structural engineering, these companies provide jobs that help sustain major manufacturing and infrastructure in Northwest Indiana and beyond.

Chemcoaters in Gary offers coil coating. Munster Steel Co. is an American Institute of Steel Construction certified advanced bridge fabricator. Service Steel Warehouse in Hammond and Northern Steel Industries supply carbon steel. American Precision Services in Gary provides fabricating and welding. These companies are

among many others that support the steel industry.

"In the 1970s, this entire secondary industry exploded in the Northwest Indiana-southern suburbs of Chicago," said Ellen Lucke, executive sales director of Northern Steel Industries in Burns Harbor.

Since Northwest Indiana is home to some of the largest steel plants in the nation, competition is fierce for support services, as Estrada is well aware.

"It's a very competitive market," Estrada said. "There's so much competition out there. It's a tough environment."

But Lucke is optimistic. And she has reason to be. Almost half of the country's primary steel is produced in the

Region's three steel mills: Burns Harbor, Indiana Harbor and Gary Works
"Steel is not going anywhere," she said.

Economic powerhouse

Since the early 1900s, U.S. Steel has operated one of the largest integrated steel plants in North America in Gary.

According to U.S. Steel, the Gary plant generated \$1.8 billion in total economic impact in 2024, supported 8,402 jobs statewide, and contributed \$67.4 million in state and local tax revenue.

"Indiana has been at the heart of U. S. Steel's story for more than a century," said David Burritt, chief Executive officer of U. S. Steel, in a company statement.

"Gary Works has been a cornerstone of American steelmaking since 1908, and today it continues to power the state's economy while supporting thousands of good-paying jobs."

The 2025 U.S. Steel report conducted by Parker Strategy Group also showed that U.S. Steel engaged 401 Indiana-based suppliers.

Meanwhile, Cleveland-Cliffs operates large plants in East Chicago and Burns Harbor.

The two companies account for 47 percent of the country's primary steel production, according to a 2026 report by Indiana University.

These large operations open the door for small and specialized companies to work for or with U.S. Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs.

"There is a symbiotic relationship, and it is happening more and more," said Joseph Gomeztagle, retired professor of the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University Northwest in Gary and associate director of the Kelly School of Business at IU.

"They do work together," he said. "The smaller companies know there is a benefit to working with the

larger mills because the larger mills can't do everything. It's too costly for them."

Gomeztagle knows the steel industry not just as a business professor but as a former worker in his younger years.

A native of Mexico City who now lives in St. John, Gomeztagle got his start working for Republic Steel on Chicago's southeast side in the water control department.

Gomeztagle then moved on to Jones and Laughlin Steel Co., better known

as J&L, working as analyst for the company. Both of those companies are now closed.

Gomeztagle said today's major steel producers make more steel but with far fewer workers.

"They don't need as many workers as they used to," Gomeztagle said. "Many of the services they used to do, they don't do it anymore. That's why the outside firms have flourished."

Product delivery

But specialty steel mills aren't the only ones that benefit. Other companies providing all kinds of services such as repair of machinery and delivery of products are finding their niche too.

Estrada said he has an advantage over his competitors in the delivery of products.

"There's a lot of carriers that I don't even know the cost per mile. They just go out there and do things without knowing their bottom number," Estrada said. "They don't have a clue as to what is going on."

Estrada believes his knowledge, understanding and relationships he's built with local steel producers is beneficial in securing clients and expanding his business. One of his clients is the U.S. Department of Defense.



Photo, Northern Steel Industries

► Ellen Lucke is the executive sales director of Northern Steel Industries in Burns Harbor.



Photo, Indiana Steel Carriers

Indiana Steel Carriers of Valparaiso transports products made from steel to aluminum, pipes and machinery.



MANUFACTURING

In 2023, the company embarked on a new chapter by opening its second terminal in Laredo, Texas. The location helps to serve the expanding transportation and delivery to their clients across the United States and Mexico.

This includes the transportation demands of major steel mills, steel processors and an array of industrial companies. Products range from steel to aluminum, pipes and machinery.

"The years that I've been in business, I've gotten to know people, and they know how we operate and how we do things," Estrada said. "We're a minority-owned company, so that makes it a little bit easier. The whole team is making it happen. It's not just me. Everybody in the office: the truck drivers, dispatchers, managers. It's not just one person that is making all this happen."

For the future, Estrada said he plans to keep the business in the family despite getting offers to sell.

"I'm ready to pass it on to the kids, and I'm pretty sure they have the ambition to build better and grow in the business,"

he said. "I'm sure that is the new generation. I've got two boys, and my daughter. They're gonna knock them out of the park. Their goals have no limits."

More than odd jobs

For Robert Migliorini, president of American Precision Services in Gary, his company does machine shop work and mechanical repairs for clients like Cleveland-Cliffs but other firms as well.

"We do fabricating and welding. We also make parts, we rebuild mechanical rotating equipment, pumps and gearboxes," said Migliorini, who employs about 60 people.

Migliorini said, when the mills are thriving, so are they.

"Some of the work that we get from the machine shop is either overflow that they're too busy to get to or maybe they



Photo, Joseph Gomeztagle

► Joseph Gomeztagle is a retired professor of the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University Northwest in Gary and associate director of the Kelly School of Business at IU.

don't have the right equipment for it," Migliorini said.

Migliorini started working in the machine shop industry in the early 1970s. In 2003, he decided to start his own business.

"With two or three other people, we started American Precision Services," he said. "The steel industry isn't our only customer nor is it our only type of customer."

For Migliorini, the size of a project doesn't bother him. He said the firm recently finished a large project in California that took two years to complete.

"I won't say what type of business it was, but it was a large, huge undertaking and a lot of dedication by the people working here to go out there, spend the amount of time needed," he said. "We were shipping components to and from."

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Migliorini said he fell in love with machine shop class while in high school. And he still loves it.

"Today I was here at five or six in the morning. I'll probably be here until 5:30 at night. That's because I don't like it. I love it," Migliorini said. "I absolutely love it. The people that work here. I love the customers, the suppliers. It's just fun to me."

Raw materials

Northern Steel Industries in Burns Harbor got its start shortly after Al "Big Al" Kumskis ended his NFL career.

Born in Chicago's Roseland neighborhood on the South Side, Kumskis attended Mount Carmel High School, a school known for football. From there, he played defensive end for the University of Miami in Florida before being drafted by the Cleveland Browns in 1963.

But injuries cut his career short. Once back home in Chicago, he got a job at a steel company.

"He did that for three weeks and came home and told my mom 'I cannot do this anymore. Like this is the worst thing on earth,'" said his daughter Ellen Lucke. "He looked in the parking lot of the steel mill and saw a beautiful car. Went in and asked, 'Whose car is that? What job do they do? And how do I get that job?' ... It was sales."

That pushed Kumskis to become a salesman at Century Steel in Chicago Heights, Illinois.

In 1975, Kumskis and his wife, Nancy, decided to start their own company. Northern Steel Industries in Burns Harbor is one of several firms established by former employees of Century Steel.

Lucke, who is now the executive sales director of Northern Steel Industries, said the company is a distributor, a service center for steel products.

"We order custom-made steel at all the local mills, and then we process it and store it for our clients. We also buy steel that's for sale on the secondary market," Lucke said. "We take what the mill makes and turn it into usable raw material for the manufacturers. That is a unique industry to Northwest Indiana."

Celebrating more than 51 years in business, the company with 74

employees now has clients near and far.

"We own the expertise in our Region because that's where all the steel mills are," Lucke said. "Although we have clients that we supply all over the country, most of this manufacturing gets done in the Gary area because that's where all the equipment and all the expertise is."

Kumskis passed away at the age of 72 in 2015, but the legacy he and his wife built survives.

Lucke said the company will remain a family-owned firm in the years to come. Its Burns Harbor facility still has space to grow.

"The next generation is coming into the company unlike so many companies that get bought by private equity and get ruined," Lucke said.

"For Northern Steel, that's not our vision. We plan to keep it and let it evolve." ■

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TAX PLANNING

Keys to Hoosier tax haven

Experts explain perks of moving to Indiana, benefits that support company growth



Mayor Thomas McDermott Jr., the City of Hammond, Uesco Industries, 219 Development Services, Fifth Third Bank, and project partners gathered July 9 to celebrate the groundbreaking of Uesco's new crane manufacturing facility in Hammond.

BILL DOLAN

Doing business in one of the most tax friendly terrains in the country still requires a map — in the helpful hands of a financial planner.

"Indiana has historically offered a strong portfolio of economic development incentives," said Jenny Walters,

"But, tax considerations and incentives need to be evaluated before signing a lease, purchasing property or equipment or making a public announcement," Walters said.

Sikich supported rScan's move to a larger space in the former South Bend Chocolate Co.'s production facility. The South Bend startup resells returned merchandise.

Ryan Marks, president of Alsip,

director of site selection and business incentives for Sikich, a professional services firm based in Chicago.

Indiana ranked 10th in the country for business favorable tax policy, according to the Tax Foundation's 2026 State Tax Competitiveness Index.

Illinois' Uesco Cranes, began deliberating a cross border leap 10 years ago. He lives in Indiana and knows the tax advantages would be worth the move.

"We had looked at building in Crete, Illinois, but the incentives Illinois was offering us were a pittance," Marks said.

In July, 105-year-old Uesco broke ground on a new \$25 million crane manufacturing facility in Hammond.

Kate Leichty, lead tax partner at South Bend-based Kruggel Lawton CPAs, said tax benefits are a big reason companies move to the Region.

"Business owners are very incentivized by big deductions, credits and write offs," Leichty said. "That keeps more dollars in their pockets, helping cash flow and reducing the cost of borrowing when they reinvest in their company."

Tax abatements and payroll tax credits help too.

"You spell out to the local government your plans to increase head count or investment spending and, if you meet those, you don't pay property taxes, for as long as 10 years," Leichty said.

"The incentives are the frosting on the cake. They are never going to make a bad site a good site."

— Heather Ennis, Northwest Indiana Forum

#10

Indiana's national ranking for having business favorable tax policies by the Tax Foundation, a Washington D.C.-based research center.

Across state line

Marks had been scouting a new location for the fourth-generation family-owned manufacturer of custom engineered overhead bridge cranes.

"Ryan had looked at Schererville and Merrillville and all over Northwest Indiana trying to find the right site and the right package," said Jack Ferrino, owner and principal of 219 Development Services of Hammond.

"He couldn't always make the economics work on a lot of these sites. Then, about a year and a half ago, he heard about our name."

Ferrino, who has previously developed many such enterprises, began discussions with Marks months ago about launching a new project in the heavily industrial but underused north Hammond vicinity.

"We told Ryan that Uesco would be a great fit," Ferrino said. "We met with Hammond and everyone got super excited."

Ferrino said they zeroed in on the 5000 block of the Calumet Street as an ideal logistics node for Uesco's headquarters and production facility.

Uesco typically transports customers' cranes, dozens of feet in length, on interstate highways.

"At this site, you've got I-90, I-94 and even Calumet Avenue is big enough for our trucks to turn on," Marks said.

Ferrino recalls the day Ryan finally said, "You've got me sold on Hammond."

"We went to the city and said we need some help with taxes," Ferrino said.

Marks said Hammond is giving Uesco a 10-year 100-percent tax abatement.

"This was in a deeply economically distressed census tract, so it qualified

for New Market Tax Credits given to attract investment in underprivileged and underserved communities," Ferrino said.

The process was intense.

"We had to check all the right boxes to make sure we were in compliance," Ferrino said. "It generates stacks of paperwork taller than me."

Uesco also met with the state to obtain Economic Development for a Growing Economy payroll credits generated by the creation of Uesco's new Indiana jobs.

"The EDGE credit is a really huge benefit for companies that increase their (Hoosier) payrolls," Leichty said. "We have a lot of clients who own pass-through entities, partnerships or S corporations, who find it really worthwhile to do the legwork showing they met their goal of hiring more people to receive those credits — dollar-for-dollar reductions on their state tax returns."

Ferrino said it took about eight months to gain those approvals for Uesco. They also met with residents to make sure they were on board.

"(We wanted to) make sure there was all the right buy-in, so we weren't disturbing neighbors and winning over everyone that we were doing the right thing for the community by bringing in these 100 jobs with local hiring measures," Ferrino said.

Marks said the "long and laborious process" wouldn't have been completed without his team of lawyers, Ferrino and Hammond Mayor Thomas McDermott Jr., among others.

Now work has begun on the 70,000-square-foot manufacturing, distribution and headquarters.



Photo, 219 Development

► Jack Ferrino is the principal and owner for 219 Development Services of Hammond.



Photo, Uesco

► Ryan Marks is president of Uesco Cranes.

Other successes for Indiana include:

- Meat by Linz, a global meat purveyor and ranching concern, moving from Calumet City, Illinois, to Hammond
- Hoist Lifteruck from Bedford Park, Illinois, to East Chicago
- Outstanding Tradeshow Exhibit Services from Romeoville, Illinois, to North Judson

Competitive market

Heather Ennis, CEO and president of the Northwest Indiana Forum, a regional economic development organization, said finding the right location, labor force and knowing Indiana's overall tax structure are the fundamentals of attracting prospective business investments.

"The incentives are the frosting on the cake," she said. "They are never going to make a bad site a good site."

However, she added Indiana isn't afraid to get into a bidding war with rival states.

"It's a very competitive market," she said, "and without incentives, companies might stay put or invest somewhere else offering incentives."

Ennis cautions there is a limit to what Indiana can offer.

"It's good to keep these things in balance," Ennis said. "Some taxes are good to keep to fund needed community services, like fire and police. We don't want it to be a race to the bottom."

Walters of Sikich said their tax advisers identify whether a company's project is in competition for incentives, negotiate the terms with economic development officials and then hold everyone to their commitments.

"An incentive only has value if a company can qualify for it, earn it and ultimately receive it," Walters said. "The important question is not simply whether one tax went down. It is the overall cost of doing business."

Other perks

Nicole Fox, a policy analyst for the Tax Foundation, a Washington, D.C.-based research center, said Indiana keeps competitive through a flat individual income tax rate that is one of the lowest in the Midwest.



READ ON PHONE

TAX PLANNING

The state also offers a ceiling on business real estate property tax collections. The newest tax perk is raising its exemption from \$80,000 to \$2 million for business tangible personal property — any equipment ranging from industrial machinery to a dentist's X-ray unit.

"On the federal side, last year, there was reinstatement of 100% bonus depreciation on business personal property," Leichty said. "Spend \$2 million on a new machine press and get a \$2 million deduction on your federal return that you can take up front the first year. We have a lot of clients very excited about that coming back into play."

The federal Qualified Business Income deduction, made permanent in 2025, is huge for businesses big and small, said Eileen Patterson, tax construction director for CliftonLarsonAllen, a nationwide CPA firm with an office in Schererville.

"Taking a 20 percent deduction off their income means money they can

invest in their business or just keep it for themselves," Patterson said. "Owners can count on them to both preserve their wealth and finance their business' capital expenditures."

She said CLA tax consultants also help business owners align philanthropic objectives with tax-efficient planning strategies, such as whether gifts should be made by the owner personally, through the business, a donor-advised fund or a private foundation.

Not just tax preparers

Taking advantage of Indiana's tax benefits requires more than a tax adviser. "We recommend a team approach among us, an investment planner and an attorney, to review large estate planning decisions about what share of a business sale they want each heir to receive to reduce the heirs' tax burdens," said Tom Newman, a CPA with Swartz, Retson & Co. of Merrillville.

His firm also develops tax projections for clients.

"Some are good at running calculations themselves for the first three quarters of the year, but rely on us to prepare their final estimate, encompass tax law changes and discuss business planning moves they should make before year-end," he said.

Newman said accountants aren't just tax preparers.

"Our clients rely on us to provide service and knowledge beyond putting numbers on a tax form," Newman said. "We send out bi-weekly newsletters on the newest tax credits available and emails to select clients who would be most impacted by the change."

Paul Applegate, founder of Michigan City-based Applegate & Co., said part of the tax preparation process is planning for the next year.

"When we prepare a tax return, we recommend applicable safe harbor estimated tax payments for the next year in order to avoid any underpayment penalties," Applegate said.

Marisa Smoljan, head of the tax department at Munster's McMahon & Associates, said understanding a client's business also is important.

"Having a good handle on the client's income and then projecting their tax liability on a quarterly basis, is really important if their income fluctuates," she said.

"Some of our businesses have been really thriving lately, but with that, comes increased taxes. We try to prepare them for April 15."

Applegate said all businesses need an accountant. He said one of his clients, an ophthalmologist, initially hesitated giving up filling out his S-corporation and his personal tax returns.

Applegate told his eye care client, "Doc, you doing your own tax return would be like me trying to do cataract surgery."

Once clients are on board, Smoljan said the work has only begun.

"The most important part is keeping in touch with clients throughout the year and knowing their business and being informed of their choices before they make a final decision," Smoljan said. "Because after the year ends, it's just too late." ■



Photo, Kruggel Lawton CPAs

► Kate Leichty is the lead tax partner at Kruggel Lawton CPAs.



Photo, IdeaSeat Marketing

► Marisa Smoljan leads the tax department at McMahon & Associates CPAs in Munster.



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Purpose meets prosperity

Region's nonprofits also employers with power of 33,000 workers



Photo, Opportunity Enterprises

Gabby Latchford, direct support professional at Opportunity Enterprises, works on an art project with a client.

KERRY SAPET

When people think about nonprofits, they often picture food pantries, community fundraisers and volunteers serving meals.

What they don't always see is one of Northwest Indiana's greatest economic engines.

"Nonprofits are a much larger part of the regional economy than many people realize," said Kelly Anoe, president and CEO of Merrillville-based Legacy Foundation. "They employ thousands of people, purchase goods and services from local businesses, occupy office and facility space, and attract funding from outside the Region into our communities."

According to the Indiana Nonprofits Project, nonprofits in 2019 employed

approximately 33,000 workers — about 11% of all paid employment in the Region — and generated \$1.5 billion in payroll. Those numbers tell an important economic story.

"Nonprofits are often viewed through the services they provide, but they are also employers creating meaningful career opportunities," Anoe said. "Professionals in fields like finance, marketing, communications, technology and fundraising can build rewarding careers while seeing the direct impact of their work in the communities they serve."

The nonprofit sector blends business with community purpose, creating financially significant organizations deeply rooted in improving quality of life.

"Nonprofits can play a vital role in the regional economy by acting as a

connector among the many groups that drive our workforce — employers, job seekers, education and training providers, community organizations, and other partners who have a stake in fostering sustainable, healthy communities," said Lisa Daugherty, president and CEO of Gary-based Center of Workforce Innovations. "By strengthening those relationships and aligning resources around shared outcomes, we help build the skilled workforce employers need to grow while contributing to Northwest Indiana's long-term economic competitiveness and resilience."

Beyond charity

For Northwest Indiana, nonprofits are far more than charitable organizations.



READ ON PHONE

They are employers, workforce developers, investors and economic anchors. Their economic influence extends across virtually every industry.

“The nonprofit sector is charitable, but it is also an important part of our economic infrastructure,” Anoe said. “Both roles can coexist.”

Nonprofits employ physicians and accountants to marketers and IT professionals. Large health systems function much like major corporations. Community foundations manage hundreds of millions of dollars in charitable assets. Museums oversee facilities, programming and tourism initiatives.

Opportunity Enterprises, for example, supports individuals with disabilities, many of whom find jobs with small businesses. The nonprofit also employs 400 people.

“Nonprofits are an investment in the community,” said Neil Samahon, president and CEO of Valparaiso-based Opportunity Enterprises. “The money that comes into these organizations, also comes back out. ... We put a lot of money back into the community in wages and payroll.”

Every paycheck issued by a nonprofit circulates through the regional economy. Employees purchase homes, dine at restaurants, buy groceries, support local retailers and pay taxes. Construction projects generate work. Grants awarded by foundations help launch workforce initiatives and economic development projects.

“If we stop at how nonprofits benefit the homeless, displaced persons, individuals with disabilities or whatever population they’re serving, we miss half the story,” Samahon said. “If we carry it a step forward, we can see these nonprofits are all not only good at the human level, but they also benefit the economy.”

The organization also supports parents and helps keep their children in the workforce. Robust support services draw people into communities across the Region. These individuals contribute to the local economy through their employment and purchasing power.

“When we speak in economic terms, we need to include nonprofits in the conversation,” Samahon said. “Having

a good network of nonprofits is like icing on the cake — it shows Northwest Indiana is a vibrant place to do business, move and grow.”

Career pathways

One of the nonprofit sector’s greatest strengths is its ability to introduce young people to the workforce.

“Nonprofits are uniquely positioned, because we can meet young people where they are, at whatever stage of their career-exploration journey,” Daugherty said. “The goal isn’t simply to help someone find their first job; it’s to help them understand career pathways, build skills, gain work-based learning experiences, and develop relationships that can support their long-term success.”

Organizations such as the YMCA have long served as an entry point for teenagers seeking their first jobs. Whether supervising summer camps, assisting with youth programs or working as lifeguards, many employees begin learning workplace expectations while still in high school.

An early experience shaped Payton Summers’ career. She now serves as a family resource specialist at Opportunity Enterprises.

“I’ve known the path I wanted to pursue since high school, where I was a peer tutor and first discovered how much I enjoyed working within the disability population,” Summers said.

“That experience made me want to work in a field where I could support individuals and families and make a meaningful difference in their lives.”

Young people gain valuable experience through internships, seasonal employment, volunteer leadership programs and part-time positions. Other organizations host college interns who gain experience in marketing, communications and nonprofit management.

These opportunities teach skills that remain valuable throughout a person’s career.

“Because nonprofit teams are often collaborative, interns and entry-level employees frequently work directly with senior leaders, board members, donors, community partners and elected officials,” Anoe said. “Nonprofit staff often wear multiple hats, so young employees get the opportunity to contribute to meaningful work while learning professional skills.”

Many nonprofit leaders can point to former teenage employees who eventually became teachers, health care professionals, nonprofit executives, entrepreneurs or civic leaders after gaining their first workplace experience through mission-driven organizations. These individual journeys illustrate the long-term return that nonprofits generate through mentorship.

“The nonprofit sector is made up of a multigenerational workforce, including



Photo, Powers Health

Students from Munster High School prepare to interact with an adult patient simulator used for education and training purposes at Powers Health. The device is capable of mimicking realistic bodily functions, such as breathing and blinking.

PHILANTHROPY

emerging professionals who are just beginning their careers and seasoned professionals with decades of experience and community knowledge,” Anoe said. “This diversity of perspectives, experiences and ages fosters a strong culture of shared knowledge and collaboration.”

Nonprofit giants

Although patients experience healthcare nonprofits primarily during doctor’s appointments, these institutions also function as anchors of regional economic stability.

“In the healthcare industry, nonprofit organizations serve a dual purpose,” said Donald Fesko, Powers Health president and CEO. “They provide vital care and services while also creating meaningful employment opportunities. Careers in nonprofit healthcare often come with a strong sense of mission, giving employees the chance to contribute to the health and well-being of their neighbors.”

Hospitals and health systems employ thousands of physicians, nurses,

therapists, technicians, pharmacists and support staff. Powers Health, for example, employs nearly 9,000 individuals.

The ripple effects are enormous. Healthcare employees purchase homes, support local businesses, and contribute to municipal tax bases through property ownership and consumer spending. Large hospital construction projects generate work for regional contractors and suppliers, while ongoing purchasing supports countless local vendors.

These organizations often partner with local schools, colleges and universities to develop talent pipelines in nursing, medical technology and allied health professions. Powers Health offers local teens opportunities to gain their first healthcare experience through volunteer programs, patient-support roles and mentorship opportunities. These programs, along with internships, residency programs and tuition assistance, help develop the next generation of healthcare workers while encouraging graduates to remain in the Region.

“Since Powers Health’s mission is

centered on community well-being, it can focus on creating pathways for young people to explore meaningful healthcare careers while remaining connected to the communities they serve,” Fesko said. “This dual commitment to community health and workforce development allows Powers Health to make a lasting impact, not only by caring for patients today, but by preparing the healthcare leaders of tomorrow.”

Mission oriented

Many nonprofit employees describe their work as meaningful in ways that extend beyond compensation.

“Working for a nonprofit gives you an opportunity to become part of the community you serve, rather than simply providing a service to it,” Daugherty said.

Many workers also value knowing their efforts improve lives every day. That sense of mission often contributes to higher engagement and long-term commitment. Employees frequently report stronger connections with



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coworkers, volunteers and community members because everyone shares a common purpose.

"We're seeing more youth looking for job opportunities that impact their environment — either bringing value to another human being or literally the environment," Samahon said. "They are seeking service-minded, mission-oriented opportunities."

Claudia Pena grew up in East Chicago. After seeing the real needs around her, Pena felt a pull to give back to her community. She took a job as communications manager at CoAction, a Crown Point-based nonprofit that helps residents experiencing financial hardship.

"CoAction served over 35,000 people each year, and working there helped me gain a clear, grounded understanding of the needs and service gaps across Northwest Indiana," Pena said. "Seeing that direct impact every day fueled my passion for nonprofit work and reinforced my commitment to this field."

In March, Pena joined the Legacy Foundation as development and marketing manager.

"I love being actively involved in driving real change in my community," Pena said. "It's incredibly rewarding to work behind the scenes, contribute to practical solutions, and help shape initiatives that directly improve lives across Lake County."

Multiplier effect

Every nonprofit employee supports other businesses by spending their earnings and creating demand for housing, retail, entertainment and professional services. Every successful youth mentoring program develops future employees for regional companies.

Economists describe this as the multiplier effect — the idea that one dollar spent generates additional rounds of economic activity throughout the community.

The result is a regional economy that is stronger because nonprofits exist.

"When nonprofits are strong, they create jobs, strengthen neighborhoods, improve quality of life, and help make our communities places where people want to live, work and invest," Anoe said.

Most importantly, nonprofits are institutions that prove the strongest economies are built not only on commerce but also on community. Every paycheck they issue, every career they launch, and every life they change reinforces the idea that doing good and driving economic prosperity can go hand in hand.

"My connection to the community is at the center of everything I do,"

Summers said. "Working for a nonprofit has allowed me to build relationships with families, community organizations and professions, but even more importantly, I get to see firsthand what can happen when a community comes together. Those connections are what make this work so meaningful and continue to drive me in my career." ■



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Creative economy

Spending on arts, culture brings strong return on investment



Photo, Doug Ross

An angel wings mural stands outside the 4th Street Theater in Chesterton. The theater is included in the new Indiana Dunes Tourism Arts + Culture Trail.

DOUG ROSS

Arts and culture are now considered vital economic drivers, and for good reason.

Not only do they bring beauty and quality of life, but they also generate a strong return on investment, attract visitors and new residents, and produce creative problem solvers.

"It actually drives a lot of jobs. It drives a lot of our economy," We Create Media CEO Wade Breitzke said. He is a member of Indiana's Creative Economy Leadership Alliance, a trade association for creative businesses.

The numbers prove his point. The National Endowment for the Arts reports that arts and culture are a \$10.1 billion sector of the Indiana economy, and that 92,643 Hoosiers are employed in creative jobs.

Indiana also has higher arts-and-culture employment growth than the rest of the country, at more than 5.5% compared to 0.3% nationally. But in Indiana, the sector provides only 2% of Indiana's GDP compared to 4.2% nationally.

That leaves room for more creative jobs, Breitzke said.

Christine Livingston, president and CEO of Indiana Dunes Tourism, leads the placemaking pillar for Ignite the Region, Northwest Indiana's regional economic strategy. In 2025, arts and culture were added as a sixth pillar.

"Quality-of-life amenities aren't just nice to have anymore," Livingston said. "They're recognized as core to economic development. Tourism knows this. Site selectors already know this. Municipalities and other regional organizations are catching up."

Janet Bloch, executive director of the Lubeznik Center for the Arts in Michigan City, sees that, too.

"A good quality of life drives the economy," she said.

Tracking return on investment

So how is ROI factored for arts and culture?

"I do painting and music and film. All these are very artistic things," Breitzke said. "There's a way to think about the return directly, but what value do we get out of this?"

Art Barn School of Art Executive Director Amy Davis Navardauskas said tracking ROI is important. Each funder has different metrics depending on the goal of their investment. "Depending on what their reporting is, we follow those."

"We're using everything from visitor



READ ON PHONE

logs to registration metrics. All those are done mostly electronically for us,” she said.

That includes attendance at offsite outreach events and website visits.

The Indiana Arts Commission is funding projects in all 92 counties. Executive Director Miah Michaelson wants to make sure the investments have an impact.

“You can start with how many participated, how many were served directly,” she said.

Most programs require a match, either cash or in-kind donation. For a \$4,000 grant for a concert series, a \$10,000 private match is common. “That is absolutely an ROI we can track,” she said.

But other measures aren’t as tangible.

“A lot of the value on our investment, you can’t track — quality of life, quality of place. You can’t necessarily put a dollar value to that,” Michaelson said.

“On balance, if you look at communities in Indiana that are high-growth places and are recognized as great destinations, whether it’s to vacation or live or start a business, they are places that have invested and have a robust arts-and-culture ecosystem.”

Case in point

Kristine Wright, director of the Brook/Iroquois Washington Public Library in Brook, was thrilled to get a \$1.9 million Regional Economic Acceleration and Development Initiative 2.0 arts-and-culture grant. With the local match, that brings \$3.88 million in investment for a library expansion.

The library, built in 1914, is one of the original Carnegie libraries funded by Andrew Carnegie’s largesse.

“Libraries have really evolved through time to become more of a community center,” she said.

The funding is going toward a 4,400-square-foot expansion.

“We really don’t want to abandon our beloved Carnegie,” Wright said.

The expansion will allow programs to be done at the library instead of shopping around for other locations. The programs are popular.

“A lot of the return on investment comes when a kid comes in just grinning ear to ear because they just watched a puppet show,” Wright said, or the 28 residents

at a nursing home smiling and thanking the staff for bringing a monthly crafts program to them.

Some of the programs are tied directly to Newton County’s culture.

“We do quite a few historical programs,” she said. Newton County was home to famed author and playwright George Ade, the Nature Conservancy’s Kankakee Sands Nature Preserve and more.

“We also love to feature local artists,” she said.

Public art helps tell the story of the land, the industry, the people, too, Bloch said.

“We have been learning about other historical figures, considering bringing those people to life in a nontraditional way,” Bloch said.

Building identity

Fourth Street Theater in Chesterton is featured on Indiana Dunes Tourism’s Arts + Culture Trail. Board President

and Technical Director Angela Heid said the small, 50-seat theater

focuses on shows that make people talk about important issues. “We only do one comedy a year,” she said.

The theater’s exterior features a pair of wings for visitors to pose with. The artist donated his time and materials for the project.

One of the theater’s annual traditions is a 10-minute play festival, featuring plays as short as the festival’s name implies. Some are world premieres.

Julia Gibbs, executive director of the Miller Beach Arts and Creative District in Gary, is also focused on attracting people to the community.

A \$172,000 READI 2.0 grant will help the nonprofit’s old, historic Marshall Gardner Center for the Arts become ADA accessible, allowing fundraising efforts to be devoted to programming



Zaria Chandler’s artwork includes this coffee table in use at a Chicago coffee shop.

Photo: Zaria Chandler



Duneland Pottery owner David Arreola and his daughter, Gabbi Arreola, watch as Valparaiso Mural Walk participants try their hand at clay creations at the Valparaiso Creative Council's Valpo Creates Center on Aug. 22.

Photo: Doug Floss

rather than facilities.

The district features a Lake Effekt mural festival as funds permit. Gibbs hopes it will become an annual event. "There will be a lot more going on in the 2027 festival," she said.

"The thing that really matters is the engagement with the community and the people who come to the neighborhood,"

Gibbs said.

Livingston recently launched the Arts + Culture Trail.

"It connects galleries, murals, performance venues and boutique dining and shopping across the Region into one experience," she said. "It's brand new ... but we are hearing anecdotally from partners that it is driving traffic to

them. This is music to our ears. Visitors enjoy it and are engaging, and it's helping our local businesses!"

Indiana Dunes Tourism is counting on those visits to add up to more than a weekend away from home.

"It's pretty simple," Livingston said. "If you want to visit a place, you may eventually want to live there. If you live there, you may want to work there. Arts and culture are what make people want to visit in the first place."

Business acumen

Marshall County Economic Development Corp. President and CEO Greg Hildebrand wants artists to succeed.

"We put together an eight-week course for entrepreneurs" in different sectors," he said. "We do have a lot of creative individuals in the area, and many of them are trying to make a living or at least subsidize their income through their arts."

What artists, he said, is a little business sense.

"They are excellent at what they do in their chosen field, but their business acumen needs some assistance," he said.

Artists need to learn how to market their business, how to identify opportunities and how to make sure their expenses are covered when setting prices.

Hildebrand said 25 people applied for the program, and 15 were included in the first cohort.

The Indiana Arts Commission has a similar program.

"Rarely do they teach in arts school or just general knowledge how to run a business or how to be a business person," Michaelson said.

"Some musicians make music and have no interest in monetizing their music, and that's just fine," she said, but for those who want to make some money on their talents, whether full-time or as a side hustle, the commission offers assistance.

Zaria Chandler, founder of Chandler Advisory in Dyer, is one of those artists who participated in the Indiana Arts Commission's On-Ramp Creative Entrepreneur Accelerator program this year.

"We got a lot of valuable information

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in those three days,” she said.

Her artworks have been primarily self-funded, she said. That’s going to change.

“In the beginning, I had the idea up front, and the last thing I thought about was the market for it and the return on investment,” Chandler said.

But that mentality is changing for her. She now understands that being a successful artist means being compensated fairly.

Most of her works pay tribute to the hip-hop movement. Among her works is a coffee table for a coffee shop in Chicago.

Sculptor Chad Copeland, founder of C2Fab in Valparaiso, works on commission, including the centerpiece at Flounder & Friends Skatepark in Valparaiso, which was funded by the Valparaiso Creative Council. He also created the Birds of Paradise scattered throughout downtown funded by the Valparaiso Redevelopment Commission.

He also does metal fabrication for

clients, including ornamental fencing. “Northwest Indiana is getting much better than it used to be” Copeland said. “There’s more and more support every year.”

He said that people want to go to creative, whimsical, artsy places, he said. They want to shop at “locally owned boutiques where a quirky woman behind the counter is making things.”

“If you look, the communities that embrace the artists, the tourism increases,” he said. “The quality of life in those communities increases. They become more fun. People flock to that.”

Funding matters

Jessica Corral, executive director of the Valparaiso Creative Council, said funding for the arts is vital to a community’s economic health. Big projects bring big results.

“Think back to the golden era, 1920s to 1940s, when monumental structures were built,” she said. “The Hoover Dam, Mount Rushmore, the Statue of Liberty.

How much tourism did that one structure create?”

Even one mural a year can put a town on the map, she said. The Valparaiso Creative Council sponsors several a year during its annual Mural Walk.

“A community willing to invest in the arts preserves its longevity. Period,” she said.

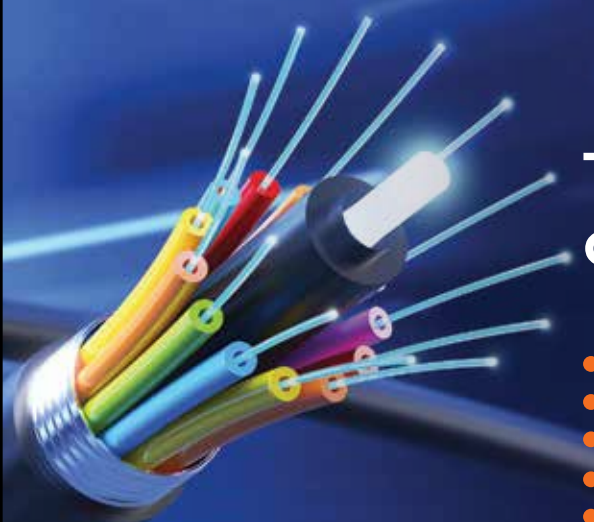
The arts affect individuals as well as communities.

“I think public money is catalytic,” Breitzke said about attracting additional funding from the private sector for the community. “We should look at corporate investment tied to these economic outcomes.”

Breitzke said encouraging creativity pays off for businesses, too.

“The more thoughtful you are, the more creative you are with your solutions, the more valuable you become,” he said.

“The world is increasingly hungry for originality, for creativity. Whoever wins that, wins the economy.” ■



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Project beyond imagination



South Bend-based Envel Facade casts letters for Obama center

KERRY SAPET

When architects envision an iconic building, turning that vision into reality often requires a manufacturing partner willing to tackle problems without easy answers.

For South Bend-based Envel Facade, solving those complex challenges is at the heart of its business. One of the

undertaking took four years. The Obama Presidential Center opened June 19.

“There was preliminary collaboration that had to do with what the product was capable of achieving from a structural standpoint in addition to the aesthetic goals,” said Craig Heaney, Envel president. “This was done in part prior to the project being awarded but much more significantly post award as we pro-

Envel used roughly 600,000 pounds of ultra high-performance concrete to create the panels, with individual panels weighing between 9,000 and 15,000 pounds. The company developed 50 unique molds, and panels required the assembly of their individual letters before casting.

Casting each panel took between five and seven days, making the casting process a yearlong undertaking. Envel then spent another 10 months completing post-casting finishing work at its South Bend facility.

Ultra high-performance concrete made the project possible, providing the strength and durability required for the enormous panels, while allowing the lettering to be reproduced with remarkable precision. But material alone could not solve the challenge. It took engineering, manufacturing expertise, and a team willing to keep working when the solution was not immediately apparent.

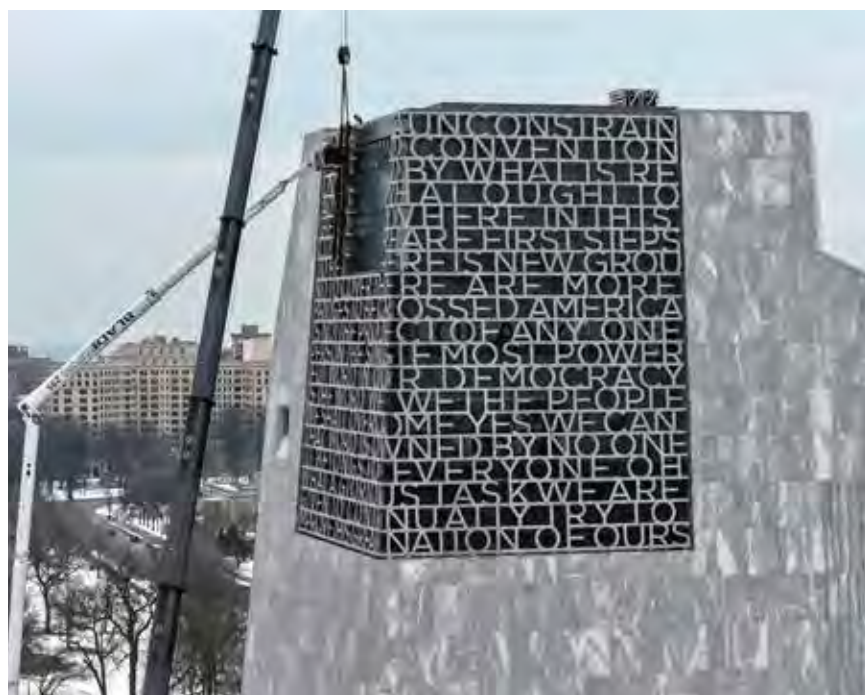
“I had a great team in the plant that didn’t give up and figured out ways to make it happen,” Heaney said.

Watching the finished message take physical form has made the years of difficult work particularly meaningful for Envel’s employees.

“It meant a lot from a design, engineering, and manufacturing perspective to be involved in something so complex and challenging during the production process,” Heaney said. “However, seeing the actual message displayed in the finished product is enormously rewarding to me and the entire team that accomplished this.”

North Carolina state Sen. Michael Garrett described his first experience seeing the Obama Presidential Center and its lettering. He visited the center Aug. 2.

“My Uber pulled up on the South Side, I stepped out onto the sidewalk, craned my neck back, and there it was, cut into the stone at the top of the building, his (Obama’s) words from Selma,” Garrett said. “I stood there in the sun while strangers walked past me on their way to lunch, and I could not read it through



Photo, Envel Facade

Envel Facade crews install lettering panels on the Obama Presidential Center in Chicago.

company’s most ambitious projects is also one of its most visible: the Obama Presidential Center in Chicago. Working with Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects, Envel manufactured 39 massive concrete panels incorporating a quote by former President Barack Obama.

The excerpt from Obama’s March 7, 2015, speech that commemorated the Selma to Montgomery marches was formed using a proprietary concrete blend.

The panels represent a colossal accomplishment for Envel’s 30 employees. From project award to completion, the

duced our manufacturing drawings and had structural calculations performed for the project.”

The process uncovered challenges Envel needed to solve before production could begin. The complexity was especially apparent inside the panels, where structural reinforcement had to be carefully engineered around the lettering and geometry.

“The internal structural reinforcement inside the panels is complex beyond imagination,” Heaney said. “There were many times I didn’t even think it could be accomplished.”

without my eyes flooding. I hadn't spoken to a single person. I hadn't seen a single artifact. I hadn't even gotten in line, and the building had already taken something out of me."

Envel's combination of collaboration and technical expertise is central to its approach. Founded in 2016, the company works with architects, engineers and contractors to solve technical challenges during the design process rather than simply manufacturing components from completed drawings.

For Envel, the lettering project illustrates what can happen when architects and manufacturers work together to push the boundaries of what is possible.

The Obama Presidential Center lettering project serves as a powerful example of the capabilities of modern manufacturing in northern Indiana. The result is a South Bend-made contribution to a nationally significant building.

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime project where your work has such a significant impact," Heaney said. ■



Photo: Steve Teepp/Midwest Photographics

Envel Facade crews work to manufacture Obama Presidential Center lettering panels at the company's South Bend facility.

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Called home for seniors



Valparaiso resident building his own team after years of working for others

HEATHER PFUNDSTEIN

Michael Heinold always knew his career would lead him home.

After several decades of leading teams for other companies, he is building his own in the heart of Northwest Indiana.

"I always thought there was a good chance I'd come back home someday," he said.

He did just that when he launched a Seniors Helping Seniors franchise last spring. Seniors Helping Seniors connects active adults with seniors who need support and companionship.

"I've lived here most of my life, but I haven't been able to work here most of my life," he said.

His first job was at his family's four-generation agriculture business, once called Heinold Elevator Co. He thought he would work there forever, but the family sold parts of the business twice, so he needed a new opportunity.

He found his niche transforming businesses at FranklinCovey for more than a decade in its Chicago office. There he helped leaders build a culture of trust for their employees.

"When I look back over my career, the common thread has always been people," he said. "Whether helping leaders become more effective, helping organizations grow, or helping seniors remain independent, the work has always been about creating positive outcomes for people."

That goes for former employees like Brad Smith, who Heinold hired at FranklinCovey, which is based in Utah.

"He's the best leader I've ever had," said Smith, who lives in Canada.

Heinold was managing director of territories in the Midwest U.S. and Canada for FranklinCovey.

"He's very transparent ... and that leads to him being a very trustful person," Smith said.

Smith said Heinold hired him again at another company.

"He's the kind of person who is very easy to follow," Smith said. "The world needs more Mike."

Plus, Heinold is fun to be around, Smith said, but don't let that mindset fool you. He's also "a quiet risk taker."

Heinold ultimately wanted to give back to the community he calls home.

"One thing that hasn't changed in Northwest Indiana is the character of its people," he said. "There is still a

strong sense of community and people genuinely looking out for one another."

He remembers hearing his great-grandfather's stories.

"I was the kid when I was young that sat around the kitchen table and listened to my grandfather and uncles tell the old stories about starting businesses," he said.

Heinold realizes now that listening to his elders helped him decide on a Seniors Helping Seniors franchise.

That decision also was influenced by his grandmothers, who lived with his family when he was growing up. One

had Lou Gehrig's disease and needed more care than was available then. She ultimately was placed in a nursing home for 10 years.

"When your family's not there every day, when you don't have those sorts of interactions, it's just not the same," he said.

His partner, Vanessa Banovic, had a different experience. Her 100-year-old grandmother still lives at home, and her grandfather lived there until 106 years old.

That dichotomy wasn't lost on Heinold. When he found himself looking for a

new opportunity, he answered a franchise recruiter's email.

He then spoke with Seniors Helping Seniors President Namrata Yocom-Jan, who described the company's mission-driven model.

"We've become a leader in this industry by prioritizing the best possible care for our seniors, and that means partnering with only the most passionate and hard-working franchise owners," Yocom-Jan said. "That's exactly what we've found with Michael as a new franchise owner, who is well-equipped to provide unparalleled in-home services to those in need throughout Indiana."

Heinold purchased the franchise territory for Northwest Indiana and officially started recruiting employees and looking for clients. So far, he's pleased with the progress he's made.

While the company name is Seniors Helping Seniors, Heinold isn't holding employees to an age limit.

"We really are seeking mature, passionate, empathetic people who can connect with seniors," he said.

Helping seniors helps families, too, he said. Many people take care of parents and children. They forgo jobs, promotions and opportunities to take care of their loved ones.

"Supporting our seniors is an economic development issue also," he said.

More than 160,000 people 65-plus live in Northwest Indiana, according to the Northwest Indiana Forum.

"My goal is to build a successful mission-driven organization that serves a population that deserves our attention, that deserves our respect and that deserves their own personal dignity," Heinold said.

He also knows that without margin, there's no mission.

"We want to build something successful for the future," he said. "I want to build something for us and our community instead of always building for somebody else." ■



Photo: Michael Heinold

► Michael Heinold opened a Seniors Helping Seniors franchise that serves Porter and La Porte counties.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Building city of readers



Gary Literacy Coalition counts on donations to give books to students

MARIE WILSON

The power of reading across a lifetime is the driving force behind one local nonprofit. The Gary Literacy Coalition works to build reading skills among residents of the Region.

The coalition is in its 25th year of teaching people of all ages how to read with confidence, and gain the skills they will need for learning, for navigating health and financial systems, even for stress relief.

"It's a life skill," Executive Director Lori Johnson Kuykendall said about the ability to read. "The more you read, the better you will be at it."

The coalition aims to make Gary a "reading city" and to help people in Gary and surrounding areas gain the reading knowledge they need for the workplace, for maintaining their health and for improving their lives.

According to statistics on the coalition's website, more than 70% of local adults function at a "low literacy level," and 33% of adults have less than a high school education.

"Our approach is age-inclusive," Johnson Kuykendall said. "We do prenatal all the way to elderly, addressing literacy needs across a lifespan and encouraging families to participate."

The Gary Literacy Coalition got its start when a local physician wanted to provide free books and literacy education to his patients at their well-child checkups from birth through age 5.

The budding coalition formed a chapter within the nationwide Reach Out and Read program to do this work and now partners with nine local physicians to help new parents build reading resources for their families.

"Our goal is to make sure that every family has an at-home library," Johnson Kuykendall said, because families simply can't read books that they don't have. "We do use new books because we

want kids to feel good about having a brand-new book as an opportunity and investment in our community."

Since its beginnings with Reach Out and Read in the early 2000s, the coalition has expanded to serve tens of thousands of people throughout the years, Johnson Kuykendall said.

The organization runs on a budget between \$100,000 and \$200,000 a year, with one employee, four consistent office volunteers, a board of directors and dozens of volunteer readers who share stories and joy with classrooms each year.

Johnson Kuykendall has worked with the Gary Literacy Coalition for 20 years. She first was a partner, when employed at other organizations in the fields of literacy and education. Since 2019, she has been a staff member. She became executive director when the coalition reopened in 2021 after a seven-month closure during the pandemic.

**"It's a life skill.
The more you
read, the better
you will be at it."**

— Lori Johnson
Kuykendall,
Gary Literacy Coalition

Partnering with supporting organizations such as Centier Bank, Chase Bank, Gary Community School Corp., Gary-area public libraries and Methodist Hospitals also helps the coalition educate residents in health literacy and financial literacy. This way, Johnson Kuykendall said, people can

learn the language and behaviors needed to build wealth and better understand diagnoses and directions from their doctors.

"Hopefully, we are also elevating the health of our community," she said.

Another local partner, Hard Rock Casino Northern Indiana, recently donated \$45,000 to help the coalition fund a new effort called the Pilot Community Reading Program.

Christine Rury, the casino's vice president of human resources, said the program will involve targeted intervention in small groups. Literacy kits and instruction materials will be provided for up to 80 students in kindergarten



Photo, Gary Literacy Coalition

Lori Johnson Kuykendall has been executive director of the Gary Literacy Coalition since 2021.

through eighth grade. The program also includes about 1,200 books that will be donated to students in further support of their increasing literacy.

"What they're looking to do is to incorporate family engagement in literacy activities as well," Rury said.

The new program will provide "direct-service tutoring" located at community centers where students are already spending time after school to avoid any transportation barriers, Johnson Kuykendall said. The personalized tutoring will help students overcome learning gaps that occur if they haven't yet learned to read well.

"We're very excited that we have dollars now to go in and actually do some real, direct service in our community," Johnson Kuykendall said.

Hard Rock Northern Indiana is excited as well to continue its partnership with the Gary Literacy Coalition, which also involves volunteers from the casino's Culture Club participating in three classroom reading events.

"We had volunteers sign up right away," Rury said. "They love seeing the bright eyes of the children." ■

Giving that returns favor



Time, money well spent when helping make world a better place

VIOLET SISTOVARIS

I grew up with a father who would say: “There will always be people who have more than you; don’t use that as your yardstick for success. And there will always be people who are less fortunate than you; don’t look down on them ... those people may need our help.”

I started doing volunteer work as a youngster, visiting rehab and assisted living centers, organizing food and clothing drives, and making small contributions with my babysitting money when “a tray was passed.”

When you enter the work world, philanthropic opportunities abound: serving on a not-for-profit board, participating in a charity golf event, or in my case, financially supporting a children’s hospital and breast cancer awareness.

So, why do people give to charity or make philanthropic donations? I can’t speak to the psychology behind why people give, but as I reflect on my own behavior and what motivates me, I can say it starts with my upbringing and my dad’s many wise lessons on life.

Philanthropy literally means for the love of mankind; it is action that supports the welfare of others. Most of us subscribe to the concept that doing good is “being good” and that we should use our time on earth to make things better.

I’m a firm believer that we all have a little financially to spare. But money is not the only way for us to “do good.”

Sometimes our brain power is more valuable to individuals or organizations; and donations of food, clothing, furniture, appliances and even cars can be incredibly helpful.

One of the first items I requested when I became president at NIPSCO was a list of all the nonprofits we supported and all the board positions we held. I was direct with my leadership team and our employees that we consistently demonstrated financial support for the many organizations that did so much in our communities. Serving on a board was not a “resume-building activity.” My expectations were that board members engage fully in the mission of the organization, help formulate strategy, raise funds, promote sponsorships and volunteer their time. The goal was to make an impact!

About two years ago, my husband, Sam, and I made a donation for a special piece of equipment to the new Franciscan Health Crown Point hospital’s NICU. We were invited to tour the new facility and see how the baby mannequin was assisting nurses and doctors in the care of their preemies and special needs babies. As we walked around the unit, I could not help but notice the signs by every room and hallway acknowledging a donor for their contribution.

It warmed my heart to see that our friends and neighbors had donated the AngelEye cameras that allow parents

and grandparents to view their baby at any time, available in every room. I sent them a note expressing what a wonderful contribution they had made, and I commented on how their gift would impact so many families during a challenging and stressful time.

Going back to what my dad said, people may need our help, and you never know when you are going to be one of those people.

He was right. In June, our first grandbaby entered the world two months early. My daughter and her husband delivered at Franciscan Health Crown Point, and our baby boy was rushed off to the NICU.

Those first 24 hours were scary and hectic, but on the second day, the new parents were told about the 24/7 camera that was available to them and their designated family members. I immediately



AngelEye Health live streaming camera systems at Franciscan Health allow parents to check in on their little ones in the neonatal intensive care units, 24/7.

texted our friends and let them know about the baby and thanked them for their philanthropy years ago. They humbly commented that it was their pleasure and were so moved to know someone who actually was benefiting from their gift.

This experience has allowed me to reflect on the true meaning of philanthropy — why people give and how it feels to experience and appreciate the kindness of others. You never know when or how your goodwill will impact someone’s life or how someone else’s goodwill can impact yours.

So, whether you give out of compassion, personal experience, religious or social beliefs, or just the feel-good factor; whether you contribute time, money or household items, take action and give! Our Northwest Indiana communities will only be better for it. ■



Photo, Violet Sistovaris

► Violet Sistovaris retired as an executive vice president from NiSource in 2022.

“You never know when or how your goodwill will impact someone’s life or how someone else’s goodwill can impact yours.”

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