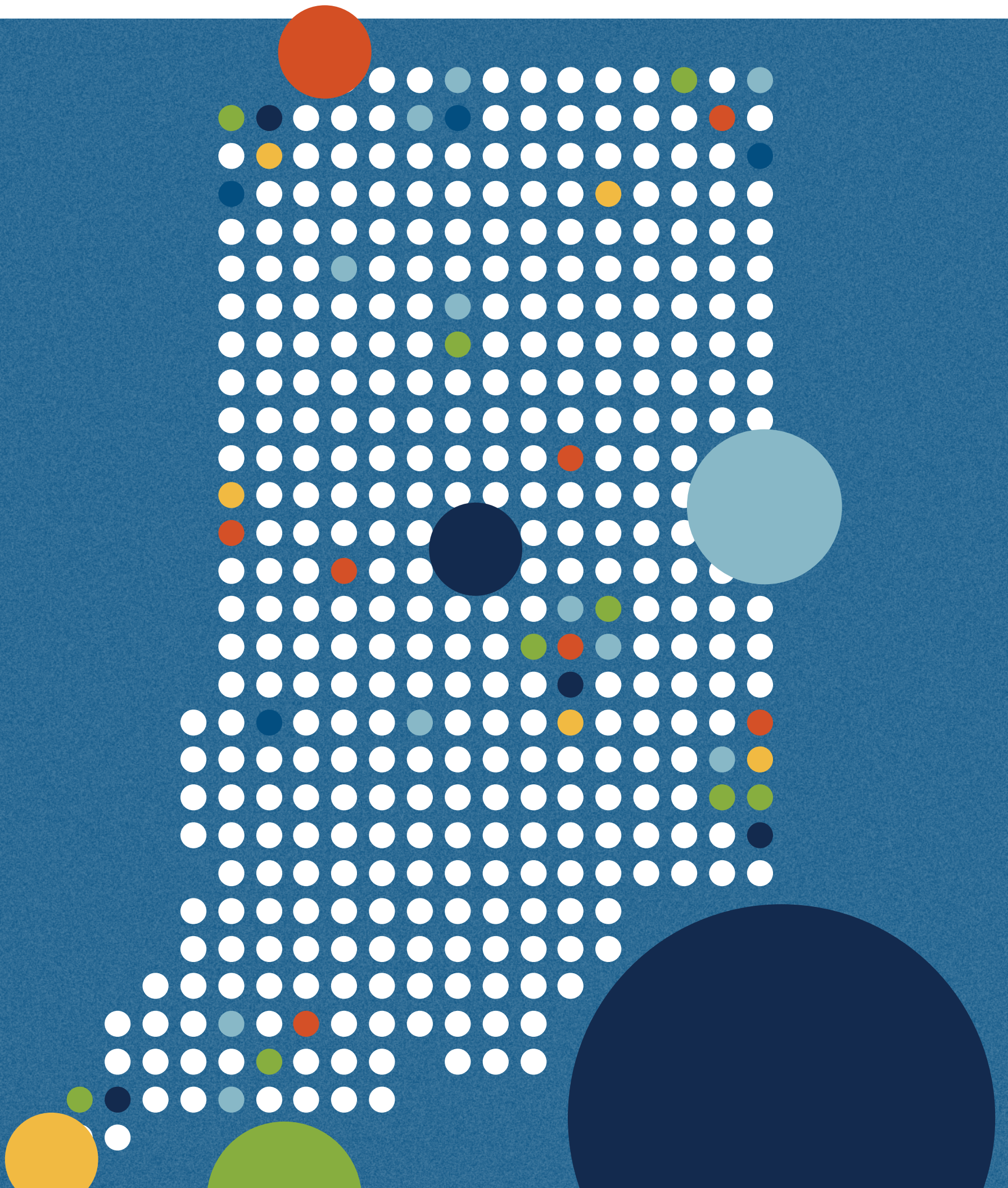


— 2025 —

ENTREPRENEURSHIP INDIANA



DO YOU KNOW AN
ENTREPRENEUR WHO
SHOULD BE **FEATURED**?
HELP US SHOWCASE
THEM IN NEXT YEAR'S
YEARBOOK.
NOMINATE THEM TODAY.

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**DON'T SIT
DOWN AND
WAIT FOR THE
OPPORTUNITIES
TO COME. GET
UP AND
MAKE THEM."**

—MADAM C. J. WALKER

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ECONOMIC IMPACT

This project used the services of seventeen Hoosier small business owners and freelancers paying them more than \$167,000 in creative fees. The funds enabled these entrepreneurs to buy new equipment, invest in their studios and marketing materials, start new ventures, and grow their teams, hire accountants and assistants.

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INDIANA

EARLY 2

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Main Street entrepreneurs and business owners are the lifeblood of the Indiana economy, representing not just jobs but the unique character of communities across the Hoosier state. The 2025 Yearbook shows off a few of the thousands of stories happening every day across our state. We hope these stories do more than just highlight these leaders, we hope they inspire others to take the leap into starting the next great Main Street business.”

— BRIAN SCHUTT, DIRECTOR,
OFFICE OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND INNOVATION

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The smartest economic development move Indiana can make is to support its entrepreneurs.”

—DAVID WATKINS, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT,
ENTREPRENEURSHIP & SMALL BUSINESS

GROWTH



ESTABLISHED



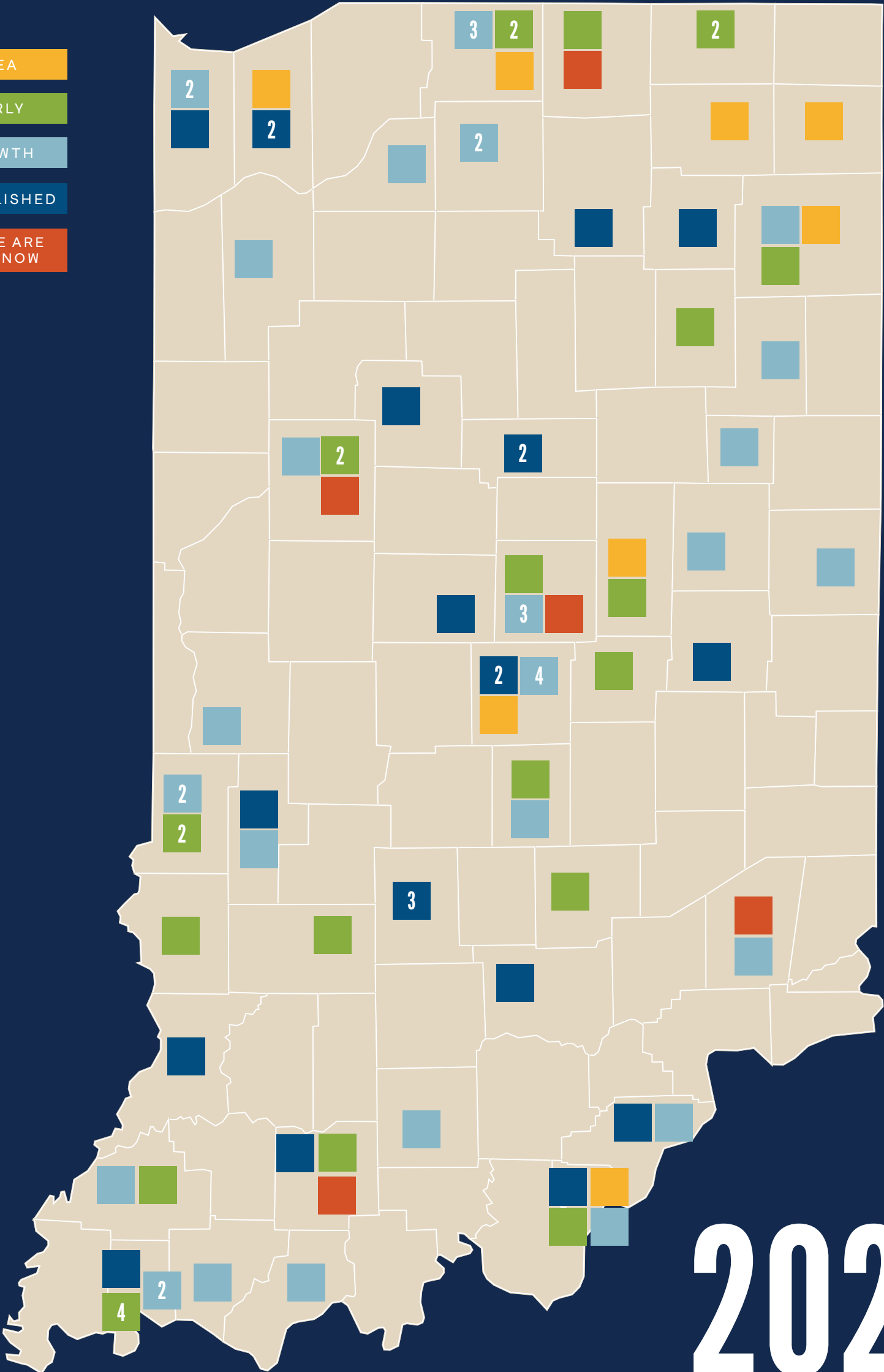
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Kendallville
Fort Wayne
Auburn
Indianapolis
Anderson

South Bend
Elkhart
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Newberry
LaGrange
Columbus
Terre Haute
Evansville
Terre Haute
Fortville
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Lafayette
Shelburn
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New Carlisle
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Fishers
Fort Branch
Lafayette

Kokomo
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Terre Haute
Rockville
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Plymouth
Orleans
Mishawaka
Fishers
Hammond
South Bend
Yorktown
Lafayette
Indianapolis
Demotte
Indianapolis
Brazil
Georgetown
Franklin
Princeton
Carmel
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Evansville
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Entrepreneurship is more than a pathway to economic prosperity—it’s the embodiment of freedom, creativity, and hope.

FROM THE GOVERNORS DESK

DEAR READERS,

As Governor of Indiana, it is my privilege to welcome you to the latest edition of Entrepreneurship Indiana. Within these pages, you will discover the courage, ingenuity, and grit that define our Hoosier spirit. Each story celebrates the risk-takers who dare to transform ideas into enterprises, igniting growth and opportunity across our state.

My own entrepreneurial journey began in Jasper, Indiana, where I launched a small auto parts distribution business after graduating from college. With little more than a single-wide trailer and a handful of employees, I learned the importance of perseverance, smart risk management and building relationships based on trust. Those early lessons shaped not only my companies’ success but also my belief in the power of private enterprise to uplift communities.

When I took office, I committed to creating an environment where every Hoosier with a vision can flourish. Our administration has cut burdensome regulations, reformed our tax

code to reward innovation and invested in workforce development programs that connect graduates to family-sustaining careers. We are only just getting started on our strategic approach to ensuring entrepreneurship remains at the forefront of Indiana’s flourishing economy. I am dedicated to supporting innovative startups and main street enterprises in all four corners of Indiana.

Entrepreneurship is more than a pathway to economic prosperity—it’s the embodiment of freedom, creativity and hope. As you turn these pages I encourage you to celebrate the successes and learn from the challenges faced by your fellow Hoosiers. Together, we will continue building a future where every idea has the chance to become America’s next great enterprise.

With gratitude,

Mike Braun

Governor of Indiana

MILESTONE

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2

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4





GRANNUS THERAPEUTICS

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ

PHOTOGRAPHED BY Adam Raschka



*raised from various
investors and the
National Institutes
of Health.*

NEW APPROACH TO TREATING CANCER RISES FROM INDIANA STARTUP

A small company with close links to the University of Notre Dame is inching closer to a drug treatment that can improve life for cancer patients around the world.

Indianapolis-based Grannus Therapeutics is taking a new look at a cancer treatment that gained popularity in clinical trials in the early 2000s, before a number of challenges stopped the studies, says Cofounder, President and CEO John Foglesong.

Massive biotech and Big Pharma companies studied how to stop a particular protein, Hsp90, that helps human cells to replicate and grow, especially fast-growing cancer cells. However, following safety concerns, they didn't follow through on their research, Foglesong says.

The big companies all but abandoned studying how to stop multiple aspects of Hsp90's effects on cancer cells.

Foglesong and his colleagues, Dr. Sanket Mishra, formerly a Notre Dame research scientist, and Dr. Brian Blagg, a Notre Dame professor, launched Grannus in 2021 when they realized they could double down on a much more focused approach to stopping Hsp90, selectively inhibiting the Hsp90 β , one of four versions of the protein.

Grannus Therapeutics may be the only company in the world focused on such a narrow but promising aspect, Foglesong says. Hopefully, a larger, more financially capable company will eventually license Grannus' development or acquire the company and fund human clinical trials.

Their drug won't be a cure, but in early tests, their Hsp90 β selective inhibitor has shown promise in helping stop ovarian cancer from spreading, and it has the potential to slow the growth of other cancers, including prostate, pancreatic and triple-negative breast cancers.

"We're not talking about a silver bullet that's going to cure cancer," Foglesong says. "We're talking about how you improve the quantity and quality of life for patients."

Last year, Grannus won a pitch contest put on by Elevate Ventures, which eventually led to an oversubscribed \$1 million funding round from Elevate and other investors.

Grannus also has raised over \$2.5 million from the National Institutes of Health, Midwest-focused venture capital firms and several angel investors affiliated with Notre Dame, Foglesong says.

Foglesong says he returned to Indianapolis, his hometown, after working in biotech businesses, in 2019.

The move shocked some friends and colleagues, who believed the West Coast was the place to be for a biotech company, but Foglesong says it's been a good move.

Despite some challenges, "Indy is very different," Foglesong says. "We're a great community. There's a small biotech community here, half-dozen to a dozen startups, much like Grannus, coming out of IU or Purdue, and it's just such a welcoming community, and we're all in this together." ➡➡

**WE'RE TALKING ABOUT
HOW YOU IMPROVE THE
QUANTITY AND QUALITY OF
LIFE FOR PATIENTS.**

JOHN FOGLESONG

PATRIOT AERIAL SOLUTIONS

30,000
ACRES OF
CROPLAND
SERVICED

DO-GOOD DRONE COMPANY DELIVERS PRECISION FOR FARMERS

NICK GROTT

01 **KOUTS, PORTER COUNTY** City

02 **2024** Founded

03 **3** Number of employees

04 **PAS219.COM** Web

“I FEEL LIKE I’M CONTRIBUTING TO SOMEBODY ELSE’S SUCCESS.”
—NICK GROTT



Patriot’s business has grown 127% year over year.

WRITTEN BY MEGAN FERNANDEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs

Farms have been fertile ground for innovation for nearly 200 years, since the inventions of the mechanical reaper and steel plow. Now, drones—some the size of a suitcase, others as big as helicopters—have revolutionized the industry.

“From the skies to the soil, our drones bring precision, efficiency and respect to every acre we touch,” says Nick Grott, founder of Patriot Aerial Solutions.

Working closely with farmers, the company tailors overcrop chemical application strategies, giving customers new levels of control and monitoring. Launched less than two years ago, Patriot has quickly expanded. Grott put multiple drones in service, became a drone dealer and now designs and builds custom trailers for drone transport.

For Grott, who grew up on a farm, the business is personal. “Farmers feed the world,” he says. “Doing something wholesome for them fulfills me. Before, I loved my job, but I didn’t go home at night and think, ‘Man, I did something good today.’ After my first 12-hour day flying this year, I felt full again.”

In Grott’s hands, drones are tools to help farmers protect their yields and their land. Traditional sprayers can use 20 to 50 gallons of chemicals per acre. Drones achieve the same results with just two gallons. Their precision saves money, reduces waste and avoids the soil compaction caused by heavy equipment.

Drones do more than just spray. With specialized sensors, they scout fields, measure crop health, detect pests and disease and provide real-time data to guide crucial decisions. And Grott is collaborating with a Connecticut company to integrate a new class of certified organic chemicals into aerial application methods.

Before Patriot, Grott had experience owning a small business, but launching one of this scale required support. He worked with Eric Beschinski at the Northwest Indiana Small Business Development Center (Indiana SBDC) to craft a business plan and land some financing. “I knew nothing about going to a bank and what to expect,” Grott says. “The people at Indiana SBDC held my hand every step of the way. I can’t say enough good things about them.”

Though the drone business is competitive, Grott embraces collaboration with others in the space. “Competition is how you make the market fair. That’s how you get better ideas. And I want to sell and service whatever they need,” he says.

He also invests in the future. Grott coaches a local high school drone team, which won a regional championship in its first year.

For Grott, Patriot Aerial Solutions is its own reward: a chance to support farmers in preserving their legacies and improving operations with the smartest of tools. ➡➡



PROPER PILOTS

AIR FORCE VET PLANS TO REVOLUTIONIZE FLIGHT TRAINING WITH APP

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs

An Air Force veteran from New Albany believes his newly launched app, Proper Pilots, will revolutionize flight training.

Why? Because the app eliminates much of the costly paperwork and legacy software the vast majority of flight schools still use. Students can use the app to find available practice flights and get extra content to help them learn faster, said founder Tim Tweet.

Tweet and his business partner Derrick Simpson went live with Proper Pilots on July 4, 2025. They had nearly 100 users within weeks.

The app also includes a rating system to help students select the right schools for them, an especially important feature for those who may want to take the years-long journey to becoming an airline pilot.

Today, a pilot that starts training has only a 5% chance of being hired by an airline, and a 25% chance of becoming a commercial pilot, Tweet said.

“But when we make that process more enjoyable for the student and the instructor, our instructors stick around longer, the quality of instruction goes up, and so does the safety in aviation,” he added.

The app is free for students and instructors to use. Proper Pilots invoices flight school owners who use the service.

Students still have to spend the required amount of time logging flying hours, but the Proper Pilots app can track those hours, help them find available plans for practice and collect debriefing notes from instructors after each lesson.

With so much to remember, students can easily forget much of each lesson. That learning loss carries over into subsequent practice flights, which means the students have to take more flights than may be necessary, Tweet said. As the app provides extra content, like quizzes, students learn more with fewer practice flights, which can run up to \$250 an hour.

Now Proper Pilots is being used in flight schools across the U.S. and in Australia, France and India. “Honestly, I didn’t expect it to be that quick,” Tweet said.

Yet Tweet said he expects the number of Proper Pilots users to grow exponentially as he looks to partner with universities and larger flight schools. He’s positioning the app as an essential industry resource: “In five years, I think Proper Pilots is going to be the operating system for the global flight training industry.” ➡➡

TIM TWEET

01	NEW ALBANY, FLOYD COUNTY	City
02	2025	Founded
03	2	Number of employees
04	PROPERPILOTS.COM	Web

“IN FIVE YEARS, I THINK PROPER PILOTS IS GOING TO BE THE OPERATING SYSTEM FOR THE GLOBAL FLIGHT TRAINING INDUSTRY.”
—TIM TWEET

Founders Tweet and Simpson launched Proper Pilots July 4th 2025 and had nearly 100 users within weeks.





231 MAIN KENDALLVILLE COWORKING

20



entrepreneurs participate in the Business and Entrepreneur Launch Tool Program, a ten-week program to start and grow their small business.

FROM BLIGHTED SPACE TO DOWNTOWN INCUBATOR

Located in historic downtown Kendallville, 231 Main is a not-for-profit coworking space focused on encouraging entrepreneurship by offering various levels of support to small businesses. The concept was initially developed through conversations between Historic Downtown Kendallville (Kendallville's Main Street organization), the Noble County Economic Development Corporation and the city itself. "We wanted to bring some sort of incubator and entrepreneurial workspace that provided the resources which we were lacking in our county," says 231 Main's Manager Kristen Johnson. After meeting with the Indiana Small Business Development Center and other experts to determine small businesses' and entrepreneurs' needs, the committee approached Kendallville's redevelopment commission for funding to purchase an old, blighted car garage.

Each office was reserved prior to the actual opening, and, as a nod to the building's history, auto parts hang on the wall alongside the modern makeover. Occupants of the space include not only paid clients, but also pop-ins who need a place to work for a day. "The goal is to provide an affordable space for founders to work while they build up their business," says Johnson. "Ultimately, the goal is that they will later relocate their business somewhere on Main Street."

Member amenities include a meeting room, conference area, copier and additional equipment such as a T-shirt press and a podcast room. Monthly workshops and networking sessions are offered on various business-related topics, and the Northeast Indiana Innovation Center and Northeast Indiana Small Business Development Center hold regular office hours in the space to help with business resources and mentorship. When the building needed two HVAC systems as part of the remodel, they partnered with trade school Impact Institute to install the equipment as part of their

training. "I told the students, 'when you get out of trade school and are ready to launch your own business, you have a free space here anytime you want it,'" says Johnson.

231 Main has received funding from the Northern Indiana Public Service Company and the Noble County Economic Development Corporation, along with a grant from the Indiana Economic Development Corporation for the Business and Entrepreneur Launch Tool program. This is a partnership between Noble, LaGrange, Steuben and DeKalb counties that offers a ten-week cohort for twenty participants to help them start and grow a small business. "Their cost is only \$125, and they're getting thousands of dollars in resources, including training and one-on-one coaching," says Johnson. "At the conclusion, there's a pitch competition, but instead of giving them cash, we've been able to curate specific awards based on their business needs, such as a chamber membership, staggered rent on storefront properties, small business loans, commercial kitchen access or other tangible awards." ➡

THE GOAL IS TO PROVIDE AN AFFORDABLE SPACE FOR FOUNDERS TO WORK WHILE THEY BUILD UP THEIR BUSINESS.

KRISTEN JOHNSON



LEARN MORE AT: KENDALLVILLECOWORKING.COM

TAILORED BITES



ENTERPRISING FUTURE VETERINARIAN TURNS PASSION INTO PET FOOD

RUBY CAMPBELL- CARPENTER

- | | | |
|----|-------------------------------------|---------------------|
| 01 | FORT WAYNE, ALLEN COUNTY | City |
| 02 | 2024 | Founded |
| 03 | 1 | Number of employees |
| 04 | INSTAGRAM : @TAILOREDBITES24 | Web |

“WHEN I SAW HOW MUCH
OUR RESEARCH PAID
OFF ... IT HIT ME WE
WERE DEFINITELY ONTO
SOMETHING.”
—RUBY CAMPBELL-
CARPENTER



*Campbell-
Carpenter
was a top 10
finalist, out of
1,000 entrants,
in the 2025
Innovate WithIN
competition.*

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs*

Ruby Campbell-Carpenter knew she had a good idea when dogs randomly preferred the bespoke dog food she and her collaborator created over dry kibble food during a palatability test.

“When we saw how much the dogs liked our recipes and how much our research paid off, that’s when it first hit me we were definitely on to something,” she says. “That, and getting good feedback at the farmer’s market. They were actually buying our product.”

Campbell-Carpenter (North Side High School, class of ‘26) and a classmate developed Tailored Bites, a frozen dog food made with high quality, locally-sourced chicken, chicken livers, green beans, blueberries and more, at Amp Lab at Electric Works, a hands-on learning lab for Fort Wayne high schoolers.

Campbell-Carpenter now runs Tailored Bites alone, but the idea already has been successful. It was named a top 10 finalist out of 1,000 student teams statewide at this year’s Innovate WithIN contest, hosted by the STARTed UP Foundation, and Tailored Bites won the 2025 Fort Wayne Foundry Pitch Competition. She’s also been featured on Fox 59’s morning news.

Campbell-Carpenter says Tailored Bites began as a way to use nutrition to treat her own pet’s specific allergies and skin issues.

It also was a great idea for an Amp Lab assignment calling for students to create a company of their own. “I could finally put my passion for animals toward something at Amp Lab.”

Tailored Bites can be customized, using ingredients such as fish oil for help with allergies and ear infections, or bone broth for joint issues, like arthritis. The meals are portioned and priced according to a dog’s sizes.

Campbell-Carpenter makes every batch of Tailored Bites in the Amp Lab commercial kitchen, and she’s committed to using the highest quality ingredients, and keeping the price affordable.

Pet owners have taken notice. Campbell-Carpenter sold 50 individual meals last summer in a Fort Wayne farmers market, with a 20 percent margin. Amp Lab teachers also became eager customers.

Now working part-time as a vet tech at East State Veterinary Clinic as she finishes her senior year, Campbell-Carpenter expects to incorporate Tailored Bites when she turns 18, and she says she’s about six months away from creating food for cats.

“Later, when I end up becoming a veterinarian, I’ll continue Tailored Bites, and that’s when I’ll really start to grow it and scale it,” she says. ➡➡

2,600

STUDENTS REACHED
IN THE US AND
CANADA

TRUE BLUE

YOUNG DUO MAKES DIABETES EDUCATION APPEALING, AND PROFITABLE

WRITTEN BY MEGAN FERNANDEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Adam Raschka

When 17-year-old Kyla La Rue's younger sister, Ava, was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes at age eight, they both learned how little most people know about the disease. Her sister's classmates were her biggest concern.

They didn't know why Ava's arm monitor kept beeping, or why she got to have a snack in class. "It would cause a big distraction, and it was kind of embarrassing for her," La Rue said.

La Rue and her friend Lydia Yoder, 18, wanted to help. (La Rue's younger brother has also since been diagnosed). In 2023, the DeKalb High School students developed bingo and card games to teach kids about Type 1 diabetes and distributed them to area schools. Yoder was a junior and La Rue was a sophomore.

"We want to eliminate any stereotypes from a young age," said Yoder, whose parents are both elementary school teachers and introduced her to creating lesson plans.

The teens also visited classrooms to educate students on the condition. And it worked—kids that age look up to teenagers and pay attention to them. "The questions that they ask are always very insightful," La Rue said.

Yoder and La Rue then developed the concept in their entrepreneurship class. Teacher Ashley Johnson helped them understand pricing and revenue streams for educational materials, such as sponsorships and advertisements. They were ready to launch their for-profit company, True Blue.

The girls began an educational YouTube channel and expanded classroom materials to a book, coloring sheets and remote learning packs to send out of county. Ten classrooms in DeKalb County became 60 in the U.S. and Canada. Ed-tech companies and healthcare groups came aboard as advertisers.

Johnson requires her students to enter the Innovate WithIN competition for Indiana high school students. The girls won in Region 5 and took home \$2,000. They also received \$1,250 from the Storm Tank pitch competition at Trine University in Angola, Indiana.

As a result, Yoder and La Rue met Brandon Noll, the director of Plug and Play Tech Center, at Huntington University. He expanded their network to include the Eli Lilly Foundation and Parkview Health in northeastern Indiana. Now they are working with an endocrinologist to enhance their content, and with an app developer Noll recommended.

As Yoder heads off to college, she and La Rue continue to pursue their mission to grow True Blue's reach. They are creating kits for newly diagnosed patients to be distributed in hospitals and ERs starting in early 2026. And last summer, they began drawing a weekly paycheck. ➡➡

KYLA LA RUE & LYDIA YODER

01 **AUBURN, DEKALB COUNTY** City

02 **2023** Founded

03 **2** Number of employees

04 **TRUEBLUEEDUCATION.COM** Web

“IN OUR ENTREPRENEURSHIP CLASS, WE STARTED WORKING ON AN IDEA WE WERE PASSIONATE ABOUT AND IT TURNED INTO SOMETHING SO MUCH BIGGER THAN WE EVER IMAGINED.” —LYDIA YODER

99.4%

OF INDIANA
BUSINESSES
ARE SMALL
BUSINESSES

INDIANA
Small Business
Development Center





*small-business
owners assisted by
Indiana SBDC.*

A MIGHTY WIND BENEATH THE WINGS OF SMALL BUSINESSES

Hoosiers are entrepreneurial by nature. The Indiana Small Business Development Center (Indiana SBDC) provides the nurture.

Founded in 1985, the Indiana SBDC is dedicated to assisting small-business owners through no-cost, confidential business advising and training. Ten regional offices offer invaluable data, personalized guidance, and crucial encouragement, ensuring that Hoosier entrepreneurs can grow their businesses smarter and faster.

Jon Myers, Indiana SBDC's state director since 2024, says the Indiana SBDC is a key part of the state's evolving economic development philosophy. "There's been a shift from the traditional approach, which is to attract employers to move to the state, and there's more of a movement to get our small businesses to the next level," he says. "Now, we're more deliberate about spending time with our clients and making sure that they're getting follow-up. And we've gotten more plugged into the communities we serve."

This commitment to deeper engagement has led to stronger relationships with chambers of commerce, economic development organizations, universities and other referral sources, allowing the Indiana SBDC to connect clients with a broader network of support services. The partnerships often extend to donated office space, enabling the Indiana SBDC to maintain a presence in all 92 Indiana counties, creating accessibility for entrepreneurs statewide.

The Indiana SBDC has also embraced specialized support for high-innovation sectors like manufacturing, agribusiness and exporting. On a more granular level, it offers intensive training on essential management tools, such as QuickBooks, in locations around the state.

Recent initiatives include adding twenty new business advisors and creating ten positions for ecosystem navigators. These navigators are dedicated to helping small-business owners explore Indiana's vast network of support organizations aggregated in the ConnectIND portal, a centralized resource hub.

Another significant resource is the Indiana Technical Assistance Program (INTAP), which provides \$15,000 for improvement projects in partnership with Indiana-based service providers. These grants can fund a business's foundational needs, such as app development, intellectual property assistance or prototype creation.

Beyond the practical skills and financial guidance, the Indiana SBDC offers a crucial element of support that is often overlooked: community. "Entrepreneurship can be lonely, and people have struggles that others in their life can't relate to," Myers says. The Indiana SBDC offices are that space where entrepreneurs can connect with advisors who truly understand their challenges...and their motives. "For many we serve, making a profit is the last thing on their minds. They're motivated by improving people's lives," says Myers.

As the Indiana SBDC celebrates its 40th anniversary, it looks forward to continuing its vital work for decades to come: building an enterprising, innovative Indiana by nurturing the dreams of Hoosier entrepreneurs. ➡➡

**THE INDIANA SBDC OFFERS
A CRUCIAL ELEMENT OF
SUPPORT THAT IS OFTEN
OVERLOOKED: COMMUNITY.**

JON MYERS

Welcome
to FLAGSHIP
ENTERPRISE CENTER



BANKABLE



*loans made and
\$73M distributed
to entrepreneurs
across Indiana's
92 counties.*

MAKING A DIFFERENCE ONE LOAN AT A TIME

Securing capital is one of the biggest challenges entrepreneurs face. To meet the critical need for mission-based funding, Anderson's Flagship Enterprise Center (FEC) founded Bankable as a Small Business Administration (SBA)-certified lender capable of providing flexible microloans to aspiring Hoosier companies.

"We think the best way to make a difference in local communities is through entrepreneurship," says Bankable Executive Director Jennifer Hall. "For that reason, we strive to use all tools and resources available to us to help people grow successful businesses."

The non-profit FEC was created to help offset the economic downturn that occurred in Madison County after General Motors closed its Anderson-based hub in the late 1990s. The expansive property that houses the center has grown to accommodate the second-largest business incubator in Indiana, including coworking space, light manufacturing facilities, private offices, a podcast studio, a commercial kitchen and incubated firms that lease business space.

"We quickly realized that a lot of entrepreneurs were having trouble getting bank loans, especially women, low-income applicants, minorities and veterans," Hall says. "They don't have three years of financial statements to demonstrate profitability, so they resort to using personal credit cards or go online and fall victim to predatory lenders."

In 2010, the FEC board of directors allocated \$100,000 to Bankable to fund the initial loan program.

"We made four loans that first year," Hall recalls. "The second year, we made six. Things just took off from there."

All told, Bankable has distributed more than 2,200 loans upwards of \$73 million to Hoosier entrepreneurs, making it the biggest mission-based lender in Indiana and the third-largest SBA micro-lender in the country. Funds distributed have helped startups and established businesses in all stages of development.

"We're trying to provide real value to business populations that have historically been underserved and disadvantaged due to social or economic circumstances," Hall says.

Prospective borrowers typically find Bankable online or through word-of-mouth referrals from bank partners and other frontline community organizations. As part of the loan package, recipients receive assistance with money management, credit counseling, marketing and coaching to help them make wise financial decisions; in short, to become "bankable."

Funding for Bankable loans comes through a combination of federal grants, bank grants, private grantors, community partners and the FEC's own funds.

"The regional offices of the Indiana Small Business Development Centers regularly refer businesses to us," shares Hall. "We in turn refer clients back to them, creating a mutually beneficial partnership." ➡➡

**WE STRIVE TO USE
ALL TOOLS AND
RESOURCES AVAILABLE
TO US TO HELP PEOPLE
GROW SUCCESSFUL
BUSINESSES.**

JENNIFER HALL

MILESTONE

1990

1991

1992

1993

1994



ADAPTA EDUCATION

\$300K

CONTRIBUTION FROM
NATIONAL SCIENCE
FOUNDATION

CHRIS MERRILL

01 SOUTH BEND, ST. JOSEPH COUNTY City

02 2021 Founded

03 1 Number of employees

04 ADAPTAEDUCATION.COM Web

“WITHIN TWO TO THREE MINUTES, ADAPTA CAN CREATE AN INDIVIDUALIZED ASSESSMENT FOR EACH STUDENT, SO THE UPPER-LEVEL STUDENTS GET CHALLENGED AND THE LOWER-LEVEL STUDENTS DON'T GET OVERWHELMED.”
—CHRIS MERRILL



One group of students raised their test grades five points higher than their classmates after using Adapta's platform.

CLOSING THE PROFICIENCY GAP IN MATH EDUCATION

WRITTEN BY MEGAN FERNANDEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Marc Lebryk

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the proficiency gaps in high school classrooms. Now, it's even harder for teachers to keep the top students engaged without frustrating their less-proficient classmates into giving up.

“You're always going to have that, but since the pandemic, it has put a really hard strain on teachers,” Adapta Education CEO Chris Merrill says.

When Merrill taught math, he imagined a digital tool that would help him assess each student's level and provide individualized feedback. A psychology professor at the University of Notre Dame, Ying Cheng, Ph.D., had the same idea and developed a platform a few years ago with a colleague, Cheng Lu, Ph.D. Merrill met them through Notre Dame's IDEA Center when he enrolled as an MBA student.

Cheng, also the director of the school's Learning Analytics and Measurement in Behavioral Sciences (LAMBS) lab, didn't have time to commercialize her idea into a company, but Merrill did. They launched Adapta Education with a \$20,000 pre-seed and private investment. Since then, the National Science Foundation has contributed \$300,000 to research and development on features teachers have requested.

Adapta allows high school math teachers to tailor an assessment test for each student. Students take the test on the Adapta platform, and it's graded in real time. Then the platform produces a diagnostic report on each student, indicating areas of improvement.

“The teacher can really teach to the needs of the class, rather than just stick to the script, so they're using time in the classroom more efficiently,” Merrill says. The report also allows students to receive targeted help in the areas where they struggle.

He says one study showed a five-point increase in test scores among students who used the Adapta Education platform.

Adapta is both adaptive and diagnostic, and Merrill estimates that it saves teachers about eight hours of prep time for each test they create. It covers every high school math curriculum, sourced from university math professors.

Notre Dame's IDEA Center, which facilitates the commercialization of faculty research, was “very helpful in getting the company off the ground and finding funding for it,” Merrill says. Adapta currently has fourteen customers and expects to grow when the funding environment improves in 2026.

Merrill, a Utah native, is often asked if being in Indiana puts him at a disadvantage running a tech start-up. The answer is no. For one, the proximity to Chicago, Detroit, Indianapolis and Grand Rapids offers a wealth of connections within a two-and-a-half-hour drive. Second, he estimates Adapta's expenses here are a fourth of what they would be in the Bay Area.

“This is a very business-friendly state. You have a lot of people who want to find some way to push the economy forward, and they're willing to put in the work to do it,” Merrill says. ➡

1500-
2500

BAGS SOLD
WEEKLY

ALL THINGS SNACKS

ALL THINGS SNACKS
DELIVERS PUFFS, PRETZELS
AND EMPOWERMENT

WRITTEN BY EMILY WORRELL PHOTOGRAPHED BY Adam Raschka

Two years ago, Mary Jess was on a health journey. She had been working in retail for twelve years and wanted to move into the health sphere, perhaps as a health coach. Turns out she was able to combine her passion for health with her retail experience in the form of All Things Snacks, a healthy snack alternative to popcorn.

"All Things Snacks Corn Puffs don't have any kernels and are all gluten free," Jess says. "Some are dairy free, some are sugar free. We just have a lot of healthy options and it's a fun, tasty, sweet, savory, or spicy snack."

Among the forty-plus flavors All Things Snacks offers, Jess's favorite is the cheesy caramel, which is classic caramel with a light coating of cheese. "It's like the Chicago Mix, which is cheese and caramel but they're all separate. With this flavor, every single bite has the buttered puff, the caramel, and the cheese," she says. Some of her other bestsellers include sea salt caramel, pineapple upside down cake, and cheesy jalapeno.

In addition to a business, All Things Snacks is a way for Jess to connect with and support her community. She frequently donates to local silent auctions and fundraising efforts. She also uses All Things Snacks to empower people, especially women, to make money by selling her product at local markets, which was a full-circle moment for her.

"Probably 15 years ago, my family and I were struggling financially, and there was a local bakery that hired me to sell their product at a flea market," Jess says. "And then I started buying the product wholesale and taking it to other farmer's markets, and it completely changed our lives financially. So when I realized that other people can now take my product out and make money with it the same way I did, it's a huge win."

All Things Snacks has retail stores in Elkhart and Middlebury and is available in Indiana, Michigan, Tennessee, Ohio and Kentucky. Jess wants to make it available in even more stores, gas stations and markets.

Her advice to budding entrepreneurs? "Start with what you have, what's right in front of you, and just do that," she says. "A lot of people don't get started because they think it's so big and scary, but if you just do what's right in front of you and you do it well, it just keeps expanding." ➡

MARY JESS

01	ELKHART, ELKHART COUNTY	City
02	2023	Founded / Purchased
03	10	Number of employees
04	SNACKSBYMARY.COM	Web

“WHEN I REALIZED THAT OTHER PEOPLE CAN NOW TAKE MY PRODUCT OUT AND MAKE MONEY WITH IT THE SAME WAY I DID, IT'S A HUGE WIN.”
—MARY JESS

*All Things
Snacks
is now
available in
five states.*



ANGIE CAREL CONSULTING

AI CONCIERGE CONSULTANCY THRIVES IN A COMMUNITY CONTEXT

ANGIE CAREL

01 **FORT WAYNE, ALLEN COUNTY** City

02 **2023** Founded / Purchased

03 **1** Number of employees

04 **ANGIECAREL.COM** Web

“HUMANIZING AI IS
NUMBER ONE FOR ME.”
—ANGIE CAREL



*Since its launch,
AI in FW has
brought together
900+ people to
explore AI.*

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ

PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs

A pioneering Fort Wayne entrepreneur is helping people and companies understand and deploy Generative Artificial Intelligence, or Gen AI, through community-driven consulting.

“Humanizing AI is number one for me,” says Angie Carel.

After running a traditional marketing agency for 18 years, Carel pivoted to Gen AI consulting in 2023, beginning with a focus on marketing applications of the tool.

“But I quickly realized the companies I worked with needed deeper guidance in understanding AI as a whole,” Carel says.

So, Carel began helping companies integrate AI across multiple departments from HR to production to sales. She noticed fear and resistance to AI in the workplace and to the male-dominated origins of AI innovation.

There was also a palpable misalignment between her values and those of the companies she consulted for. So after six months, Carel completely pulled back from AI consulting and started a free community of Fort Wayne people of all ages and tech abilities to learn about AI. The group, *AI In FW*, meets twice monthly.

“We do in-person only, because we believe, as society moves toward a more digital world, we, as humans, need to form face-to-face connections and energy,” Carel says.

Some of the meet-up attendees began recommending Carel to their bosses, to help them understand Gen AI.

Over the next year, Carol received many consulting opportunities—turning down several so she could stay true to her intentions, she says. Carol also started speaking on panels and podcasts on AI, and she was named to the “Top 50 Women To Watch In AI” list.

To help companies get a grip on GenAI’s positive potential for their specific context, she builds AI literacy strategies and brings teams up to speed on the basics. Then, they discuss the solutions a company wants to build before entering a longer adoption phase.

Only a year into this chapter of her AI consultancy, and completely solo, Carel is on track to outpace the annual growth of the 10-person marketing agency she once led.

Carel also founded Co-Crafted AI Consultancy Collective, a network of independent consultants who collaborate to design tailored AI solutions for organizations. Each member brings unique expertise—from leadership and organizational development to data readiness and beyond.

Carel’s best and biggest discovery so far? She says, “Fort Wayne, Indiana, who you’d think, based on assumptions, might be backwards in tech and such, has shown up like nobody else.” ➡

32

ROTATING TAPS

BARKER
BREWHOUSEBARKER BREWHOUSE BRINGS
CRAFT BEER TO EVANSVILLEWRITTEN BY RYAN MILLBERN PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Sean Molin*

The vision for Barker Brewhouse was born out of Grant Davis and Scott Schmitt's shared love of craft beer and their desire to bring more of it to Evansville. "Evansville is the Busch Light capital of the world," Davis says. "Ten years ago, every restaurant and bar had five or six domestics on tap, that was mostly it."

Davis and Schmitt visited family in Boulder, Colorado, and were inspired by the booming craft beer scene. "You can stand on one corner and see five breweries," Davis says. "We thought, 'Evansville deserves something like this.'"

Davis had been homebrewing for years—and getting rave reviews from friends. Davis and Schmitt built a bar in their barn-dominium just west of Evansville, hosting parties, barbecues and weddings, and serving their original beers. They even created a logo for their establishment, featuring their dog, Leo.

In 2021, Davis was working in construction management and Schmitt was juggling two jobs when they put a bid on an abandoned building on Barker Avenue in Evansville. "It was just a dusty white box," Davis says. "We had a vision for a brewery, and everybody thought we were crazy."

The partners developed a business plan, conducted research and commenced renovating the building, with Davis serving as general contractor. They met with Julie Folz, an advisor at the Southwest Indiana Small Business Development Center. Folz connected them with the City of Evansville revolving loan fund, enabling them to purchase necessary equipment. Schmitt enlisted his sister to serve as interior designer.

"Her touch is all over the place," he says.

"We wanted to hire the professionals to help us, but we wanted to understand every step of the process," Davis recalls. "As a business owner, you need to have your hands on everything and fully understand what every aspect of starting and running a business takes."

Barker Brewhouse—a dog-friendly and family-friendly taphouse and nanobrewery—opened on March 14, 2023. Of the thirty-two taps, up to seven are claimed by beer Davis brews himself.

"The first three months were insane," Davis recalls. "We'd open at 2 p.m., and we'd have people outside waiting to get in. We learned via firehose."

The duo intentionally built their staff, hiring on "personality and character" as opposed to industry experience. The approach has paid off. "Two years in, we've had zero turnover," Schmitt says.

The loyalty from the Evansville community has been similar. Their Mug Club, which offers discounts on beer, merchandise and access to special events, has grown to 232 members.

The brewhouse will soon install a five-barrel brewing system, which will enable them to produce more beer. They also plan to launch a canning operation and sell four packs to go.

"The community has rallied around this place and our beer," Davis says. "It's exciting to see the craft beer scene growing here in Evansville and witness people branching out and trying new things." ➡

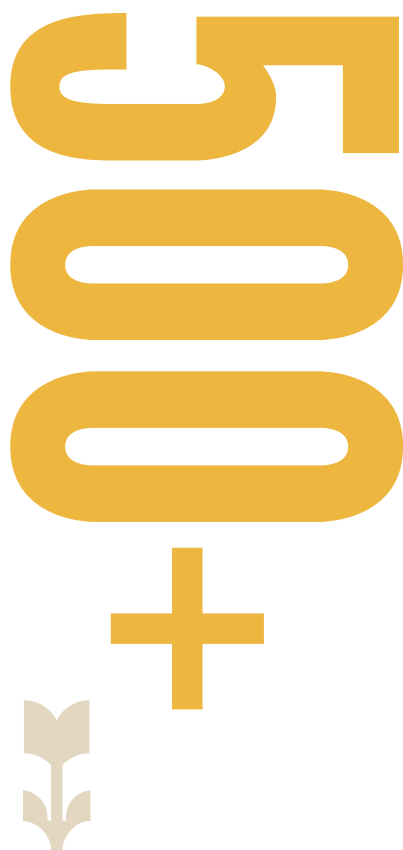
GRANT DAVIS &
SCOTT SCHMITT

01	EVANSVILLE, VANDERBURGH COUNTY	City
02	2023	Founded
03	7 (AND LEO, THE DOG)	Number of employees
04	BARKERBREWHOUSE.COM	Web

“AS A BUSINESS OWNER, YOU NEED TO HAVE YOUR HANDS ON EVERYTHING AND UNDERSTAND WHAT EVERYTHING TAKES.”
—GRANT DAVIS



BATTERY INNOVATION CENTER



*business,
government,
academic and
industry clients
have partnered
with BIC to
advance battery
development and
commercialization
since 2013.*

POWERING THE FUTURE

As the only initiative of its kind in Indiana, the Battery Innovation Center (BIC) is a non-profit public/private organization shaping the future of energy storage for clients in the state, across the country and around the world. Operating from within a 36,000-square-foot facility in Newberry, the center works collaboratively with a diverse group of partners across commercial, government, academic and retail sectors, from start-ups to established original equipment manufacturers (OEMs).

The BIC functions under a fee-for-service model, but also receives grant funding from the Indiana Economic Development Corporation (IEDC) that it allocates to education, training and development. If all goes according to schedule, the organization anticipates opening a second location in Indianapolis next summer.

Launched by the Energy Systems Network in 2013, BIC's mission is built on three main operational pillars: early-stage development of advanced batteries including materials analysis, battery testing and evaluation and workforce development and education.

"Over the past five years, we've trained more than 1,500 people through our foundational familiarization class," says President and CEO Les Alexander. "There's definitely a need to support a pipeline for engineers and scientists in the battery industry, and we're actively working to meet that need through workforce development initiatives and STEM student challenges."

The BIC actively works on anywhere from eighteen to more than twenty-four different projects each month, relying on word-of-mouth referrals, partner-generated leads and a consistent presence at industry conferences

like the annual Battery Show in Detroit to generate new customers. Alexander recognizes the Applied Research Institute, the Energy Systems Network, the Naval Surface Warfare Center - Crane Division and Purdue University as just a few of the valued partners who have contributed to the center's continued growth through the years.

As an "honest broker," BIC thrives by helping other entities succeed. More specifically, it aids customers in exploring new battery technologies, accelerating development, improving existing products and providing supporting data for prospective investment. Any intellectual property or patentable products the center creates ultimately belongs to those customers.

Alexander says some clients also approach BIC to supplement testing their own researchers are already doing, or to rent state-of-the-art equipment that might otherwise be cost-prohibitive for them to purchase. Other customers welcome the chance to work alongside BIC's team of expert scientists and engineers in the battery field.

"We measure ourselves on our ability to move our customers forward along their paths toward commercialization, and we're proud to have played an indirect role in attracting manufacturers and companies to Indiana," he explains. ➡➡

**WE'RE PROUD TO HAVE
PLAYED AN INDIRECT ROLE IN
ATTRACTING MANUFACTURERS
AND COMPANIES TO INDIANA.**

LES ALEXANDER

LEARN MORE AT: BICINDIANA.COM



BLOOMFIELD SCHOOLHOUSE LAVENDER FARM & APOTHECARY

THE FRESH, CRISP SCENT OF AGRITOURISM

MARION WIGGINS

01 **LAGRANGE, LAGRANGE COUNTY** City

02 **2024** Founded

03 **5** Number of employees

04 **BLOOMFIELDSCHOOLHOUSELAVENDER.COM** Web

“WE’RE IN A GOOD LOCATION FOR PEOPLE WHO WANT THE AGRITOURISM EXPERIENCE, AND THERE’S ALWAYS A PUSH FOR INDIANA-GROWN AND INDIANA-MADE,”
—MARION WIGGINS



Only lavender farm in U.S. operating in a National Register of Historic Places building.

WRITTEN BY TERRI PROCOPIO PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs

During the pandemic, Greg and Marion Wiggins purchased a historic schoolhouse in LaGrange, Indiana with the intention of listing it on the National Register of Historic Places to preserve it for future generations. They were initially uncertain how they would use the three-room schoolhouse built in the late 1800s. Around this same time, the family planted lavender in their front yard because they loved how the shrubs looked on farms in Texas, from which they had recently relocated.

By 2023, the harvest was so abundant the couple let their children sell it at the farmers market, with the understanding that any money they earned could be used for a new playhouse. “We sold out every weekend and my kids now have the most spectacular playhouse you can imagine,” says Marion.

The Wiggins opened their first storefront before Christmas 2024 and currently have about 50 lavender products, including wreaths, soap, lotions, balms and teas created by a master herbalist. The next goal is to complete renovations on the schoolhouse and add a lavender oil distillery. Events and classes will be held in the schoolhouse where patrons can also shop a windfall of lavender merchandise. “We have products that I make or we buy from other lavender farmers and local makers,” says Marion. “I have a candlemaker, a couple jewelry makers, an oil painter and my friend who does watercolors.”

In 2024, 3,400 plants were added to the 1,000 plants, and 3,000 more will be planted in fall of 2025, bringing the total to 7,400 shrubs. Most recently, Bloomfield Schoolhouse Lavender Farm & Apothecary was approved for a \$250,000 United States Department of Agriculture producer grant, which will be used to procure a marketing plan, new packaging and two full-time production staff.

At the onset, Greg and Marion found support from the LaGrange Chamber of Commerce and the Indiana SBDC who understood their goals for both the building and the business. They are currently working with the Shipshewana Visitor Center to develop and advertise an agritourism program to include off-site field visits, classes and a u-pick component.

The hands-on, engagement angle positions the business to draw regional visitors from Chicago, Detroit, Fort Wayne, South Bend and Kalamazoo. “We’re in a good location for people who want the agritourism experience, and there’s always a push for Indiana-grown and Indiana-made,” says Marion. “After COVID, people want those authentic experiences and they understand that life exists outside of cities.” ➡➡

37K

TREATS SOLD
TO 1,350 UNIQUE
CUSTOMERS

CAYPOPS BAKERY

ICING ARTIST BAKES HER WAY INTO BOOMING BUSINESS

WRITTEN BY EMILY WORRELL PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Jay Goldz*

During COVID-19 quarantine, many of us picked up random hobbies (sourdough, pottery, ukelele, you name it). However, most of us didn't turn our pandemic hobbies into a business. Caylyn Pruitt (only 15 years old at the time!) did.

Pruitt founded her home-based baking business CayPops Bakery in 2021, specializing in custom-themed cake pops and sugar cookies for birthdays, showers, graduation parties, weddings, and more. CayPops can render almost any design in icing: from corporate logos and sports teams, to seasonal motifs and monograms.

"I'm a happy person and always smiling," Pruitt says, "and I want people to feel the same way, from the beginning of the ordering process to when they pick up and enjoy their treats."

Pruitt was inspired by her pandemic fixation: Kids' Baking Championship, a Food Network reality show. After testing out some of the recipes herself, it became a hobby. After about a year, she decided she wanted to start her entrepreneurial journey.

Since then, she's sold about 37,000 items to 1,350 different customers. She's won pitch competitions and acquired several employees.

"I actually hired my mom two years ago because I had overfilled my capacity and was wanting to grow the business," Pruitt says.

Pruitt has opened a second branch in Bowling Green, KY, run by her aunt. She is working to expand her bakers' network, essentially providing

a "business in a box" for interested bakers who want to join her team.

"I want to inspire people who love to bake to not be worried about, 'oh how do I start my own business?'" Pruitt says. "If you join the bakers' network, I'm going to provide you with your starter kit which has all of your pans and ingredients and mixers. I'm going to train you in less than a week. We'll throw you a big grand opening so that your community will be familiar with the business and then help you with marketing support."

Currently, Pruitt is finishing her associates degree in entrepreneurship at Ivy Tech Columbus and will go full-time back into CayPops upon graduation. One of her next goals is to be more involved with the Columbus community.

Pruitt's advice to other young entrepreneurs? Just start. "It's never too early or late," Pruitt says. "Sometimes we get hung up on things, like, 'Well, it's not perfect yet. I'm gonna wait.' But if I had waited until it was perfect, I wouldn't be here today with a three-year-old business. Mistakes are not a bad thing. It's just going to help you continue to improve." ➡

CAYLYN PRUITT

01 **COLUMBUS, BARTHOLOMEW COUNTY** City

02 **2021** Founded

03 **3** Number of employees

04 **CAYPOPS.COM** Web

“I WANT TO INSPIRE PEOPLE WHO LOVE TO BAKE TO NOT BE WORRIED ABOUT, ‘OH HOW DO I START MY OWN BUSINESS?’”
—CAYLYN PRUITT

CdE SCENT DETECTION DOGS

8-10

SEARCHES PER
MONTH



PATTI FARNSWORTH

01 **TERRE HAUTE, VIGO COUNTY** City

02 **2024** Founded

03 **1** Number of employees

04 **CDEPETFINDERS.COM** Web

“THERE’S A REAL SCIENCE TO IT; YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND HOW LOST PETS BEHAVE AND DEVELOP SEARCH AND RECOVERY STRATEGIES BASED ON THE INFORMATION COLLECTED.”
—PATTI FARNSWORTH



CdE Scent Detection Dogs relies on the services of two specially trained canines to locate missing pets by tracking their scent trails.

BLAZING NEW TRAILS WITH SCENT DETECTION

WRITTEN BY AMY LYNCH PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs

Who says you can’t teach an old dog new tricks? Patti Farnsworth spent the COVID-19 lockdown playing “find it” games with her dog, quickly discovering he had an uncanny ability to locate anything she’d hidden. She later became inspired to train Opie and his cousin Opal (both Cirneco dell’Etna—a Sicilian hunting breed) to detect and track scent trails after experiencing the painful uncertainty of losing a pet of her own.

“Something like that would have been so helpful when I was looking for my lost dog,” she explains. “There’s a real science to it; you need to understand how lost pets behave and develop search and recovery strategies based on the information collected.”

Following guidance from a book about how to become a pet detective, Farnsworth consulted with the Missing Animal Response Network, Pet Search and Rescue and Unlimited Pawsibilities to get Opie and Opal ready to work. In 2024, she contacted the West Central Indiana Small Business Development Center in Terre Haute for assistance with formalizing a business plan for CdE Scent Detection Services.

“They paired me with Indiana State University to develop my web page, and they’ve helped me navigate the challenges of filing articles of incorporation and dealing with new technology,” she says.

Farnsworth relies heavily on word-of-mouth referrals and social media to market her services, handing out cup-coaster cards in lieu of standard

business cards at regional veterinary offices, dog parks, pet adoption events and throughout her community.

“I know for certain these efforts are generating calls,” she says. “I wear shirts with my CdE logo everywhere I go; it sparks conversations and gives me more opportunities to talk about the business.”

Recently retired from a part-time administrative job at age 69, Farnsworth plans to devote her energy to growing CdE to full-time status, working up to conducting a minimum of eight to ten searches per month, and creating a Dick Tracy-style comic strip called Opie Alexander, K-9 Pet Detective for her Facebook page.

“I’d like to train another dog to rotate in and out with the other two, and I’m hoping to find a younger person to mentor who can help with the searches,” she adds.

For Farnsworth, the most rewarding part of the job is being able to bring missing pets home to their worried families. She and Opie received a Best Teamwork award in May from a national organization for locating a miniature Schnauzer stranded in the middle of a creek in the dark in under two hours.

“It was a very powerful moment,” she says. “I counsel owners that it could take days or weeks before they’re reunited with their beloved pet, but I always tell them not to give up hope!” ➡

2,700

BIRTHDAY PARTIES
HOSTED

DEEP BLUE INDOOR PLAY

EMILY CRAWFORD'S MAGICAL INDOOR PLAYGROUND

EMILY CRAWFORD

01 **EVANSVILLE, VANDERBURGH COUNTY** City

02 **2022** Founded

03 **15** Number of employees

04 **DEEPBLUEEVANSVILLE.COM** Web

WRITTEN BY MEGAN FERNANDEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Alex Kumar

Emily Crawford interned at Walt Disney World in college, and when she wasn't dressed as The Little Mermaid or Sleeping Beauty, she walked around and soaked up the theme park's immersive environment. The elaborate scale stuck with her when she moved back to Evansville, started a family and worked in healthcare and logistics.

When Crawford decided to find a more creative career, she wanted to bring the Disney magic to Indiana. The inspiration culminated in an ocean-themed family entertainment center called Deep Blue Indoor Play.

"Some children in our area will never be able to have a Disney World experience or go to the ocean. I wanted to create a space where every child felt welcome and part of something special," Crawford says.

The 15,000-square-foot fun zone has four playgrounds, six party rooms, a concession stand, gift shop and nursing rooms for moms. Crawford conceptualized custom-built play features herself, like slides down from the balcony, a massive Lite Brite peg wall and a multilevel crochet playscape.

Crocheted playgrounds are a new trend. The large-scale, suspended net installations allow kids to crawl, climb, balance and practice motor skills. Deep Blue's looks like a coral reef and has swings on the uppermost level. Adults are allowed on it, too.

In true Disney style, Crawford went all-out with splashy colors and eye-popping installations. Instead of walking into the party room through a door, kids can crawl through tubes in the wall.

Instead of taking the stairs from the upper floor, they can slide down.

Crawford's creative instincts hit a sweet spot for kids with autism who benefit from sensory features on play equipment.

"After we opened, I kept hearing that this is exactly what kids needed here. I had no idea how beneficial this business would be for those on the spectrum," Crawford says.

Her drive and imagination impressed Doug Claybourn at the Southwest Indiana Small Business Development Center. He advised Crawford on a floorplan that would prevent lines and congestion, and hiring teenage employees. The latter has surprised Crawford, who enjoys teaching accountability and responsibility to kids working their first job.

Crawford has made other successful pivots. Though Crawford originally envisioned a majority of walk-in attendance, parties and field trips quickly took the top spot. Now Deep Blue has twelve parties on the average Saturday. With overlapping events, the climbing wall couldn't handle the party volume and kids spent too much time standing in line. Crawford replaced it with the crochet playground, which can fit many more children at the same time.

Adaptability is key to Deep Blue's success. Crawford is eager to react as she learns about her market. Luckily, she has a willing and handy husband to help. "I'll go to him with a crazy idea, and he'll say, 'Yes, let's do it,' then he brings it to life," she says. ➡

“ I WANTED TO BRING SOMETHING TO LIFE THAT WAS JUST SO OVER THE TOP, SOMETHING DIFFERENT FOR OUR COMMUNITY.”
—EMILY CRAWFORD

*Deep Blue
Indoor Play has
hosted 8,500
kids on school
field trips.*





Brand. Market. Expand. brings digital marketing expertise to business owners in rural communities.

BRIDGING THE DIGITAL MARKETING DIVIDE

The long-awaited expansion of broadband Internet in rural areas has created opportunities for small businesses to move into e-commerce and connect with customers online. Yet there is still a gap in expertise and understanding about how to maximize digital marketing, according to Courtney Chipol, regional director of the West Central Indiana Small Business Development Center (ISBDC).

Chipol used a grant from the U.S. Small Business Association to address the need, creating a one-day conference called Brand. Market. Expand. It was free the first year, and Chipol has been able to keep the cost under \$50 each year since.

"Marketing is always changing in terms of the platforms available, what really works, and how people are consuming content," Chipol says. "Relevant real-time training is what's really needed."

Attendees have praised the quality of the presenters, who have subject-matter expertise in a range of digital marketing topics, such as SEO, videography, social media strategy, food photography and the psychology of persuasion. "It's the only event of its kind in the area," Chipol says. Around 115 entrepreneurs attend each year.

The West Central office ensures that speakers present cost-effective solutions that solo entrepreneurs can execute themselves. "What we heard consistently is that attendees left with at least one tangible thing they could change right away. When you get advanced training, sometimes you still have to hire someone to do those things," Chipol says.

Attendees learned how to maximize their Google Business profile for local exposure, turn social media content into revenue, tailor one video for three different platforms and host an online Q&A session with customers.

Chipol develops Brand. Market. Expand. by finding out what Indiana SBDC's clients truly need and building partnerships with service providers who share her vision for growing small business. Her office puts out a call for speakers a few months before the event—the earlier, the better to be able to promote the conference.

"Our speakers would get paid more at another conference. They're doing it because they share our passion for making sure small business owners are successful," says Chipol. "They are more than happy to collaborate."

The third conference takes place November 21, 2025. "People appreciate having highly specialized training, which is rarely available in a community the size of Terre Haute," Chipol says. ➡➡

**RELEVANT REAL-TIME
[MARKETING] TRAINING
IS WHAT'S REALLY
NEEDED.**

COURTNEY CHIPOL

DU LIT RESTAURANT



PRESTON ZWOLLE

01 FORTVILLE, HANCOCK COUNTY City

02 2024 Founded

03 20 Number of employees

04 EAT-DULIT.COM Web

“IT’S AN INCREDIBLE
EXPERIENCE.”
—PRESTON ZWOLLE



*In 15 months,
Du Lit has
tripled its
weekly sales.*

SMALL EATERY WITH BIG FLAVORS LIGHTS FORTVILLE’S FIRE

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Marc Lebryk

On an August Friday night, Du Lit is jumping with people lined up to dine at the tiny Fortville eatery with a name that roughly translates to “your fire” in German.

Preston Zwolle started the restaurant in a former bakery in May 2024. At first, he was worried the business would fail.

“Now, it’s actually scary how busy we get sometimes,” Zwolle says.

Years ago, Zwolle bounced around different careers before landing in the restaurant business, managing locations in large restaurants and pizza chains.

A few years ago, he decided to pursue a major health upgrade. Zwolle cut gluten and dairy from his diet. He learned to cook meals with interesting recipes he could enjoy with his family. He lost 86 pounds. Zwolle then started thinking about a menu for his own restaurant, a far-fetched dream at the time. “I didn’t imagine being fortunate enough to open a restaurant,” he says.

Zwolle offered samples of his new recipes to restaurant coworkers, much to their delight.

Finally, after some financial planning, Zwolle took the leap and opened his own place. The menu grew into a large, eclectic array of dishes under categories like “Prereq” (for appetizers), “Wichery” (for sandwiches) and “Plated” for entrees with wildly creative names that don’t shy away from cheese, carbs and veggies but can absolutely be made to accommodate gluten or dairy allergies.

On busy nights, Du Lit is filled with curious customers and a team of cooks and servers hustling with frantic choreography.

“It’s an incredible experience,” says Zwolle, who, as head chef, spends most of his time managing cooks in the open kitchen. “I want to be the fly on the wall. I want to know what it’s like to sit in this chair and watch it happen when we’re all buzzing.”

Du Lit is an unforgettable experience for the senses, from the aromas that greet visitors to the sheer volume of activity, Zwolle says.

Sales have exploded at the small restaurant with 80 chairs in a small town that has embraced Zwolle’s place. “I’m super grateful for everyone who’s supported us,” he says.

In just 15 months, the restaurant has tripled its weekly sales. Du Lit’s success has opened Zwolle’s field of vision.

“I have found over my career that I need a new project after about two years,” Zwolle says. “Realistically, I’d love to have more than one restaurant. The sky’s the limit with this.” ➡➡

100+
CLIENTS

ELITE PRIMARY CARE & WELLNESS

JESSICA MCCARTIN IS
DELIVERING PATIENT-
CENTERED HEALTHCARE
THROUGH THE DIRECT
PRIMARY CARE MODEL.

JESSICA MCCARTIN

01	NEW ALBANY, FLOYD COUNTY	City
02	2024	Founded
03	1	Number of employees
04	ELITEPRIMARYCAREANDWELLNESSCLINIC.COM	Web

WRITTEN BY MEGAN FERNANDEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs

Direct primary care (DPC) is a growing trend in American healthcare. The patient-centered model involves paying a monthly membership, which averages \$125, for unlimited appointments and 24/7 access to their doctor. DPC offices don't accept insurance; rather, the flat fee covers routine and long-term preventative care with the goals of lowering out-of-pocket costs and focusing on overall wellness to avoid chronic disease.

Nurse Practitioner Jessica McCartin opened Elite Primary Care & Wellness in southern Indiana after working in a traditional family medicine office and then an operating room. The doctor's office left her unfulfilled and disillusioned.

"I was just sick of it. I almost left medicine altogether because it was impossible to provide good care to patients, and just morally and ethically it didn't meet what I wanted things to look like in health care," she says. "I was seeing twenty to twenty-five patients a day for an average of five to eight minutes. I knew there had to be something better."

That's when McCartin came across the DPC model. She worked in a DPC office in the area and learned the system before opening her own practice in July 2024.

McCartin partnered with local health and wellness businesses to market Elite at info sessions, and the business grew to more than 100

patients through mostly word of mouth. About half of Elite's clientele comes through partnerships with small businesses who offer a membership in lieu of a traditional health insurance plan.

Most appointments last about an hour, and McCartin welcomes patients to text or email her between appointments. DPC appeals to people who want more time and regular guidance from their primary care doctor on nutrition, fitness, sleep and mental health. McCartin says regular screenings get more attention in the DPC environment, too. "In traditional primary care, a lot of that stuff gets overlooked, and we're just checking boxes," she says.

One patient had been taking medicine for high cholesterol for years, but previous doctors hadn't recommended a coronary artery screening. McCartin did, and it found severe blockage. The patient needed a quadruple bypass surgery and was lucky to catch it before having a heart attack, McCartin says.

Rachael Armstrong with One Southern Indiana began encouraging McCartin to tap into Indiana's wealth of resources for entrepreneurs. McCartin was then selected as the Indiana Economic Development Corporation (IEDC)'s 2025 Startup Small Business of the Year for eliminating barriers to healthcare and making it more inclusive. ➡

“I WAS SEEING TWENTY TO TWENTY-FIVE PATIENTS A DAY FOR AN AVERAGE OF FIVE TO EIGHT MINUTES. I KNEW THERE HAD TO BE SOMETHING BETTER.”
—JESSICA MCCARTIN

*The average
appointment
time is one
hour rather
than fifteen
minutes.*



HATTIE LOU BLOOMS

HATTIE BENNETT'S LEMONADE STAND TURNED BUSINESS

700+

BOUQUETS
SOLD SINCE 2023

HATTIE BENNETT

01 **FRANKLIN, JOHNSON COUNTY** City

02 **2023** Founded

03 **1** Number of employees

04 **HATTIELOUBLOOMS.COM** Web

“MY FAVORITE PART IS SEEING PEOPLE BEING SO HAPPY ABOUT THEIR FLOWERS THAT THEY WERE GETTING.”
—HATTIE BENNETT

WRITTEN BY MEGAN FERNANDEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Jay Goldz*

Hattie Bennett just wanted a cell phone. She started a lemonade stand to save money, then wondered what else she could sell. She looked around the family's home in Franklin and asked her mother if she could pick flowers from the yard.

Those became \$5 bouquets for Mother's Day. They sold out from the family's porch, and Hattie Lou Blooms was born. Bennett was just ten years old.

With the help of her parents, Bennett kept making floral arrangements in Mason jars with a label in her own handwriting. She sold them at a fitness studio after classes, then at the Bargersville Kids Market. As word got out about Hattie Lou Blooms, she began getting orders. She even booked a wedding gig.

"It was a really opportune and manageable way for her to make money," says her mother, Kailee Bennett.

The middle-schooler and mother duo expanded into making bookmarks and trinket dishes with flowers, teaching pressed-flower classes and preserving wedding and memorial flowers in frames made by a local woodworker. They also let parents order flowers for teachers during the holidays and have a subscription service. Hattie began donating a portion of sales to charity each month.

At the Bargersville Kids Market, Kailee connected with a young cotton candy maker who was receiving help from the Indiana Small Business Development Center at Butler University.

Kailee reached out and received a business advisor, who said their prices were too low and suggested a pay-what-you-can model. Sales have spiked since then, and most people offer more than \$5.

"Now we always make the sale versus before when we would say a price. People would be like, 'Well, okay, we'll come back,'" Kailee says. They have sold around 700 bouquets since that first Mother's Day whim.

Hattie is committed to growing the business even as she gets more involved with school and sports. Her favorite part is "seeing people being so happy about their flowers that they were getting." She's primarily responsible for making arrangements and doing deliveries, and her parents help out when she is busy. They've also ensured that she has a proper summer vacation.

"If I make Hattie be at the farmers market every Saturday at 7 a.m., I think she would quit this business. So we just did four Saturdays strategically in July and August, when we have the most flowers," Kailee says.

Kailee has her hands full, too, supporting not just one child entrepreneur but two—Hattie's younger brother has started a business with candy vending machines. ➡

~\$10M

REPORTED REVENUE
IN THE 1ST YEAR

HUNTINGBURG MECHANICAL INC.

BUILDING A LEGACY WITH A NEW SET OF TOOLS

WRITTEN BY ASHLEY CAVEDA PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Alex Kumar*

Nearly 65 years ago, Ruger Kerstiens' grandfather started a homebuilding business. Over the decades, this legacy expanded to multi-family development with an integrated property management company. For years, the only missing piece was plumbing, HVAC and electrical. In 2024, this pain point led the Kerstiens family to purchase a company in the mechanical space, retaining all assets and a majority of the original employees.

Now called Huntingburg Mechanical Inc, Kerstiens, who serves as president, shares that a "majority of our work is actually third party." In the first year alone, they reported nearly \$10,000,000 in revenue, which exceeded expectations by 42%. This year, they are on track to increase revenue by another 20%. What these incredible statistics don't convey is how intimidating the initial transition to a new type of business was.

Early on, Kerstiens recalls standing before his employees, some who boasted more than twenty-five years of experience. "I know how to run the operations of a business and you guys know how to do the plumbing, mechanical and electrical," he remembers telling them. "You let me handle the back end, and I'm going to trust you to handle and make the right decisions in the field."

This largely sums up Kerstiens' approach to leadership. He believes in mutual respect and taking care of his staff. "If you trust us, we're going to invest in you. We want it to be a long-term relationship, rather than a pit stop on your way somewhere else," he says. "It was a lot of them trusting me and me trusting them."

Even while impressive stats continue to roll in, Kerstiens is most concerned about doing good work that uplifts the community, while building a company filled with talented, dependable people. For those considering a similar path, Ruger shares this: "Focus on the team members you're bringing on and make sure they have the integrity you're looking for, the honesty, the loyalty, because these are people you're going to be spending the majority of your time with, and you want to surround yourself with people you really enjoy."

As a student, Kerstiens' familial background led him to the IU Kelley School of Business, where he graduated with a business management degree. As a freshman, he joined the Real Estate Club. He also participated in the I-Core program, a semester designed to give students real-time experiences that challenge them to solve cross-functional business problems, while developing professional and leadership skills. The education, connections and hands-on learning Kerstiens gained while at IU have served as a launching point for everything since. He says: "I've been able to take pieces of all of that, what I learned, and put it into the business now." ➡➡

RUGER KERSTIENS

01 HUNTINGBURG, DUBOIS COUNTY City

02 2024 Founded

03 35 Number of employees

04 HUNTINGBURGMACHINEWORKS.COM Web

“ I’VE BEEN ABLE TO
TAKE PIECES OF ALL OF
THAT, WHAT I LEARNED,
AND PUT IT INTO THE
BUSINESS NOW.”
—RUGER KERSTIENS



**CDFI
FRIENDLY
EVANSVILLE**

CDFI FRIENDLY HELPS FUND THE AMERICAN DREAM

Securing a loan to get a business concept off the ground is one of the biggest challenges aspiring entrepreneurs face. That's where CDFI Friendly Evansville Region steps in to help.

Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) are private institutions that meet the financing needs of under-resourced people in urban, rural and Native communities across all 50 states. Although CDFI Friendly Evansville Region isn't technically a lender itself, it has the ability to connect prospective borrowers with other CDFIs that are able to provide more flexible funding than conventional banks and credit unions.

"The CDFI concept actually emerged back in the 1970s as an extension of the Civil Rights movement," says founding executive director Taylor Price. "A group of nuns in Michigan noticed lending disparities for black and brown people in comparison to their white counterparts. They pulled together their retirement funds and gave them to a local bank with instructions to lend to people who have traditionally been overlooked for financing."

Stakeholders convened to launch the Evansville-based non-profit in 2023, installing Price as Founding Executive Director of CDFI Friendly's Evansville Region in February 2024.

Price estimates that there are currently more than 1,400 CDFIs in existence across the United States, many created to meet a specific lending needs. CDFI Friendly Evansville Region acts as a hub to help southern Indiana-based borrowers find CDFIs to work with in the state and elsewhere throughout the country.

"I always say I am a matchmaker, a bridge builder and a storyteller," Price says. "I help connect the CDFIs to the entities that need them by sharing their stories."

Some of these stories include a financially-challenged man looking to buy a box truck to launch his own transportation business, a local non-profit that rehabs blighted houses for families in need to live in and a young woman seeking a safe new space to operate her daycare. Supporting these endeavors not only helps funding recipients pursue their own version of the American Dream, it also benefits the southwest Indiana economy by generating tax dollars and creating jobs.

In her first 18 months as executive director, Price has been able to put approximately 90 prospective borrowers in touch with CDFIs to submit applications for funding. She's hopeful more success stories will continue to pour in.

"We receive a lot of support from big banks and private family foundations; that's how we stay sustainable right now," Price says. "Whenever external supporters come to visit our region, I drive them by the businesses we've worked with so they get a chance to see exactly where their money is going and who it's helped." ➡➡

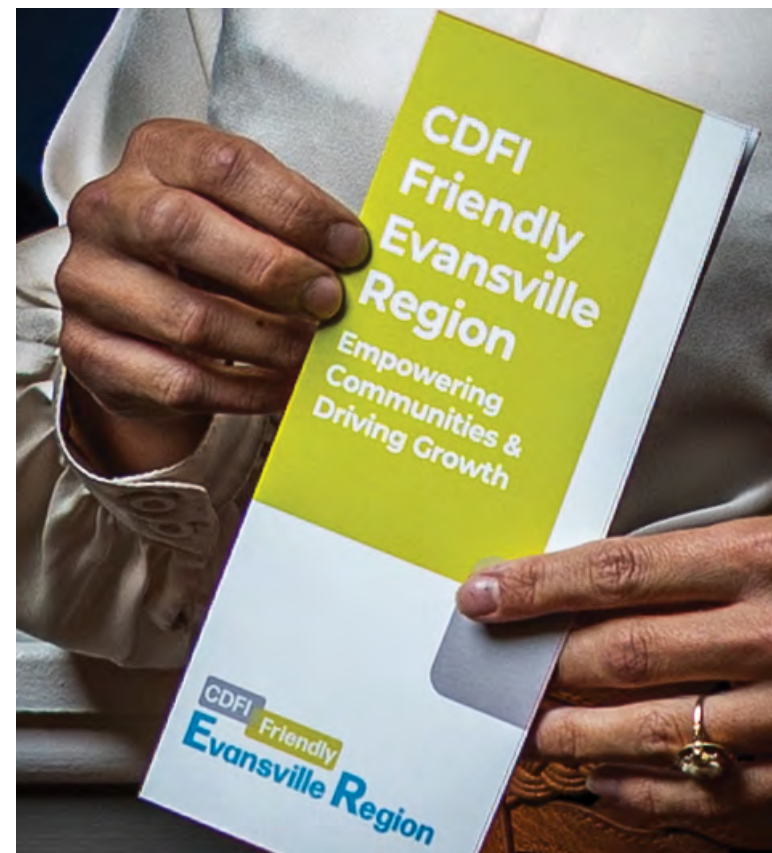
90

ENTREPRENEURS
ASSISTED IN
SUBMITTING
APPLICATIONS
FOR CDFI FUNDING
CONSIDERATION

I HELP CONNECT THE CDFIS TO THE ENTITIES THAT NEED THEM BY SHARING THEIR STORIES.

TAYLOR PRICE

LEARN MORE AT: CDFIFRIENDLYEVANSVILLE.ORG



INDIGENOUS ENDEAVORS

KIM LEMING

01 HUNTINGTON, HUNTINGTON COUNTY^{City}

02 2023 Founded

03 1 Number of employees

04 INDIGENOUSENDEAVORS.ORG Web

“AN ELDER ONCE TOLD ME THAT KNOWLEDGE IS NOT TO COVET, BUT TO PASS ON. THAT’S WHAT I DO. I FIND INFORMATION AND I PASS IT ON.”
—KIM LEMING



The company is based in Huntington, Indiana, but works with Alaska Native People and American Indians across the contiguous United States.

SHARING THE KNOWLEDGE SHE’S LEARNED

WRITTEN BY AMY LYNCH PHOTOGRAPHED BY Adam Raschka

For Kim Leming, working with American Indian and Alaska Native People isn’t just a job. It’s a passion.

Originally from Huntington, Leming relocated frequently while growing up dependent on her father’s military career postings, including a stint in Alaska where she felt right at home. So much so that she later moved back and lived there for thirty years, working on economic and community development projects with the Native villages, putting her Bachelor of Business Marketing and Master of Social Work degrees from the University of Alaska and Master’s in Indigenous Peoples Law from the University of Oklahoma to good use.

“I returned to Huntington two years ago,” Leming says. “I love being on the ancestral land of Indiana, but I really missed the work and the people.”

Those connections inspired Leming to launch Indigenous Endeavors in 2023 as a way to continue her support of American Indian and Alaska Native People. A few of her clients thus far have included the Reindeer Herders of the Nome region and the Ivory Carvers of St. Lawrence Island. She’s also raised funds for subsistence projects and works with private foundations on behalf of Native opportunities.

“I do a lot of grant research,” she mentions. “For example, I worked on getting historic preservation grants and recognition for a building owned by the federal government that needed to be stabilized before it was returned to the Native People.”

As a one-person operation, Leming works from a home office, tapping her local Indiana Small Business Development Center for assistance and resources. She’s registered with the U.S. Federal Government for contract leads.

Understanding the logistics of working in Alaska puts her at an advantage.

“The road system is extremely limited,” she says. “You have to fly in to most of the remote villages; a population of 300 to 600 people make up a village.”

Leming markets her company through a website, by sending out her capability statement to prospective clients and by networking at Native-American-focused events like the Sovereignty Symposium in Oklahoma City and the annual Reservation Economic Summit (RES) in Las Vegas organized by the National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development.

“I’d like to work with more tribes in the contiguous U.S., especially in Indiana,” she shares. “I plan to develop a newsletter, and I know I need to be more active on social media.”

To that end, Leming hopes to eventually hire an assistant to help with the workload.

“An Elder once told me that knowledge is not to covet, but to pass on,” she says. “That’s what I do. I find information and I pass it on.” ➡➡



LSM ANALYTICS

COUNTING COUNTLESS DATA BITS ADD UP TO BETTER ROADS & TRAFFIC SIGNALS

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Marc Lebryk*

The American Society of Civil Engineers consistently gives the nation's road infrastructure a failing grade, with a massive backlog of maintenance projects facing most cities and counties. For local governments with shrinking budgets, the question isn't just where to spend money, but how to spend it as effectively as possible. That's where two Purdue graduates stepped in, leveraging data to transform a costly guessing game into a precise science.

"We can look, because it's crowdsourced, and see how the roads are performing," says Justin Mahlberg, one of the cofounders of LSM Analytics. "Zooming in a little more on Central Avenue, we can see certain sections of it look a little bit rough at an intersection, but when we look to the left, we can see where they actually did some maintenance or pavement patches there."

Mahlberg and cofounder Howell Li launched LSM Analytics in West Lafayette in 2023 to gather tons of raw data from various sources and create statistical and analytical reports. Their clients, usually governments and government-related agencies, can use those reports to plan street maintenance, traffic lights and more.

It's cheaper and faster than government agencies sending workers into the field to gather similar data, Li and Mahlberg say.

LSM Analytics is on the front end of a growing industry that curates huge amounts of crowd-sourced data into detailed reports on infrastructure needs for governments.

Most of the crowdsourced data come from private sources, like automotive vehicle manufacturers and government agencies. LSM packages the information for clients. Many vehicles are "connected cars," equipped with sensors and equipment to relay information quickly to the Internet, other cars and other sensors nearby.

"We use new technologies to basically do what agencies have been doing for decades," Li says. "But, we can do it for lower costs using data already out there."

For example, LSM Analytics is a subcontractor on a project to improve the efficiency of the buses for a major public transportation corporation. They are providing traffic operations support using data from different sources to determine the effects of traffic signal system upgrades on city buses.

In 2024, LSM Analytics worked with a consulting firm for Spain's Ministry of Transport, and the team recently landed a contract in the United Kingdom for another pavement condition study.

Since their days working together in Purdue's Joint Transportation Research Program, Li and Mahlberg quickly learned how much faster technology moves relative to the pace of change in the transportation infrastructure industry. They also realized someone had to bridge the gap between that technology and that industry.

"The technology is there, but the industry is not yet," Mahlberg says. "And so why not have the industry come to us? That's what we really want to do. We want to start with the technology we have here in Indiana, start local, then grow across the Midwest and keep going from there." ➡➡

HOWELL LI & JUSTIN MAHLBERG

01	WEST LAFAYETTE, TIPPECANOE COUNTY	City
02	2023	Founded
03	2	Number of employees
04	LSMANALYTICS.COM	Web

“WE WANT TO START WITH THE TECHNOLOGY WE HAVE HERE IN INDIANA, START LOCAL, THEN GROW ACROSS THE MIDWEST AND KEEP GOING FROM THERE.”
—JUSTIN MAHLBURG

*LSM Analytics
is working on a
project to improve
the efficiency
of the buses for
a major public
transportation
corporation.*



RED DOG DUMPSTERS, LLC

\$200K+

YEAR TWO
REVENUE

CLEANER BY THE YARD, TIDY BY THE TON

COLTIN KENNEDY

01 **SHELburn, SULLIVAN COUNTY** City

02 **2024** Founded

03 **1** Number of employees

04 **REDDOGDUMPSTERSIN.COM** Web

“MY PHONE RINGS A LOT NOW AND IT GETS ME EXCITED TO GET MORE BUSINESS AND MEET NEW PEOPLE.”
—COLTIN KENNEDY



*Red Dog
Dumpsters has
hailed 1,200
tons in 2025.*

WRITTEN BY TERRI PROCOPIO PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs

Watching his father run a construction company for 25 years, Coltin Kennedy saw what it took to keep a business afloat financially. In 2024 after securing a credit union loan, he decided to try his hand in something outside construction.

In honor of his best friend, a golden retriever named Ruger, Kennedy founded Red Dog Dumpsters, LLC. The business rents roll-off dumpsters for residential and commercial purposes.

The business provides 20-, 30- and 40-yard dumpsters at weekly and monthly rates. Red Dog also provides custom hauling to nearby landfills. By offering a wide range of dumpster sizes and flexible scheduling, Kennedy is able to manage waste removal solutions that won't slow down construction projects or major home renovations. Red Dog hauls anything from construction and yard waste, to appliances, mattresses, trash and furniture.

Red Dog prides itself on serving a generous multi-county area in south-central-western Indiana—and accommodating sites even further afield for an extra fee.

Kennedy initially acquired customers through his parents' business and personal contacts. He then started strategically placing signs on the side of the road and making Facebook posts. Once he had his business website built, he activated it to acquire new customers through online avenues. Clients can now easily book services online.

After only a year in business, he continues to expand and add customers. “My phone rings a lot now and it gets me excited to get more business and meet new people,” he says. “It makes me feel like I'm really getting somewhere.”

During his first year in business, he reached \$100,000 in revenue. He's already netted \$200,000 along with hauling 1,200 tons, in 2025. “Those were pretty much my goals for this year,” he says. “I've already exceeded all that, so I'm pretty excited.” He next wants to purchase five additional dumpsters, including one that will haul one ton of waste.

Kennedy finds Indiana to be very supportive of small business owners, from launch to growing into larger businesses. Red Dog Dumpster benefits from its location and being able to service customers across a wide geographic area. “All the towns are close together, so you can jump back and forth between them,” he says. “The more ground you cover, the more people you can serve, the faster you can grow.” ➡➡

3.6M

WEEKLY READERS
ONLINE AND IN PRINT

SUPR DEE

MEET SUPR DEE, THE YOUNGEST SYNDICATED CARTOONIST IN THE NATION

WRITTEN BY RYAN MILLBERN PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs

Deon Parson, aka Supr Dee, struggled socially as a child in Elwood, Indiana. He took refuge in the unlikelyst of places: *Garfield* comic books.

"I checked the *Garfield* books out so much at the library that the librarian eventually permanently withdrew one for me," Parson recalls. "I learned about myself from *Garfield*: he's fat, lazy and won't change himself for anybody. That made me think, 'I should be ok with myself and who I am.'"

By 17, Parson had developed his own original comic strip about a single mom and her bouncing baby called *Life with Kurami*. It would take two years of rejections—and help from his childhood hero—before he got his first break.

In 2014, Parson's friend was working for *Garfield* creator Jim Davis at Paws, Inc. studio. They invited Parson to show his comics to Davis. "I cried a little bit in front of him," Parson remembers, "telling him how much *Garfield* meant to me."

Davis put in a good word at the Herald Bulletin (the Anderson, Ind. newspaper), and on April 6, 2015, *Life with Kurami* appeared alongside *Garfield*.

Life with Kurami ran daily for over two years before Parson stopped to create a graphic novel. His next big break came in 2020, when he shared an original strip called *Rosebuds* on social media, chronicling rivalries between three sisters, Rosa, Maria and Maricela Gonzalez. "It took off like crazy," Parson says.

In 2024, King Features Syndicate, distributor of *Popeye*, *Flash Gordon* and *Beetle Bailey*, picked up *Rosebuds* for syndication after a year-long bidding war with another newspaper syndicate. This is almost unheard of, since newspapers are shrinking, as is the real estate for comics. Also, legacy comic strips (think *Peanuts*) tend to outlive their creators, making it difficult for new artists to break through.

Rosebuds is one of only three original comic strips to enter print syndication since *Garfield* in 1978. The strip also appears online on Comicskingdom.com, where it frequently tops the popularity charts, going head-to-head with legacy strips such as *The Family Circus*.

In addition to his comics, 30-year-old Parson is the promotional lead artist for the video game *ToeJam & Earl: Back in the Groove!*, an illustrator for SEGA, and creator of strips and animations for Lofi Girl, a YouTube channel with 15 million subscribers. He also hosts comic workshops and speaks about his journey pursuing a career in art.

Parson's advice for new artists starting out? "Find your own voice. You're the only one who can tell the stories you want to tell." ➡➡

DEON PARSON

01	ANDERSON, MADISON COUNTY	City
02	2015	Founded
03	1	Number of employees
04	SUPRDEE2.COM	Web

“YOU’RE THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN TELL THE STORIES YOU WANT TO TELL.”
—DEON PARSON

As of 2025,
Supr Dee
has 62,200+
followers on
social media.





CIRCULAR VENTURE LAB



Indiana high schools are projected to have the IMPACTT curriculum by 2026.

THE CIRCULAR VENTURE LAB MISSION IS TO CREATE, TEST AND PROTOTYPE NEW PRODUCTS, SYSTEMS AND SERVICES IN THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY.

LOGAN JENKINS

BRINGING THE ECONOMY FULL CIRCLE WITH CIRCULAR VENTURE LAB

Everything old is new again. By promoting the concepts of reuse, recycle and repurpose, Circular Venture Lab is helping companies and partners reimagine the way they do business.

Landing in southern Indiana by way of California and Colorado, Logan Jenkins founded Circular Venture Lab as a non-profit organization in 2021 while living in Wyoming.

"I wanted to do more with it after I arrived in Evansville in 2023, so I just started meeting with as many community members as I could," he says.

In early 2024, Jenkins proposed several projects to the University of Evansville as a way to work collaboratively with the students and faculty. Through that partnership, he was able to secure \$400,000 in grant funding the same year from the U.S. Department of Energy, the U.S. Small Business Administration Growth Accelerator Fund and the Indiana Economic Development Corporation. In addition to supporting Circular Venture Lab, those awards also allowed Jenkins to launch the Indiana Center for Emerging Technologies.

"The Circular Venture Lab mission is to create, test and prototype new products, systems and services in the circular economy," he says. "Our work reduces the use of new materials needed, energy and water used and waste produced."

Operating as separate entities under the same non-profit umbrella, the Circular Venture Lab and Indiana Center for Emerging Technologies focus on a three-part methodology—inspiration, ideation and impact. Although the Center for Emerging Technologies works across Indiana and around the country to promote technology innovation, sustainable practices, community networks and education development, efforts focus mainly on the southwestern region of the state.

IMPACTT is the center's main project at present, a curriculum designed to introduce students to the process of technology transfer at universities, research institutions and national labs. The program encourages critical thinking and economic development principles.

"We developed the program in partnership with the University of Evansville and the STARTedUP Foundation," Jenkins says. "The curriculum is under development; by Spring 2026, it will be available to students in 110 Indiana high schools."

With an eye toward early-stage companies with growth potential, Jenkins vets prospective partners who find him through referrals, startup accelerators and venture capital firms. Community partners and student interns help increase awareness about what both organizations are doing.

"Our newest program through the Center is called Accessible Innovation, where we're empowering community members and entrepreneurs across Indiana to pursue innovation in the disability technology space," Jenkins says. "That's opened up so many new partnerships with organizations across not only the state, but throughout the Midwest, and it has great potential to become a national program." ➡➡

KINGDOM KIDS LEARNING HOME



CRYSTINA DIAZ

01 **KOKOMO, HOWARD COUNTY** City

02 **2022** Founded

03 **3** Number of employees

04 **THEKINGDOMKIDSLLC.COM** Web

“WE ARE MORE THAN A DAYCARE. WE ARE A PLACE WHERE CHILDREN FEEL WELCOMED, WHERE THEY CAN LEARN AND GROW WITH THE HELP OF PEOPLE WHO CARE.”
—CRYSTINA DIAZ



Owner Crystina Diaz has built a reputation within the Kokomo community for providing strong academic curriculum and high-quality care.

TAKING A LEAP OF FAITH

WRITTEN BY AMY LYNCH PHOTOGRAPHED BY Adam Raschka

As a young mother, Crystina Diaz took a chance and moved from Chicago to Kokomo ten years ago in the hopes of building a better life for her six-month-old son.

“I applied for Section 8 Housing, which created a way to provide shelter for my family, but I still needed a job, reliable transportation and childcare,” she recalls.

Diaz found work as a preschool teacher with several childcare facilities, where she began to notice a shortage of educational opportunities for low-income minority families in her local community.

“Some of the places I worked were basically a babysitting service,” she says. “I wanted to become an advocate and make childcare center academics a major program fundamental while also creating a safe space for diverse families.”

After earning an associate’s degree in elementary education from Ivy Tech, Diaz licensed and launched the Kingdom Kids Learning Center in 2022 with a goal of providing a high-quality curriculum and care that nurtures the God-given potential of each unique child.

“We are more than a daycare,” she says. “We are a place where children feel welcomed, where they can learn and grow with the help of people who care.”

Working with two other full-time teachers, Diaz has the capacity to accommodate sixteen children between the ages of six weeks and thirteen years old at Kingdom Kids. Word of

mouth and her TikTok feed have built her a loyal following, and the United Way helped her weather the COVID-19 pandemic by donating masks, hand sanitizer and temperature-check machines. Diaz distributes flyers and business cards to promote the learning home and works with Child Care Resource Centers and On My Way Pre-K for support.

“The City of Kokomo has a lot of resources,” she adds. “They host monthly meetings for childcare providers where I’ve been able to meet some good people who want to help the community and see us succeed.”

Eventually, Diaz would like to open a second learning facility to devote to before- and after-care for school-aged children. In the meantime, she wants to hire and train more staff and pursue new funding avenues.

“It’s hard to apply for state grants because they mainly go toward non-profit organizations, not for-profit businesses like mine,” she explains.

For that reason, Diaz is looking into becoming non-profit-certified through the Community Foundation in Kokomo. Even in the face of challenges, she’s more determined than ever to see Kingdom Kids grow and thrive.

“Anyone can start a business, but not everyone can maintain a business,” she says. “You have to really love what you’re doing, be willing to invest in it and stick with it for the long run.” ➡➡

THE KINGSBURY ARTS & EVENT CENTER

HAIRDRESSER-TURNED-DEVELOPER BUILDS BOLD CREATIVE HUB

WRITTEN BY JENNY WALTON

PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Alex Kumar*

Andi Sherman doesn't just cut hair—she solves problems. For 23 years, she's worked as a bridal hairstylist and makeup artist, building a successful business one client at a time. But in the modest town of Howe (pop. 887), she's doing something bigger: transforming an entire downtown block into a vibrant arts and event center that serves her rural community in unexpected ways.

An Indiana native, Sherman spent several years in California before returning to settle in Howe in 2013. In 2023, Sherman noticed a particular row of historic buildings, built in 1864, listed for sale. "It started as an intrusive thought," she says. "I just kept pulling at the thread—Googling how to buy buildings, what commercial real estate even meant—and then suddenly, I owned a block."

The Kingsbury Arts & Event Center is a business investment that's also a long-term vision for Howe's cultural future. Sherman approached adaptive reuse the way she does styling: with intuition, hustle, and a deep desire to help people feel like they belong. "Hairdressers are problem solvers at our core," she says. "We listen. We troubleshoot. We find creative ways to make things work. That's exactly what this project is about."

Transforming a space so large took literal sweat equity. Sherman and her partner spent months digging footers, hauling concrete, tackling decades of deferred maintenance. "There's never been food in these buildings. No kitchen, no elevators—just a lot of beautiful bones," she says.

She funded the purchase with a mix of bank loans, personal savings, help from her parents, and short-term business partners. "We even mortgaged our house," she says. "It was terrifying—but if money is the only thing stopping you, do it scared. There's money out there."

Along the way, she tapped into a network of support: the Community Foundation of LaGrange County, Howe Community Association, LaGrange Partners and the Indiana Small Business Development Center, where advisor Nikki Heffelfinger is a regular sounding board. "I was already running another successful business and still didn't know how much money I actually made," Sherman says. "Nikki sat me down and said, 'Let's figure it out together.' That kind of support was game-changing."

Today, the candy-colored Kingsbury houses Sherman's beauty studio, a shared retail shop for local makers, and rental spaces for events from kids' story time, to car shows and open mic nights. Ben's Pretzels just opened. Next comes a coffee shop, ADA-compliant spaces, and eventually—Sherman hopes—a rooftop bar.

"I told everyone my vision, and no one got it right away," she says. "Now they're starting to see it: I may be crazy, but it's the good kind!" ➡

ANDI SHERMAN

01	HOWE, LAGRANGE COUNTY	City
02	2025	Founded / Purchased
03	1	Number of employees
04	THEKINGSBURYINHOWE.COM	Web

“HAIRDRESSERS ARE PROBLEM SOLVERS AT OUR CORE. THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT THIS PROJECT IS ABOUT.”
—ANDI SHERMAN

TOOLSEY

75%

AVERAGE
QUARTERLY GROWTH
BY MID 2025

SPEEDY SALES CONVERSION PLATFORM SERVICES THE HOME SERVICE INDUSTRY

DAN JOHNSON

01	FISHERS, HAMILTON COUNTY	City
02	2022	Founded
03	15	Number of employees
04	TOOLSEY.COM	Web

“I LOVE BUILDING THIS
COMPANY IN INDIANA.”
—DAN JOHNSON



*Toolsey is
partnering with
building and
construction
materials
giant Owens
Corning.*

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Sean Molin

For home service companies—be they residential roofers to flooring companies or a paving outfit—waiting a few hours or a day to respond to a lead can be the difference between landing a lucrative contract and laying a goose egg.

Co-founder and CEO Dan Johnson launched toolsey.com, a sales enablement and lead management platform, in 2022, to fix that problem.

When home services companies get service requests, or leads, from platforms like angie.com or thumbtack.com, Toolsey, based in Fishers, helps them respond to those leads in seconds, not hours.

“If [home service contractors] respond extremely quickly to those leads, they’re going to be much more likely to win the business,” he says.

At the core of Toolsey are “speed-to-lead” management tools. Sales leads are aggregated from multiple sources into the Toolsey platform. Leads are then instantly and automatically fed to a salesperson using proprietary Toolsey assignment algorithms.

Notifications are also provided to company leadership and admins. And a welcome email is sent to the prospect. The process is frictionless, instant and automatic, Johnson says.

The 15-employee company has customers in all 50 states, and it’s seen massive growth in just a few years.

“For the first half of 2025, the average quarterly growth rate exceeded 75%,” Johnson says.

A huge win for Toolsey was landing a relationship with Owens Corning, the global building and construction materials giant. Toolsey now is the lead management system for thousands of the corporation’s contractors, Johnson says.

If you bring value to the marketplace by delivering a service that solves a real and significant problem, you can build a great business, Johnson says.

Partnerships have been critical to the company’s success.

“Toolsey has more than 30 industry specific partnerships and integrations, and we are poised to become the center hub in a wheel of activity within the sales stack for home service companies nationwide,” Johnson says.

With more than six million home services contractors in the U.S., there’s plenty of room to grow Toolsey, Johnson said. AI will figure prominently in the tools the company offers and its growing success, but locating the company in Indiana was also a great idea.

Indiana, on the whole, is a tightly knit community of business owners, and organizations like the Indiana Economic Development Corporation make it easier to grow a business, Johnson says.

“We can grow great companies right here, where there’s a great cost basis. And there are great universities all around here,” says Johnson. “I love building this company in Indiana.”➡



UNITED POWERLINE SOLUTIONS

UTILITY CONTRACTOR
POWERS CURRENTS
NATIONWIDE

THOMAS WILLIAMSON

01	FORT BRANCH, GIBSON COUNTY	City
02	2024	Founded / Purchased
03	2	Number of employees
04	UPOWERLINES.COM	Web

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Alex Kumar

Thomas Williamson’s path to opening United Powerline Solutions in Fort Branch, Indiana in 2024 was an unplanned but logical journey.

“I didn’t have a calling to do line work. I fell into the industry,” said the former college football quarterback. After graduation, Williamson bounced around different jobs and started a family, but, at age 28, he landed a spot in a utility company’s apprentice lineman program.

As he worked the job, Williamson saw new opportunities. After discussing it with his wife and his parents, Williamson started United Powerline Solutions. “I didn’t want to be limited in my view, so I started traveling, learning electrical systems across the country,” he said. “I wanted us to be known for safety, a good culture and follow-through.”

Now, Williamson manages dozens of as-needed contract workers as they travel the country responding to emergencies, like devastating storms, infrastructure projects and “basically doing anything electric utility-wise,” he said.

Trends in the electric utilities industry have opened space for Williamson’s company. The electric infrastructure is aging rapidly. New technologies mean more demand for electricity and technologies, like smart grids, but utility companies have been reducing their in-house labor ranks in the field, Williamson said.

“Thirty years ago, there might’ve been 100 linemen on a utility company payroll,” he said. “Now, there may be 30.”

The need to ensure power flowing to every home and business after natural disasters and other interruptions keeps companies like United Powerline Solutions in demand. The National Electrical Contractors Association estimated there are more than 70,000 electrical contracting firms, with 500,000 workers across the U.S.

The work can be dangerous. The Electrical Safety Foundation International reported there were 1,940 workplace fatalities involving electricity between 2011 and 2023. “If you touch the wrong two wires, you don’t get a second chance,” Williamson said.

Nationally, utility companies have formed mutual aid groups to support each other during disasters, and they work with brokers who hire contract workers for the jobs the utilities need.

At the same time, Williamson and his industry peers often observe how little most people think about the lines over their heads and beneath their feet. “I don’t think people generally respect [utility work] until they’re without power,” Williamson said. “But, all the technology they use requires electricity.”

These days, Williamson is doing less field work and more administrative and business development work, but he said there’s no sign of a slow-down. “Obviously, we’re going to stay busy with this work,” he said. ➡➡

“ I WANTED US TO BE KNOWN FOR SAFETY, A GOOD CULTURE AND FOLLOW-THROUGH.”
—THOMAS WILLIAMSON



*United Powerline
Solutions hires
dozens of contract
workers for jobs
across the nation.*



DOWNTOWN LAFAYETTE BUSINESS OWNERS ASSOCIATION



*new businesses
opened in
downtown
Lafayette.*

**WE WANTED TO BRING
THE COMMUNITY
TOGETHER TO
CHAMPION SMALL,
LOCAL BUSINESSES**

TROY WEBER

ATTRACTING DIVERSE BUSINESSES

When Nolan Willhite was approached by the Conventions, Sports and Leisure study group to discuss the needs of the Downtown Lafayette area, he and his business partner Troy Weber, co-owners of Flora Candle Company, assembled a group of small business owners to exchange ideas and determine how to assist local entrepreneurs. They quickly realized that while downtown Lafayette had many businesses, they could attract more niche establishments to strengthen the overall economic footprint. "We wanted to bring the community together to champion small, local businesses," says Willhite. "We formed a nonprofit so our organization could apply for grants and we could provide resources to help entrepreneurs."

The Downtown Lafayette Business Owners Association (DLBOA) currently has thirty-five active members and has seen twelve new businesses open in downtown Lafayette since its inception. The wide array of businesses include an art studio, candle shops, a 113-year-old candy store, specialized bakeries, unique coffee shops, boutiques, restaurants and florists. Citing high rent costs as the biggest obstacle for opening downtown, the DLBOA created an acceleration grant to help businesses offset their initial rental costs, which allows them to open within a shorter window.

The sole recipient of the acceleration grant, Emily Colombo, owner of A Pinch of Pepper Tea and Spicery, was able to relocate to a brick-and-mortar location. "The rent assistance program helped me go from a micro retail space to a permanent location downtown," she says. "The rent would have been about five times what I was paying before, but the rental assistance I received from the acceleration grant helped make that leap feasible."

The organization receives support from First Merchants Bank, which sponsors the program, and the local Ivy Tech Community College. By enrolling in Ivy Tech's entrepreneurship certificate program, business owners receive a free space for one year at MatchBOX Coworking Studio.

"It's a really good networking opportunity," says Weber. "There are a lot of startup entrepreneurs and business owners who are going through that program, and it's a great way to connect with what's going on in the community."

A goal of the program is to create a diverse group of establishments in downtown Lafayette, both in terms of attracting business owners from different backgrounds and attracting various types of businesses. The organization's board is committed to filling the void with the types of businesses that are missing in the downtown area. Through the organization's ongoing work, the number of establishments continues to grow. "Business owners keep coming downtown because they like it and Lafayette is a very unique place for people to visit and stay," says Weber. ➡



LEARN MORE AT: [DISCOVERDOWNTOWNLAFAYETTEIN.ORG](https://discoverdowntownlafayettein.org)

MILESTONE

GR
RO
MT
E



BACK WOODS TRADING CO.

BRANDING HATS FOR BRANDS ADDS UP BIG

LUKE TALLEY

01 **KOKOMO, HOWARD COUNTY** City

02 **2024** Founded

03 **3** Number of employees

04 **BACKWOODSTRADINGCO.COM** Web

“ I THINK THERE’S ONLY ONE OTHER COMPANY IN THE U.S. DOING [LEATHER CUSTOMIZATION IN COLOR]. ”
—LUKE TALLEY



Sales are projected to more than double, from \$70,000 in 2024 to \$150,000 in 2025.

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs

As an avid hunter and outdoorsman, Luke Talley trademarked the logo for his company, Back Woods Trading Co., even before he came up with a business idea. His branding instinct would be key.

Talley began selling handmade wooden boxes for use as cocktail smokers. He tried his hand at branding the boxes with a logo using a laser engraver. Then, he experimented with imprinting faux leather hat patches.

In 2023, Talley learned to use an industrial machine to sew real leather patches onto hats. Making more patches with his logo—or images of elk, deer and even Sasquatch—he began selling ballcaps and beanies at expos and festivals.

Business really ticked up in 2024 when he demo’d his capabilities to other expo vendors. “We go in and sell our own brand, and while we’re there, we hit [potential customers] up and try to sell them stuff with their companies’ custom logos,” says Talley.

Back Woods Trading Co. won \$10,000 in a Shark Tank-like competition in Kokomo called “The Drive” in 2024, which encouraged him to do more. Talley bought embroidery equipment in June 2025, so his company could make more customized products. “We can take a color image and transfer it to a leather patch, which is kind of cool,” says Talley. “I think there’s only one other company in the U.S. doing that.”

In 2024, Back Woods Trading Co. generated \$70,000 in sales. Since founding, they’ve made and shipped over 10,000 hats all over the U.S. and Canada. The company now sells leather customizable hats, flasks, bourbon glasses, apparel and more.

In January 2025, Talley opened a Back Woods Trading Co. storefront in downtown Kokomo, where he welcomes customers to sidle up to candle and leather goods bars to make their own products, or watch his team make leather hats or embroidered shirts.

Talley’s also developed partnerships with other local stores, and he projects his business will make \$150,000 in 2025. He’s considering licensing deals and more.

Talley also said the pace of Back Woods Trading Co.’s growth so far has been beneficial. “I think we’re growing at a steady and gradual pace that’s giving us the opportunity to build a foundation as we develop.” ➡➡

8,000

POUNDS OF CORN
STOVER PROCESSED
PER HOUR BY FIBERX

FIBERX

FIBERX IS HELPING FARMERS AND CONVERTING CORN STOVER INTO CLEANER PRODUCT

DAVID SKIBINSKI

01	MERRILLVILLE, LAKE COUNTY	City
02	2022	Founded
03	7	Number of employees
04	FIBERXPRODUCTS.COM	Web

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs

Indiana farmers harvest a billion bushels of golden corn annually, but the leftover corn stover- corn stalks, husks, cobs and leaves- holds the promise of agricultural innovation for FiberX, a Merrillville company.

Launched in 2022, FiberX buys stover from farmers and converts it into ingredients that can eventually replace or reduce petroleum-based elements in manufacturing, chemical and consumer products. This leads to healthier products and farms and a new revenue stream for farmers.

"We want to make this residue a new cash crop for Indiana's farmers," said FiberX CEO David Skibinski.

Historically, the stover left over after Hoosier corn farmers harvested their 5.3 million acres annually has been left to decompose and feed the soil. Today, due to high harvest yields, it can be too much stover before the next year's planting, he said.

FiberX buys stover from farmers, has it transported to its pilot plant in Merrillville and breaks the stover down into biodegradable fibers and powders for manufacturing and chemical processes.

"Those powders can be added to plastics, making them twice as strong and 50 percent more rigid," Skibinski said. "In some cases, companies eliminate the use of petroleum to make the plastic. When we work with bioplastics, and we help them reduce their costs of goods, which opens new markets because their products can be more competitive in the plastics industry."

FiberX has been working with an artificial turf company to use its fiber as an additive to reduce the use of petroleum-based rubber in their turf with FiberX's biodegradable powder.

Even skin care companies, most of which use petroleum-based feedstocks, can use FiberX products as feedstock for their ultraviolet ray protection products.

FiberX also has been working with researchers at Purdue University to break stover down into three components: cellulose, hemicellulose, which helps the corn plant's structure, and lignin, a polymer that helps keep plant cells together.

All three components can be used elsewhere. The lignin can be depolymerized, or broken down even further, and more than 40 components of lignin can be optimized for chemical and manufacturing uses, such as industrial resins, adhesives and epoxies, Skibinski explained.

FiberX started in Hammond before moving its operations to Merrillville, where it created a fully automated plant.

That plant has grown from processing 50 pounds of stover an hour to processing up to 8,000 pounds an hour, and, as the demand for FiberX products grow, there are plans to process up to 70,000 pounds an hour in a site closer to the corn farms, Skibinski said.

"We are creating a new industry, founded in Indiana, with a new company and with new products that have never been introduced to the world before," he said. ➡➡

“WE ARE CREATING A NEW INDUSTRY, FOUNDED IN INDIANA, WITH A NEW COMPANY AND WITH NEW PRODUCTS THAT HAVE NEVER BEEN INTRODUCED TO THE WORLD BEFORE.”
—DAVID SKIBINSKI

*FiberX breaks
corn stover
lignin down into
40 components
that can be used
in thousands of
combinations.*





ESO SUMMIT



*organizations
attended the
inaugural ESO
Summit in 2024*

**THE ESO PLAYBOOK IS
ABOUT IDENTIFYING
GAPS IN THE
ENTREPRENEUR
ECOSYSTEM SO WE'RE
NOT DUPLICATING
EFFORTS BY CREATING
SOMETHING THAT
ALREADY EXISTS.**

ERIC BESCHINSKI

LEARN MORE AT: IEDC.IN.GOV

WHEN ESOS REFINE THEIR NICHE AND WORK TOGETHER, SMALL BUSINESS WINS.

By design, Indiana's entrepreneurial ecosystem reaches every corner of the state. Hundreds of entrepreneur support organizations (ESOs) form the country's best network for small-business owners. Last year, the IEDC and the Indiana Small Business Development Center launched a new program to coordinate efforts between ESOs and enhance the entire ecosystem's power and efficiency.

The inaugural ESO Summit took place in Fishers during Global Entrepreneurship Week in November 2024. More than 200 participants from Hoosier ESOs came together to connect, collaborate, and compare notes on resources and strategies, with the goal of eliminating redundancy and building resilience in the ecosystem.

The day was an invigorating gathering of thought leaders, innovators, and ecosystem-builders, culminating with an address by David Watkins, the IEDC's Senior Vice President of Entrepreneurship and Small Business. "Supporting entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship is a team effort that requires ESOs in every part of the state," Watkins shared. "ESO's know their communities and how to serve them. The summit provides a space for best practices and ideas to be exchanged to support entrepreneurs all the better."

All attendees took home the new ESO Playbook, a lean Canvas-style guide adapted for ESO development from idea to impact. (It's also available online to download—see the QR code on this page.) Others left with proven solutions.

Eric Beschinski, the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Navigator for the Northwest Indiana SBDC, connected with some of the numerous ESOs in his region and came away with a better understanding of why co-working spaces aren't thriving there. Together, they concluded that because real

estate is affordable, many entrepreneurs have a home office. Therefore, co-working spaces should serve the market by offering other types of value.

"It was an a-ha moment, and now we can ask what co-working spaces should look like in the future," Beschinski said.

The summit builds on the IEDC's effort to encourage collaboration through the Community Collaboration Fund in recent years. CCF provided grants to ESOs for joining forces on new workable solutions, programming and initiatives. "That's intentional, to encourage ESOs to participate in the ecosystem," Beschinski said.

Strong, connected ecosystems are crucial for economic development, and they are comprised of groups that find a niche where they can provide the most value.

Follow this QR code to download the IEDC's Playbook for a guide to optimizing your ESO. ➡➡



RANDOM FILL-UPS

~70

CUSTOMERS
SERVED A DAY

FILLING UP WITH FOOD LOVE

RANDOM PHILLIPS

01 **EVANSVILLE, VANDERBURGH COUNTY** City

02 **2020** Founded

03 **4** Number of employees

04 **RANDOMFILLUPSFOODTRUCK.COM** Web

“ I DON’T WANT THIS
BUSINESS TO STOP
WITH ME.”
—RANDOM PHILLIPS



*Phillips converted
a used recreational
vehicle into a
food trailer with
plans to create
generational
wealth.*

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs

Random Phillips builds meals at his popular RV-turned-food trailer, Random Fill-Ups, one ingredient at a time. His offerings are glorious culinary layerings: imagine pulled pork-loaded fries, caramel-drizzled cheesecake balls and fries topped with birria, a rich Mexican meat stew.

And meal by meal, the Evansville man with the unforgettable name wants to grow generational wealth with his business.

“When I look at the way of the world, last names on billboards and businesses,” Phillips says. “I want that for my family, for my grandchildren.”

Phillips started Random Fill-Ups in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic and after he’d been making dinners for his neighbors and coworkers at his former job.

Phillips went full-time with food trailer cooking, and now, he serves 10 to 12 different dishes a day, while serially experimenting with more.

“Cooking is my passion, the thing I love to do,” Phillips says. “That’s how I set out to accomplish the goal of being a business owner.”

Phillips built out his bright blue food trailer and sold his eats at different spots in the Evansville area. When people couldn’t go to restaurants during the shut-down, restaurants had to go to them. Random Fill-Ups began drawing customers who followed the company’s social media posts.

“If you had a food truck around that time, it was definitely a plus,” he says. “I’d pull up at a corner, set up shop, and people would beat me there sometimes.”

Random Fill-Ups became a popular eatery. It still draws 60 to 70 a day, he says. Online, customers rave about his hand-breaded chicken nuggets, smoky brisket and proprietary sauces (known, with a wink, as “random sauce”).

“We provide more than just food,” Phillips says. “It’s an experience, because I literally put a lot of love into my food and everything pertaining to the business.”

The next step in Phillips’ plan is opening a spot at Evansville’s Main Street Food and Beverage food court before the end of 2025. After that, he’s looking to open several brick-and-mortar Random Fill-Ups as family-friendly, faith-forward restaurants where people can eat, play and enjoy live music without alcohol around.

Along with Evansville, one spot will be in Corinth, Mississippi, where Phillips still has family, he says.

Phillips frequently thanks God for the opportunity to start and run a business, as well as his big brother, Jermal Phillips, wife Andina and his pastor for encouraging him.

With his eyes on the horizon, Phillips reflects: “I don’t want this business to stop with me. I want it to keep going. I want to train the next generation to keep it going and add to what’s already there.” ➡

BLUE ADAPTATION

MAKING WAVES FROM THE MIDWEST

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ

PHOTOGRAPHED BY Alex Kumar

In the agriculture-rich town of Bremen, Indiana, far from the coasts where scuba culture typically thrives, Jamie Dietrich is making a splash in the global dive industry.

Dietrich, a certified Divemaster, founded Blue Adaptation in 2016 by blending two of her interests: creative design and the ocean. After several years of research and development, the brand finally launched and began selling marine-inspired activewear to female scuba divers and water sports enthusiasts.

Dietrich's journey began at Indiana University Bloomington, where a scuba course for credit sparked her interest in diving. After earning a degree in merchandising, she moved to New York City, where she worked in product development and experiential marketing for Macy's and other major companies. Yet after a decade in the city, she felt called to something different.

A transformative sabbatical in Fiji became the turning point. There, during an extended dive internship she was able to reconnect with the natural world, mesmerized by the vibrant life beneath the waves.

"I was blown away by what I saw underwater," she recalls. "The fish with their ornate patterns, the colors of the coral reef; my imagination took over."

Inspired by the sea and motivated to combine her design background with her love of diving, she returned to her hometown of Bremen to be closer to family and start a company of her own.

Today, Blue Adaptation's swimwear is made from recycled materials and printed using sublimation, a waterless dyeing process that significantly reduces environmental impact. Each dive-durable piece is crafted not only for performance and sun protection, but also to tell a story rooted in marine biodiversity and conservation efforts.

"Conservation is at the core of Blue Adaptation," Dietrich says. "If people feel a connection to the ocean, if they're inspired by it, they'll be more inclined to protect it."

Since its launch, Blue Adaptation has grown steadily, finding fans around the world. As a direct-to-consumer ecommerce brand, it has shipped to customers in over twenty-five countries, and 2025 is already proving to be a milestone year: by July, sales had already surpassed all of 2024.

To support her developing business and gain a sense of community, Dietrich participated in a creative business peer group through the North Central Indiana Small Business Development Center and a business bootcamp hosted by the South Bend-Elkhart Regional Partnership.

As Blue Adaptation continues to grow, so does its visibility. The brand has recently caught the attention of national media, and Dietrich is now exploring wholesale opportunities with dive retailers eager to carry the line. New designs are also in the works, as she continues to innovate with sustainability, style and storytelling at the forefront. ➡➡

JAMIE DIETRICH

01	BREMEN, MARSHALL COUNTY	City
02	2016	Founded
03	1	Number of employees
04	BLUEADAPTATION.COM	Web

“CONSERVATION IS AT THE CORE OF BLUE ADAPTATION. IF PEOPLE FEEL A CONNECTION TO THE OCEAN, IF THEY'RE INSPIRED BY IT, THEY'LL BE MORE INCLINED TO PROTECT IT.”
—JAMIE DIETRICH

Blue Adaptation's sun-protective swimwear is made from recycled materials and printed using sublimation, a waterless dyeing process that reduces environmental impact.





GENESIS: PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS

\$12,000



*awarded to
entrepreneurs in
the last two years*

EIGHT-COUNTY STUDENT ENTREPRENEURSHIP INITIATIVE BOOSTS BUSINESS BUZZ

Launched in 2007, Genesis: Pathways to Success recently outgrew its home with the Ripley County Community Foundation (RCCF). Under the energetic leadership of Executive Director Clarice Patterson, the workforce development initiative split off into a separate 501(c)(3) this year to extend its mission to eight southeastern Indiana counties.

"The programming under Clarice's leadership grew astronomically over the last five years to where we were stifling them by confining them to one county," says Amy Streater, RCCF executive director.

At Genesis, local educators steer the programming for middle and high school students, focusing on STEM education, career development and entrepreneurship.

"We want to make sure all students have unique hands-on learning opportunities so they can identify their passions, develop a career pathway and determine whether they want to enroll in college, enlist in the military, join the workforce or start an entrepreneurial journey after graduation," Patterson says.

Now Genesis has evolved to put more entrepreneurship tools in the hands of students. "A local educator approached Genesis and explained that many high school students were unaware of all the entrepreneurial resources in their backyard. Students often thought that larger cities like Indianapolis, Cincinnati, and Louisville offered greater opportunities with more resources," Patterson reports.

So with a \$38,000 Indiana Economic Development Corporation (IEDC) Community Collaboration Fund (CCF) Grant, Genesis launched the Emerge: Young Innovator Summit in October 2024.

More than 120 students from seven school corporations participated in the one-day entrepreneurship conference at Ivy Tech Community College in Lawrenceburg. The summit is expected to expand in 2025.

IEDC also awarded Genesis a second CCF grant of \$40,000 to expand its high school pitch competition, the D.I.C.E. (Dreams, Ingenuity, Creativity, and Entrepreneurship) Challenge, to the whole community.

Students remain Genesis's focus. Success stories include a baseball-glove repair service, a tutoring program that found an angel investor at the Emerge Summit and a florist enterprise.

Gogh Bloom flowers grew (so to speak) out of a student garden at Jac-Cen-Del High School. After students began designing and selling bouquets, their supervisor approached Genesis about turning it into a business. The students wrote a business plan, pitched it at DICE, and won \$3,000 to create a sustainability plan. Patterson points out that it was an art teacher who spearheaded the effort.

"It doesn't have to be a business teacher. We go where the energy is. When we find champions who can help us bring something amazing to fruition, we'll make it happen," she says. ➡➡

**WHEN WE FIND CHAMPIONS WHO
CAN HELP US BRING SOMETHING
AMAZING TO FRUITION, WE'LL
MAKE IT HAPPEN.**

CLARICE PATTERSON

TAY'S AUTO DETAILING

GOOD COACHING + GREAT HUSTLE =
ENTREPRENEURIAL EXCELLENCE

TAYLOR BURNETT

01 FORT WAYNE, ALLEN COUNTY City

02 2022 Founded

03 1 Number of employees

04 TAYSAUTODETAILING.COM Web

“FREEDOM IS WEALTH.
BEING MY OWN BOSS AND
HAVING THAT FREEDOM IS
THE GREATEST PART OF
THIS JOURNEY.”
—TAYLOR BURNETT



*Tay's Auto
Detailing makes
special trips
to Michigan,
Illinois and Ohio
to serve clients.*

WRITTEN BY RYAN MILLBERN PHOTOGRAPHED BY Adam Raschka

Taylor Burnett spoke with us about Tay's Auto Detailing from the inside of a car, rag in hand. “I’ve always had this hustle,” she said, proceeding to clean while fielding questions for the entirety of the conversation.

For Burnett, cleaning cars was a side gig while she worked full time at Fire Police City County Federal Credit Union. When the Credit Union fired her in 2022, Burnett officially launched Tay's Auto Detailing. “Oprah wasn't Oprah until she got fired,” Burnett laughed. “And Taylor wasn't Taylor.”

Burnett was on unemployment when she started her business. “It was a little nerve-wracking,” she said. On a friend's recommendation, Burnett visited the Northeast Indiana Innovation Center (NIIC) in Fort Wayne, where she met Rosalina Perez, director of the Women's Business Center.

“I see Rosalina as my coach,” Burnett said. “She helped me think through a lot of situations that sometimes made me nervous at first... she's given me books to read about launching a business. She always tells me that you've got to be willing to do the work.”

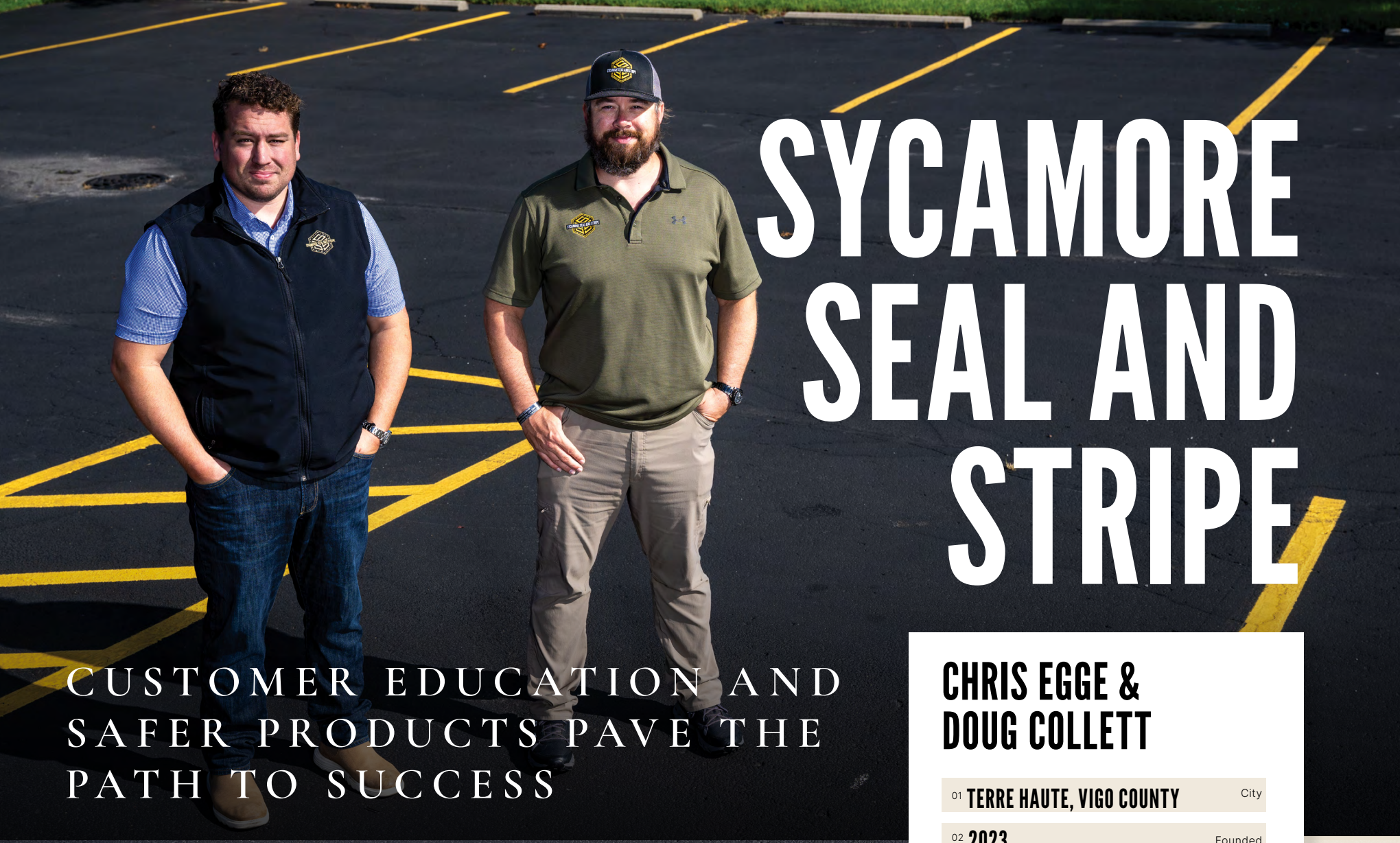
With Perez's mentorship and Burnett's trademark spunk, revenue from Tay's Auto Detailing has doubled every year since it launched. In the process, Burnett has expanded her service area to include Indianapolis, where her fiancé, Alma, lives, and has become the most

referred detailer in both markets. She even makes special trips to Michigan, Illinois and Ohio to serve clients.

While Taylor still handles most of the detailing herself, she has 40 people on the payroll, but not under contract, who can help when volume gets high. “At my stage of growth, I'm struggling with finding help that's consistent and high quality,” Burnett said. “I know that I need help, and I can't do it alone, but it's hard to let go of the reins.”

But Burnett is too in love with the independence of entrepreneurship to consider going back to work for someone else. “Freedom is wealth,” Burnett said. “Being my own boss and having that freedom is the greatest part of this journey.”

In 2024, Burnett saw the fruits of her labor recognized by the larger business community, winning the 2024 Mirro Award for Entrepreneurial Excellence from the Northeast Indiana Innovation Center. “I feel like this award recognizes the hard work of Rosalina and myself,” Burnett said. “You've got to be a little crazy to be an entrepreneur. You have 17,000 bad days in a row, but you have one good moment and it's like, ‘Yes, keep going!’” ➡



SYCAMORE SEAL AND STRIPE

CUSTOMER EDUCATION AND SAFER PRODUCTS PAVE THE PATH TO SUCCESS

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Marc Lebryk*

When Chris Egge and Doug Collett started Sycamore Seal and Stripe in early 2023, they made three decisions that would later significantly grow their business.

The two-person team based in Terre Haute invested in community relationships, turned to a Hoosier-made asphalt sealing product that is far safer than anything else on the market, and began giving away lots of information, even if it did not guarantee any business.

“We believe in being a good steward of where you live and where you work, and the reputations we already had before we started the business is what helped get the momentum rolling,” said Egge, who is very active on the local parks board and fraternal organizations.

The company also got a boost with a Spark Revolving Loan from Thrive West Central’s Spark Revolving Loan Fund. Thrive’s fund was created to encourage entrepreneurship in the area, adding value to the region’s economic base.

In 2022, Collett, a civil engineer by training, and Egge, experienced in project management and logistics, began tossing around ideas about starting a paving business, “even though we didn’t know anything about starting a business,” Egge laughed.

They formed Sycamore Seal and Stripe in 2023 and took it full-time a year later. Within two years, Sycamore grew from a side business

sealcoating asphalt lots and driveways to a full-time residential and commercial asphalt maintenance company that handles massive projects.

In July 2025, Sycamore began its largest project yet, repairing and striping a 90,000-square-foot parking lot for an aquatics center owned by a local school district.

One of the secrets to Sycamore’s success is an innovative product called Pitch Black, an asphalt emulsion sealer that protects asphalt areas and makes them more aesthetically pleasing.

Pitch Black, made by Black Shadow, in Auburn, Indiana, is free of carcinogens, does not burn the skin or eyes of workers applying it or have an noxious odor, and it’s superior to the environmentally-harmful coal tar, Egge shared.

Another pillar of Sycamore’s success has been its commitment to content marketing. The company’s social media posts are filled with information prospective customers can use when planning asphalt maintenance and similar decisions.

“When we educate people on the benefits of a seal coat, or preventative maintenance, then the sales come organically,” Egge said. “If you’re giving them something of value, then that sticks with your brand.” ➡➡

CHRIS EGGE & DOUG COLLETT

01	TERRE HAUTE, VIGO COUNTY	City
02	2023	Founded
03	2	Number of employees
04	SYCAMORESEAL.COM	Web

“ WHEN WE EDUCATE PEOPLE ON THE BENEFITS OF A SEAL COAT, OR PREVENTATIVE MAINTENANCE, THEN THE SALES COME ORGANICALLY.” —CHRIS EGGE



Sycamore is working on repairing and restriping a 90,000-square-foot parking lot for a local aquatics center.

SOCKET SHIELD

BROTHERS IN BUSINESS

ALEX OLIVER & AUSTIN OLIVER

01 **BOONVILLE, WARRICK COUNTY** City

02 **2018** Founded

03 **3** Number of employees

04 **SOCKETSHIELDUSA.COM** Web

“[OUR BUSINESS] HAS DEFINITELY BROUGHT OUR BROTHERHOOD—AND OUR WIVES AND NIECES AND NEPHEWS—CLOSER.”
—ALEX OLIVER

WRITTEN BY JENNY WALTON PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Gabrielle Minion*

Austin Oliver first dreamed up the idea for Socket Shield back in grade school—a simple yet clever protective guard designed to cover electrical outlets and keep homes safer. Now, years later, Austin and his brother Alex have built the business on the strength of their invention and on a unique working dynamic that has strengthened their bond.

While many businesses depend on a single visionary leader, Austin and Alex share responsibilities equally, according to their strengths. Austin is the planner, thinking “a week out, a month out, six months out, a year, two years.” In his words, “I don’t want to talk about what we’re doing today because I give those responsibilities to Alex.” Alex, on the other hand, excels at managing the immediate, tactical tasks—“the day to day, what’s tomorrow, maybe two days out, kind of a checklist guy.”

This balance keeps their operation running smoothly. “We very rarely just pull from the hip and run with gut feelings,” Alex explains. “We lean heavily on each other and ask questions.” Austin adds, “It’s a true blessing because I don’t have to check in to see if Alex is doing what he needs to do—it’s done as far as I’m concerned.”

Their partnership is more than just business; it has also strengthened their fraternal connection. Although they attended the same high school and college, they weren’t especially close growing up. Starting Socket Shield was also an act of bonding.

Alex says, “Our mom loves it because it’s definitely brought our brotherhood—and our wives and nieces and nephews—closer.”

The Oliver brothers have also leaned on community resources to help grow the business. Alex shares, “We use the Indiana Small Business Center here in Evansville quite regularly. Doug Claybourn has been our contact and he’s been nothing but great. If he doesn’t have the answer, he finds it or points us in the right direction.” Doug has been instrumental in helping with their business plan and securing an SBA loan.

Austin highlights another key partner: “The Southern Indiana Builders Association has been huge for us. We’ve been showcased in the Home of the Year for the past three years, which helps us get direct feedback from builders and customers in the tri-state area.”

Recently, the brothers submitted a package to Menards, aiming to take Socket Shield to a nationwide market. To support this growth, they partnered with Jasper Industrial Supply, a logistics company that handles packaging, shipping, and will soon help them launch advertising campaigns—a first for them. “We’ve never run paid ads before,” Austin notes, “but with this Menards deal, that’s about to change.” ➡➡

~12

FLOWER VARIETIES
GROWN ANNUALLY

LEWELLEN BLOOMS

LEWIS AND JOELLEN MATZAT
ARE SPREADING KINDNESS AND
COMMUNITY LIKE WILDFLOWERS

WRITTEN BY EMILY WORRELL PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Adam Raschka*

High school sweethearts Lewis and Joellen Matzat have been married for eleven years. They have three kids together. They've run a woodworking business together. It seems like there's nothing this Northern Indiana power couple can't do—including running a flower farm.

"I was driving up to Crown Point, which is 45 minutes away, to a flower farm that I was following on social media and buying flowers in 2020 and Lewis was like, 'why don't we just plant our own flowers instead of driving up there every week?'" Joellen says.

Their garden thrived to the point where they had enough flowers to deliver to neighbors, family and friends. In 2021, they officially became a flower farm—selling cut flowers, bouquets and hosting U-Pick events.

The business's success has allowed the Matzats to spend more time with their kids, ages seven, five and two, who also serve as great helpers. "All the kids, they're pretty involved with delivering flowers with us and even harvesting at certain times," Lewis says.

Every challenge the Matzats have faced, including working with temperamental Indiana weather while growing delicate blooms, have built their capacity. And they've had some exceptional wins. Their victory at Starke County's pitch competition, "Starke Tank," netted them a \$10,000 grant, which they used to buy a greenhouse. "The greenhouse has given us the flexibility of

extending our season by a couple weeks," Joellen says. "It also protects the more fragile flowers from the elements."

The Matzats have exciting plans for the future of Lewellen Blooms, including their team-up with a local DECA class that will help them present more workshops and U-Pick events. They're turning their pole barn into a workshop. And they're working with a new wholesaler that buys flowers from small farms in Northwest Indiana and brings them to the Chicago market. As if that weren't enough, Lewellen Blooms has launched a subscription service (one bouquet a week for four weeks in spring and/or summer), and the Matzats are looking to double their subscribers this year.

As life partners and business partners, the Matzats lean on each other to keep things going. "It's great if you can find someone who's very supportive of what you're doing," Lewis says, "because there are days where I'm tired, and she picks up the slack, and then days where she's dragging, so I pick up the slack. They don't have to be your business partner or wife, but have someone who's gonna support you and cheer you on." ➡➡

LEWIS & JOELLEN MATZAT

01	NORTH JUDSON, STARKE COUNTY	City
02	2020	Founded
03	2	Number of employees
04	LEWELLENBLOOMS.COM	Web

“THEY DON'T HAVE TO BE YOUR BUSINESS PARTNER OR WIFE, BUT HAVE SOMEONE WHO'S GONNA SUPPORT YOU AND CHEER YOU ON.”
—LEWIS MATZAT





*Attendees
for Global
Entrepreneurship
Congress Indiana
2025.*

INDIANA BUSINESS ON A GLOBAL STAGE

The Global Entrepreneurship Congress is the world's premier gathering of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, and occurs annually in a rising business location. In 2025, the Congress was held in the US for the first time in fifteen years—right here in Indianapolis, Indiana with the help of the Indiana Economic Development Corporation.

This event focuses on various entities and organizations that make for a vibrant business ecosystem. "It includes not only the founders and the entrepreneurs themselves, but also support organizations, coworking spaces, and accelerators," says David Watkins, Senior Vice President, Entrepreneurship & Small Business at Indiana Economic Development Corporation. "It's also capital providers, governments and government adjacent organizations like chambers of commerce and industry associations who ensure a good policy environment." GEC created a space for attendees to learn best practices in advancing entrepreneurship and bring newly gained knowledge back home to practice in their own communities.

Other attendees include corporations who are looking to buy innovative products or new startups trying to solve problems and are seeking universities that have brilliant researchers developing new technology and inventions. This event also connects entrepreneurs to various organizations where they have the opportunity to learn about each other's businesses and create new contacts and relationships.

From an economic impact standpoint, Indianapolis benefitted from several thousand visitors to the city for a week who were there to learn about and discuss entrepreneurial programming. "We also wanted to expose the attendees to Indiana's entrepreneurial ecosystem, so we put everybody on buses and drove them to various parts of the state to see innovation districts, such as life sciences, battery technology and youth entrepreneurship," says Watkins. "We had an entire day dedicated to agriculture and the confluence of farming and ag tech, and those

opportunities are where we got to go deep with attendees and show them all that Indiana has to offer."

On the final day of the Congress, there was a state and local policymaker summit chaired by the governor along with policymakers from cities and counties from around the country. They discussed entrepreneurship and attendees learned more about future Indiana initiatives. During the Global Entrepreneurship Congress, a London Artificial Intelligence (AI) startup announced they were setting up their North American headquarters in Indiana because of how impressed they are with the state and its business-friendly environment. "We firmly believe that Indiana is the best state in the country to be an entrepreneur and that we absolutely should be considered on par with the most innovative cities, states and countries around the world," says Watkins. "The Global Entrepreneurship Congress gave us a platform to show people that Indiana is taking its rightful place on the entrepreneurial stage." ➡

**THE GLOBAL
ENTREPRENEURSHIP
CONGRESS GAVE
US A PLATFORM TO
SHOW PEOPLE THAT
INDIANA IS TAKING ITS
RIGHTFUL PLACE ON THE
ENTREPRENEURIAL STAGE.**

DAVID WATKINS

LEARN MORE AT: WWW.GENGLOBAL.ORG/GEC

BUTTA'S BETTER BBQ

RODNEY & CATHERINE HILL

01 TERRE HAUTE, VIGO COUNTY City

02 2022 Founded

03 6 Number of employees

04 BUTTASBETTERBBQ.COM Web

“IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT FOOD. IT’S ABOUT CONNECTION, ENCOURAGEMENT AND HONORING OUR SON’S LEGACY.
—CATHERINE HILL



In early 2025, the Hills received a \$42,000 grant from United Way to fund essential catering equipment and a new van, giving the business a major boost.

CATHERINE AND RODNEY HILL'S JOURNEY TO BUTTA'S BETTER BBQ

WRITTEN BY JENNY WALTON PHOTOGRAPHED BY Marc Lebryk

When Catherine and Rodney Hill moved to Terre Haute, they never imagined their passion for barbecue would evolve into a thriving business and community anchor. Butta's Better BBQ, named in honor of their late son Rodney Jr., affectionately called “Butta,” began humbly—born from a need to raise funds for their sons’ basketball team.

Rodney recalls, “We started selling barbecue dinners to cover hotel stays and tournament fees. When the season ended, people kept calling and asking why we stopped. That’s when we knew we had something special.”

In 2021, the Hills experimented with catering, but it was in 2022 that they truly took the leap, purchasing a food truck and later opening a full-fledged restaurant. Transforming an old doctor’s office into a commercial kitchen was no small feat. “It was a shell of a building,” Rodney explains. “We had to build the kitchen from scratch. Our church family stepped in—contractors, electricians, painters—they were all a blessing.”

Financed through personal savings, the couple’s vision was further propelled by community support. Catherine credits the Indiana Small Business Association and the Terre Haute Chamber for their guidance and encouragement: “They walked us through everything—from setting up our POS system to organizing the kitchen. They were with us every step of the way.”

United Way also played a pivotal role. In early 2025, the Hills received a \$42,000 grant to fund essential catering equipment and a new van,

giving the business a major boost. “That grant was a game-changer,” says Catherine. “It helped us get the tools we needed to grow.”

A defining moment came when local news station WTOV aired a story about the restaurant’s unique fusion of faith and food. “They ran it at 6 p.m., and within a half-hour, our doors were flooded,” Rodney says. The story’s impact continued for days, driving sales and drawing in neighbors who hadn’t known the restaurant existed.

Through it all, the Hills remain grounded in their mission. “We call it a business ministry,” said Catherine. “It’s not just about food. It’s about connection, encouragement and honoring our son’s legacy.”

The name itself holds deep personal meaning. “Our son was known as Butta,” Catherine shares. “We lost him in a house fire fourteen years ago. Naming the business after him keeps his memory alive and makes him part of everything we do.”

Now operating a restaurant, food truck and catering service, they continue to dream big. “Right now, I think only 5% of the county knows about us,” Rodney says. “Once more people discover us, the sky’s the limit.”

Reflecting on their journey together, Catherine adds, “Perseverance pays off. You just have to take that first step.” ➡➡

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MEMBERS IN
A TOWN OF 2,50051 BRIDGES
CROSSFITJENNIFER PENDLETON
PROMOTES HEALTH AND
FITNESS THROUGH COMMUNITYWRITTEN BY MEGAN FERNANDEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs*

Jennifer Pendleton knows firsthand that a supportive community is key to weight loss. She shed 115 pounds after she found CrossFit, a group exercise with an uplifting culture.

Pendleton was so impressed with the power of CrossFit, she made it her new career, leaving a successful role in philanthropy and community development to become a CrossFit trainer and gym owner. She and her husband, Mike, who also lost nearly 100 pounds around the same time, relocated to Rockville, where they owned a lake house, and opened a gym, 51 Bridges CrossFit.

The Pendletons defied data that suggested a CrossFit studio wouldn't succeed in a community as small as Rockville. Plus, equipment was hard to come by due to the supply chain issues during the pandemic. But within sixty days of opening, they were covering their expenses. Now the gym is thriving after three years with seventy loyal members. For its efforts supporting health and wellness, 51 Bridges CrossFit is the Indiana Economic Development Corporation's Rural Small Business of the Year.

"Even if this business was going to fail, we had to try because it was our life's mission. If you can help other people experience the passion, some of it transcends charts and data," Jennifer says.

The unique challenge with 51 Bridges CrossFit is retention more than sales. CrossFit is a fitness phenomenon built on support and camaraderie. The couple must get members into

the gym so they will experience that community, achieve results and keep renewing.

The challenge is right in Jennifer's wheelhouse because it taps into her expertise with community development. Her leadership roles with Riley Children's Foundation, Kappa Alpha Theta Foundation and the Community Foundation of Boone County translate well to running a fitness studio rooted in the group's culture. She excels at getting people to show up—which is half the battle to reach fitness goals.

One member is sixty-six years old and finished in the top fifty worldwide in her age group at the 2025 CrossFit Games. "We all say we want to be her when we grow up," Jennifer says. "There's so much inspiration everywhere you look around here, and everyone's working hard and that's what I don't get at a big gym."

Jennifer has also implemented creative ideas to bring the 51 Bridges CrossFit members together. For instance, large posters of members who have met certain goals line the gym walls. After completing 100 sessions, members receive a personalized Yeti water bottle. After 250, they become a "legend" and get to create their own eponymous workout.

Jennifer credits Dave Bittner with the West Central Indiana Small Business Development Center for helping the couple navigate early entrepreneurship and Partnership Parke County for a \$1,000 grant. ➡➡

JENNIFER PENDLETON

01 **ROCKVILLE, PARKE COUNTY** City02 **2022** Founded03 **7** Number of employees04 **51BRIDGES.COM/CROSSFIT/** Web

“EVEN IF THIS BUSINESS WAS GOING TO FAIL, WE HAD TO TRY BECAUSE IT WAS OUR LIFE'S MISSION.”
—JENNIFER PENDLETON

*Membership
has doubled
each year
since 2022.*



GOODWIN RV

90%

OF WORK IS
THEIR MOBILE
SERVICE

JUSTIN GOODWIN

01 **BLUFFTON, WELLS COUNTY** City

02 **2023** Founded

03 **2** Number of employees

04 **FACEBOOK.COM/P/GOODWIN-
RV-100093280754720/** Web

“WORD OF MOUTH AND
DOING GOOD WORK ARE
MY TWO MAIN SOURCES
OF INCOME.”
—JUSTIN GOODWIN



*Goodwin RV
has doubled its
revenue growth
in both years.*

THE GOODWINS PROVIDE FAST RV SERVICES

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Alex Kumar

Justin Goodwin and his wife Shannon have seen their revenue growth double in the two years since they opened Goodwin RV, a recreational vehicle maintenance and service business, and they haven't needed artificial intelligence or advanced technology to do it.

“Word of mouth and doing good work are my two main sources of income,” Justin says, “And integrity.”

Spending a lot of one-on-one time with customers has been a big key, too, he says.

Justin opened the Bluffton-based business about two hours southeast of Elkhart County, long considered the “RV Capital of the World,” “because I saw a need.”

Goodwin RV works on cooling and heating systems, appliances, plumbing and electrical systems, roof and structural repairs, seasonal prep, inspections and upgrades and more.

Justin does the technical work, while Shannon runs the office, handles warranty work and rolls up her sleeves for bigger in-house jobs.

About 90% of the work has been the mobile service, with Justin traveling fifty miles or more to help customers, but opening a shop to do bigger projects has been huge, Justin says.

Without services like Goodwin RV's, the growing number of people buying RVs would have to take their units to dealerships for repairs and maintenance, which often can take as long as 90 days to do, Justin says.

“If it takes that long, someone's pretty much ruined most of the season for camping,” Justin says. “I try to complete our jobs in under a week.”

RVs are not just for retirees and campers, he says. Contract workers, from traveling nurses to pipe fitters and plumbers, who travel the country for work, make up most of his business.

Living in their own RV generally is a lot more economical, according to Justin.

Justin earned a Master Certified Level Four RV Technician Certification from the RV Technical Institute in Elkhart, and he keeps his skills sharp with additional training.

Moving to a full-time business owner has worked, he says. Goodwin RV has doubled its revenue growth in both years, and there's more to come.

The Goodwins don't do a lot with AI or social media yet, but they've seen enough growth to project something bigger in a few years.

“My goal is, in five years, to actually have my own building and to be able to sell RVs,”

Justin says. “I want to be a full-service dealership.” ➡➡

10

YEARS AS
ENTREPRENEURSHOMETOWN
COFFEEMARIEL AND JAIME TAPIA ARE
BREWING UP COMMUNITY

WRITTEN BY MEGAN FERNANDEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs

Mariel and Jaime Tapia already had 10 years of experience as entrepreneurs when they decided to open a second business, a coffee shop, to complement their custom cake company. But no startup is immune to challenges. After some serious setbacks with their contractors, they were back to square one.

Through their church community in Union City, where the Tapias had moved from Indianapolis to expand their home business to a brick-and-mortar, Mayor Chad Spence knew about their situation. He also knew that the current owners of HomeTown Coffee were looking to sell. The mayor played matchmaker, and the Tapias were adaptable.

"There was an instant connection. By the second meeting, they decided that they wanted to sell it to us," Mariel says.

It was a win-win-win—for the Tapias, the community and the sellers who wanted to leave their cafe in good hands.

The Tapias serve specialty lattes with housemade syrups and the customer-favorite cookies from original recipes. One day, a gentleman from Randolph County Chamber of Commerce came in to explain their pitch competition and invited them to enter.

The Tapias pitched the idea of a coffee cart and won second place for \$5,000, as well as the public's choice award.

Participating in the Randolph County United Open for Business competition gave the Tapias

access to resources and guidance. An account with LivePlan business development software was instrumental in helping them organize financials and develop other revenue sources. They became the concessions vendor at the municipal pool in the summer, and the coffee cart that businesses can bring in or hire for events is in development. The Tapias are also working on a website to sell their housemade syrups and branded coffee beans, and allow locals to book the cafe for private events, even with a barista on hand.

The Tapias were nervous about transitioning their established cake business from Indianapolis to a much smaller community. On top of that, the original plans to open a bakery with a coffee counter fell through when they hit the snags with the contractor. They had to pivot on faith. "The support was 1,000 percent there," Jaime says. "Everyone in Union City is like family and they will support you as much as they can."

The Tapias have quickly given back as well. They employ two high-schoolers as part of a work-study program. And their ambition is sure to pay off with more offerings for Union City soon, including the bakery, which the Tapias still plan to open.

"We're big dreamers," Mariel says. "But we also put in the work to see those possibilities come to life." ➡➡

MARIEL & JAIME TAPIA

01 UNION CITY, RANDOLPH COUNTY City

02 2024 Founded

03 8 Number of employees

04 FACEBOOK.COM/OURHOMETOWNCOFFEE Web

“THE RANDOLPH COUNTY UNITED PITCH COMPETITION OPENED THE DOORS TO ALL THE AVENUES WE'RE EXPLORING NOW.”
—MARIEL TAPIA

Won second place for \$5,000, as well as the public's choice award at Randolph County Chamber of Commerce's pitch competition.





HEARTLAND ART CENTER EXPANSION



artist-members strong, this volunteer run organization is based out of Plymouth's historic Montgomery Ward Building

THE COMMUNITY SUPPORT WE'VE RECEIVED IS WHAT HAS ALLOWED US TO CONTINUE OUR OPERATIONS.

ANNA KIETZMAN

GROWING THE COMMUNITY THROUGH ART

With roots that stretch back to the late 1970s when a group of local artists banded together for support in a high school classroom, the Heartland Art Center has enjoyed a presence in the Plymouth community for decades. As the group grew and evolved, members realized they needed to find a bigger, more permanent home.

"We maintained a downtown space for about eight years until 2024 when we moved into the Montgomery Ward Building," says Anna Kietzman, Heartland Art Center president. "It's got an interesting history and really cool architectural features."

Roughly 100 artist-members strong, the volunteer-run organization has repurposed the main level of the 23,000 square-foot facility as an art gallery with rotating exhibitions, a stage/performance area, classrooms and a kids' creativity corner. The mezzanine houses offices and studio spaces, and the basement is used for screen-printing services and storage.

"We try to be open to the public as much as possible, and it's free to come in and look around," Kietzman says. "Because we're constantly switching out the works on display, it's always a fresh experience."

Exhibits explore a wide range of media, and guests who feel inspired can sign up for hands-on classes to make their own paintings, pottery, stained glass, needle felting and more. An annual arts festival, live music on the second Saturday of each month and other special events provide additional incentive to visit. The center relies mainly on word of mouth and social media to get the word out about everything it has to offer.

In 2024, the Heartland Art Center received a \$500,000 READI award designation to put toward its expansion, requiring a 20% public fund match covered by the City of Plymouth and the Marshall County Community Foundation. The center is preparing to launch a capital campaign later this year to fulfill the private funding requirement.

"One of the biggest reasons for our growth is partnerships with local organizations like The REES Theatre, Wild Rose Moon and MoonTree Studios," Kietzman mentions. "The community support we've received is what has allowed us to continue our operations. These and other arts organizations have all contributed to building a rich creative ecosystem that allows the arts to thrive."

By feeding the regional arts community and fostering revitalization in Plymouth's downtown sector, the Heartland Art Center helps drive economic development by legitimizing creative job opportunities and generating tourism.

"Our organizations and businesses really see us as a significant catalyst for that growth," says Kietzman. "That's become a real component of our mission. We recognize the value of creating solid arts businesses and making sure our artists are treated with the same level of respect as other entrepreneurial businesses and livelihoods." ➡

LEARN MORE AT: [HEARTLANDARTGALLERY.COM](https://heartlandartgallery.com)

HOMETOWN SCOOPS ICE CREAM SHOPPE

SADIE PADGETT SCOOPS UP
DELICIOUSNESS AT ICE CREAM SHOP

SADIE PADGETT

01 **ORLEANS, ORANGE COUNTY** City

02 **2021** Founded

03 **16** Number of employees

04 **HOMETOWNSCOOPS.WEBADOR.COM** Web

“I LOVE MY TOWN, AND I PROBABLY WON'T EVER MOVE THAT FAR FROM HERE. I KNEW I WANTED SOMEWHERE FOR PEOPLE TO HANG OUT WITHOUT COMING INSIDE.”
—SADIE PADGETT



*Indiana's
Ice Cream
Ambassador to
St. Louis and
Louisville in 2023.*

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Tamera Noble

Sadie Padgett started selling frozen yogurt and cake pops from a local bakery in Orleans, her hometown, at different dirt bike racing events around Southern Indiana when she was 11.

Eight years later, the business veteran runs Hometown Scoops, a walk-up ice cream parlor and hangout in her town, Orleans, where visitors can have super-premium ice cream, play volleyball or corn hole games and try their hand at Jenga.

“I love my town, and I probably won't ever move that far from here,” Sadie says. “I knew I wanted somewhere for people to hang out without coming inside.”

In her mid-teens, Padgett moved on to selling ice cream from a former snow cone shack, and she later added a thirty-foot trailer with a full dipping cabinet and machines to make snow cones and milkshakes.

With help from her father, Larry Padgett, and other family members, Sadie opened Hometown Scoops while she was a high school freshman in 2021. That meant squeezing in homework assignments during study hall, long nights and very early mornings, she says.

Sadie spent her nights helping build her ice cream shop.

“I juggled it all, and it was definitely a lot to manage,” she says.

Now, Sadie manages fifteen employees from March through late September, and she sells ice cream at sporting events, fairs, festivals and more.

They scoop out frozen treats like Munchie Madness (cake batter ice cream with Oreos, M&Ms, Reese's and caramel) and Exhausted Parent (Bourbon-spiced espresso with chocolate chunks) along with chocolate, vanilla, strawberry and butter pecan.

In 2023, the State of Indiana sent the ice cream ambassador to St. Louis and Louisville, where she gave away ice cream and “basically told people life is sweeter in Indiana.”

That same year, she landed a contract with the Indiana University Bloomington athletics department, where she sold ice cream at sporting events, including basketball games at Assembly Hall.

Running an ice cream parlor isn't Sadie's only work. Her ice cream Advent calendars are hugely popular, she says, and she's studying to be a special education elementary teacher.

Sadie also works as an aide for a special needs child. Teaching is in her future, but so is running—and maybe expanding—Hometown Scoops, she says.

Sadie says she's amazed at what she's accomplished, especially when she thinks of her journey.

“It's so crazy looking back, because I've done this so long I kind of know what to expect,” Sadie says. “I kind of know what's going to happen every year, but, to think how long I've done this, I really don't know how I did all that when I was younger.” ➡

KRUIS STUDIOS

SMALL BUSINESS, BIG PICTURE

WRITTEN BY AMY LYNCH PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Adam Raschka*

If every picture tells a story, Ben Kruis is compiling an entire anthology. From wedding videography to documentary films and sound design, he manages it all from his Mishawaka-based Kruis Studios.

"I essentially do audio and video production work for a variety of clients, but I seem to specialize in working with small business start-ups, non-profit groups and ministries," he says.

Kruis admits he's always been creatively inclined, recording music and making short narrative films with friends well before he ever got to Ball State, where he earned a degree in audio production. After college, Kruis—an Elkhart native—returned to northern Indiana, spending five years working with the Grotto Network at Notre Dame. An inflection point arrived when he realized the solo work he was doing as a side hustle was getting to be too much to manage on top of his full-time gig. He struck out on his own to launch Kruis Studios as a one-man operation in 2022.

"At the time, my wife and I were hoping to grow our family," he explains. "We realized we wanted to be able to co-parent and co-work, so I needed to have a job that allowed more flexibility."

Working for himself has allowed Kruis to control his own schedule, scaling back to a part-time basis while caring for his young son at home. He hopes to return to full-time status soon, and is also in the process of exploring a new start-up opportunity.

"I appreciate the freedom that comes with being your own boss, and I love spending this time with my toddler, but I do miss the collaborative nature of working closely with other people and feeding off that shared energy," Kruis says.

Balancing story creation with budgeting, administration, marketing and all of the other hats independent business owners must wear is another responsibility Kruis finds challenging. The Indiana Economic Development Corporation and the North Central Indiana Small Business Development Center in nearby South Bend have provided valuable support through classes, meetings and one-on-one mentorship.

"There are so many resources out there I'd like to find time to tap into, especially for my new venture," Kruis says.

He'd also like to see more niche-specific networking groups for Indiana entrepreneurs in creative fields. In the meantime, Kruis plans to continue to scale, diversify and grow his A/V business to serve clients to the best of his ability.

"At the end of the day, it all comes down to just trying to tell the very best story I can for them, staying true and authentic to their unique experiences," he says. ➡➡

BEN KRUIS

01	MISHAWAKA, ST. JOSEPH COUNTY	City
02	2022	Founded
03	1	Number of employees
04	KRUISSTUDIOS.COM	Web

“AT THE END OF THE DAY, IT ALL COMES DOWN TO JUST TRYING TO TELL THE VERY BEST STORY I CAN FOR THEM, STAYING TRUE AND AUTHENTIC TO THEIR UNIQUE EXPERIENCES.”
—BEN KRUIS

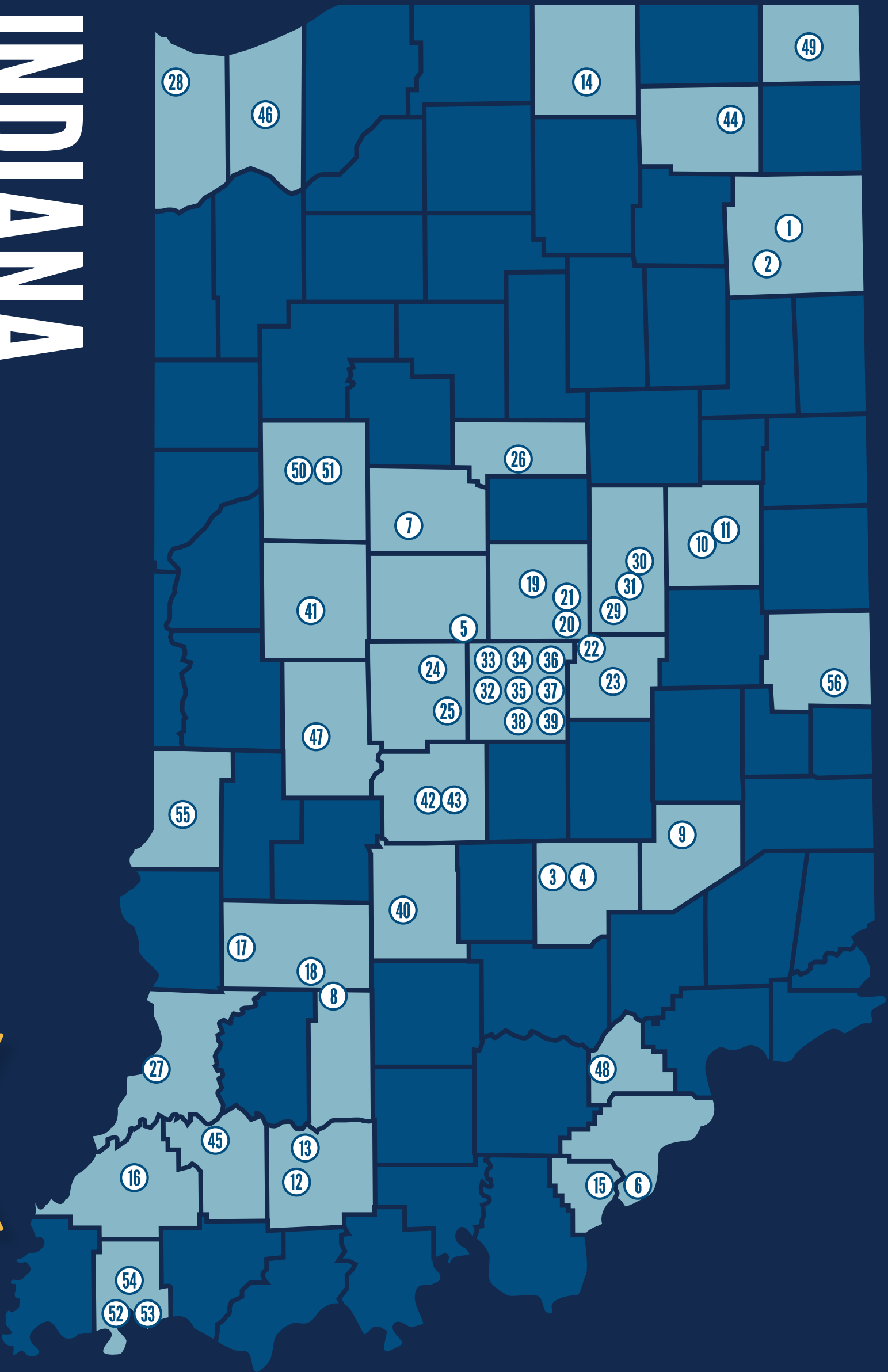
Kruis' client list includes engaged couples, non-profit organizations, small business start-ups and ministries.



INDIANA GOWORKING PASSPORT

56

LOCATIONS



SHARING THE COWORKING WEALTH

For entrepreneurs and small business owners who use shared coworking spaces, the Indiana Coworking Passport (ICP) expands access to office options across the state.

After he founded the Launch Fishers coworking space in 2012, John Weschler reached out to MatchBOX Coworking Studio creator Jason Tennenhouse in Lafayette to confab about the industry.

“The coworking concept was still relatively new to Indiana then and just starting to catch on,” says Rachel Drake, Launch Fishers director of marketing and communications. “John and Jason realized that someone who was trying to build a business in a specific Indiana city was probably going to have contacts they needed to see and work with in other locations as well.”

The resulting ICP, established in 2014, allows members of any participating coworking facility to access other participating spaces anywhere in the state once a month at no additional charge. Drake and Launch Fishers Executive Director and CFO David Bolling oversee the program with input from more than fifty participating hubs.

“Entrepreneurs are often traveling, and having expanded access to coworking spaces with the same resources they enjoy at their home location is really useful,” Drake explains.

There’s no cost for the coworking facilities to participate in the reciprocal program, and each location has the freedom to communicate about the feature in its own way, a marketing advantage they can use to attract new members.

“The other big benefit is access to like-minded people,” Drake says. “Once a year, we try to host a summit for the coworking space operators to get together, share best practices and learn from each other. It’s a great opportunity to interface with other people who are working in the same environment.”

ICP passport holders simply go online to find a list of participating spaces and fill out a form to request access for a specific date, along with any special accommodations they might need. The system then sends an email to the home location and the requested location for verification.

Drake says the Indiana Economic Development Corporation and Indiana Small Business Development Centers have been big proponents of the ICP program, touting it to the coworking spaces themselves and the entrepreneurs who use them.

“We’d love to see even more spaces join in and explore the possibilities of forming some regional coworking groups,” she adds. “We’re all Hoosiers, and we’re always looking for new ways to connect people.” ➡➡



The Indiana Coworking Passport allows members of a participating coworking space to make use of any other participating space in the state once a month at no additional charge.

LEARN MORE AT: INDIANACOWORKINGPASSPORT.COM

- ALLEN - FORT WAYNE**
01: NIIC Shared Workspace
02: Start Fort Wayne
BARTHOLOMEW - COLUMBUS
03: Propeller Makerspace
04: The Workshop
BOONE - ZIONSVILLE
05: zWORKS
CLARK - CLARKSBURG
06: Elevate @ Bolt + Tie
CLINTON - FRANKFORT
07: Ironblock Studio
DAVISS - ODON
08: The Lock & Key
(Cowork @ WestGate)
DECATUR - GREENSBURG
09: The Studebaker Studio
DELAWARE - MUNCIE
10: Innovation Connector
11: Madjax / the CO:LAB
DUBOIS - HUNTINGBURG
12: Current Blend
DUBOIS - JASPER
13: Livewire Coworking
ELKHART - GOSHEN
14: Launchpad Goshen
FLOYD - NEW ALBANY
15: The Root
GIBSON - PRINCETON
16: The HUB 127
GREENE - LINTON
17: Open Desk
GREENE - NEWBERRY
18: Battery Innovation Center, Inc.
HAMILTON - CARMEL
19: Platform 24
HAMILTON - FISHERS
20: Indiana IoT Lab
21: Launch Fishers
HANCOCK - FORTVILLE
22: Fortville Business Center
HANCOCK - GREENFIELD
23: Idea Co-op
HENDRICKS - BROWNSBURG
24: Elevate Office - Brownsburg
HENDRICKS - PLAINFIELD
25: Level Two Coworking
HOWARD - KOKOMO
26: The Shared Drive
KNOX - VINCENNES
27: The Pantheon

- LAKE - HAMMOND**
28: Commercialization and Manufacturing Excellence Center
MADISON - ANDERSON
29: Flagship Enterprise Center
30: InerG Impact
31: Work, etc.
MARION - INDIANAPOLIS
32: 16 Tech Innovation District
33: Cowork 1010
34: The Haverstick
35: Nexus Impact Center
36: Refinery46
37: Speakeasy
38: {the study} cowork @ UnionCampus
39: Switchboard
MONROE - BLOOMINGTON
40: The (Dimension) Mill
MONTGOMERY - CRAWFORDSVILLE
41: Fusion 54
MORGAN - MARTINSVILLE
42: Launch Martinsville
43: The Source
NOBLE - KENDALLVILLE
44: 231 Main Kendallville Coworking
PIKE - PETERSBURG
45: Elmer Buchta Technology Center
PORTER - VALPARAISO
46: Zoseco Coworking
PUTNAM - GREENCASTLE
47: Tenzer Hub For Entrepreneurship
SCOTT - SCOTTSBURG
48: Mid-America Science Park
STEBEN - ANGOLA
49: Cowork Steuben / Steuben County Cowork
TIPPECANOE - LAFAYETTE
50: MatchBOX Coworking Studio
TIPPECANOE - WEST LAFAYETTE
51: Purdue Railyard
VANDEBURGH - EVANSVILLE
52: Cowork Evansville
53: The Foundry on Main
54: US Incubator
VIGO - TERRE HAUTE
55: The Station
WAYNE - RICHMOND
56: Main Street Resource Center

JEDTV SPORTS NETWORK

NOW STREAMING: FRIDAY NIGHT HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETICS FRENZY

SAM MICHEL

- | | | |
|----|----------------------|---------------------|
| 01 | HAMMOND, LAKE COUNTY | City |
| 02 | 2020 | Founded |
| 03 | 4 | Number of employees |
| 04 | JEDTV.COM | Web |

“IN EARLY 2024, WE SIGNED WHAT WE BELIEVE IS THE FIRST-EVER HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS STREAMING NETWORK DEAL.”
—SAM MICHEL

WRITTEN BY AMY LYNCH PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs

In Indiana, never underestimate the power of high school sports: they provide weekly entertainment, instant community and civic pride in the smallest of towns. So in a culture accustomed to media at our fingertips, fans are chomping at the bit for greater access.

No wonder the fastest-growing sports network in Indiana is JEDtv, which partners with 19 high schools and three college affiliates across the northwest Indiana region to broadcast games and events live and on demand.

Managed out of a studio on the Purdue Northwest campus in Hammond, JEDtv launched in 2020 to broadcast games from three local high schools. “We based our model in part on what the Big 10 Network and SEC Network do to give viewers easy access in one place, but scalable to the size of our market,” says JEDtv COO Sam Michel.

After adding more individual schools, JEDtv pivoted to entire conferences. “In early 2024, we signed what we believe is the first-ever high school sports streaming network deal, with the Porter County Conference, and this year, we added the Northwest Crossroads Conference,” Michel explains.

Partner schools receive broadcast rights fees, revenue sharing opportunities and sellable inventory space. Says Michel, “we rely on income from advertisers and brands that use the network as a way to engage directly with our base of sports fans.”

So JEDtv viewers can watch all their local high school and college teams (as well as graduations, awards ceremonies, etc.) live and on demand via phone, TV or other streaming device at no charge. A staff of four markets the network to prospective sponsors through organic sales efforts, social media and the Hammond-based WJOB radio network (co-owned by JEDtv Founder Jim Dedelow).

Beyond its voracious viewing audience, the sports network also enjoys support and sponsorship from the Northwest Indiana Small Business Development Center, area unions and small colleges.

JEDtv is bringing more buzz to the scene, with an on-site broadcast called Friday Night Kickoff. “We’re building the energy hours before the game and giving fans, students and parents a reason to feel part of something bigger,” says Peter Krukowski, JEDtv’s chief content and corporate partnerships officer.

Another engagement tool is Student Section of the Week, a spirit contest drawing fans to one-up each other in terms of creative school pride, culminating in a winner of the year.

“Our goal is to engage every level of the community,” adds Krukowski. “We want students to be able to see themselves on screen, for parents to relive the moments, and for alums to stay connected. It’s about making sure JEDtv isn’t just a sports network, but a place where memories live.” ➡➡

JEDtv Sports Network broadcasts games from nineteen high schools and three college affiliates across the northwestern Indiana region including the Northwest Crossroads Conference and Porter County Conference.



BOTANY & CO.

PLANT-POWERED RETAIL WITH COMMUNITY-BUILDING BENEFITS

WRITTEN BY AMY LYNCH PHOTOGRAPHED BY Adam Raschka

As someone with a lifelong green thumb, Ben Futa grew up tinkering in his family’s gardens. After briefly studying landscape architecture at Purdue University and finding his way to an internship at Millennium Park in Chicago, he fell in love with horticulture. But he soon noticed some puzzling disconnects.

“Public gardens, retail spaces and nurseries all operate in silos,” he explains. “It’s a \$40 billion industry, but no one’s talking to each other. Customers might see a plant they like in a public garden, but have no way to buy it at a retail center.”

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a move back to Futa’s hometown of South Bend. By early 2021, the Botany Shop was making its first pop-up appearance in a local restaurant, and has since blossomed into a full-scale urban shop offering a curated collection of plants, tools, services (“houseplant house calls”) and classes (“build-your-own-terrarium”).

Botany & Co. explored some startup funding opportunities, but had trouble finding grants that felt like a good fit for the business model. Instead, Futa launched his own capital campaign, raising more than \$100,000 from a small group of investors.

“The people of South Bend have been our biggest support,” he says. “The fact that we were able to raise this money speaks volumes about our community, both here at home and elsewhere, but also to our professional commitment to community building as an essential output.”

Room by room, Botany & Co. has steadily grown to fill its brick-and-mortar space. So Futa recently repurposed two adjacent vacant lots as flower farms, and a third lot as community space dubbed *The Lot Next Door*, centered on the idea of the power of plants as connectors.

“We’re working on a concept we refer to as the ‘Botany Block’ to ultimately beautify and activate other vacant lots around us,” Futa says. “Our goal is to cultivate a hyper-local ecosystem of people and plants.” This includes selling rare, climate-appropriate plants, most of them native.

While finding his own footing as an entrepreneur, Futa created a support group for his fellow small business owners a couple years ago. He’s since turned the management of that effort over to the North Central Indiana Small Business Development Center.

Going forward, Futa plans to focus on strengthening Botany & Co.’s operational sustainability. “We’ve grown into a bigger shell that we’re still settling into,” he says. “Maybe in the next three to five years, we’ll think about our next big project. But first, we’re just going to exist for a minute and enjoy the fruits of our labors.” ➡

BEN FUTA

01	SOUTH BEND, ST. JOSEPH COUNTY	City
02	2021	Founded
03	7	Number of employees
04	VISITBOTANY.CO	Web

“OUR GOAL IS TO CULTIVATE A HYPER-LOCAL ECOSYSTEM OF PEOPLE AND PLANTS.” —BEN FUTA

The company ran its own capital campaign to generate support, raising \$100,000 from dedicated community investors.



INDIANA ENTREPRENEURSHIP SCORECARD

➡➡ **INDIANA WAS RANKED #2 IN THE COUNTRY FOR THE BEST STATE TO START A BUSINESS IN 2024**

➡➡ **ONE OF THE HIGHEST RATES OF BUSINESS SURVIVAL AFTER THE FIRST YEAR**

➡➡ **INDIANA IS HOME TO MULTIPLE TOP-TIER RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES DRIVING INNOVATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

SCORING INDIANA'S BUSINESS SUCCESSES

The Indiana Entrepreneurship Scorecard is a county-by-county assessment of the business activity happening across Indiana. Compiled by the Indiana Economic Development Corporation (IEDC), it captures multiple factors to consider in supporting entrepreneurialism in Indiana. "We look at capital access, such as the number of loans and innovation grants and try to identify hotspots of entrepreneurial activity," says David Watkins, Senior Vice President, Entrepreneurship & Small Business at Indiana Economic Development Corporation. "Whether this be private, philanthropic or government, we try to empower stakeholders to take a look at their own county or community and get a sense for where they're doing really well and where they might be able to improve." The scorecard empowers communities by providing them the data needed to tangibly measure the impact and gaps of their ecosystems.

Updated annually, the scorecard includes federal data sources and is adjusted to each county's size in order to highlight on a per capita basis the areas of strong entrepreneurialism and new businesses opening. "The most fascinating thing about the scorecard is it shows where there is a lot of activity happening," says Watkins. "It shows where entrepreneurialism is occurring and oftentimes, it's at higher rates in more rural parts, and we want to be able to shine a light on those regions of the state that are excelling."

In 2024, Indiana ranked number two in the country for the best state to start a business and has one of the highest rates of business survival after the first year.

"We have some amazing stories of entrepreneurship that make up the foundation of our corporate and business community," says Watkins. "Companies like Cummins and Lilly literally bear the name of the entrepreneur who started them."

The state also excels in innovation along with multiple top-tier research universities that drive entrepreneurialism. "It's a big state, but not so big that you can't

get on the phone or send an email to connect relatively quickly to a person, an organization or a resource that you need to help your business grow from top to bottom," says Watkins

Indiana's business-friendly environment is being recognized outside the state. Businesses are relocating from around the world to the Hoosier state including entrepreneurs and startups to take advantage of the resources and the assets that are offered. "We have these centers of excellence, whether it's automotive, batteries, agriculture, tech or life sciences, there are innovation centers that compete globally and startups are paying attention and coming to Indiana for exactly that," says Watkins. ➡

**WE TRY TO EMPOWER
STAKEHOLDERS TO TAKE A
LOOK AT THEIR OWN COUNTY
OR COMMUNITY AND GET A
SENSE FOR WHERE THEY'RE
DOING REALLY WELL AND
WHERE THEY MIGHT BE ABLE
TO IMPROVE.**

DAVID WATKINS

PIVOT MANUFACTURING

SUSAN CARLOCK

01 YORKTOWN, DELAWARE COUNTY City

02 2020 Founded

03 3 Number of employees

04 PIVOTMANUFACTURING.COM Web

“WE’RE PROVING THAT YOU DON’T HAVE TO LEAVE HOME TO BE PART OF THE FUTURE OF INNOVATION.”
—SUSAN CARLOCK



The company operates out of a 5,000 square-foot Yorktown facility that also houses the Mursix Corporation headquarters.

HER TWO COMPANIES MAKE MAKING BETTER

WRITTEN BY AMY LYNCH PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs

When it took the world by surprise in 2020, COVID-19 threw companies in Indiana into a state of uncertainty. But the unprecedented challenges motivated some momentous professional moves for Pivot President Susan Carlock.

“My family’s company, Mursix Corporation, shifted from automotive manufacturing to making face shields for state governments, hospitals and healthcare organizations, and I ran point on that,” the former nurse explains. “It got me thinking, maybe I could set out to do something on my own as a woman-owned business to help people in a more innovative way.”

Carlock founded Pivot Manufacturing as a passion project to work with aspiring entrepreneurs who have great ideas, but no real manufacturing experience. Putting both her healthcare background and her manufacturing knowledge to use, she’s been able to assist hopeful small business owners in developing their product concepts through design consultation, prototyping and manufacturer sourcing services.

“Entrepreneurs have so much enthusiasm... just listening to their goals and dreams goes a long way toward supporting them,” Carlock says. “Even if I can’t help them, I can still try to point them in the right direction.”

In the five years since she launched Pivot, Carlock has worked on projects across a range of industries, from medical devices to automotive accessories, taking on two or three Indiana-based clients at a time. She leases a 5,000 square-foot space on Mursix’s Yorktown

property to accommodate production, offices and a conference room, and is currently looking into outsourcing some fabrication, warehousing and distribution to keep costs affordable for her clients.

Carlock says Pivot’s growth journey was a slow burn that picked up once she made connections with organizations in the entrepreneurial space like the Indiana Small Business Development Center, Conexus Indiana and the Purdue University Manufacturing Extension Partnership.

“Another piece that helped us take off was an Indiana Economic Development Corporation’s Manufacturing Readiness Grant,” she adds. “That really allowed us to start focusing on prototyping, research and development.”

Carlock’s also turned her attention to growing her other recently incorporated enterprise: Murray Mentor, an AI-powered voice assistant that provides real-time guidance so more-experienced manufacturing workers can transfer knowledge to less-experienced workers. The ultimate goal is to help stop the existential crisis of a declining factory workforce.

“We just ended our first round of investment and have four employees on the payroll,” she says proudly. “Murray has the potential to become a valuable solution for Mursix, for Indiana businesses and for manufacturing companies from coast to coast.” ➡➡

130

TYPES OF
INTERNATIONAL
CANDY OFFEREDSOMETHING SWEET
CANDY SHOPHOOSIERS SWOON OVER
TRENDY AND RETRO
CANDY

WRITTEN BY MEGAN FERNANDEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs

One-year-old Something Sweet Candy Shop has taken downtown Lafayette by storm, even with an established candy store already in the area. Something Sweet's secret to success lies in its dedication to offering international candies—and viral sensations.

Started by William Skaggs and Joy Gorringer, Something Sweet attracts sugar-seekers chasing TikTok and YouTube trends. Lately, that's included tangy-cute Bubs gummies from Sweden, freeze-dried candies, and Dubai chocolate bars, filled with thin pastry layers and a pistachio-tahini cream. The store also sells nostalgic domestic favorites.

"Freeze-dried candy blew up," Skaags reports. "We were making it nonstop while working full-time jobs."

Freeze-drying Lemonheads, Skittles, and taffy turns them into airy, crunchy versions with concentrated flavor and the texture of cereal. They made thousands of bags to sell at a booth at the Parke County Covered Bridge Festival, Indiana's largest festival with two million attendees. The candy hit a chord, and sales funded their move into a brick-and-mortar storefront.

Bootstrapping the venture, the couple found support from Patrick Moeller at Hoosier Heartland Indiana Small Business Development Center, who provided market data, and Purdue's Small Business Engineering Club, which designed an inventory-tracking system.

Something Sweet has doubled its sales, and has already won a Best of the Wabash award for favorite Lafayette-area businesses.

Skaggs and Gorringer make their own brittle, Dubai chocolate, and freeze-dried candy. Skaggs is always experimenting with his own wacky ideas, like covering freeze-dried Skittles in pickle powder, or adding Tajin seasoning to peach gummy rings. The extensive product line boasts an impressive 96 rotating options for pick-and-mix selections.

Skaggs-Gorringer partnership is key to their success. Gorringer brings years of expertise as a confectioner, while Skaggs leverages his background in imports, previously selling goods on Amazon. Skaggs's experience with international suppliers helped them find an independent source for Bubs when the Swedish company couldn't keep up with social media-fueled demand.

Skaggs had to adjust to his market's social media preferences, though. "Teenagers and college kids aren't on Facebook anymore. We use TikTok to see what's trending," he says.

Something Sweet is just about to exit the startup phase. "We haven't taken a salary. We've been reinvesting because our goal is to open five to ten more locations," says Skaags. They're also exploring delivery options for Purdue students and a wholesale program for its freeze-dried candy.

Though he never dreamed of having a candy store, Skaags admits it's a fun adventure. He says: "We always joke that no one comes into the store mad. My favorite part is watching adults become kids again when they see a lot of the candies they grew up with." ➡➡

WILLIAM SKAGGS &
JOY GORRINGE

01 LAFAYETTE, TIPPECANOE COUNTY City

02 2023 Founded

03 3 Number of employees

04 SOMETHINGSWEETCANDIES.COM Web

“WE ALWAYS JOKE THAT NO ONE COMES INTO THE STORE MAD.”
—WILLIAM SKAGGS

The store is on track to double its sales from 2024 after opening a brick-and-mortar.



THE BOTANICAL BAR

VICTORIA BEATY

01 INDIANAPOLIS, MARION COUNTY City

02 2020 Founded

03 5 Number of employees

04 THEBOTANICALBARINDY.COM Web

“ I JUST WANTED TO
CREATE A SPACE I
FELT WAS NEEDED IN
INDIANAPOLIS.”
—VICTORIA BEATY



Beaty sold houseplants at farmers markets before opening a store.

A FLORAL & GIFT SHOP BLOOMS AND BOOMS

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Marc Lebryk

Victoria Beaty says she wants people to reconnect with nature in the gentlest way: through houseplants.

In 2020, she launched The Botanical Bar, selling plants at pop-ups and farmers markets in Indianapolis. Two years later, she opened The Botanical Bar store: a good-vibes celebration of chlorophyll, along with Black-inflected products such as greeting cards, apparel and mugs.

“Our whole goal is making plant ownership accessible, stylish and uplifting,” Beaty says. “Our store focuses heavily on Black art, Black music. A lot of our products feature Black women.” Beaty says she wanted her store to be culturally relevant, with people working there who look like her and with music that’s familiar to them.

“I just wanted to create a space I felt was needed in Indianapolis,” she says.

The 600-square-foot store is tucked in between a bakery and a hookah cafe just northeast of downtown. The Botanical Bar hosts book clubs, meet-ups, dinners, workshops on Plants 101, repotting techniques and more. Along with celebrating Black culture, the idea is to make it simple to own plants.

“Everything you need to become a plant parent you can find at The Botanical Bar,” Beaty said. “I would say the store’s small but mighty. We do a lot with our space.”

And she’s got a talent for engaging customers with inspiring content. Beaty maintains a website blog bursting with tips for boosting wellness and productivity with plants, and thoughtful gift giving.

She also features cross-promos with adjacent Black enterprises.

In its first year, the bar took off, with sales in the high six figures. But a year later, thanks to construction work that shut down the street for six months, sales sagged by 50 percent, but The Botanical Bar kept going: filling corporate orders, providing on-site plant maintenance services for customers and hosting more educational courses.

Recently, the WNBA and a major local golf tourney tapped The Botanical Bar to create plant arrangements for their events.

Sales are back this year, from plant subscriptions to The Botanical Bar branded merch. The business will double its revenue over the first year. “I would say we’re definitely on track with our sales for 20 percent growth this year,” Beaty says.

Her plans are even bigger. She’s looking at The Botanical Bar branded products, like plant fertilizer, plant spray and soil. Spreading across the country is in her sights, too.

“I see The Botanical Bar expanding to a full-service cafe and wine bar and having stores throughout the U.S.,” Beaty says. “I would love to have one in Chicago, in Philadelphia and one in Ohio.” ➡



COLLIER ROW COTTAGE FLOWER FARM

HAPPY HOME-GROWN
FLOWERS + COMMUNITY
LOVE = BUSINESS BOOM

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs

In a fast-changing world, flowers speak a language of kindness and purity. That's one reason Tori and Anthony Van Gorp's Collier Row Cottage Flower Farm LLC and Collier Row Floral Studio are both thriving.

Two other reasons might be the couple's English heritage and their decidedly old-world, romantic brand.

Until the fall of 2025, the Van Gorphs sold their home-grown flowers from a charming storefront: a converted 600-sq.ft. World War II-era hen house (sold kit-style in 1943 by Sears & Roebuck). Even their newer, bigger store gives off major throwback cottage vibes. "It goes along with the old fashioned feel we have," says Tony, a retired law enforcement professional and the green thumb of the operation.

His wife Tori is the company president and handles all things business. Together, since 2021, they've grown and sold tons of cut flowers made into arrangements for weddings, funerals, homecomings and baby showers. "The brides think it's a beautiful concept that they're buying the flowers grown for their bouquets on our farm," Tori says. Quite a nice counter to the fact that up to 80% of all cut flowers sold in the U.S. are imported from Columbia, Ecuador, Holland and Kenya.

The Van Gorphs' business bloomed after some important decisions. At first, they considered starting a produce business, but they didn't want

to interfere with neighbors already covering that base. When they moved to flowers, Collier Row initially sold its product to existing floral shops, but providing large quantities of high quality flowers became cost-prohibitive, Tony says. Their personalities and enthusiasm for their community helped the business catch on.

"Doors kept opening, and we kept just walking through them," Anthony says.

Along with selling flowers in their new 2,000-sq.ft. shop in downtown DeMotte, and via their website, they host floral design classes and deliver to seven nearby communities. "I love to listen to the stories of why people are sending flowers," says Tori with a smile.

Floral sales grew by 30 percent in August 2025 over August 2024. And Collier Row has gone from servicing 10 events (weddings, funerals, showers, etc.) in 2020, to at least 50 in 2025.

The Van Gorphs say they're considering opening more stores and expanding their delivery service further into adjacent Lake County. As for where they are today, Tori praised her DeMotte neighbors for their support. She says: "People rally around you when you have a good product." ➡➡

TORI & ANTHONY VAN GORP

01	DEMOTTE, JASPER COUNTY	City
02	2020	Founded
03	11	Number of employees
04	CRFLOWERFARM.COM	Web

“DOORS KEPT
OPENING, AND WE
JUST KEPT WALKING
THROUGH THEM.”
—ANTHONY VAN GORP

*The company's
business providing
floral arrangements
for events has
grown five-fold.*





INDIANA TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (INTAP)



*small businesses
around Indiana
were awarded
with funds in the
2025 yearly cycle.*

TAPPING INTO NEW RESOURCES

Taking a small business to the next level often requires more help, resources and technical assistance than owners have on hand.

Created in 2017 as a way to contribute to the costs of entrepreneurial growth and improvement projects, the Indiana Technical Assistance Program (INTAP) awards eligible applicants up to \$15,000 to go toward qualified professional and technical vendor services.

"The INTAP team operates out of our lead center in Indianapolis," says Indiana SBDC State Director Jon Myers. "Our small business programs manager oversees the bulk of registrations and manages the flow of the project; our South Central Region Office and Ivy Tech help with the financial piece."

Small businesses that are Indiana SBDC members can submit INTAP applications early in the year. Volunteer judges from across the statewide entrepreneurial ecosystem then review the entries and determine allocations of up to \$15,000 in award money, notifying recipients in the spring with a caveat that all funds must be used before the end of the same calendar year. Applicants are responsible for drafting project proposals and securing quotes from Indiana-based vendors.

"INTAP is there to help businesses generate technology, IP, patents, prototypes and other services," Myers explains. "The program isn't a grant because it pays directly to the vendor, not the applicant. There's also an expectation that the applicant will provide some of the funding as well; INTAP just helps fill the gap to get projects across the finish line."

For the 2025 cycle, the program received 142 applications and distributed \$1 million (mainly from state funding) through sixty-seven awards. In the past, INTAP has supported equipment training for staff, provisional patents, grant writing, AI models, software integration and app development.

"One of the most impactful awards we made went to a company that used the money to establish an inventory control system," Myers recalls. "It really helped that business solve a problem, and it helped them grow."

Regional Indiana SBDC offices offer INTAP information sessions to share best practices and help interested businesses put their best foot forward on the application.

"Our business advisors, chambers of commerce and ecosystem navigators working with incubators, maker spaces and coworking facilities throughout the state always want to connect small businesses with resources that can help them grow," Myers says. "If we identify a client or an entrepreneur as a good candidate for INTAP, we will certainly let them know and encourage them to apply."

In the future, Myers would like to see more funding for INTAP to subsequently increase the number of awards distributed, or perhaps to feed a second application cycle each year.

"When you're trying to grow a business, every little bit helps," he says. ➡

**INTAP IS THERE TO HELP
BUSINESSES GENERATE
TECHNOLOGY, IP,
PATENTS, PROTOTYPES
AND OTHER SERVICES.**

JON MYERS

LEARN MORE AT: [ISBDC.ORG/PROGRAMS/INTAP/](https://sbdc.org/programs/intap/)

1ST CHOICE LAWN CARE

5+

CITIES AND TOWNS
SERVED

CHRIS & BRITTNEY MORRIS

01 **BRAZIL, CLAY COUNTY** City

02 **2021** Founded

03 **7** Number of employees

04 **FIRSTCHOICELAWNSINDIANA.COM** Web

“THERE’S ALWAYS
SOMETHING DIFFERENT,
AND THAT’S GREAT.”
—CHRIS MORRIS

FROM SIDE GIG TO ALL-PRO, FROM WEED TO SNOW

WRITTEN BY **TERRI PROCOPIO** PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs*

1st Choice Lawn Care, LLC, founded by high school sweethearts Chris and Brittney Morris, has grown from a side business to a full-time operation in less than five years. Both Chris and Brittney had worked in pharmaceuticals for many years, but when COVID disruptions came calling, the couple felt the pull of entrepreneurship.

“I’ve always liked doing outdoor work like mowing and landscape,” says Chris. “I had everything to get started as a little side gig, and we took about a year to plan everything out.”

The Morrisses self-funded the business, and Dave Bittner of the West Central Indiana Small Business Development Center (SBDC) helped them create a business plan that lined up with their future goals. What started out with a mower, a weed eater and one small trailer quickly grew to add snow removal gear.

Business accelerated quickly which allowed Chris to quit his pharma job; Brittney joined the company in a full-time capacity a year later. Initially serving friends and family and relying on word of mouth, the business now attracts new customers through branded wrapped vehicles and area billboards. With five employees, 1st Choice Lawn Care is able to service customers year-round, from spring and fall clean-ups and mowing, to snow removal and ice management.

“I never thought when we first started that we would get into snow work,” says Chris. “We decided to try it out for a year to see how it went.”

The company now signs multi-year contracts—a big accomplishment, and the ultimate sign of customer trust in the company. Community engagement helps, too. The 1st Choice team volunteers to serve at community dinners and proudly sponsors youth sports teams.

1st Choice Lawn Care has already outgrown its current location due to an exploding inventory of trucks, trailers and equipment including snowplows and salters. The next goal is to either buy property and build a new shop or to try to find an existing shop and to make it their own.

Both native Hoosiers, the Morrisses love the seasonal variety of their work. “That’s the beauty about doing outdoor services in Indiana,” says Chris. “You do your spring cleanup, landscaping, then you go into mowing all summer, then come fall clean-ups, pruning, tree trimmings, and then the mums and pumpkins. There’s always something different, and that’s great.” ➡➡

\$8.3M

PROJECTED
REVENUE FOR 2027

FAT OF THE LAND

BEEF TALLOW FUELS SNACK BUSINESS'S METEORIC GROWTH

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs*

An old school way of cooking is finding new life through a Floyd County business. In 2023, Donald Ridings, owner of Fat of The Land, started selling his kettle-style potato chips cooked in animal fat on Amazon.

Today, with the help of distributors across several states and a co-packer production company, Ridings is “selling out of multiple thousands of bags” at groceries across the country.

Sales have skyrocketed so fast, “it’s like drinking water from a fire hose.”

Fat of The Land chips now are available in 12 independent grocery store chains, with plans to begin selling them in Meijer stores in October 2025.

The company is expecting 30 times its revenue growth year-over-year 2024-2025, and Ridings said the company is projected to sell \$1.8 million in chips in 2026 and \$8.3 million the following year based on its distributor and retail partnerships.

As a traveling nurse, Ridings was often away from home for long stretches, with his wife running the household and caring for the kids. Ridings said he wanted to create a healthier snack option for his family, especially after he’d read about the benefits of animal fats.

“So, I just bought into that (cooking style) and ran with it,” Ridings said. “I didn’t realize so many other people were as interested in it as they were.”

Ridings said he began by testing his homemade chips on Amazon in 2023 to see if

there was a market, and he kept selling out of bags of chips.

At the Sweets and Snacks Expo in Indianapolis in May 2025, where he circulated samples of his preservative-free snack, it became apparent Fat of The Land chips were a hit.

“Almost everyone who came by said, ‘Oh my gosh. This is so on-trend,’” Ridings said. “That’s when I realized, ‘OK. We might be onto something here.’”

At that point, Ridings teamed up with the second biggest distributor in the U.S., and Fat of The Land began seeing interest from grocery chains.

With three kettle chip flavors at present, Fat of The Land is considering expanding to other products, like tortilla chips and granola bars. And maybe even beef tallow itself.

“The whole idea, from the start, was to create a food company that gets back to cooking with animal fats like our ancestors did,” Ridings said. “So, we have a lot of product line expansion planned ahead. We’re at the forefront of the trend.” ➡

DONALD RIDINGS

01 FLYODS KNOBS, FLYOD COUNTY City

02 2023 Founded

03 1 Number of employees

04 EATFATOTHELAND.COM Web

“ I DIDN’T REALIZE SO MANY OTHER PEOPLE WERE AS INTERESTED IN IT AS THEY WERE.”
—DONALD RIDINGS

Ridings sold hundreds of bags of chips in 2023 and is selling out of multiple thousands of bags in 2025.





LAUNCH
JOHNSON COUNTY

LAUNCH JOHNSON COUNTY SETS ENTREPRENEURS UP FOR SUCCESS

Every business starts with the seed of a great idea. To nurture those seeds, the Greater Franklin Chamber of Commerce, Franklin College and the City of Edinburgh teamed up in 2024 to create Launch Johnson County, a collaborative effort to support aspiring local entrepreneurs.

"Two of our community leaders, Jeremy VanAndel and SaraBeth Drybread, came to us with this idea to help launch new businesses in Johnson County," says Rosie Chambers, Greater Franklin Chamber of Commerce President and CEO. "We typically work with businesses after they've been established, but didn't really have any programming in place to help startups find their footing."

With a \$35,000 Community Collaboration Fund grant from the Indiana Economic Development Corporation (IEDC) and donated time, materials and space, the chamber created a series of events that kicked off in Franklin last September with subsequent gatherings in Bargersville, Edinburgh, Trafalgar and other Johnson County locations. After several workshops to help aspiring entrepreneurs fine-tune their business ideas, attendees were invited to participate in pitch sessions to compete for cash prizes, legal support, financial guidance and office/retail space.

"We also brought in mentors, people who've been in the trenches, to consult with the entrepreneurs," Chambers adds.

Pitch competitions in October and March generated close to twenty applications each; the six entrants with the most viable business ideas were invited to present their concepts to a panel of judges and prospective investors in a Shark Tank-style format. The winners each received a \$10,000 cash award, and the spring event runner-up took home \$7,000.

"The presenter who came second in the fall competition returned in the spring and won," Chambers says. "We were very glad

she was brave enough to give it another try, and now she's further along on her way to opening the Cosmic Dog Bakery."

Although the IEDC grant for Launch Johnson County has now expired, the Greater Franklin Chamber of Commerce will be folding portions of the initiative into its scope of services to keep supporting local entrepreneurs.

"As a non-profit chamber, we simply don't have the resources to continue the pitch competition," Chambers says. "But if we could collaborate with another organization that wants to help with funding, we'd absolutely consider doing it again."

In the meantime, she urges aspiring small-business owners to tap into as many resources as they can to get their vision off the ground.

"Make sure you've got a solid business plan and talk to everybody, especially organizations like SCORE [Service Corps of Retired Executives] who can help you at no cost," she recommends. "There's a lot of good advice out there." ➡➡

**WE BROUGHT IN MENTORS,
PEOPLE WHO'VE BEEN IN THE
TRENCHES, TO CONSULT WITH
THE ENTREPRENEURS.**

ROSIE CHAMBERS



LEARN MORE AT: WWW.FRANKLINCOC.ORG

PORT SIDE COFFEE COMPANY

142%
INCREASE IN
CUSTOMER BASE
BETWEEN 2023
AND 2024

BREWING COMMUNITY: HOW STEPHANIE DOWNEY TURNED A PIVOT INTO A PURPOSE

STEPHANIE DOWNEY

01	PRINCETON, GIBSON COUNTY	City
02	2018	Founded
03	10	Number of employees
04	PORTSIDECOFFEECOMPANY.COM	Web

“LAST YEAR WAS MY FIRST FULL YEAR, AND I WAS NOMINATED FOR CHAMBER BUSINESS OF THE YEAR.”
—STEPHANIE DOWNEY



Port Side Coffee Company roasts their coffee beans in-house and serves homemade baked goods.

WRITTEN BY JENNY WALTON PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs

When Stephanie Downey first dreamed of opening a business, it wasn't a coffee shop...it was a bakery. But when the owners of her favorite local coffee roastery announced they were selling, Downey and her husband had a moment of clarity. "He looked at me and said, 'Is this a pivot?' and I was like, 'I think it is.'"

That pivot is now Port Side Coffee Company, a downtown Princeton café where Downey roasts beans in-house and serves up scratch-made baked goods. On a mission, Downey quickly began transforming the space into more than a coffee stop. "I wanted it to feel kind of like customers were coming to my grandma's house—where they were welcome to sit down, have a treat, and just forget the world around them for a minute."

Financing the purchase meant cobbling together savings from a career shift—she had recently left the U.S. Postal Service—and securing a \$70,000 business loan. From there, she immersed herself in learning the art of coffee roasting. "It's a sink-or-swim instinct," she says. "I use my senses—how the beans look, how they smell. You can feel the acidity in your nose when it's right."

Community support has played a powerful role in Downey's journey. She cites Downtown Princeton Inc., the Gibson County Chamber of Commerce and the Gibson County Economic Development Corporation as key allies. "Last year was my first full year, and I was nominated for Chamber Business of the Year," she says. "That was a shocker."

Downey's customer base has skyrocketed since she took over, growing 142% in 2024 compared to the previous year. Even with rising inflation—reflected in the cost of raw coffee beans—she's managed to keep prices steady for in-store customers by adjusting her focus. "We're concentrating more on drinks in-house. That's where we can be creative and still make ends meet."

Through it all, she says, she's learned the value of following her heart. "Doing what actually makes me happy seems to make customers happier than anything else." And part of that is making sure everyone feels seen the moment they walk through the door.

Looking ahead, Downey hopes to deepen Port Side's impact through partnerships with local nonprofits and community outreach, while continuing to aim high. "I feel like I've grown so much in the last year and a half—learning how I want to be here for the community." ➡➡

ANTHONY'S CHOPHOUSE & 3UP LOUNGE

ANTHONY'S CHOPHOUSE AND 3UP LOUNGE REIMAGINE THE STEAKHOUSE EXPERIENCE

WRITTEN BY RYAN MILLBERN PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Dave Pluimer*

One of Anthony Lazzara's first memories is standing on a milkcrate at age six, scooping mashed potatoes at the Indianapolis 500. He was working for his father's company, Ritz Charles Catering.

"I've been in the food and hospitality industries my entire life," Lazzara says. "It's really all I know."

Lazzara wrote his first business plan for a fine dining restaurant as a senior at Carmel High School. He refined his plan in the Entrepreneurship and Innovation program at Ball State University, working at Sullivan's Steakhouse in the summers and meeting with fine dining establishments to inform his vision.

His research continued after graduation. "My wife and I went to New York, Chicago, Lexington, all over the place," Lazzara says. "I carried a little black book that I'd take notes in. I would bring a laser measurer to get the square footage of waiting rooms and bathrooms, I'd count all the tables, estimate sales volume based on what the average guest check could be."

Lazzara's research paid off. In 2016, he broke ground on an 18,000-square-foot building that would eventually become Anthony's Chophouse and 3UP Lounge in downtown Carmel. His vision: an innovative take on the traditional steakhouse with a rooftop lounge above. "I didn't want the old school, dark steakhouse experience," Lazzara says. "I wanted a modern feel, with thirty-foot ceilings, big windows, bright colors. And I wanted

to cater to all demographics in one building. Whether you are wanting fine dining or a rooftop lounge experience, our building was the one-stop location."

Anthony's Chophouse opened in August 2018. The first three months were "humbling," as guests adjusted to a distinctive steakhouse experience. "They see different appetizers that aren't creamed spinach and they're surprised," he says. "It was like, 'What is this place trying to do?'"

Lazzara continued to make improvements to the menu and staff. Anthony's Chophouse changes its menu twice a year, retaining favorites and introducing new offerings. "We're trying to set the bar, so other steakhouses look to us for inspiration."

The addition of Executive General Manager Colin Atterson accelerated the restaurant's growth. "Colin really catapulted us to the next level," Lazzara says. "You're only as good as the people around you. If you don't take care of them and give them the tools, support and leadership they need, they're not going to reach their full potential, and neither are you."

Relationships with customers continue to feed Lazzara as well. "I've gone to their weddings, sat on boards for their businesses, partnered with them at charity events," he says. "Relationships are key; we're not just there to process food and people out the door. We are here to build relationships in the community." ➡

ANTHONY LAZZARA

01	CARMEL, HAMILTON COUNTY	City
02	2018	Founded
03	90	Number of employees
04	ANTHONYSCHOPHOUSE.COM	Web

“YOU'RE ONLY AS GOOD AS THE PEOPLE AROUND YOU. IF YOU DON'T TAKE CARE OF THEM AND GIVE THEM THE TOOLS, SUPPORT AND LEADERSHIP THEY NEED, THEY'RE NOT GOING TO REACH THEIR FULL POTENTIAL, AND NEITHER ARE YOU.”
—ANTHONY LAZZARA

18,000 square
feet - size of
Anthony's
Chophouse and
3UP building





“LAUNCHING YOUR OWN BUSINESS” WORKSHOPS AT CENTRAL INDIANA CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES



ISBDC WORKSHOPS SUPPORT ENTREPRENEURIAL ASPIRATIONS

As part of her Indiana Small Business Development Center job duties, Business Advisor Tressa Mazhandu conducts “Launching Your Own Business” workshops several times a year at three Central Indiana correctional facilities.

MY HOPE IS THAT AT THE END OF A SESSION, THESE PEOPLE HAVE A MUCH CLEARER VIEW OF HOW TO GET A BUSINESS GOING AND WHAT THEIR NEXT STEPS NEED TO BE.

TRESSA MAZHANDU

Organized by Indiana Small Business Development Centers (Indiana SBDC), the “Launching Your Own Business” workshop doesn’t just share practical advice with incarcerated individuals—it also gives them hope for a better future.

In addition to her other Indiana SBDC job duties, Business Advisor Tressa Mazhandu travels to three Central Indiana correctional facilities—the Indiana Women’s Prison, the Heritage Trail Correctional Facility and the Plainfield Correctional Facility—several times a year to conduct the two-hour sessions. Ultimately, the initiative aims to equip participants with the practical knowledge and skills they need for successful entrepreneurship.

“We recognize that for some people, self-employment is the best means to acquire income after they’re released,” Mazhandu says. “It’s very important for people to get accurate information; there are a lot of misconceptions circulating about self-employment.”

As a former Ivy Tech Community College instructor, Mazhandu feels comfortable in the classroom setting, and is one of several Indiana SBDC advisors who currently conduct the workshops for aspiring business owners in locations all around the state.

Adapted for correctional facility audiences, the “Launching Your Own Business” curriculum follows an eight-chapter Indiana SBDC workbook called “A Guide to Starting a Business” that Mazhandu hands out to all session participants. The first chapter is a self-assessment that helps attendees zero in on their professional goals and identify their own strengths and weaknesses.

“If the group is small enough, I like to make it interactive and get a feel for what kinds of businesses they are interested in pursuing,” Mazhandu says. “If someone says they want to start a food truck or fix

cars, for example, I try to work that into part of my presentation.”

Subsequent chapter slides touch on how to do market research, where to find helpful resources and managing operating costs, legal structures and business registrations. Mazhandu says the sessions she’s done thus far have been met with positive feedback.

“When I’m finished with the presentation, people always thank me for coming and tell me they find the information really useful and informative,” she says.

The more workshops Mazhandu does, the more interest in them seems to grow. For her, the most rewarding part of the project is knowing she’s planting seeds of knowledge that can make a real difference in someone’s life and future.

“There are always a few people in each class who I feel like the information truly reaches,” she shares. “I can tell when someone is interested, taking notes and really taking it seriously. My hope is that at the end of a session, these people have a much clearer view of how to get a business going and what their next steps need to be.” ➡➡

LEARN MORE AT: [ISBDC.ECENTERDIRECT.COM/EVENTS](https://isbdc.ecenterdirect.com/events)

KAREN'S UPSCALE RESALE

20%

INCREASE IN
INVENTORY AFTER
RELOCATING

LARRY SCHWARTZ

01 **EVANSVILLE, VANDERBURGH COUNTY** City

02 **2008 / 2022** Founded / Acquired

03 **4** Number of employees

04 **FACEBOOK.COM/KARENSUPSCALERESALE** Web

“I’VE GOT A FEEL FOR
WHAT PEOPLE ARE
LOOKING FOR.”
—LARRY SCHWARTZ

FURNITURE FINDS AT KAREN’S UPSCALE RESALE

WRITTEN BY MEGAN FERNANDEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Alex Kumar

Larry Schwartz, already a successful upholsterer, saw an opportunity to expand his reach by purchasing Karen’s Upscale Resale, a furniture resale store that was on the market in Evansville. Larry decided it would be a perfect complement to his upholstery service.

Schwartz approached the Southwest Indiana Small Business Development Center (Indiana SBDC) to meticulously analyze the sales figures of both businesses.

“They are wonderful people to work with,” Schwartz says. “They also helped me get a great interest rate. Because of that, I felt confident I could make it work.” This confidence was well-placed. By combining the two businesses into a single location, Schwartz not only increased Karen’s inventory by 20% but also strategically created a natural flow of customers for his upholstery services.

The integrated business flourished, Schwartz says. Beyond the numbers, Karen’s Upscale Resale provides a valuable community service for individuals looking to downsize, offering a valuable way to rehome items that might otherwise be difficult to part with. The knowledge that their cherished possessions will find new life while providing a monetary return is a significant draw. “At least they can make somebody else happy,” Schwartz says.

Schwartz has discovered a gift for expertly arranging furniture and decor in vignettes, creating inspiring living spaces that demonstrate how different styles can be blended for personality. Customers consistently praise the store’s beautiful presentation, often remarking on how perfectly everything is placed and how easy it is to navigate. This meticulous curation has led to a popular local refrain: “If you can’t find it at Karen’s, you’ll never find it.”

A perfect example: one couple came in shopping for a durable patio table. Schwartz suggested an iron sewing machine base, envisioning a marble top for outdoor use. The customers took his advice, even having the base sandblasted and redone, and now their friends ask where they found their unique table. “We found it at Karen’s,” they proudly declare.

Schwartz has also taken on upholstery jobs for neighboring businesses, directly driving new clients. One customer, impressed by his work in a nearby establishment, brought him ten chairs to reupholster. Karen’s Upscale Resale stands as a shining example of strategic growth, community value and a timeless knack for satisfying customers. ➡

*By acquiring
a consignment
furniture shop,
Larry Schwartz
created more
business for his
upholstery service
and was able to
move it out of his
home for more
workspace.*

116

ACRES MOWN
WEEKLY

ELKINS MOWING & LANDSCAPING

FROM CHILDHOOD CHORE TO THRIVING BUSINESS

WRITTEN BY MEGAN FERNANDEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs*

When teenaged Austin Elkins was mowing yards before and after school for \$200 per month, he didn't know he was laying the groundwork for business ownership. A decade later, the 25-year-old is capitalizing as the owner of Elkins Mowing & Landscaping.

The business began when Elkins was serving in the National Guard, and his unit was asked to handle snow and ice removal for an armory. That spring, the armory asked him to bid on mowing. Now he counts four armories as clients, as well as other businesses and residential customers.

The armories are in Indianapolis. Elkins lives an hour away in Montpelier, stores his equipment in Indy, and commutes into the city for work. His father is his only employee.

Elkins's bank, 3Rivers Federal Credit Union, suggested he reach out to the East Central Indiana Small Business Development Center. James Womack became his business advisor and counseled Elkins on professionalism and maintenance.

"James is there when we need him, not when he needs us. He works around our schedule, which is really helpful," Elkins said.

Elkins appreciated Womack's guidance on triage with equipment breakdowns. "If something goes down, it's a headache. It screws up the whole day. We have to stop and work on it, or take time on the weekend to work. And lately it seems like we have to work every single day just to keep up," Elkins said.

Elkins has mastered the strong work ethic, but stress management has been his biggest challenge as a new business owner. "I don't play video games, so I had to figure out a way to decompress. I just mow yards and occasionally go to Cedar Point or go hunting."

But Elkins is making quick strides in the business strategy department. He's not afraid to take risks to benefit the company. "You need to take chances. I put myself in a lot of debt by upgrading all of our equipment this year, but I was able to take on more clients and I'm slowly building back up."

Right now, Elkins is on the mower from sunrise to sunset, but he's able to take winters off. His long-range plans are to hire enough crews to handle the labor while he focuses on management. It's a pretty safe bet, since grass isn't likely to stop growing. ➡

AUSTIN ELKINS

01	MONTPELIER, BLACKFORD COUNTY	City
02	2020	Founded
03	2	Number of employees
04	N/A	Web

“YOU NEED TO TAKE CHANCES.”
—AUSTIN ELKINS

*Austin Elkins
learned to
mow lawns
from his
grandfather
at age 4.*



MAKER13 AND
MAKER MOBILE

\$500,000



awarded to young entrepreneurs.

HOW WE MAKE THINGS IN SOUTHERN INDIANA IS VERY DIFFERENT FROM HOW YOU MIGHT SEE THINGS MADE IN OTHER PARTS OF THE COUNTRY, SPECIFICALLY THE COASTAL REGIONS

JOHN RILEY

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MAKER13 PROMOTES ADVANCED MANUFACTURING AND CREATIVITY

Maker13, a 501(c)(3) incubator for aspiring entrepreneurs, is fostering advanced manufacturing skills and creativity in Southern Indiana. Started in 2014 by John Riley, an employee of Samtec, a global electronics manufacturer headquartered in New Albany, the venture has reached hundreds of thousands of people and continues to support the launch of more than 100 startups.

Two years ago, support from the Indiana Economic Development Corporation Community Collaboration Fund provided a significant boost.

"That kicked off a lot of student programs that culminated with our regional Global Entrepreneurship Week activities and a pitch competition hosted at Indiana University Southeast. In the past two years, we've helped give away \$50,000," Riley says.

Maker13 introduces people to state-of-the-art 3D printers, laser cutters, textile machines and other advanced manufacturing tools through expert-led training programs and memberships. Maker Mobile, a thirty-two-foot race car trailer outfitted with equipment, is a key component of their outreach. Since 2014, the mobile lab has engaged over 500,000 people at events and schools.

Over a decade ago, John and his wife, Christy, noticed the makerspace movement taking off on the coasts and realized Southern Indiana needed its own version. Yet they quickly discovered that existing makerspace models didn't fit the manufacturing-driven culture of Southern Indiana.

Instead of forcing a model that didn't work, the Rileys built their own. They started with a mobile lab, then launched Maker13, a for-profit makerspace. The Samtec Family Foundation, impressed by their impact, helped unify the efforts under a single nonprofit, securing a stronger foundation for growth and sustainability into the future.

Maker13 has since flourished with numerous community collaborations. Support from Impact100 Southern Indiana allowed the group to launch a six-month training program

for women, spurring the creation of forty startups in eighteen months. It also hosts Manufacturing Week with One Southern Indiana. More than 800 manufacturing students have connected with local employers through the program.

Maker13 promotes the unexpected connections between everyday life and manufacturing. Students are amazed to see how they can laser-etch patterns onto blue jeans or how local companies like Redwire Space conduct biomedical 3D printing and experiments on the International Space Station.

"They don't realize that some of the most obscure things have a tie to manufacturing, making and creating. This empowers teachers to lean into the STEAM and STEM aspects in the classroom while connecting the students to companies they drive by every day on the way to school," Riley says.

Beyond technical skills, Maker13 also engages special needs communities, such as those struggling with mental health. "We meet people where they are, we find out what they're interested in and then enable the heck out of that and let them be as creative as they want to be," Riley says.

Through the support of community partners, the organization has welcomed its first official CEO, Kyleigh Hublar. With a dedicated board of directors, the organization continues to strengthen and inspire the area's creatives. ➡➡



PURE GREEN FARMS

2.5M
POUNDS OF
PRODUCE SOLD

GREENHOUSE LETTUCE LEAF-OUT DISRUPTS PRODUCE MARKET

JOE MCGUIRE

01 SOUTH BEND, ST. JOSEPH COUNTY City

02 2018 Founded

03 13 Number of employees

04 ENJOYPUREGREEN.COM Web

“[HYDROPONICS ARE] A GAME CHANGER THAT FIELD GROWERS ARE GOING TO HAVE TO GET USED TO.”
—JOE MCGUIRE



After four years, Pure Green Farms is looking to expand and offer more varieties of produce.

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Adam Raschka

A massive greenhouse on the edge of South Bend is growing and selling 2.5 million pounds of lettuce a year, and it's still not enough to meet customer demand, says Pure Green Farms CEO Joe McGuire.

“We’re working on expansion plans right now,” McGuire says. “We’re up this year over prior years, and this year we’re tracking at maximum levels, and that’s about a 30 percent growth over last year.”

An investment group incorporated Pure Green Farms in 2018, and after constructing and outfitting the 3.5-acre hydroponic greenhouse on a 65-acre parcel, they began selling four types of lettuce in April 2021.

In a hydroponic system, plants are fed nutrient-rich water, instead of soil. At Pure Green Farms, that water carries standard plant food, sodium, potassium and calcium, McGuire explains.

The products are branded as Earthbound Farm Greenhouse, and consumers can buy clamshell packages of the clean, crispy, buttery goodness—all labeled as “locally grown”—in retail stores within a 300-mile radius of South Bend, including Meijer, Jewel, Costco, Whole Foods, Fresh Thyme, and other retail outlets.

Other Pure Green Farms customers include institutions like schools and universities.

McGuire, who has built a 35-year career in fresh produce, said growing the lettuce in greenhouse environments has a number of

advantages, especially the ability to precisely control the climate. Pure Green Farms is even set up to ingeniously capture carbon dioxide from their heating system’s exhaust and feed it to the plants to encourage more robust growth, McGuire says.

The locally grown label is an attractive feature, according to McGuire. In the U.S., the vast majority of lettuce consumed is grown in California, Arizona and Mexico, but relatively new hydroponics technology is scaling up and democratizing opportunities to grow high quality produce while shrinking the distance food needs to travel from farm to plate.

In the past, McGuire would’ve described the idea of growing delicate lettuce in the upper Midwest as “crazy,” he says. But the wonder of a controlled environment has proven its value again and again.

In the near future, McGuire plans to expand production volume, improve efficiencies, drive down costs and add more varieties of lettuce.

“It’s that we’re able to produce this good crop that’s clean and tastes good, right in the middle of population centers, and this disrupts the produce industry a lot,” McGuire says, referring to traditional reliance on growers in Western states and south of the border. “This is a game changer that field growers are going to have to get used to.” ➡

20+

PRODUCTS
AVAILABLE

HYMN & HERD FAMILY WINERY

KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY

WRITTEN BY AMY LYNCH

PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Sean Molin*

Shelly and Mike Webb have a long-standing passion for riding motorcycles to visit area wineries. When their son Mac turned 21, he started joining them on their adventures.

"We've definitely passed our love of wine along to our sons," Shelly laughs.

After college, Mac purchased several acres of his family's nearly 200-year-old farmstead intending to live in an on-site parsonage, but wondered what to do with the old 8,000 square-foot church building the property also included. An educator by training, Spencer County Commissioner and a home winemaking enthusiast, he decided to team up with his parents and his brother Malin to incorporate Hymn & Herd Family Winery in 2019.

"We're Catholic, but we make wines in an old Methodist church on land deeded by my great-grandfather, who was a Baptist," Mac says.

Mac oversees production and Shelly manages sales, marketing to a mostly Southern Indiana clientele through festivals and wine-related events. The rest of the family pitches in to help with bottling, labeling and any other tasks that need to be done. The Webbs are hoping their third son will eventually buy into the enterprise as well.

To build a 20-plus product portfolio that includes Pappaw's Pasture, Holy Moly, Acres & Acres, Preacher's Son and Ark wines (all the names are a nod to either the family or the church), the Webbs source grapes and fruit mainly from regional vineyards and orchards.

"Southern Indiana is predominantly of German and Swiss heritage, so we like to joke that we make wine for beer drinkers," Mac says. "About seventy-five percent of our production is sweet wines because that's what the market here demands."

The Southwest Indiana Small Business Development Center has proven a valuable resource for the operation, helping the Webbs navigate the often-overwhelming ins and outs of government regulations and funding opportunities.

"We were awarded an INTAP (Indiana Technical Assistance Program) grant in 2024 that we used for an engineering redesign to improve our shipping and receiving facilities," Mac says.

The Webbs also hope to open a new tasting room this fall and have recently added a rock parking area to the property to upgrade the visitor experience. In the longer term, Mac would like to see the winery grow into a full-fledged agritourism destination.

"We're very close to Holiday World and only four miles from the Owensboro [Kentucky] riverfront, so we're in a great location to draw traffic," he says. "We feel like this is a unique property, and we're thrilled that we've been able to repurpose and give new life to an old building that probably would have just sat vacant and decrepit." ➡

MIKE, SHELLY, MAC AND MALIN WEBB

01	ROCKPORT, SPENCER COUNTY	City
02	2019	Founded
03	4	Number of employees
04	HYMNANDHERDWINERY.COM	Web

“WE’RE THRILLED THAT WE’VE BEEN ABLE TO REPURPOSE AND GIVE NEW LIFE TO AN OLD BUILDING THAT PROBABLY WOULD HAVE JUST SAT VACANT AND DECREPIT.”
—MAC WEBB

Hymn & Herd Family Winery is sited in a 73-year-old church on a 1.5-acre Spencer County farmstead now in its fourth generation of family ownership.





MILESTONE

ESTABLISHED

ALLIED INSURANCE AGENCY

500%
INCREASE IN
REVENUE IN 5
YEARS

MEGAN & SCOT RUBECK

01	BRAZIL, CLAY COUNTY	City
02	1962/2018	Founded / Purchased
03	10	Number of employees
04	ALLIEDINSURANCEAGENCYIN.COM	Web

“I UNDERSTAND THE BUSINESS AND WHAT THEY ARE GOING THROUGH AND THE PROBLEMS THAT THEY NEED SOLUTIONS FOR.”
—SCOT RUBECK

A COUPLE'S UNLIKELY PATH TO BUSINESS SUCCESS

WRITTEN BY ASHLEY CAVEDA PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Marc Lebryk*

A nurse by trade, Megan Rubeck never dreamed of one day co-owning an insurance company with her husband, Scot. After growing up on farms, Scot moved into agricultural sales at 17. He loved the relational aspect of his work, and thought crop insurance might be an even better way to support farmers. “I understand the business and what they are going through and the problems that they need solutions for,” says Scot.

Chance encounters with the ready-to-retire former owner of Allied Insurance Agency led Scot to a new dream that combined farmwork, insurance and a nascent entrepreneurial drive. More risk-averse, Megan was hesitant when Scot suggested taking over the company. To her, insurance was like taxes: Who would want to do that? But, in 2018, Scot convinced Megan to take the leap and become small business owners together.

With contacts developed through Scot's work in agricultural sales, their insurance business exploded. In 2021, they constructed a new building and bought a second agency in Terre Haute two years later. Today, with ten employees, Allied Insurance Agency covers many small businesses in their community and beyond, including farmers, excavators, loggers, restaurants and more. In just five years, they've experienced a 500% increase in revenue.

Early on, after attending a meeting at the Clay County Chamber of Commerce, Megan connected with Dave Bittner from the Indiana Small Business Development Center (Indiana SBDC).

Housed within the Indiana Economic Development Corporation, the Indiana SBDC helps small businesses start, grow, finance, innovate and transition through no-cost, confidential business advising and training. Having the SBDC's support and guidance gave Megan and Scot confidence they were getting it right.

With their complementary strengths, the Rubecks have developed an effective rhythm. Scot still builds long-lasting relationships with his customers, even driving over to the home of a farmer whose property caught fire one Sunday night. After the fire was extinguished, he helped the family carry their stuff out. “He made sure the adjuster was there that next morning,” Megan says. The more organized of the two, Megan focuses on the day-to-day details of running a successful small business, committing to Allied Insurance Agency full time in 2022.

Although initially afraid to move into the world of small business ownership, Megan is grateful Scot pushed her out of her comfort zone. Today, they are free from standard nine-to-five schedules, deeply rooted in their community and proud to support meaningful causes like 4-H and Veterans of Foreign Wars in annual donations of nearly \$25,000.

When people ask the couple if it's challenging to work together, Megan quips, “Who else do you trust more fully than your partner?” ➡

*\$20,000 to
\$25,000 in
charitable
donations
annually,
between two
locations*

70

COUNTRIES
SHIPPED TO BY
ANDYMARK

ANDYMARK, INC.

THE FUTURE IS NOW

WRITTEN BY AMY LYNCH PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs

With self-driving cars, guided surgeries and countless other applications, the age of robots has definitely arrived.

Delphi engineers Andy Baker and Mark Koors met while coaching the Kokomo High School robotics team in the late 1990s. Noticing quickly that there wasn't anywhere students could go to buy the common parts they needed, the duo began crafting their own solutions, giving away designs to other teams after their competition events wrapped up each year.

"People started asking us to sell the parts," Baker recalls. "We launched AndyMark Inc. in 2004 out of our own homes to make parts and provide services for people who build mobile robots."

During their very first year in business, AndyMark fielded a request to make several thousand gears and shafts for a large customer project. Three years later, Baker and Koors were able to quit their day jobs and move the company into Kokomo's Inventrek Technology Park. They also widened their offerings to distribute control systems, batteries and parts made by other manufacturers.

Another move followed in 2011, the same year the company was named "Business of the Year" by the Kokomo Chamber of Commerce. In 2018, AndyMark settled into its current home, an 88,000 square-foot facility that more than doubled the company's warehousing capabilities.

Although Koors retired from AndyMark in 2016, Baker continues to oversee the venture's day-to-day operations. The education industry

and education-supporting corporations make up around 70% of sales, with robot hobbyists and makers accounting for the rest of the company's customer base.

"People also rely on us to develop prototypes," Baker adds. "There are a lot of people like me who coach teams and also work in the industry; they might use some of our parts for a development product."

Being part of the For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology (FIRST) global non-profit community automatically puts AndyMark on the radar of organizations that promote and support school-based robotics education.

"We also advertise in some magazines, and anyone who's contacted us can opt-in to receive our newsletters," Baker says. "Those communications go out to around 25,000 people."

The Greater Kokomo Economic Development Alliance, the City of Kokomo and the Indiana Small Business Development Center have all played instrumental roles in contributing to AndyMark's growth through the years. Presently, the company employs a staff of forty-four, shipping inventory across the U.S. and to more than seventy countries around the world.

"Our short-term goals are really just to continue providing great service and high-impact products to our existing markets," Baker says. "Long term, we aim to sustain and keep steadily growing." ➡➡

ANDY BAKER

01	KOKOMO, HOWARD COUNTY	City
02	2004	Founded
03	44	Number of employees
04	ANDYMARK.COM	Web

“WE LAUNCHED ANDYMARK INC. IN 2004 OUT OF OUR OWN HOMES TO MAKE PARTS AND PROVIDE SERVICES FOR PEOPLE WHO BUILD MOBILE ROBOTS.”
—ANDY BAKER

AndyMark Inc. develops, manufactures and distributes robotic parts for mobility, educational, hobbyist and combat markets





PLUG & PLAY

250



*capital investments
each year.*

**WE'RE PROVING THAT
YOU DON'T HAVE TO
LEAVE HOME TO BE
PART OF THE FUTURE
OF INNOVATION.**

BRANDON NOLL

CONNECTING STARTUPS TO GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS

Founded in 2006 in Sunnyvale, CA, Plug and Play founder Saeed Amidi traveled across America looking for the best states to open additional offices. Along with Florida and Texas, Amidi soon identified Indiana as one of the top three places for startup success due to the Hoosier state's culture, values, balanced budget and strong research institutions such as University of Notre Dame, Purdue University and Indiana University. In 2024, Plug and Play added a location in Warsaw, IN to its portfolio which focuses on developing medical technology companies. In September 2025, a second Indiana location will open in Indianapolis, IN to help grow the life sciences industry in partnership with the IU Launch Accelerator for Biosciences (LAB) initiative.

Funded through the private sector from nearly 600 corporate partners around the world, Plug and Play currently has over sixty locations across twenty-seven countries. Plug and Play is one of the most active venture capital firms in the world, making roughly 250 investments every year. In Warsaw, the program brings in worldwide medical technology startups and introduces them to corporate partners such as Zimmer Biomet, Paragon Medical and Parkview Health. The office is led by two Indiana natives, Director Brandon Noll and Program Manager Eileen Alberding, and one transplant from Boston, Karlens Joas. "What's truly remarkable is that Plug and Play's success in Indiana is being driven by two born-and-bred Hoosiers," says Noll. "We're connecting the heartland's rich talent with Silicon Valley's global platform, and in doing so, we're proving that you don't have to leave home to be part of the future of innovation."

Twice a year, Plug and Play hosts a three-month accelerator program centered

on medical technology, inviting startups from around the world to participate. The program is open to companies at various stages, from pre-seed to Series D, provided they have a minimum viable product (MVP). It's designed to connect global entrepreneurs with Plug and Play's corporate partners, helping them solve technology challenges and scale their businesses, regardless of where they are based.

After completing the accelerator program, the goal is for participating entrepreneurs to remain in Warsaw and grow their business locally. By helping the founders and startups be the best version of themselves through education from the program, and by introducing them to venture capital firms who are willing to make investments in their company, the hope is they will continue to re-invest back into Indiana. "Startups thrive in Indiana for a simple reason: the odds are in their favor," says Noll. "The state's tax structure allows them to retain more capital, and with a lower cost of living and a more affordable labor market, their financial runway stretches much further." ➡➡



LEARN MORE AT: [PLUGANDPLAYTECHCENTER.COM](https://plugandplaytechcenter.com)

BE HAPPY PIE COMPANY

JENNY LAMBLE

01 EVANSVILLE, VANDERBURGH COUNTY City

02 2015 Founded

03 15 Number of employees

04 BEHAPPYPIECOMPANY.COM Web

“THE THING THAT I DID NOT EXPECT FROM RUNNING A BUSINESS IS FALLING IN LOVE WITH MY CUSTOMERS.”
—JENNY LAMBLE



The company has shipped pies to 25 states.

A RECIPE FOR HAPPINESS

WRITTEN BY ASHLEY CAVEDA

PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs

Jenny Lamble couldn't do it anymore. She loved her job as a school counselor, but the weight of everything was too much. Between active shooter drills and losing a student to suicide, Lamble was heavy-hearted. When her husband asked her what she wanted, she recalls saying, "I want to be happy!"

That Thanksgiving, making pies for a friend, she felt joy. "I needed something fun and light," said Lamble. "I needed to go work with dough." She began selling homemade pies at Evansville's Franklin Street Bazaar, investing in a garage and doing a build-out to make pies for more people.

Her entrepreneurial dreams grew and Lamble sought mentorship advice from the Indiana SBDC. They helped her understand the work required to jump start a business, stressing consistency as essential to building a customer base. She decided to give her business a real chance, dedicating herself to pie full time.

The Be Happy Pie Company opened its first storefront in Evansville in 2017. For four years, Lamble worked 13-hour days, lugging huge bags of flour and making everything by hand. "You don't need a gym membership if you run a bakery," she joked.

Lamble expanded The Be Happy Pie menu to include scones, cookies, and savory items like chicken pot pie, quiche and taco pie. To this day, scratch is queen. "From our pie crust, our fillings, our toppings—every filling that we serve, we

make," she said. "I like to be able to pronounce all the ingredients. We don't want to be one molecule away from plastic."

Today, Lamble has two stores in Evansville, which ship pies nationwide and do a mean walk-in business. "We currently do not sell wholesale to anyone. I'm very particular about where our product is and how people treat it," she said.

During the Thanksgiving season, the line of customers stretches out the door. Since 2017, they've served over 25,000 customers and sold more than 140,000 mini pies (aka "pie bites").

Recently, they also sold two franchises, one in Paducah, KY and the other in Kansas City, MO. In the next five years, Lamble hopes to sell 10 more franchises. "I think every town should have a Be Happy Pie Company," she shared.

When she reflects on what it took to get where she is today, Lamble stresses the support of her husband and daughter, her staff, and the loyalty of everyone who buys her pies, saying, "The thing that I did not expect from running a business is falling in love with my customers." ➡➡

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THROWING HIGH-SPEED INTERNET LIFELINES TO RURAL COMMUNITIES

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs

James Berry's Kokomo-based internet company, BerryComm, provides fast online access to rural residents and small businesses, thanks to fiber optic networks.

"We need more data, faster, and that's just going to keep on going," Berry says. "With streaming and the way of the world we live in today, you've got to have good internet with good speed."

Until BerryComm, which he started in 2015, people in these areas were mostly overlooked, Berry says.

"I always wanted to own my own internet company, and my big focus was on rural and undeveloped areas," he says. "No one would bring fiber optics or that kind of technology to the rural areas back in the early 2000s."

BerryComm provides internet and VoIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) services and more through fiber optic networks built by his first company, Berry-IT.

BerryComm now has a wide range of customers—from farmers and families, to residential homes and small businesses—who pay for monthly service and receive any needed support from local customer service reps and techs who help them keep the data flowing.

BerryComm was born when the owner of a small cable company approached Berry to connect with his network. Berry ended up buying the cable company, with its two sites and network infrastructure.

Before BerryComm, Berry built ISPs for larger communication companies through Berry-IT, which continues to offer utility construction in the form of underground or aerial installation, and splicing and design of fiber optic networks.

While he knew how to build networks, providing internet service was another story. "I knew nothing about how the internet worked, how to service customers inside their homes and how to make all this work," Berry says. "I got on YouTube, attended conferences and started learning how to do those things myself."

Walton, Indiana, was the first town built out with BerryComm, a job that took nine months to complete, Berry says.

"We designed the first town and started building a fiber optic network through the town. We are really big on the customer service side of it." More and more customers began signing up for the high-speed internet service, as one small town led to another.

As of fall 2025, BerryComm had about 2,000 internet customers; the goal is 10,000 users in three to four years.

Berry credits the company's success with hiring the right people and letting them do great work. "We're transforming lives with fiber internet, as we say, at the speed of light." ➡➡

JAMES BERRY

01	KOKOMO, HOWARD COUNTY	City
02	2015	Founded
03	16	Number of employees
04	BERRYCOMM.ORG	Web

“WE NEED MORE DATA, FASTER, AND THAT'S JUST GOING TO KEEP ON GOING,”
—JAMES BERRY

The company provides internet and VoIP services through a fiber optic network built by James Berry's first company, Berry-IT.





STATE SMALL BUSINESS CREDIT INITIATIVE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

HOW PENNY TRACKER AND PROJECTIONHUB ARE HELPING INDIANA SMALL BUSINESSES PUT THEIR BEST FINANCIAL FOOT FORWARD

The Indiana Economic Development Corporation is ensuring Hoosier entrepreneurs, startups and small businesses are beyond ready when seeking capital. Through Indiana's State Small Business Credit Initiative Technical Assistance (SSBCI TA) program, small businesses benefit from no-cost training and customized solutions from providers who are themselves small businesses, including Penny Tracker and ProjectionHub.

Kari Johnson noticed a lack of financial literacy among small businesses and inadequate financial documentation that was preventing access to funding. In 2020, she launched Penny Tracker, LLC, which offers bookkeeping services for small businesses along with QuickBooks training. With that expertise, Johnson was hired by the Indiana Small Business Development Center to teach QuickBooks.

"That opportunity allowed me to pivot from doing people's books to being a trainer," she says. Johnson was the recipient of an Indiana Technical Assistance Program (INTAP) grant which she used to produce her first online course covering foundational bookkeeping for small business owners.

With her passion for teaching, Johnson created a proprietary two-day workshop curriculum that schools entrepreneurs and small business owners in bookkeeping and accounting. "I'm addressing the challenge that many people struggle with—understanding financial reports and building strong bookkeeping skills," she says.

Then Johnson developed a hybrid (remote/in-person) curriculum that resonated with small business owners. Soon the East Central Small Business Development Center asked her to design a workshop for use statewide.

She works with clients to set up templates and the software integrations that

work specifically for their businesses. "I'm really excited about that component, and there will be a big need for this," she says. "After two days of my class, they get the basics of how the software works, but then can use it to make it work most efficiently for them."

Founded in 2012 by Adam Hoeksema and his brother Brandon, ProjectionHub helps small businesses construct cash flow projections that are attractive to potential lenders. "We tell the story in a way that's based on reasonable assumptions," says Adam. "The lender needs research and historical performance, and we're trying to show how a company's cash flow can repay a loan in the way the lender wants to see."

Prior to launching ProjectionHub, Adam worked as a lender for twelve years and Brandon was a software developer. "We started building out custom models that we eventually put up for sale on our website," says Adam. Services now include custom financial modeling, industry-specific templates, comprehensive Small Business Administration (SBA) loan process consultation and research-grounded financial assumptions. Says Adam: "We're expanding our services throughout the SBA process by assisting our clients from initial idea to securing the loan." ➡

AFTER TWO DAYS OF MY CLASS, THEY GET THE BASICS OF HOW THE SOFTWARE WORKS, BUT THEY CAN USE IT TO MAKE IT WORK MOST EFFICIENTLY FOR THEM.

KARI JOHNSON

LEARN MORE AT: [IEDC.IN.GOV/SSBCI/SSBCI-TECHNICAL-ASSISTANCE](https://iedc.in.gov/ssbci/ssbci-technical-assistance)

CLUTCH FABRICATION AND DESIGN

OLD SCHOOL SKILLS MEET TECH AT EXPANDING FAB COMPANY

JOSH & ROSE SMITH

01 **BLOOMINGTON, MONROE COUNTY** City

02 **2014** Founded

03 **7** Number of employees

04 **CLUTCHFAB.COM** Web

“WE JUST TRY TO DO GOOD WORK AND KEEP OUR NAME GOOD. THAT’S ALLOWED US TO REALLY HAVE GOOD CUSTOMERS WHO TRUST US.”
—JOSH SMITH



Clutch has averaged 8-10% annual growth.

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Alex Kumar

Josh and Rose Smith have used old-school skills to build a fast-growing company, Clutch Fabrication and Design, but they expect new technologies to frame up an even bigger future.

Josh Smith launched the Bloomington-based company in 2011 as an LLC before he and his wife, Rose, a co-owner, incorporated in 2014.

Clutch designs, creates, installs and maintains everything from metal hand railings to awnings, from architectural touches like ornate doors and decorative gates to mailboxes, counter-tops and rustic and modernist furniture. They also consult on a wide range of structural designs.

“I don’t know if there’s really anybody I would call a competitor that does exactly what we do,” Josh says. “There are others doing similar stuff, but they’re mostly smaller scale.”

Their customer base is 60% to 80% residential, with most of the balance in commercial work, but they are moving toward growing the commercial side, Josh says.

Except for the years 2023 and 2024, when most construction-related companies saw business drop, Clutch has averaged 8 to 10% annual growth, according to Rose.

Most of their work has been in Central and Southern Indiana, and growing alongside Bloomington-based builders has helped build their reputation, Josh says.

“We just try to do good work and keep our name good,” he says. “That’s allowed us to really have good customers who trust us.”

They built Clutch’s reputation the way they handle their projects: one step at a time and with a lot of skill.

“The first ten years were lean years because we started with nothing, buying every single tool; every single thing was purchased,” Rose says. “Then, we increased our work over the months and years.”

New technology is likely to take their successes to a new level, according to Josh.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is streamlining their administrative operations, while new technologies have significantly cut time spent on projects.

A new computer numerical control tube cutter transforms designs into everything from details like tabs and slots to lengths of tube neatly and accurately. What previously took four hours can now be done in ninety minutes, Josh says, freeing up that team member to work on other projects.

It also creates new revenue streams. Most companies don’t have such equipment, so they will pay Clutch for their services, turning new equipment into competitive advantages.

Clutch’s growth projections are as solid as structural steel, Josh says, with growth likely to double in the next year or so.

“Now people are spending more,” he says. “We’re set with our people and our technology and the customers to start really ramping up.” ➡

EARTHWISE

EARTHWISE FINDS GREENER PASTURES WITH THRIVA

SCOTT & ANNMARIE SEVERSON

01	VALPARAISO, PORTER COUNTY	City
02	1997	Founded
03	7	Number of employees
04	GOEARTHWISE.COM	Web

WRITTEN BY RYAN MILLBERN PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Adam Raschka*

Scott Severson grew up on a 23,000-acre farm in Northwest Indiana that his father managed. In 1997, Scott and his wife, Annmarie, would return to his old stomping grounds, this time as environmental consultants for its new occupant: Fair Oaks Farms.

The Seversons had recently launched EarthWise, a consulting firm specializing in sustainable environmental and engineering solutions, out of their one-bedroom apartment. Their work to that point had come primarily with municipalities and industries to find agricultural uses for waste byproducts.

Their relationship with Fair Oaks Farms established a foundation of dairy industry clients that would enable EarthWise to grow to seven employees, move into a traditional office space in Valparaiso and expand their offerings into a new area of potential revenue.

Over its twenty-eight-year history, EarthWise has helped dairy clients with everything from water monitoring to CFO regulatory compliance to renewable natural gas projects.

In 2019, Bos Dairy, Fair Oaks Farms' parent company, faced a challenge stemming from the sheer amount of cow manure their feed stock produced. "We're constantly searching for value in waste streams," Annmarie says.

In partnership with Bos Dairy, EarthWise developed a process to produce a liquid ammonium nitrogen fertilizer derived from on-farm generated manure. While nitrogen fertilizer is inexpensive for large-scale farming operations, it represents a major expense for organic farmers. EarthWise saw a golden opportunity.

In 2019, EarthWise met with Lorri Feldt, Regional Director of the Northwest Indiana Small Business Development Center, who connected them with the resources needed to develop their idea.

Scott likened the arduous process of developing a product for market with approaching a seemingly never-ending series of pastures. "When you come to a fence, you can see across the pasture to the next fence, but you don't know what's on the other side," Scott says. "When you get to the next fence, you ask yourself, 'Am I going to open this gate or not?' We've had people helping us at each gate."

In 2025, EarthWise opened another gate, launching Thriva, an organic ammonium nitrogen fertilizer.

Thriva helps clients lower manure handling costs and promote environmental compliance. And, because Thriva is approved for use in certified organic production by the Organic Materials Review Institute, it can be sold to organic crop farming operations and home gardeners as a 100% all natural, organic fertilizer.

Thriva earned EarthWise Indiana's 2025 Innovative Small Business of the Year Award from the Indiana Small Business Development Center—and a visit from Governor Mike Braun. "The recognition this past year has been a shot in the arm," Annmarie says, "and validation for years of hard work that got us here."

EarthWise has big plans for Thriva—and a vision for the positive change it could bring about. "My dream is that Thriva could make organic food more affordable," Scott says. "You shouldn't be restricted from accessing healthy food just because you can't afford it." ➡➡

“MY DREAM IS THAT THRIVA COULD MAKE ORGANIC FOOD MORE AFFORDABLE. YOU SHOULDN'T BE RESTRICTED FROM ACCESSING HEALTHY FOOD JUST BECAUSE YOU CAN'T AFFORD IT.”
—SCOTT SEVERSON



RENDER CAPITAL

TOP 10%



*performance
of the world's
venture capital
funds, according
to Cambridge
Associates' recent
benchmark data.*

LEVERAGING INDIANA'S UPSIDE MARKET WITH LOYALTY

It's not every day that an investor turns down a \$100 million exit offer.

Render Capital did this year, opting for continued growth in one of its portfolio companies because it believes the Indiana investor market is all upside.

Render is a venture capital firm that's grown to \$30 million under management with support from Indiana's Next Level Fund. Aaron Gillium of 50 South, the fund's manager, noticed Patrick Henshaw's potential after Henshaw helped grow Cintrifuse, a Midwestern fund of funds, from \$30 million to \$150 million under management.

Henshaw, an Army veteran who cleared bombs to create economic pathways for Afghans, has built and exited three startups; so have his team members. "We've all been in the trenches. We've dealt with founder issues, board issues, investors, employees and customers," says Henshaw.

Their hands-on experience makes them powerful investment partners. Render is here to fill the gap for early-stage traditional capital in the overlooked Midwest and South, after decades of 97 percent of venture capital flowing to the East and West coasts.

Those tailwinds blow in Indiana's favor, complementing the state's economic advantages in logistics, advanced manufacturing and healthcare.

One contributing factor is a new generation of wealth in the hands of middle-market executives and founders who are selling and like their Indiana lifestyles just fine.

A second factor is the ability to work from anywhere. Indiana's low cost of living and business-friendly environment combine for an attractive package.

Even Indiana's misunderstood reputation for being twenty years behind bigger cities is a strength, Henshaw says. Here, we learn from the mistakes made elsewhere and avoid the boom-and-bust cycles. With less competition, the top talent isn't constantly tempted to jump ship for more salary or equity.

Capitalizing on these factors, Render takes a higher ownership percentage and level of involvement from a board position, and the team has the practical experience to coach startups on the three essential ingredients for high growth: customers, capital and talent.

"We're also loyal, and I think that goes a long way in a startup partnership, when we're going to be partners with these companies for five, seven, or ten years before the founders exit. We want to have that same trust, transparency and commitment to them on both sides of the table," Henshaw says.

Render looks for resilient, capital-efficient companies that want to stay in the game and create value until the time is right. "It's not just about getting to more fundraising," Henshaw says. "Render's strategy puts them in the position to say, 'We don't want to raise any more money because our business is profitable.'" ➡

THE RENDER TEAM HAS THE PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE TO COACH STARTUPS ON THE THREE INGREDIENTS FOR HIGH GROWTH: CUSTOMERS, CAPITAL AND TALENT.

PATRICK HENSHAW



THE FROZEN GARDEN

400%

GROWTH OVER FIRST FOUR YEARS

FROM LOCALLY-SOURCED PRODUCE TO MULTIMILLION-DOLLAR HEALTH FOOD COMPANY

ALLYSON STRAKA

01 VALPARAISO, PORTER COUNTY City

02 2015 Founded

03 10 Number of employees

04 THEFROZENGARDEN.COM Web

“HOPEFULLY, IN FIVE YEARS, WE’LL BE FIVE TIMES THE SIZE WE ARE NOW.”
—ALLYSON STRAKA



The Frozen Garden began in 2015 with a 500-square-foot kitchen.

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Gabrielle Minion

When Allyson Straka started Frozen Garden in 2015, she and two team members could produce up to 200 frozen smoothie pouches a day.

Nine years later, the company has ten employees and can make over 1,000 smoothie packages a day with the same three-person smoothie team. The last four years has seen the Valparaiso-based company grow 400% from the first four years, and Straka projects they’ll reach seven times growth over the next four years and reach eight figures in annual revenue.

“It all started with getting people back into their kitchens, making real food from scratch instead of all the highly processed foods,” Straka says.

In 2015, Straka launched Frozen Garden, using a 500-square-foot space rent-free for six months. She and her team began cutting lots of locally-sourced vegetables and fruits, flash freezing them and using environmentally friendly packaging.

Clients from a healthy eating company Straka previously owned began buying her new products, and the business grew, stocking grocery shelves and picking up high-end hotels, including some in the Marriott Bonvoy line.

The COVID-19 pandemic convinced Straka to focus exclusively on direct-to-consumer instead of stocking the shelves of hundreds of grocery stores, especially as more people chose to have food delivered to their homes.

Today, about 90% of Frozen Garden’s business is direct-to-consumer, with the remainder in high-end hospitality locations, but Straka says she expects that to change to a seventy-thirty split in a few years.

Frozen smoothies make up 87% of her company’s revenues, while other products, like rice and quinoa bowls, overnight oats and healthy deserts called “Delites” make up the rest.

A massive change Straka made was taking on strategic partners and investors in late 2024. Turning to the Indiana Economic Development Center and the Northwest Indiana Small Business Development Center, Straka reconsidered her company’s ownership, and she brought on Wade Breitzke as a partner and his firm, WeCreate Media, to handle marketing and strategic partnerships.

“At the end of 2023, I basically had the realization I had taken Frozen Garden as far as I could on my own, and I needed to get to the next step,” Straka says.

Expanding into partnerships has moved the company to a much higher level, with visions of an explosion in revenue and more in Frozen Garden’s future.

“Hopefully, in five years, we’ll be five times the size we are now; even more than that is what we’re really shooting for,” Straka says, mostly made possible with the strategic partnerships. “It was definitely a piece which we were missing significantly.” ➡➡

1,800

INDIANA HOMES
POWERED ALL YEAR

GAI ENERGY

ENERGIZING INDIANA WITH SENSIBLE, SAVVY, LOCAL SOLAR

WRITTEN BY MEGAN FERNANDEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Marc Lebryk*

The political headwinds have shifted around renewable energy. Federal funding and incentives are being slashed, and Hoosier solar energy companies face opposition to what some consider a “blue state” technology, according to Chris Rohaly, founder of solar supplier GAI Energy.

But Rohaly is persevering—and is optimistic about the future of clean energy in Indiana. “We’re going to survive the environment. The value is going to be undeniable to all involved,” he says. “In spite of tariffs and labor-market barriers, the continuing steep increases in energy demand and conventional utility pricing will continue to make self-generated power a viable option.”

GAI is a solar energy system pioneer in Indiana. Started in 2008, the company designs, installs and maintains solar systems and microgrids for commercial, agricultural and residential clients.

The family-owned company has built a reputation for quality and customer service. Every project exceeds Indiana’s standards, written before solar installations were common, and complies with the stricter best practices outlined in the 2020 National Energy Code, Rohaly explains.

Though there is much misinformation about the effect of solar fields on farmland, Rohaly understands some of the public’s distrust. “Many homeowners nationally were taken advantage of by a large solar company a few years ago. The company used deceptive sales tactics, targeted the elderly and saddled people with debt,” he says. That company shut down after a flurry of

state-level lawsuits. Many of their victims have turned to GAI to fix their broken systems.

“That’s what has kept our phone ringing off the wall this year,” Rohaly says. “We’re local and they can trust us.”

Interest in residential solar surged this year as the cut-off for federal tax credits moved up to the end of 2025. GAI believes it is poised to thrive without those incentives, too. Unlike competitors, the company handles a range of project scales, from a small 10 kilowatts installation to industrial-sized megawatt systems, as power bills are increasing across the board.

Recently, GAI designed systems for a solar project developer working with two large manufacturers in Indiana. And a Colorado client hired GAI to outfit a new “community resilience center”—a school gym that can double as a storm shelter, complete with solar and battery backup.

“I’m excited about the increasing sophistication of what we’re able to offer, like an inverter battery system that makes it easy for people to check their power load from their phone,” Rohaly says.

Rohaly credits the Indiana Small Business Development Center for its support as GAI refines its target markets. Says Rohaly, “the market data that is available through them is pretty amazing.” ➡➡

CHRIS ROHALY

01	FLORA, CARROLL COUNTY	City
02	2008	Founded
03	8	Number of employees
04	GAI.ENERGY	Web

“ I’M EXCITED ABOUT
THE INCREASING
SOPHISTICATION OF WHAT
WE’RE ABLE TO OFFER.”
—CHRIS ROHALY



SOCIETY OF INNOVATORS AT PURDUE NORTHWEST

537



*Official honorees
Inducted to date.*

OUR FOUNDING BELIEF
IS THAT ANYONE CAN
BE AN INNOVATOR.

JASON WILLIAMS

INNOVATION’S MORE THAN JUST A BUZZWORD

Ask 100 people what innovation means, and you’re likely to get 100 different answers.

“We define innovation as thinking creatively to develop ideas that provide solutions, add value and can be implemented as new or improved products, services and social initiatives,” says Jason Williams, CEO of the Society of Innovators at Purdue Northwest.

Growing out of the Ivy Tech system as Innovators Northwest Indiana in 2005, the society became a legal non-profit entity in 2017, changing its name to reflect a new partnership with Purdue in 2018.

“The whole state, and certainly Northwest Indiana, punches above its weight class when it comes to innovation,” Williams says. “The society was birthed from a desire to educate the region on what innovation is, and also shine a spotlight on the innovation that’s alive and thriving here.”

The society is governed by a board of directors; Williams is officially employed by Purdue, and the school provides staff and offices in keeping with its partnership agreement.

“Now, twenty years in, our role has expanded into a mission of helping support community and economic development through innovation,” Williams explains. “We see ourselves as a valuable resource partner for entrepreneurship support organizations.”

The society isn’t a membership organization per se, but instead inducts classes of innovators on a yearly basis. Since its inception, the organization has recognized 537 individuals and teams at its annual awards luncheons.

“Typically, we receive several dozen applications every year through an open nomination process,” Williams says. “We usually select between four to six individuals and three to five teams.”

Inductees receive a plaque, a lapel pin, media recognition and continued promotion through the society’s newsletter and communication channels.

In 2022, a \$470,000 Regional Economic Acceleration and Development Initiative (READI) grant from the Northwest Indiana Forum and the Indiana Economic Development Corporation helped the society develop a Youth Entrepreneurship Ecosystem for regional high school students. Programming to launch in 2025 will include an “Ask An Innovator” online marketplace and a series of documentary-style interviews with inspiring local leaders.

“We’ve hosted Innovate WithIN, and we’ve started our own pitch competitions to give students more opportunities to present their ideas,” Williams adds.

The society has also led summer leadership camps for high schoolers and a Women’s Leadership and Innovation Summit, and served as a community partner for THE Summit entrepreneurship conference in Gary last spring.

“Our founding belief is that anyone can be an innovator,” Williams says. “We’re sector-agnostic in that we recognize innovation in all its shapes and forms, from nonprofits and small startups to large corporations. We exist to shine a spotlight on the innovators of Northwest Indiana, amplify their stories and just continue to celebrate them.” ➡➡

LEARN MORE AT: [PNW.EDU/SOCIETY-OF-INNOVATORS/](https://pnw.edu/society-of-innovators/)





HOPWOOD CELLARS WINERY

GROWING A HOBBY
INTO A LIVELIHOOD

16 ACRE
VINEYARD &
PRODUCTION
FACILITY

RON HOPWOOD

01	ZIONSVILLE, BOONE COUNTY	City
02	2012	Founded
03	4	Number of employees
04	HOPWOODCELLARS.COM	Web

“AS AN ENTREPRENEUR, I HAVE TO GIVE THIS MY ALL...WE HAVE TO BE THE ONES WHO SET THE TONE FOR THE BUSINESS, AND WE TAKE THAT COMMITMENT VERY SERIOUSLY.”
—RON HOPWOOD



The Hopwood product portfolio includes award-winning dry, sweet and fruit wines along with bourbon and whiskey.

WRITTEN BY AMY LYNCH PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Sean Molin*

Ron Hopwood had already been tinkering around with making wine and whiskey at home for years as an enthusiast when he finally decided to give it a go on a professional level. Leaving a 30-year real estate career behind, he officially launched Hopwood Cellars Winery in 2012 by opening a small retail storefront in downtown Zionsville.

“The concept initially emerged back around 2005 when my daughter was born, followed by my son in 2009,” he recalls. “The idea was to create a family business I could grow and eventually turn over to them.”

The operation is definitely a family affair, with Hopwood’s kids now working alongside him and his wife, Janet, in the shop on weekends. The Hopwoods also live on the nearby 16-acre spread that houses the vineyard and production facilities. Looking to diversify the company portfolio following the height of COVID lockdowns, Hopwood added William Rose Distillery to the mix in 2021.

Struggling to find financing early on, Hopwood built the business on a credit card and a dream.

“Even though we had a near-perfect credit score, no one wanted to lend money to a winery in Indiana because the risk was too high,” he says. “Thankfully, we’re now debt-free, doing quite well and have managed to increase our year-over-year sales every year but one.”

Hopwood appreciates support from the Boone County and Zionsville Chambers of

Commerce, but spends so many hours at the winery, he doesn’t have as much time to devote to networking as he’d like. Customers—many of them wine club members who enjoy benefits like special discounts, exclusive tastings and access to private events at the vineyard—like knowing they can always find him or one of the other Hopwoods behind the counter.

“As an entrepreneur, I have to give this my all,” Hopwood says. “We are here every day. My family hasn’t had a vacation or a weekend off in 13 years. We have to be the ones who set the tone for the business, and we take that commitment very seriously.”

To other aspiring small business owners, Ron advises thinking outside the box and establishing emotional boundaries, words of wisdom he’s trying to keep in mind after making the bittersweet decision to put Hopwood Cellars up for sale and retire in 2025.

“I like to say that the winery is a hobby gone wild, but the truth is, it’s not just a hobby,” he says. “You always have to remember that it’s a business and treat it that way.” ➡➡



20-30

(PET) PATIENTS
SERVED DAILY

LATIMER ANIMAL HOSPITAL, LLC

GROWING A COMMUNITY- ROOTED VETERINARY PRACTICE WITH HEART

DR. MATTHEW LATIMER

01	NEW ALBANY, FLOYD COUNTY	City
02	2015	Founded
03	10	Number of employees
04	LATIMERANIMALHOSPITAL.COM	Web

WRITTEN BY JENNY WALTON PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Gabrielle Minion*

Dr. Matt Latimer, founder of Latimer Animal Hospital in New Albany and a southern Indiana native, has spent the past decade building a veterinary practice grounded in community care, teamwork, and smart business principles. His journey, which began with a clear vision shaped by family influence and mentorship, highlights the power of blending professional passion with entrepreneurial grit.

Inspired by his father, a longtime private dental practitioner, Dr. Latimer understood early the value of owning a practice and shaping it on his own terms. “My dad owned his own practice for thirty-five or forty years, and off of his model and mentorship, I knew I wanted to be a partner and owner.”

After graduating from veterinary school, Dr. Latimer landed a job that provided excellent mentorship in medicine and business, but no opportunity for partnership. This led him to the decisive step of starting Latimer Animal Hospital from scratch in 2015 on family-owned property, allowing him to build a clinic aligned with his values.

From day one, Dr. Latimer’s operation focused on teamwork and high-quality care balanced with affordability. “I don’t look at this as employer and employee. I look at this as a team. Everyone is just as important as the next person to reach our goals.” This inclusive culture has helped the hospital serve around twenty to thirty patients a day, growing steadily since its opening.

Local business organizations have been instrumental in supporting Dr. Latimer’s entrepreneurial path. The Indiana Small Business Development Center (SBDC) played a key role in his initial planning and financing. “The SBDC was amazing from day one for the initial planning to get our loan and laying out everything,” Dr. Latimer says.

Despite challenges such as navigating the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on operations and staffing, Dr. Latimer’s practice has maintained steady growth and profitability. “From year one, we were always in the black, and each year we’ve grown.” He emphasizes the importance of understanding local market data rather than relying solely on national averages, “so you stay grounded and realistic,” he notes.

Looking back, Dr. Latimer describes entrepreneurship as “amazing and humbling,” marked by ups and downs but far more rewarding than difficult. He believes balancing passion, business acumen and personal well-being are the key to thriving. “Try to make sure everything stays in balance so that you can keep moving forward and enjoy.” ➡➡

“THE [INDIANA] SBDC WAS AMAZING FROM DAY ONE FOR THE INITIAL PLANNING TO GET OUR LOAN AND LAYING OUT EVERYTHING.”
—MATTHEW LATIMER

701

BUSINESS
DEVELOPMENT
PROGRAM
ATTENDEES IN
2025

THE PANTHEON: BUSINESS AND INNOVATION CENTER

In 2024...

3

new business starts.

55

clients served.

16

jobs created.

**WE HAVE TO INVEST
IN OUR OWN PEOPLE
AND THEIR IDEAS AND
THAT'S WHAT THE
PANTHEON IS DOING.**

NICHOLE LIKE

VINCENNES' COWORKING INNOVATION HUB

Founded in 2019 in a renovated 1920s theater, The Pantheon Business and Innovation Center serves as a coworking space and entrepreneurial center in the heart of downtown Vincennes. From plumbers, graphic designers and marketers to scalable tech startups, the space provides a wealth of programming and networking events to help local businesses grow within the community. "We help everybody in our space and it's the hub of business activity in Knox County," says Nichole Like, CEO of The Pantheon. "It's nice to see different types of entrepreneurs come together to exchange ideas."

The Pantheon has grown to seventy members and programming covers everything from time management skills and growing as an entrepreneur to effectively using artificial intelligence in a business. A partnership through the Southwestern Indiana Small Business Development Center (SBDC) provides mentorship opportunities and business plan development to the members. The Pantheon has even helped members such as Katelyn Ice of Ice Design Studio transition from a home-based marketing startup to a three-employee business in a brick-and-mortar location in just over two years. "Katelyn has grown her clientele exponentially, and now she's investing in the community by leasing a building outside the Pantheon," says Like.

Early in development, The Pantheon created an ag tech committee, which is led by Drew Garretson, that connects local farmers and innovators to address agricultural needs such as the high cost of employees and working with the Federal Department of Labor's H-2A program. The goal is to develop creative solutions which will assist the local farming community. Recognizing that Knox County grows more melons than anywhere

else in the Midwest, Pantheon entrepreneur Mike Jacob, founder and CEO of TerraForce, designed a prototype of an autonomous melon harvester using AI and robotics that will be harvesting area melon fields in the near future.

Like recognizes outside The Pantheon, Indiana business people are helpful in reaching out across the different coworking spaces and entrepreneurial hubs. The state colleges such as Purdue University, Indiana University and nearby Vincennes University also play a strong role in startup development. "We're looking for the next entrepreneur or the next founder who wants to take an idea that comes out of The Pantheon and grow it into a scalable business," says Like. "We have to invest in our own people and their ideas, and that's what The Pantheon is doing. We're asking the people in our community, 'what are your ideas and how can we help you to get those ideas across the finish line and create a sustainable business?'" ➡



MARSHALL SECURITY LLC

PROVIDING PROTECTION WITH
VIGILANCE AND INTEGRITY

JEFF NESBITT & MEGAN BENTLEY

01 **BLOOMINGTON, MONROE COUNTY** City

02 **2016** Founded

03 **65** Number of employees

04 **MARSHALLMSI.COM** Web

“MAKING AN INVESTMENT
IN YOUR PEOPLE REALLY
DOES PAY OFF.”
—JEFF NESBITT



*Bloomington-based
Marshall Security
is currently
licensed to work
with clients
throughout the
state of Indiana.*

WRITTEN BY AMY LYNCH PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jay Goldz

Jeff Nesbitt's career has always revolved around one goal—keeping people safe. A former Coast Guard member and law enforcement officer, the Marshall Security owner launched his company in 2016 after a string of private security jobs revealed an untapped opportunity to do something differently.

“They were good companies, but they all did the same things the same way,” Jeff recalled. “I knew that I could find a way to do it better.”

After a shaky first year in business, Marshall Security landed a contract with a company that managed high-end student housing.

“They hired two guards at first, then requested 20 more,” Jeff said. “That was my big break. It allowed me to grow my company and focus on providing excellent service.”

CEO Megan Bentley joined the company in 2021 and has played an integral role in taking Marshall to the next level, restructuring the way the company does business, from administration and human resources to training and client acquisition.

“Our success truly lies with our team,” Jeff said. “Each person complements the others and we work together toward accomplishing our mission.”

Currently licensed in the state of Indiana, Marshall Security is looking to add Kentucky, Michigan and Ohio to its service territory. A few of the company's past and present clients

include Indiana University fraternities and student housing, the Indiana Department of Revenue, VA hospitals and pharmaceutical companies.

Finding good staff and securing capital for operations have been some of Jeff's biggest challenges to date. He's presently applying for training and development grants to expand the business further.

“There are a lot of incentives and benefits available through the SBA [Small Business Administration] for starting a company in Indiana, especially if you're a minority, a woman or a veteran,” Jeff mentioned.

These days, Marshall Security is emphasizing employee training, benefits and career growth opportunities.

“One of my mentors told me not to be afraid to pay people to the point it almost makes you uncomfortable,” Jeff said. “I've done that, and it's helped our company thrive. Making an investment in your people really does pay off.”

Jeff urges would-be entrepreneurs to solicit advice and input from other successful business owners across a wide variety of different fields.

“I have a good friend who's a builder; he's also a financial wizard and really good with business strategies,” Jeff said. “I'm always asking him ‘how'd you do that?’ In the end, I'm just a guy who had an idea, and I'm constantly looking for ways to keep improving and adding value to the company.” ➡➡

17%

AVERAGE REVENUE
GROWTH ANNUALLY

MICROPULSE

HOW MICROPULSE FOUND ITS BACKBONE

WRITTEN BY ASHLEY CAVEDA PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs*

The most important business lesson Brian Emerick ever learned was nearly fifteen years after founding Micropulse, a contract manufacturer in Columbia City. “I was really too diversified,” he says. “I was doing some medical device work, but also high-speed progressive dies, plastic injection molds, sophisticated automation, custom machines, test and assembly, et cetera... It got to a point where we were a mile wide and an inch deep.”

In the early 2000s, customers started closing plants and moving offshore, forcing Emerick to make a difficult decision. “Since 2003, we have done nothing but medical devices,” he says. “We’ve become a mile deep and an inch wide as far as being really good at what we do.”

A self-described serial entrepreneur, Emerick started as a tool and die maker right out of high school. In 1988, he bought a computer numeric control (CNC) machine and began working out of his garage. By the time he quit his full-time job two years later, he owned multiple CNC machines and his business was taking off. Emerick says those early years were like the Wild West. The regulatory burden was relatively light and a startup like Micropulse required far less capital. “I made a fair amount of mistakes,” he says. “I learned from those and survived and surrounded myself with the best people.”

Today, Micropulse works exclusively in the orthopedic device market, manufacturing “all the

hardware they use to repair the skeletal system.” They serve as one of the largest employers in Whitley County and recently completed a renovation, expanding their building to 250,000 square feet. On average, Micropulse sees an annual revenue growth of 17%, all while remaining privately held. “Our competitors are getting picked off all the time,” Emerick shares, but he has no interest in going down that same path. He likes what he does and is committed to his employees and customers: “My motivation isn’t for a big payday.”

Unconventionally, Micropulse has never had a sales team. “Our philosophy is you do the absolute best job you can,” says Emerick. “That’s doing the hard stuff; telling the customer whether it’s good or bad news as soon as you know it. So, if you make a mistake, you fix it and you communicate it immediately.”

As a leader, Emerick tends to dismiss attention or praise, saying that owners and founders get too much credit as a business matures. Instead, he focuses on the 520 employees that are the bedrock of his company. The feeling seems to be mutual as Micropulse’s leadership team, comprising roughly twenty people, boasts an average tenure of sixteen years, though most individuals are only in their thirties and forties. “We’ve got an unstoppable culture at Micropulse,” Emerick says. ➡➡

BRIAN EMERICK

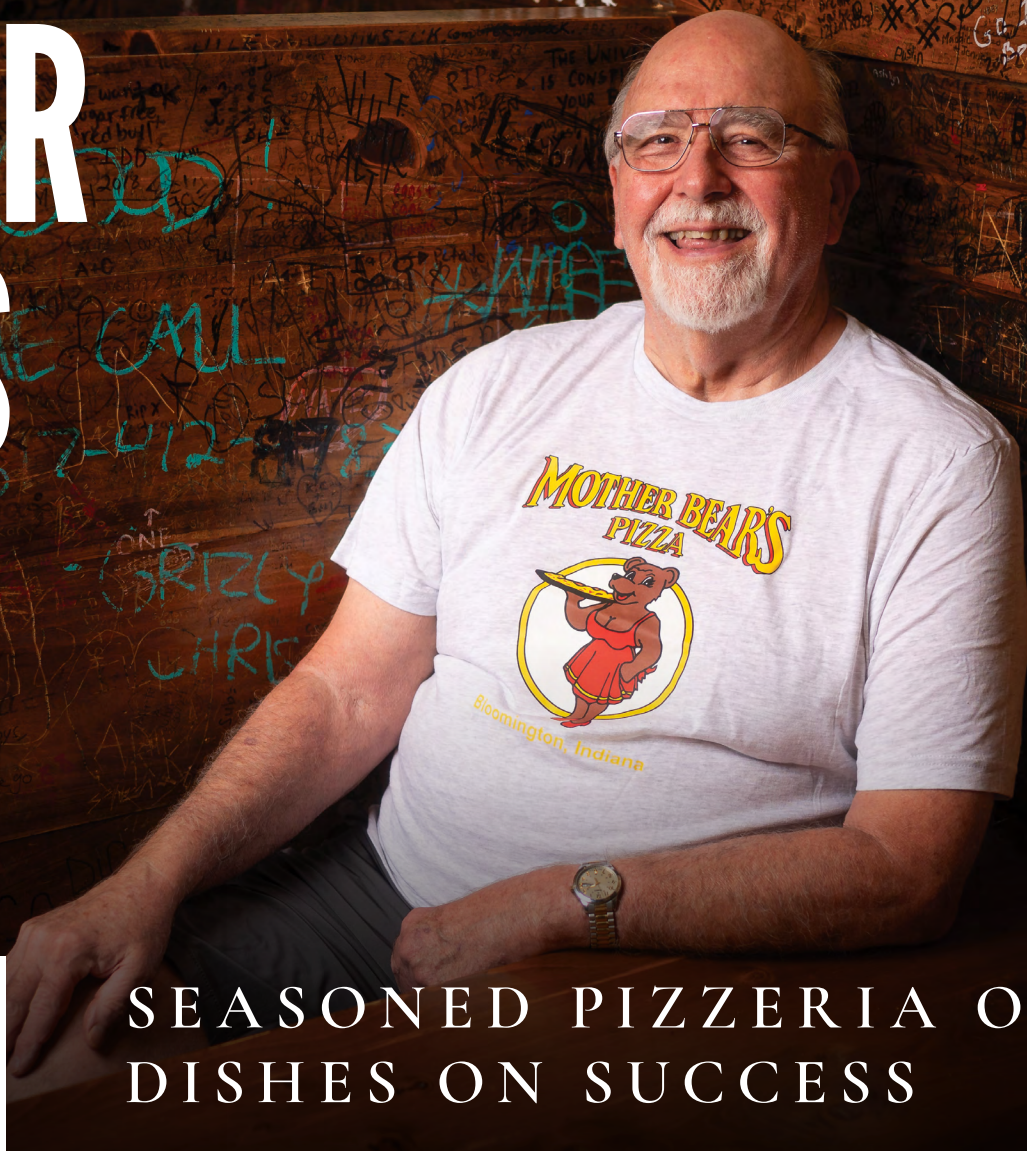
01	COLUMBIA CITY, WHITLEY COUNTY	City
02	1988	Founded / Purchased
03	520	Number of employees
04	MICROPULSEINC.COM	Web

“WE’VE GOT AN
UNSTOPPABLE CULTURE
AT MICROPULSE.”
—BRIAN EMERICK

*Micropulse has a
leadership team with
an average tenure of
sixteen years.*



MOTHER BEAR'S PIZZA



RAY MCCONN

01 **BLOOMINGTON, MONROE COUNTY** City

02 **1974** Founded

03 **20+** Number of employees

04 **MOTHERBEARSPIZZA.COM** Web

“THE BUSINESS IS AN ICON... IT'S A GOOD FEELING.”
—RAY MCCONN



Mother Bear's Pizza has often been called one of the best pizza restaurants in the country.

SEASONED PIZZERIA OWNER DISHES ON SUCCESS

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Alex Kumar

When Ray McConn graduated from Indiana University-Bloomington in 1971, the Indianapolis native wanted to open a college bar.

He did that two years later, and soon after, Mother Bear's Pizza was born. “The business is an icon,” McConn said. “It's really nice being part of a successful business that has such great respect from the populace. It's a good feeling.”

In 1979, the Indiana Daily Student, the campus newspaper, declared Mother Bear's the best pizza place in Bloomington, but things really took off when People magazine named it the nation's best pizza in 1982, McConn said.

“We'd have people waiting outside an hour, an hour and half in line to get in to eat our pizza,” he said.

There have always been challenges, McConn said. Parking has always been tough on East Third Street, and the school year makes revenue a roller coaster.

In the early 2000s, McConn said he tried other ventures. Mother Bear's suffered while he was gone, but, when he returned to a hands-on role, “things started happening.”

“Each year, we'd see substantial increases,” McConn said. “We ended up leasing a building next door and expanding. A couple years later we expanded again, and a couple years later, we expanded some more.”

In 2016, McConn and his business partner, Bruce Storm, opened a Mother Bear's on the west side of town, near a Kohl's department store and with access to a 500-car parking lot.

“That store really, really took off,” McConn said.

In 2024, the partners opened a third location near a sports complex in Columbus, Ind., and, despite some ups and downs, that one also has done very well, McConn said.

The business's secret sauce is listening to the suggestions of the stores' managers and staff. That has meant better pizza sauces, crusts, toppings and a wider variety of products, McConn said.

“You try new things, you take care of your people and solicit their ideas and you move the load down the road,” he said.

Franchising is not in Mother Bear's future, but opening up pizzerias around Indianapolis or maybe near other Big 10 college campuses is on the table, McConn said.

“As we expand, we're not going to do little corner mom-and-pop restaurants,” he said.

“With that we have to build a store that's going to have approximately 250 or so seats. We're not going small.” ➡

S&S DIESEL MOTORSPORT

160

DEALERS WORLD WIDE
SELLING S&S DIESEL MOTOR
SPORTS FUEL SYSTEMS

FUEL SYSTEM REFINEMENTS FUEL WORLD-CLASS GROWTH

WRITTEN BY MEGAN FERNANDEZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY Alex Kumar

Diesel engines have become much cleaner, quieter, and more powerful in the last 25 years, thanks to precisely controlled high-pressure fuel systems. S&S Diesel Motorsport has emerged as a world leader in this space.

The company develops and manufactures technically advanced fuel systems and electronic controls for existing vehicles. It also provides engineering consulting for large engine manufacturers. A motorsport division provides components and onsite tech support for racing and competition vehicles.

Founded by engineers Luke Langellier and Andrew Stauffer, formerly of Cummins and Bosch, respectively, S&S Diesel Motorsport was successful from the get-go, Stauffer says, but growth has accelerated in the last several years as a result of new product development and expanded distribution. In that time, S&S has grown from roughly 12 people to 42.

"Identifying needs for better products in modern vehicles and developing those engineering solutions has created markets that didn't even exist before," Langellier says.

One of the best-selling products is a fuel pump conversion for Ford Heavy Duty 6.7L diesel trucks.

"Ford makes a great truck, but the fuel pump has earned a reputation for early and expensive failures. We created a solution for a much more robust fuel pump," Langellier says. "A lot of our growth has been the Ford market. There are about 2.5 million trucks of that generation." The S&S

conversion kit can save the owner \$10,000 or more in repairs if the original fuel pump fails.

S&S sells through a network of 160 dealers worldwide and is a leader in the industry in emissions-compliant certified automotive diesel components. The company has attracted top talent from the automotive original equipment (OE) sector.

"That has been a great success for us—taking that talent out of the OE world and into the smaller, more nimble aftermarket world and developing good, well-validated products," Langellier says.

Another growth area is testing components for other manufacturers. "We have built such a strong, well-rounded team of engineers, a lot of other companies have started to come to us to help them solve problems or develop better products," Langellier says.

Southern Indiana's strong industrial footprint and supporting supply businesses have been instrumental to S&S's strategy. "There's a lot of automotive and even diesel-specific industry within Indiana, and a lot of machining operations and suppliers," Stauffer says.

As a result, Langellier and Stauffer have been able to grow and keep growing while maintaining 100 percent ownership, allowing the company to stay nimble while innovating at the highest levels. ➡

LUKE LANGELLIER & ANDREW STAUFFER

01	SEYMOUR, JACKSON COUNTY	City
02	2012	Founded
03	42	Number of employees
04	SSDIESEL.COM	Web

“IDENTIFYING NEEDS ... AND DEVELOPING THOSE ENGINEERING SOLUTIONS HAS CREATED MARKETS THAT DIDN'T EVEN EXIST BEFORE.”
—LUKE LANGELLIER

S&S Diesel Motorsport has created almost 30 well-paid technical jobs in Jackson County in the last four years.







*members
connecting
with each
other via
Venture Club
of Indiana*

**WE'RE SET UP TO
FOSTER ENGAGEMENT
THAT SUPPORTS—AND
HOPEFULLY GROWS—
THE ENTREPRENEURIAL
ECOSYSTEM
THROUGHOUT INDIANA.**

KATIE BIRGE

THE MORE, THE MERRIER

When it comes to supporting Hoosier startups and established companies, the Venture Club of Indiana aims to showcase and strengthen the state's position as a solid investment.

Founded in 1984, the non-profit organization serves as a networking platform for members to share expertise, trade information and pool resources to drive economic growth. The club currently claims a membership of approximately 150 venture capital and angel investors, startup founders, entrepreneurs, service providers and other wrap-around supporters.

"We're set up to foster engagement that supports—and hopefully grows—the entrepreneurial ecosystem throughout Indiana," says Venture Club Secretary Katie Birge.

Building and promoting a business-friendly climate that's attractive to investors is a critical component of the state's economic success.

"Putting focus on venture capitalists has helped us organize investors across the state," explains Venture Club Board President Aaron Gillum. "In turn, this draws more entrepreneurs, community partners, universities, accelerator programs, incubators, attorneys and others who do business in this space to the club. We realize that investors are the center of gravity for Indiana; growth can't happen without their financial support."

The organization operates under the cooperative guidance of a full-time executive director and a nineteen-member board with input from community partners like the Indiana Economic Development Corporation.

"We collaborate with a lot of investment firms; High Alpha has been a wonderful partner for content and event space," says Venture Club Vice President Chelsea Linder. "We enjoy great relationships with higher-ed institutions in the state and long-term partnerships with our sponsors."

Venture Club members stay connected through a recently updated website, an active LinkedIn page and monthly newsletters, gathering regularly for meet-ups and the annual Innovation Showcase signature event featuring a pitch competition for prize money and valuable exposure.

"It's the only statewide contest where entrepreneurs can present their ideas directly to regional and out-of-state investors," Birge says. "Most of the competitors are nominated by members of our group. In recent years, we've been able to showcase twenty to twenty-five innovative Indiana startups, mostly in the software, life sciences and advanced manufacturing sectors, as well as ag tech and ag science."

Looking ahead, Gillum would like to see the Venture Club membership continue to thrive in Indiana, and extend its footprint beyond state lines.

"We love inviting fellow investors from Ohio, Michigan, Illinois—even the East and West Coasts if they're making a trip to the Midwest—to attend the Innovation Showcase or other Venture Club events as a launch point," he says. "Leveraging their insights, time and money pumps energy into the broader ecosystem to generate even more growth." ➡➡



LEARN MORE AT: [VENTURECLUB.ORG](http://ventureclub.org)



TELL CITY
PRETZELS

WRITTEN BY ASHLEY CAVEDA PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs



pretzels made per minute, thanks to an Indiana Manufacturing Readiness grant.

**THERE'S 160 YEARS
BEHIND THAT NAME.**

BRAD SMITH

A TWIST OF FATE: THE REINCARNATION OF TELL CITY PRETZELS

In 2008, Sandy Smith could no longer find Tell City Pretzels on grocery store shelves. Determined to find her husband Brad's go-to snack, she did some internet sleuthing and discovered the company was shuttered. The timing felt fortuitous as the couple was looking for a new venture, and they loved the notion of resurrecting an old tradition. By 2009, the previous owners accepted their offer, and a legendary business was reborn.

Initially, the Smiths were surprised by how many others loved the brand as much as they did. Brought to Tell City, Indiana in 1858 by a master Swiss baker, the iconic secret recipe was passed down generation to generation. Customers with heartwarming stories and childhood memories featuring the famously crunchy snack became the norm for the Smiths. A relative of the original baker, Casper Gloor, even reached out to thank them for keeping the Tell City Pretzel legacy alive.

A computer programmer who had also worked in real estate, Brad experimented with blending tradition and innovation, adding different flavors to the pretzels, like garlic and honey mustard. After Sandy transitioned to work at Tell City full time in 2022, the Smiths took their biggest risk: making soft pretzels alongside the classic, brand-defining crunchy pretzel.

Brad worked for years to develop his secret soft recipe, one that would eventually secure Tell City Pretzels their first national distributor. Originally, the Smiths considered marketing the soft pretzel under a different name, but their distributors insisted they keep it under the Tell City umbrella: "There's 160 years behind that name," said Brad.

This move continues to pay off. The soft pretzel has catapulted Tell City Pretzels into food service, with their products being sold in restaurants, pubs, and stadiums. "Since launching soft pretzels, we've grown from a six-foot chest freezer, to a 2,000-cubic-foot walk-in freezer with capacity to stage pallets for distributor pickup," shared Sandy.

In the past year, equipment purchased through an Indiana Manufacturing Readiness Grant has allowed them to boost efficiency. "Prior to some of the automation, the work was very hard and very physical," Sandy said. Now, instead of having to handle trays six or seven times, it's down to three. And by automating the lye application process—the substance that gives soft pretzels their satiny brown sheen and tangy taste—they can treat 60 pretzels per minute instead of 24.

In the next five years, the Smiths envision a national presence. "The crunchy pretzels got us to where we are today," said Sandy. "The soft pretzels are going to take us beyond." ➡➡



THE TOY PIT

COLLECTIBLE TOY STORE'S FOOTPRINT GROWS BIGGER THAN GODZILLA'S

MICHAEL SCHOTT

01 **INDIANAPOLIS, MARION COUNTY** City

02 **2009** Founded / Purchased

03 **6** Number of employees

04 **YOURTOYPIT.COM** Web

“IF YOU FIND WHAT YOU LOVE AND STICK WITH IT, EVENTUALLY IT WILL COME TOGETHER. IT’S MORE OF A MARATHON THAN A SPRINT.”
—MICHAEL SCHOTT



As of 2025, The Toy Pit has been in business for 16 years total, 11 of those years were in Indianapolis.

WRITTEN BY EMILY WORRELL PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jay Goldz

When cruising through the intersection of College Avenue and 38th Street in Indianapolis, your eye will undoubtedly be drawn to a building facade covered in a color-crazed mural painted by Indy artist Kwazar Martin featuring characters and pop culture icons ranging from Reggie Miller doing his famed “choke” pantomime, to singer Chappell Roan, to manga character Sailor Moon.

Welcome to The Toy Pit.

Step inside and you’ll find neatly arranged cases of collectibles and a staff ready to help you buy, sell or trade. The Toy Pit is the brainchild of Michael Schott, who has been dealing toys and memorabilia for over 20 years. “I have a young uncle who I would hang around a lot, and he was always into video games, pop culture, comic books and action figures. He kind of got me into all that,” Schott says. “Then when eBay came out, he was into buying and selling and trading. He got me into it as well, and then it became a side income.”

When the recession hit, Schott started viewing this commerce as a career move. He quickly outgrew his basement and bought a small shop. From there, The Toy Pit grew into an establishment in Fort Wayne in 2009 before Schott moved north in 2014. It’s now Indianapolis’ largest toy store, at 13,000 sq. ft.

While his personal collection ranges from Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles to Transformers, Schott sells vintage and modern action figures,

as well as vinyl records, T-shirts and video games from Star Wars to Dragon Ball at his store. He credits his team with helping him develop such a broad range of stock.

“You really have to have people who know their stuff,” Schott says. “They have to know or be taught how to give fair values on items that are brought in, for example. I’ve had a lot of good people along the way that have helped The Toy Pit get to where it is now. I have to give a lot of credit to my team, my managers Marcc Church and Stockton Repischak in particular.”

Next steps for The Toy Pit include opening a snack shop in a building across the street, which will sell exotic/imported snacks for hungry shoppers.

Schott advises young entrepreneurs to find something they’re passionate about and pursue it. “Sometimes things take time, but if you find what you love and stick with it, eventually it’ll come together,” he says. “It’s more of a marathon than a sprint.” ➡

WHOLEHEART COMMUNICATIONS

~24

UNIQUE B2B
CUSTOMERS SERVED
AT A TIME

A BUSINESS WITH HEART

WRITTEN BY AMY LYNCH PHOTOGRAPHED BY Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs

For Christy Ragle, helping other small companies succeed is more than just a professional goal. It's a calling, and one she embraces whole-heartedly.

While growing up in Battle Creek, Michigan, Ragle witnessed the behind-the-scenes work and dedication her parents put into building her dad's excavation company, and saw the impacts his projects generated for their local community. Inspired to help others in the same way, she founded WholeHeart Communications in late 2014, offering a wide range of consultative services from marketing strategy, social media management and content creation to short-form videos and public relations. The company serves small businesses and non-profit organizations that may not have the budget to hire a big advertising agency.

First and foremost, Ragle works on uncovering the unique stories each of her customers has to tell.

"One of our favorite things is getting the word out about successes our clients have achieved and how they've improved people's lives," she said. "We basically act as an in-house marketing department for them. When we first started out, we had a lot of clients who were still advertising in the Yellow Pages. It's been fun to help them transition into digital platforms."

In a strategic move to be closer to the heart of the community it serves, WholeHeart moved into an office space called The Hub in downtown New Castle in 2022. The scope of services Ragle and her team provide and the variety of

customers they work with mean no two days are ever the same.

"Every business is different, so there's no one-size-fits-all plan," she described. "However, things we learn from one client can often be tailored to benefit other clients in completely different industries."

The East Central Indiana Small Business Development Center has been much more than just a helpful resource for Ragle. The organization was actually her first client.

"They've been our biggest support from the beginning and encouraged me to expand my services to other customers," she recalled. "Many of our clients now come through our membership in Business Networking International; we're also on LinkedIn and we stay really connected to the New Castle Henry County Economic Development Corporation and our local chamber of commerce."

Persevering through several challenging inflection points, Ragle still loves the work she does and feels assured she's exactly where she's meant to be.

"To me, being an entrepreneur means never being satisfied with the way things are and always looking for opportunities to level up," she said. "You have to constantly keep learning. And find your niche. Figure out what you can do better than anyone else, and then just knock it out of the park." ➡

CHRISTY RAGLE

01 DEMOTTE, JASPER COUNTY City

02 2014 Founded

03 3 Number of employees

04 WWW.WHOLEHEART.BIZ Web

“EVERY BUSINESS IS DIFFERENT, SO THERE'S NO ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL PLAN,” —CHRISTY RAGLE

Services provided include social media management, content creation, short-form videos, public relations and more.



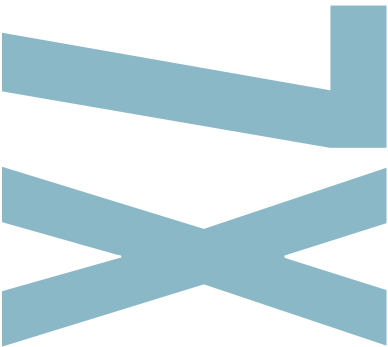
**WHERE ARE
THEY NOW?**





ARCTICRX

WRITTEN BY EMILY WORRELL PHOTOGRAPHY BY Marc Lebryk



longer; the time that ArcticRx keeps food and medicine cold compared to what's been made before.

WE'RE VERY PROUD ARCTICRX IS AN INDIANA PRODUCT GOING GLOBAL TO MAKE CHANGE FOR GOOD.

SHANE BIVENS

SAVING THE WORLD, THE SUPER CHILL WAY

Since their company ArcticRx was profiled in the debut Entrepreneurship Indiana Yearbook three years ago, Co-Founders Shane Bivens and Stuart Lowry have kept their eye on the prize: gaining a global market for their cold transport and storage solutions.

It was the need to keep COVID-19 vaccines cold during shipment that upped the ante on their invention of a unit without batteries or electricity that keeps food and medicine cold about seven times longer than anything else on the market. No small feat, when the World Health Organization estimates that up to 50% of all vaccines are lost from spoilage.

"I think one of the superpowers we both have is we don't think anything is impossible," Lowry says. "We ask, 'how do you form a team to attack something that's never been done before?,' which is exactly what we did with ArcticRx."

The company is now based out of the IoT (Internet of Things) lab in Fishers and has developed a final design engineered and manufactured entirely in the U.S. The team is now "in the eye of the hurricane" with first adopters and pilot tests.

Reflecting over the past three years, Lowry says: "There's a lot we've done that seemed incremental at the time, but when you put it all together, it's a massive leap forward."

"Everyone's seen the data," Bivens says. "And they can touch our solution and they can see it actually functioning. But now comes the question, 'does it work with my product?'" In our pilots, we're making this as clear to our clients with real-life scenarios as the data does on paper."

ArcticRx started in pharma, but Bivens and Lowry have aspirations to tackle food transport and safety. "Our goal is to shape a lot of products around food and health equity issues around the world, and also help with research and everything else that goes into improving lives," Bivens says.

As far as advice for up-and-coming entrepreneurs, Bivens and Lowry recommended finding a co-founder, assembling a strong team, and staying energized.

"If you have that entrepreneurial spirit and approach and you're really passionate, then no one's going to stop you," Lowry says. "You're the only one who can stop you."

At the time of this interview, the first ArcticRx pods were just making their way from the Fishers lab into the hands of potential global partners. "Momentum is building," Bivens says. "We're very proud ArcticRx is an Indiana product going global to make change for good. ➡➡"





**HIVIZ CUSTOM
OUTFITTER, LLC DBA
COSA WOVE™ WORKWEAR**

WRITTEN BY EMILY WORRELL PHOTOGRAPHY BY Jay Goldz



Cosawove has a uniform program, corporate apparel program and a travelling work-wear/boot store



In 2025, Cosawove is set to move more products through than in all of its first three years.

COSAWOVE WORKWEAR™ PROVIDES SAFE WORKWEAR TO FIT ANY BODY

Lisa Hutson has always been crafty and creative, sewing and decorating garments while raising her five kids. It wasn't until after beating breast cancer that she decided to turn her skills into a business.

Hiviz Custom Outfitter, LLC (DBA Cosawove Workwear), creates work clothes that are specifically made for a woman's body, rather than just being a smaller version of men's work clothes. Cosawove also sells men's work clothes, as well as PPE and work shoes for all.

"With one contract we had, there was a woman that had never been able to wear what the rest of her team was wearing. We ensured that the clothes were specially made for her and she got to be a part of the team for the first time ever," Hutson says. "It's important to us that everybody gets to feel that sense of belonging."

Cosawove also focuses on size inclusivity, specially making clothes for individuals who are typically too small or too large to fit company clothes...that includes pregnant women.

Since being featured in the 2023 Entrepreneurship Indiana Yearbook, Cosawove has moved from Batesville to Sunman and landed contracts with Fortune 500 clients Amazon and Nutrien Ag Solutions.

"We want to continue to build those relationships, and continue to grow," Hutson says. "We want to become that reliable source for large corporations where they know that they can depend on us, not just our products, but on our personalized service of ensuring the quality of embroidery and printing is premium."

Another improvement Cosawove has made since their last interview is in more clearly explaining their mission, so that potential clients understand that good workwear is about fit and safety, not style for

style's sake. "Some women have been told, 'this isn't a fashion show,'" Hutson says. "It has nothing to do with that. It's that when you have sleeves hanging down over your hands, and you're stepping on your pants, that's not safe workwear."

Cosawove is all about "comfort and safety woven together"—hence their name.

Although Hutson admits she's had some difficulties and learning opportunities along the way, she and Cosawove are ramping up based on the solid foundation they've built: "I think that between now and the end of the year, we will move more products through than we have the entire three years we've been open." ➡➡

IT'S IMPORTANT TO US THAT EVERYBODY GETS TO FEEL THAT SENSE OF BELONGING.

LISA HUTSON



JANUS MOTORCYCLES

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHY BY Adam Raschka



annual growth on average.

JANUS MOTORCYCLES MAKES RETRO LOOK COOL AGAIN

Richard Worsham waxes poetic when reflecting on the appeal of his company, Goshen-based Janus Motorcycles.

“Riders may say it in different words, but they will all talk about the sensation of freedom, independence, the wind in your hair,” Worsham said. “The whole point of the motorcycle is you want to smell that smell and feel the feel.”

The Janus thrill has only grown since being profiled in the 2023 Entrepreneurship Indiana Yearbook. Their design and manufacture of distinctive, handcrafted bikes with steampunk vibes is flourishing; employee count has surged from 18 two years ago, to 29 today.

Worsham and his team continue to flip the script on the big-noise engines of Harley Davidsons, Indians or Victory bikes in favor of bespoke charm. Since its founding in 2011, the company has enjoyed year-over-year growth between 10 and 15 percent, all while U.S. motorcycle sales dipped 4.6 percent in 2024, and year-to-date sales in March 2025 were down 10.6 percent, according to motorcyclesdata.com.

“This year, we’re seeing really good sales, and we keep growing,” he said. “We have a lot of room for growth.”

Worsham, a Virginia native and Notre Dame grad with an eye for design, launched Janus with a business partner. Now, Janus sources the majority of his motorcycle parts from Northeast Indiana companies and, in 10 years, has grown from producing 20 units a year to 350.

Janus began by making six small, 50 cc, two-stroke motorcycles before developing the Halcyon 250, “the product that defines us,” Worsham said. “It looks very old-fashioned.” Janus’ boutique models include electric and kick starters, and some have leather saddlebags. All in all, they look like they’ve emerged from a mid-20th century movie.

Customers can choose from a wide range of options to personalize their handmade motorcycles, said Worsham. The company has evolved to offer three model families—the Halcyon, the Gryffin and Phoenix—with the first two models coming in both 250cc and 450cc engines. More models may come in the future, Worsham said.

The base prices range from \$7,000 to \$13,000 per unit.

Janus does lots of content marketing, with tons of YouTube videos on everything from how to change a motorcycle’s oil to how the fenders are made, and they’re on the first page of Google searches for “American motorcycle manufacturers.”

Even comedian and former late night host Jay Leno rode a Janus Motorcycle in his series, “Jay Leno’s Garage,” in 2020.

“What we’re trying to say is motorcycles aren’t just for bikers,” Worsham said. “You can have fun and be classy while carving or cruising the open road.” ➡➡

WHAT WE’RE TRYING TO SAY IS MOTORCYCLES AREN’T JUST FOR BIKERS. YOU CAN HAVE FUN AND BE CLASSY WHILE CARVING OR CRUISING THE OPEN ROAD.

RICHARD WORSHAM



20%

AVERAGE
ANNUAL
GROWTH



LEGACY
COURTS



LEGACY
SPORTS
PARK

PLAY LIKE A PRO
LAFAYETTE, IN

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Jennifer Wilson-Bibbs*

BOOK



*athletes a year
come to Legacy
Sports Park.*

WHEN YOU TRY TO DO
THE RIGHT THINGS
AND PROVIDE A GREAT
PRODUCT, PEOPLE KEEP
COMING BACK.

DONTE WILBURN

PURPOSE-DRIVEN SPORTS PARK SCORES BIG WITH COMMUNITY

When Donte Wilburn was first featured in the 2022 Yearbook, his three businesses—Premier Auto Detailing, Legacy Sports Club and Legacy Courts—were drawing big attention because of their impacts on the community.

Since then, the Lafayette entrepreneur and his partners have combined their two sports businesses into the Legacy Sports Park, which welcomes hundreds of thousands of athletes a year. Wilburn said the businesses have been so successful because they are purpose-driven.

“We focus on serving kids, families and the community,” he said. “When you try to do the right things and provide a great product, people keep coming back.”

Until 2023, Wilburn ran Legacy Courts and Legacy Sports Club separately. He combined them that year. Today, the 29-acre site welcomes about 300,000 athletes annually to its indoor courts for basketball and volleyball, the outdoor fields for soccer, and facilities for cheer, football, softball and baseball (and soon, agility training).

Legacy Sports Park has averaged 20% growth annually, but Wilburn says that increase represents more than revenue. It reflects more athletes competing, more families connecting, and more opportunities for kids to thrive.

“The more people we serve, the bigger the impact,” he says. “Now the whole community sees and recognizes us as one destination in the sports arena with some really cool things for these kids,” Wilburn says.

Case in point: college coaches from various universities offered more than 50 scholarships to athletes who demonstrated their skills at the sports complex, Wilburn says.

“We’re helping kids go to college for no charge, because if they play the sport well, and now they can go to college, it changes the trajectories of their lives when they come out of college debt-free because of the investments we put into them as young kids growing up here,” he says.

In 2021, when Wilburn and his partners approached banks for funding to start his first sports businesses, he predicted Legacy Courts would double in revenue after one year. Those bankers told him to be more conservative.

Wilburn obliged by lowering his revenue projections by 30%, only to prove that the sports businesses indeed doubled their revenue from 2021 to 2022.

There’s more to come in the Sports Park vision, Wilburn said, including \$1 million in facility improvements, and additional courts and fields for baseball, softball and football to meet demand.

Wilburn reflects on the casual miracle of entrepreneurship: “It’s just funny how you can just cast a vision and you go after the vision slowly, steadily...and then it comes to pass.” ➡





MOM WATER

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL GONZALEZ PHOTOGRAPHY BY Alex Kumar

MOM WATER



cases sold annually

WE'RE VERY BLESSED
AND FEEL GOOD ABOUT
WHERE WE'RE AT, BUT
WE STILL HAVE A LOT
OF GROWTH LEFT.

BRYCE MORRISON

MOM WATER SALES EXPLODE AS FOUNDERS STAY GROUNDED

Jill and Bryce Morrison had big plans for their hot new product, Mom Water, when they were profiled in the Entrepreneurship Indiana 2022 Yearbook. And they succeeded.

Jill Morrison created Mom Water, a vodka- and fruit-infused water drink, which they later began selling as a spirit water. It was an alternative to carbonated, sugary drinks, Jill says.

"For me, it's clean and simple," she says. "Water, vodka, a little bit of flavor. That's where I like to land."

They wanted to sell about 10,000 cases of their drink by the end of 2021. They sold 38,000 that year, and they're now up to moving one million cases annually.

Within five years, they expect to sell up to five million cases a year, Bryce says.

Three years ago, the company sold Mom Water in two states. Now, they're selling in forty states, and they've grown their team from thirteen employees in 2022 to forty-one workers.

Since launching the company, Jill and Bryce Morrison have quit their day jobs to promote Mom Water. In 2023, they promoted Bryce's sister, Kara Woolsey, to CEO of Mom Water, while Jill remains the Chief Mom Officer, and Bryce holds the title of Chief Dad Officer.

Staying true to who they were back then has been a big part of their success, Bryce says. In the early days, they sold Mom Water at promotional events and bars, especially those near college campuses.

While most big spirits brands get endorsements from big stars, the Morrisons like to put themselves out there with their product. They've stayed true to their Hoosier roots, Bryce says.

"The reception we get is kind of crazy," he says. "And, I think it's because we try to put authenticity in our product and who we

are. We're unabashedly who we are. We're not corporate people. We're Hoosiers, and we're family-owned and operated."

Alcohol sales nationwide continue to drop, but Mom Water continues to grow, Bryce says.

"The alcohol people are freaking out over the dip, and the only category that's growing is this little one we're in," he says.

Mom Water has even birthed another product: Dad Water. It's a tequila-infused drink, much like Mom Water.

"There's something fun when talking about Moms and Dads," Bryce says. "It can be kind of fun to have these brands playing off each other. We're a mom and dad, and we're kind of quirky in our own ways, so we are excited to develop that banter into these brands. We're very blessed and feel good about where we're at, but we still have a lot of growth left." ➡➡



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AND **EVERYTHING IN**
BETWEEN, ConnectIND
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“

Continue writing
Indiana’s success story—
one innovator at a time,”

A NOTE FROM THE SECRETARY OF COMMERCE



DEAR READERS,

I’m honored to close out the 2025 edition of the Entrepreneurship Indiana yearbook. This yearbook shines a spotlight on the innovators, risk-takers, and dreamers who drive our state forward. From Fort Wayne’s tech startups to Terre Haute’s Main Street pioneers, these stories remind us that entrepreneurship is woven into Indiana’s DNA.

After studying engineering at the University of Louisville, I spent much of my life starting, growing, and exiting businesses. One career highlight I would share is building a company from ground break until it was indexed on the NASDAQ as a Top 50 technology business. Paired with my entrepreneurial journey, I proudly served as Commissioner of the Indiana Department of Workforce Development, where I focused on ensuring Hoosiers could pursue gainful employment and entrepreneurs were able to access top-notch talent.

When I joined the State Commerce Department, I vowed to champion every entrepreneur in Indiana with the resources, training, and networks they deserve.

Entrepreneurship is more than an economic engine—it’s a promise of resilience. In every corner of Indiana, small businesses adapt to global challenges, embrace new technologies, and reinvest in local talent. As you turn these pages, you’ll meet founders who are tackling everything from digital health solutions to ensuring their family manufacturing business thrives in coming decades, proving that our spirit of innovation remains boundless.

I hope this yearbook inspires you to take bold steps, support your neighbors, and maybe even start your own journey. Together, we’ll continue writing Indiana’s success story—one innovator at a time.

Sincerely,

David J. Adams

Indiana Secretary of Commerce



**NOMINATE AN ENTREPRENEUR
FOR NEXT YEAR'S YEARBOOK**