

GREATER • FORT WAYNE  
**Business Weekly**



**INNOVATION**  
**2021 AWARDS™**

A SUPPLEMENT OF GREATER • FORT WAYNE  
**Business Weekly**

*RECOGNIZING THOSE WHO ARE ADVANCING*  
**BUSINESSES, PRODUCTS, & SERVICES**  
*IN THE GREATER FORT WAYNE AREA*



Vera Bradley



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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



# Problem-solvers are seen in all industries

Many businesses in Northeast Indiana not only survived but thrived during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We're happy to bring back the Innovation Awards to honor those who found new and creative ways of doing business over the last year. From creating new products and services to incorporating environmental and sustainable designs, the 2021 winners have shown their innovative spirit.

We received nominations in the categories of Innovator of the Year and Start-Up Innovator of the Year as well as Innovation in Banking & Finance, Construction & Engineering, Education, Food & Agriculture, Health Care & Fitness, Law, Real Estate and Retail. From there, our staff chose two of what we deemed were the most deserving individuals and companies and let the people decide, through an online poll, who would take the winner and



LISA ESQUIVEL LONG

semifinalist honors.

I hope you enjoy reading about the innovative ways that companies are finding success during a difficult time. Sarah Keltsch, owner of The Monogram Shoppe, took the idea of window shopping literally. Central Noble Community Schools teacher Kari Parker adopted a new wardrobe to keep students engaged during virtual learning. AccuTemp Products has cut down on cooking time by up to 75% with its new product for the food industry. Michelle Charles of Parkview Health worked with computer modeling to streamline the process at the health group's mass COVID-19 vaccination center.

The Innovation Awards will be presented at a luncheon event at 11 a.m. June 25 at Ceruti's Catering, 6601 Innovation Blvd., Fort Wayne.

The presenting sponsor for the 2021 Innovation Awards is Vera Bradley.

**ABOUT GREATER FORT WAYNE BUSINESS WEEKLY**

Greater Fort Wayne Business Weekly is one of only two Indiana business

journals and covers the 12-county region surrounding Fort Wayne in Indiana along with four counties across the Ohio border and is a publication of KPC Media Group Inc. with editorial and business offices in Kendallville, Auburn, Angola, Columbia City and Fort Wayne. It also hosts monthly webinars on timely topics, which are free to subscribers.

Nominations are open at [www.kpcev-entbuzz.com](http://www.kpcev-entbuzz.com) for several other of our upcoming events:

- 2021 Education Awards
- 2021 Influential Women Awards
- 2021 Manufacturers' Awards
- 2022 Forty Under 40 Awards
- 2022 Innovation Awards

KPC Media Group is family-owned and was founded in 1911. Along with the Greater Fort Wayne Business Weekly, it publishes three daily newspapers, and the IN Fort Wayne Community Newspapers along with phonebooks and real estate guides in Northeast Indiana. The company also has commercial printing and direct-mail divisions and offers expanded digital services through Keyflow Creative.

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**INNOVATOR OF THE YEAR WINNER**  
**MIKE WERLING, MIKE WERLING FARMS**



# Mike Werling promotes benefits of farming conservation practices

**BY SHERYL PRENTICE**  
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Fifth-generation farmer Mike Werling's disdain for soil erosion drives his lifelong quest to preserve and improve the soil on his farm through innovative conservation practices.

His soil conservation work on his own farm and as a technical specialist and agronomist for the Allen County Soil & Water Conservation District has earned him a nomination for Innovator of the Year.

Werling said the "allowable" loss of soil is a thickness of two dimes per acre.

"The thickness of one dime is a loss of 5 tons per acre," he said. "My 'allowable' loss is zero."

Werling describes himself as an "early adopter" of no-till farming in the early 1980s, well before it was a popular trend in the 1990s.

"We didn't know how to do it back then," he said.

Werling then explored the use of cover crops to prevent soil erosion and add organic material to the soil to improve its health.

"Regenerative agriculture, building the health of the soil, is my focus now," he said.

Werling is an advocate of the 4 R's of nutrient stewardship, a science-based approach to applying the right source

of fertilizer, at the right rate, at the right time, and in the right place.

Among the benefits of these conservation practices are improved soil health, increased yields, less use of pesticides and other inputs, and reduced soil erosion. On a recent day, Werling was operating a roller-crimper in corn and soybeans fields planted with rye as a cover crop. The crimped rye makes a mulch-like mat on the soil surface that prevents weeds and adds organic material to the soil.

Werling started his affiliation with the SECD by serving on several committees. He then assisted with maintenance and transport of the SECD's equipment. As a project manager, he began working in outreach to underserved and small farmers and growers, including minorities, women and the Amish.

His position as a technical specialist and agronomist is funded by a grant and permits him to take on the important role of sharing his knowledge.

"My role is to be a mentor. We talk one-on-one on how to do it," Werling said.

Werling recently had the opportunity to share his knowledge nationally. He and SWCD director Greg Lake were presenters at the virtual conference of the National Association of Conservation Districts in the spring.

"It's farmer-to-farmer advocacy," Werling said.



Mike Werling stands in his field, planted with a cover crop to enrich the soil and prevent erosion.

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INNOVATION IN EDUCATION WINNER  
JASON BLUME, TRINE INNOVATION 1



# Ti1 director helps Trine students develop life-changing projects

BY MIKE MARTURELLO  
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ANGOLA — As executive director of Trine innovation 1, Jason Blume's world is ever changing, unlike the days when he was working in industry.

Blume is a product of Tri-State University — now Trine University — having graduated with his bachelor's degree in 2004 and a master's from Trine in 2017.



Blume

“Coming from a manufacturing background prior to my career at Trine, I enjoy working with the wide variety of partners I now get to interact with. I am amazed and honored

to get to learn about all of the interesting and diverse processes, products and industries that call our region home. Earlier in my career, I had a number of opportunities that could have led me to other states, but I truly believe northern Indiana has great opportunities,” Blume said.

In his position, Blume works to connect business, industry and the community with the students, expertise and resources of Trine University.

Throughout not only the region, but the world, projects that came from Trine innovation 1 are making an impact.

Blume's accomplishments at innovation 1 have included directing swim reaction lights, now used to start swim meets around the world, from concept to commercialization, and coordinating student projects that have included a redesigned toboggan for the run at Pokagon State Park.

The swim reaction lights now are used in starting races all over, enabling people with limited or no hearing to compete on a level field. The redesigned toboggan is still in development.

“The Pokagon sled redesign is still being refined and remains an active project partnership with Pokagon. Some projects have lengthier implementation timelines than others. This project has to be vetted for safety and longevity of use, which is completely understandable given the potential number of visitors to the park that this could encounter,” Blume said.

No matter how a project turns out



CONTRIBUTED

Trine University mascot Storm uses a balloon to show the effect of static electricity on the hair of Julie Frame, a mechanical engineering student at Trine, during a STEM with Storm video on electrical engineering. At left, Jason Blume, executive director of Trine innovation 1, explains how physical energy is used to create electrical energy.

— they can't all be home runs — it is about giving students the opportunity to gain real-world experience in working on projects from concept to reality.

“A key to all of our projects is the experiential learning outcomes that they have for Trine students; some projects may get immediate implementation, while others may need further refinement and validation. No matter what

happens, our students learn a great deal as a result of real-world project experience,” Blume said. “This advances the goals of our industry partners while providing experience for Trine students, which aids in developing a more career-ready graduate.”

The work has resulted in many projects that have brought great experiences for students and some that have been life-changing for the recipients.

“From a most rewarding project standpoint, Trine innovation 1 has worked on several projects that have had individual life impact. For example, developing prosthetics devices for a young child with Helping Hands in Warsaw, designing a prosthetic arm so that a veteran could shoot archery and developing a software app so a stroke survivor could more easily communicate with his family,” Blume said.

Most recently, earlier this spring, Blume was named to the Elevate Northeast Indiana board, quite a personal accomplishment but one he says is because of the work being done at the university.

“I think that it is a testament to what Trine is doing in our region and how we play an integral part in our region's trajectory. Having involvement in regional entrepreneurial growth and investment for the future allows Trine to help guide how our region will evolve and expand,” he said.

He also coordinates the university's Employment Resource Center and STEM outreach efforts to area school corporations. Elementary school

children throughout northeast Indiana are probably familiar with Blume through the popular STEM with Storm program, which brings STEM lessons into schools utilizing Trine's mascot, Storm, a white tiger.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Trine had to pivot with its STEM with Storm program, creating virtual lessons.

Trine Innovation 1 collaborated with several departments on campus to create a virtual STEM with Storm five-installment video series. The videos have accumulated nearly 850 views on YouTube and from our post-program survey the program was leveraged by over 55 K-5 educators, impacting 3,592 K-5 students.

Necessity being the mother of invention — or in Trine's case, innovation — more work is being done to make sure Storm gets in classrooms.

“Our team is currently working to create a hybrid in-person program with accompanying videos and teacher guides aligning with state standards for multiple grade levels to be rolled out during next school year,” Blume said.

In addition to Elevate Northeast Indiana, Blume serves on the board of the Parkview Community Foundation. Outside of work, he is active with the Boy Scouts of America, serving on the board of directors for the Anthony Wayne Area Council, and the Avilla Elementary School Parent Teacher Organization.

He received the university's Distinguished Service Young Alumnus Award in 2007.

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**START-UP INNOVATOR OF THE YEAR WINNER  
BRETT BLOOM, DIRT WAIN LLC**



# Environmental-conscious artist creates community composting service



**BY SUE CARPENTER**  
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Brett Bloom, a trained artist with an eye on the environment, began Dirt Wain LLC in 2019.

The company is dedicated to community-scale composting gathering food scraps and turning them into soil. Aply named, a wain is a large open farm wagon.

“Building community and giving folks a strong sense that they are a part of something important is at the core of Dirt Wain’s mission,” Bloom said.

Communities around Fort Wayne need composting solutions that fit their specific needs. Dirt Wain provides its services to households, condo-associations, unique neighborhood organizations and businesses of various sizes, he added.

Keeping food scraps out of landfills is critical as it saves space, reclaims valuable nutrients, and helps reduce methane emissions, a key driver in the climate crisis. Dirt Wain offers household pickup subscriptions for food scraps and yard waste picked up weekly. They now have three drop-off sites in Fort Wayne, and one in Columbia City.

Bloom has a decades-long commitment to environmental problem-solving. He has formal training as an artist (Bachelor of Arts, Indiana University, Bloomington, 1993; Master of Fine Arts, University of Chicago, 1996).

Bloom considers himself an artist in residence at his own business, by only taking a creative approach to running his business and

solving various composting problems and needs, but by dedication to contributing to the visual culture of Fort Wayne to provide the unique sense of place that is increasingly important as the city revives economically and culturally.

Based on rough estimates from the last U.S. Census, an estimated 39,000 tons of food scraps from households are going into the landfill. This has a carbon equivalency of 68,000 car emissions.

“Our dent is close to 125 tons since we started,” Bloom said.

Dirt Wain has built a shed at Salomon Farm Park out of buckets that are no longer food grade and reclaimed wooden pallets.

“The shed is for dropping off food scraps for our subscribers. It has helped generate interest and many conversations about composting,” he added.

“We are still constructing a Compost & Prairie demonstration garden to find multiple ways to make the connections between reclaiming nutrients from your kitchen to repairing and rewilding entire Indiana landscapes. The garden will be open to the public for workshops later this summer,” he added.

“Composting readily lends itself to the cultural approach we take. We are serious about building community around composting and doing our part to heal Fort Wayne. Using art and sculptural approaches to making small buildings has created interest and excitement about what we do and we will continue with new projects in the coming months,” Bloom said.

**Brett Bloom began Dirt Wain LLC in 2019 with an eye on cleaning up the environment.**

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**INNOVATION IN HEALTH CARE & FITNESS WINNER**  
**MICHELLE CHARLES, PARKVIEW HEALTH**



# Computer model helped COVID-19 vaccination process

**BY LISA ESQUIVEL LONG**  
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There's nothing like a pandemic to put your business to the test.



**Charles**

Luckily, Parkview Health was up to the challenge.

"We had about a month to get this up and running," Michelle Charles said of Parkview Health's mass vaccination clinic at Parkview Mirro Center for Research & Innovation.

The State of Indiana chose Parkview Health among the first five sites in November 2020 to receive the initial vaccines. It had the ultracold storage needed to keep the Pfizer vaccine at the required minus 60 to minus 80 degree Celsius temperature.

As the vaccine became available, Parkview pulled together 20 different teams.

"Within 1½ weeks we did our first simulation," Charles, Parkview's vice president of informatics-CNIO and leader of the efforts, said.

Key to the process was computer modeling that used real-time data to show how to get people checked in, vaccinated

and observed afterward in an efficient amount of time.

"Our goal was 1,000 shots a day," Charles said.

They got the time between one patient coming in and one leaving to 28.8 seconds.

Its efforts to create a safe, efficient process to get thousands of people vaccinated earned Parkview Health's COVID-19 vaccination team the Innovation in Health Care & Fitness award.

"The value stream map is a visual representation of the process, which was built using existing flu vaccine clinic standard work documents, door screening procedures for COVID-19, hospital registration requirements, and COVID-19 vaccination guidelines from the Indiana State Department of Health," according to the nomination form.

The simulation days were rehearsals with over 20 volunteers serving as mock patients to collect task and walk times between service points. At the end of three days of simulation, the vaccination team had created nine work roles with process times for each area and a functional physical setup.

The simulator allowed vaccination clinic managers to predict how many patients would be coming and how much staff and supplies were needed.



CONTRIBUTED

**Terrence Gant, environmental services technician, was one of the first six health care workers in Indiana to receive the COVID-19 vaccine on Dec. 14, 2020, at the Parkview Mirro Center for Research & Innovation's vaccine clinic.**

By April, over 1,400 vaccinations a day were being given at Mirro, Charles said.

"We created a playbook" and shared the process with other groups.

"I believe in sharing the wealth," Charles said.

Charles spent the first 20 of her 32 years in nursing in recovery for open-heart patients before getting into nursing

informatics, a new position at Parkview Health that brought her to Fort Wayne two years ago. It involves taking the available technology and making sure it makes sense to the nursing staff.

The focus now in Allen County is not on mass vaccination sites but pop-up clinics to reach people who may have transportation, time or language barriers.

**INNOVATION IN REAL ESTATE WINNER**  
**START-UP INNOVATOR OF THE YEAR, SEMIFINALIST**  
**MANILAL CHAUDHARI, SUNRISE APARTMENTS**



# Apartment development designed to fill need in Auburn

**BY KATHRYN BASSETT**  
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AUBURN — Manilal Chaudhari moved to Auburn in 1997 to open his first business, Sunrise Donuts.

"For many years, there was a lack of available apartments for all-aged people in Auburn," said Rachna Chaudhari, who nominated him for the startup innovator of the year award.

"At that time, the availability of apartments was very limited. In addition, many landlords discriminated against minority rental applicants. Manilal Chaudhari had a vision to improve Auburn for all future residents."

In June of 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Sunrise Apartments opened. The 16 duplex units are located directly across from Parkview DeKalb Hospital and are for tenants of all ages. It is home to a multitude of diverse individuals of all ages, Rachna Chaudhari said in her nomination.

Sunrise Apartments bills its facilities as being within walking distance to downtown, shopping and churches. All duplexes are two-bedroom, one-bathroom, 950 square feet with a 300-square-foot garage. All amenities — microwave, stove, dishwasher, refrigerator, washer and dryer — are included. The units have an outdoor patio and fence for maximum privacy.

"Mr. Chaudhari witnessed a problem in Auburn and created a solution by building accessible and affordable apartments in a prime location with all amenities included. Although many real estate companies choose to renovate old houses and turn them into rental houses, this does not solve the housing issue in a creative way. It actually takes away a citizen's opportunity to own a home in Auburn by giving them less options to choose from when buying a home. Sunrise Apartments does not take anything away. The new apartments simply add to the number of options available to those looking to rent in Auburn," Rachna Chaudhari said.



KATHRYN BASSETT

**Manilal Chaudhari found a lack of available apartments for all-aged people in Auburn and created a solution by building accessible and affordable apartments in a prime location with all amenities included.**

INNOVATION IN RETAIL WINNER  
SARA KELTSCH, THE MONOGRAM SHOPPE



# Monogram Shoppe found window-shopping alternative during COVID-19

Owner Sarah Keltsch learned to get the word out beyond the brick-and-mortar storefront.

BY CINDY LARSON  
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"I never thought at 64 I would be reinventing myself," said Sarah Keltsch, owner of The Monogram Shoppe in Fort Wayne's Covington Plaza.

But that's just what she had to do, and fast, when the pandemic shut down her business and many others mid-March 2020. She had just returned from a trip and walked into the store and never left, except to sleep. She was there every day.

"I had a little breakdown one day," she said.

But tears weren't going to keep The Monogram Shoppe in business. She needed to devise a strategy to get products out in front of her customers' faces. She also needed to keep those personal relationships that she'd developed over 41 years in business.

Among the ideas Keltsch came up with was selecting certain items to be placed in the front window of the store, along with a number and a price. Customers could drive up, decide what they wanted, and text or email their order, which could be picked up in front of the store or delivered to their home.

Social media became Keltsch's friend. She began doing Facebook Live shows at 7:30 p.m. Thursdays. So far she has done more than 50 shows. "It



Sarah Keltsch used social media to keep her business, The Monogram Shoppe, going during the worst of the pandemic.

has been very successful," she said.

She's had nearly 400 people watching the ½-hour show on one night.

Keltsch also is on WPTA-21's "INSight" TV show regularly to showcase new products. That has resulted in

a lot of new customers.

In fact the pandemic — and the changes she made because of it — have opened up new possibilities for new customers outside the Fort Wayne area as people learn about the shop via social media. "The pandemic has changed The Monogram Shoppe from a brick-and-mortar shop to one that has become a nationwide shop with lots of followers due to social media," she said.

Keltsch also gives credit to Paycheck Protection Program loans and small-business loans for what they did for businesses such as hers. "Those pretty much helped save us," she said.

"It's been a long journey." The walk-in store was closed March 19, 2020, and reopened mid-May.

She feels blessed to still have her business. She credits "wonderful friends and wonderful family and wonderful customers" for helping her survive. She also gives thanks to God for seeing her through.



LISA ESQUIVEL LONG

The Monogram Shoppe owner Sarah Keltsch placed items in the front window of her store for people to order by phone or text, one of the ways she learned to cope during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## The Monogram Shoppe

**WHO:** The Monogram Shoppe  
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**CONTACT:** 260-436-3138  
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## INNOVATION IN LAW WINNER INDIANA LEGAL SERVICES STAFF



# Pandemic creates initiative to help low-income people avoid eviction

BY KAYLA BRENNAN  
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When it comes to supporting low-income people, Indiana Legal Services, a nonprofit law firm located at 110 W. Berry St. in Fort Wayne, prides itself on helping in any way possible, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to staff attorney and Director of the Tenant Assistance Legal Clinic Andrew Thomas, when people lost their jobs at the beginning of the pandemic and were facing eviction, Indiana Legal Services helped.

“We focus on providing access to justice to low-income Hoosiers,” Thomas said. “We are working with issues where people are in crisis such as evictions or trying to get driving privileges or expungements or protection from abuse of a spouse or boyfriend. So we provide services in civil law for folks who can’t afford it.”

Last year, the Tenant Assistance Legal Clinic was created to help people avoid eviction because of the pandemic. Approximately 300 clients have been served so far, Thomas said.

This initiative was always in mind, but it was created quickly early last year because of the need. Indiana Legal Services partnered with the City of Fort Wayne, Metro and various nonprofits such as Bright Point and the Volunteer Lawyer Program to provide services for tenants. The City of Fort Wayne funds this program through a grant.

Thomas explained how he helps these people from losing their place of residence.

“The reasons vary, but often it is for nonpayment,”



LISA ESQUIVEL LONG

**Indiana Legal Services staff attorney and Director of the Tenant Assistance Legal Clinic Andrew Thomas said 300 clients so far have received help to avoid eviction during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

Thomas said. “In March of 2020, a lot of folks obviously lost their jobs in the last year. Maybe they worked at a restaurant, or they worked at a factory that no longer could be open during the pandemic, people were laid off. And even though there was and is an eviction moratorium, that does not actually stop landlords from filing for

### Indiana Legal Services

**WHO:** Indiana Legal Services  
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**CONTACT:** 260-424-9155  
**WEBSITE:** [www.indianalegalservices.org](http://www.indianalegalservices.org)

eviction. If the tenant does not know what to do, people have still been evicted during this time.”

He said that there was also an increase in self-help evictions, which is when landlords change the locks or harass tenants to leave without going through the eviction process. This is also a situation in which their law firm would help.

Other programs are available at Indiana Legal Services as well. For example, Thomas explained another clinic that the law firm runs called the Specialized Driving Privileges Clinic. This program helps people who have a suspended license to get special permission to drive to and from work to make sure they do not get into more trouble.

“This allows people to remain productive and not get into more legal trouble,” Thomas said. “A lot of people have been helped by that clinic.”

Thomas feels their services are helpful to the community.

“I do believe we provide a very important service for folks who are in crisis who cannot get an attorney but very often need one,” Thomas said. “We provide that access to the courts for these folks.”

## INNOVATION IN BANKING & FINANCING WINNER 3RIVERS FEDERAL CREDIT UNION



# 3Rivers Federal Credit Union focuses on community efforts

BY CINDY LARSON  
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3Rivers Federal Credit Union takes its commitment to helping people understand money matters seriously. And goes beyond understanding, in helping people when they need it the most.



Cooper

One of the things that nominator, Lisa Cooper, loves about her job is all the different ways she can help impact lives. Whether it’s helping students learn about finances through school programs, helping a member create a financial plan, or volunteering with a nonprofit, she knows that through her work at 3Rivers, she is making a difference. And no one day is the same.

“It’s the people I get to work with in and out of the credit union that make my work so special,” said Cooper, branch manager at Stellhorn Crossing.

3Rivers community focus supports her personal passion for volunteerism and giving back, which is important to her. Cooper has volunteered with Junior Achievement, Easter Seals, Junior League and the Learning Community, to name a few. In 2020 Cooper was named “Ambassador of the Year” through the New Haven Chamber of Commerce.



CONTRIBUTED

**3Rivers Federal Credit Union Stellhorn branch manager Lisa Cooper said she loves to be able to help customers with the various financial needs they have.**

3Rivers started out as the International Harvester Credit Union in 1935. Over the years it changed names, grew to 21 locations, \$1.8 billion in assets, nearly 500 employees and now serves over 100,000 members in our region.

Cooper has been with 3Rivers for 24 of those years. She started as a part-time teller, then went to full time. She spent 2½ years in accounting before returning to a branch. “I missed that face-to-face interaction with people,” she said. She has

since managed or worked in at least 9 of those 3Rivers locations.

Throughout all the growth and changes, 3Rivers has never lost sight of putting the needs of the community, members and team members first.

“3Rivers has empowered us to help us be the best we can be personally and for the membership; she said.

During the pandemic the credit union lobby was closed for a short period of time, but the credit union was busier

than ever. Teams proactively made 40,000 follow up calls with members and processed over 900 PPP loans for local businesses and non-profits. The credit union granted more community support dollars than ever and hired over 120 people.

“Everyone has financial needs,” Cooper said, “And I am so proud I get to work for a company that always goes beyond the basics. You’re never a number here.”

## INNOVATION IN CONSTRUCTION & ENGINEERING WINNER MSKTD & ASSOCIATES



# MSKTD offers full range of services, features sustainable design

### KPC STAFF REPORT

Founded in Fort Wayne in 1978, MSKTD & Associates Inc. is a full-service architectural, interior, landscape design and engineering firm. With a current staff of more than 70 professionals, MSKTD also has an office in downtown Indianapolis.

Embracing sustainable design early on, MSKTD designed the first — and largest at the time — Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Platinum Certified commercial project in Indiana — the corporate headquarters of Sweetwater Sound.

MSKTD offers clients a full range of services with in-house architects, landscape architects, interior designers, planners; mechanical, electrical, energy, civil and structural engineers; estimators, graphic designers and support personnel, according to its website.

A company executive told KPC Media Group that what distinguishes MSKTD is its combination of architecture, interior work and the type of engineering needs typically found in commercial and industrial building design. They also believe in being

responsive and in providing design and engineering solutions that are tailored to the clients they work for in their focus industries.

The company's areas of focus include — but are not limited to — higher education, health care, corporate offices, advanced manufacturing and hygienic food design and engineering.

MSKTD's work in Fort Wayne also includes the Ash Brokerage Headquarters, the Fort Wayne Children's Zoo and the ongoing Electric Works project.

MSKTD's other recent work includes two residence hall projects and a agricultural bio-engineering facility for Purdue University in West Lafayette and an a new Indiana University Health Systems regional hospital and academic medical school project in Bloomington.

The company works outside in over 20 states outside of Indiana providing advanced and specialized hygienic food design to some of the largest and most well recognized leaders in the food industry.



MSKTD & Associates designed Quimby Village's revitalized Clyde Theatre in Fort Wayne.

FILE PHOTO

## INNOVATION IN RETAIL SEMIFINALIST VERA BRADLEY



# Vera Bradley creates a new store selling 'good' products

### BY CINDY LARSON

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When Vera Bradley came up with the concept for its newest retail store, goodMRKT, the company had a new goal in mind.

"Retail has been changing dramatically for a few years," said Rob Wallstrom, CEO of Vera Bradley. "What customers expect out of stores has changed."

Because of e-commerce, the role of stores has changed, Wallstrom said. "That was the genesis (of goodMRKT)."

To accommodate people's desire to linger, goodMRKT, which opened April 16 in Fort Wayne's Jefferson Pointe, has a cafe inside the store where people can linger over a drink or a bite to eat.

The purpose of the cafe, Wallstrom said, is to give people a place to linger, similar to other coffee shops.

But the differences don't end there. As the name implies, there's something "good" about this market. And that has to do with the businesses that sell their wares there. Vera Bradley has curated a collection of products made by about 35 "partners" of Vera Bradley, all of whom give back to their community or the world. Some are local brands; others come from vendors who live and work far away.

For example MudLOVE, a pottery shop in Warsaw. According to its website, "Every product you purchase provides 1 week of safe, clean water to someone in need. All of this is made



FILE PHOTO

The new goodMRKT store at Jefferson Square has a cafe inside with drinks and snacks.

possible through Water for Good and their continual work to transform one of the world's most neglected countries, the Central African Republic."

Each product line has a purpose and a commitment to doing good. Some products are made with recycled goods in an effort to protect the environment.

Sackcloth and Ashes makes blankets, and for every one purchased the company will donate one to a homeless shelter.

Wallstrom says customers like the concept. As for the future of goodMRKT, it's too early to tell. He calls the store a "lab."

"The experience of goodMRKT is something we're learning from."

In another area of innovation,

Vera Bradley found itself inspired by the pandemic to look for something new to make that would be useful for customers.

The answer was making masks. "Our customers were very excited," Wallstrom said. "We had a very strong mask business."

The company also has formed collaborations with other businesses. They are making Harry Potter branded products, continuing their collaboration with Disney, working with Croc shoes and even designing Vera Bradley packaging and razors for Venus.

Customers want something new and fresh, Wallstrom said, while the company keeps true to the Vera Bradley heritage.



CONTRIBUTED

Rob Wallstrom, CEO of Vera Bradley, says changes in retail prompted the company to come up with a new concept — goodMRKT.

## INNOVATION IN FOOD & AGRICULTURE WINNER PURDUE EXTENSION



# Purdue Extension increases fresh food access at Johnnie Mae Farm

BY LISA ESQUIVEL LONG  
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A photo sits in the kitchen of Johnnie Mae Farm, a former city of Fort Wayne fire station that now serves as a place for its southeast neighbors to buy fresh herbs and vegetables.

The late Johnnie Mae White looks down onto the commercial-grade kitchen where she once taught her neighbors healthy cooking.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced cooking lessons to take a hiatus, but the garden behind the building at 2518 Winter St. is ripening.

“The main purpose of this project is to support Renaissance Pointe (neighborhood) but also more broadly the (468)03 and 06” ZIP codes, Terri Theisen, extension educator in horticulture/urban agriculture with Purdue Extension.

Those ZIP codes are among those that the U.S. Department of Agriculture have deemed as food deserts, places where the poverty rate is 20.0% or greater and where a third of the residents live more than a half-mile from a grocery store.

The urban farm is a collaboration of the city, Purdue Extension and the surrounding neighborhoods. The project’s effort to provide fresh, low-cost produce to residents has earned the Purdue Extension the Innovation in Food & Agriculture award.

Purdue Extension has two goals for the project, which it has been involved in since 2018 and now manages; provide affordable produce and education to neighbors, Theisen said.

Once a week in the summer residents can come to the farm to buy produce grown on site. Cash and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits are accepted.

The project tries to keep the prices at or below those of grocery stores. “Our market isn’t profitable,” Theisen said. Donations and grants from places that include St. Joseph Foundation and a partnership that allows SNAP recipients to use their Electronic Benefits Transfer card and get double the food dollars.

Pre-COVID Purdue Extension presented a lot of cooking and nutrition classes, along with impromptu education where residents ask, “How do I garden? How do I grow stuff?” Theisen said.

Community groups and outside organizations can visit the garden to see how it’s done. On this day, Ellen Bauman and Dayanna Wilson are working in the garden. Every year more people visit and more produce is added.

The project tries to keep a variety of herbs and vegetables, with up to 40 offered, Theisen said. Resting on  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an acre of what was once vacant lots now has onions, garlic, chocolate mint, strawberries and artichoke among its produce.

The biggest sellers are okra, green tomatoes and collard greens that the farm can’t plant enough of. “These are things that we want to grow to show people that we want to provide them with the foods that are culturally relevant to their diet, their desires.”

Wider beds allow for people of differing abilities to tour.

Inside the hoop house where the soil may be more contaminated, vegetables grow in containers, including spinach and collard greens that were overwintered.

“Everything we do here we use organic practices,” Theisen said.

While pesticides are used when needed, the project uses companion plants that keep pests at bay or attract predators that make a meal of the pests.



Ellen Bauman picks a pea pod at the Johnnie Mae Farm in Fort Wayne.

PHOTOS BY LISA ESQUIVEL LONG



Dayanna Wilson works at Johnnie Mae Farm, which provides fresh produce for the neighborhood.



Bauman sorts through produce collected at Johnnie Mae Farm in Fort Wayne.



Nasturtiums are companion plants to cucamelon.



Johnnie Mae Farm can't grow enough collard greens to meet demand.

## INNOVATOR OF THE YEAR SEMIFINALIST KARI PARKER, CENTRAL NOBLE SCHOOLS



# Central Noble teacher dressed for success in pandemic lessons

BY MATT GETTS

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ALBION — Kari Parker knows better than most how difficult it can be to keep the attention of a special-needs student.



So when she learned during the 2020-21 school year that Central Noble would be going to strictly virtual learning for a couple of weeks, she knew she would have to think out of the box.

And that's just what the KPC Media Group 2021 Innovation in Education Award nominee did.

**Parker**

"I saw how hard she worked every day during the times that Central Noble was on virtual learning," said Patricia Franke, who nominated Parker. "She teaches special education in grades 3-5 and tries desperately at all times to help her students learn to read and helps them use reading skills."

That desperate need to help her students led her to some creativity as a substitute teacher shortage and the coronavirus pandemic led to the closure of school for two weeks around Christmas time.

Keeping the attention of special-needs students can be difficult when they are right in front of you.

"It's a huge challenge for the parents and the teachers who have them," Parker said.

But to do it through recorded lessons played while they were at home?

"I knew I would have to make it entertaining," Parker said.

"She dressed up in funny, pretty and ridiculous outfits EVERY DAY to get their attention as she taught them so that she could really connect and keep lessons from being boring," Franke said.



CONTRIBUTED

**Central Noble Community Schools teacher Kari Parker used costumes to keep her students engaged during virtual learning.**

Parker went so far as to create characters to go along with the fancy outfits she wore.

Those funny costumes did grab the attention of her students.

"I had a really good turnout," she said.

Once school was back to in-person learning, one of her students told her how he learned a language skill from a funny lady wearing purple, not realizing it was Parker herself in that purple outfit.

Filming herself was not easy, and downloading the videos so her students could watch them on their schedules (some don't have access to the internet until their

parents are home from work, she said) took a long time.

"As an older teacher, technology is not my thing," Parker said. "I have a pretty supportive staff."

But being creative and dressing up to help her students? That's definitely Parker's thing.

"I enjoyed it myself," she said. "I enjoyed teaching the lessons because it was a fun thing for me."

While she had her successes thanks to her innovation, it was a struggle trying to reach and teach special needs students in a virtual setting.

"It was really hard," she said. "I never realized how many kids struggle away from school."

Many of her students simply don't want to be home, for whatever reason.

"It's just critical these kids are in school," Parker said.

Parker and her husband have a son who was a straight-A student. Then came their daughter, who struggled.

"Our daughter is on the autism spectrum and she has an anxiety disorder," Parker said. "Having our daughter has changed my perspective on everything."

Her daughter led her to switch from a general education teacher, which she did in the Westview school system for 20 years, to getting her degree in special-needs education. She moved to Central Noble four years ago.

"I finished my college as I taught" general education, she said.

Along the way, she has learned that playing the strict disciplinarian doesn't work with special-needs students.

"They rebel against that kind of tactic," Parker said.

"If you form a good relationship with students, they will work really hard for you."

Parker said she didn't expect to be nominated for an innovation award.

"I was a little shocked," she said. "I would do anything for my kids. I really would."

## INNOVATION IN LAW SEMIFINALIST CARSON LLP



# Streamlining digital transition created more secure virtual options

BY KAYLA BRENNAN

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Exceptional customer services and satisfied employees.

This is what Carson LLP hangs its hat on.

While it offers services similar to many law firms, managing partner Jeremy Senk explained part of what makes this firm unique.

"In terms of the services we offer, I don't know that the service itself is more innovative, but we think how we deliver it or provide it has become more streamlined," Senk said. "It has become more secure. It's giving clients more virtual-type of options."

He said the firm's way of managing, delivering, and reviewing documents with clients has been transformed into a digital format, making this process easier for both parties, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This transition was something the firm planned to make at some point, but it happened quicker than expected with the pandemic.

"I think this is where we were going anyway in time, it just sped up our getting there," Senk said. "We've been interested in what we can do to make our client experience better for a long, long time. And we think that having better, more technology involved, having more sharable technology



**Carson LLP team strives to provide exceptional service.**

with clients and a variety of other things helps us get there."

Senk said that making these critical changes has helped make Carson LLP more relatable as a business.

"We have tried to ask not what a law firm would do, but what would a good business that wants to drive incredible customer service, what would they do," Senk said.

Senk said the firm wants to use technology and other resources to provide its clients with the best customer service possible.

But why should people choose Carson LLP?

"All we care about is client service," Senk said. "It's all we focus on. Timeliness, high quality and getting results. And really focusing on the northern Indiana regional area and provide incredible services to those regional businesses."

Carson LLP employs 45-50 people. Senk believes that the way the firm manages people is out of the ordinary as well, but it has been working for them.

"We don't have a tremendous amount

### CARSON LLP

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of rules," Senk said. "We let our employees use their best judgment as much as humanly possible. We trust them. There is a lot of freedom and happiness to work remote, not work remote, wear what you want, dress appropriately for the occasion. We even started before the pandemic having people work out of the office and giving them flexibility with that. Part of our technology supported that, so it was really helpful when the pandemic happened. It was very easy for us to transition virtually."

When comparing Carson LLP to other law firms, Senk said they like to foster and keep talent and think outside the box.

"I think the mindset of how do you get great talent and keep great talent happy, and we think outside the box of what a typical law firm would do," Senk said. "Our goal is to have great people delivering great results to our clients. We think that happy people who enjoy coming to work and working together as a team give better results to our clients."

## INNOVATION IN EDUCATION SEMIFINALIST MLK MONTESSORI SCHOOL



# MLK Montessori an innovator in Montessori education centers

BY ASHLEE HOOS  
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The women behind MLK Montessori School, Fort Wayne, founded the school because they wanted children from all walks of life to receive a quality preschool education, regardless of socioeconomic status.



McKinley

It was started in 1968 after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., and is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit agency.

Today, the school is led by Executive Director Gretta McKinley, who shares those same values.

A licensed mental health counselor by trade, McKinley spent her career prior to going to MLK Montessori working in the nonprofit sector as a counselor at a center as well as the state hospital. Once she completed her master's degree, she went

onto teaching at Huntington University and Purdue Fort Wayne.

"The opportunity came open at MLK Montessori and I said no way, I teach college and master's level students, not preschool," McKinley said.

But once she took the job, she was in love and knew it was the right move.

"I get to use all of my talents under one roof," she said.

MLK Montessori is licensed as a child-care facility, but McKinley said every one of her teachers in the school are licensed and hold degrees.

"I tell my staff every morning they are here to have the opportunity to make an impact on the future," she said. "The children we're educating will lead our world."

The majority of the student body doesn't pay anything to attend the school, due to scholarships and other subsidy programs available.

"We look at the whole person, not just the academic side," McKinley said. "Social and emotional well-being is important too."

Teachers also know each individual child's best learning style, because they understand that all children learn differently.

When COVID-19 altered so much of the world, teachers at MLK Montessori were already working in a framework that would make sure if any child had to miss school, they could still be connected and learning in the style that best fit them.

"The teachers knew the learning styles and made sure to keep it in mind when they made materials to go home," McKinley said. "Every packet was in the style the child learns in so even virtually, learning was done their way. What we sent home was always very intentional."

Having the mindset McKinley and her staff do about shaping tomorrow's world leaders, they wanted to make sure even in a pandemic to build a solid foundation for each child.

Staff at MLK Montessori are always asking the children questions to help jump-start their thinking.

"We make sure our students have plenty

of take-home books," she said. "We send home books the students can keep to build their home libraries."

They also have a partnership with a program that partners the children with a volunteer reader that will read to them.

"We don't want them to just hear the book, we want them to love the book," said McKinley.

The staff also stay in touch with families, holding conversations about their children and making sure that the families know their child's learning style as well that way, even if they don't continue their education in the Montessori fashion, that knowledge is still there so if the child needs help in the future, the family can tell their future teachers how the child best learns to get them the help they need.

"We empower our parents to really know their child," she said. "The more informed our parents and teachers are, the better our leaders will be."

For more information on the school, visit [mlkdreamschool.org](http://mlkdreamschool.org).

## INNOVATION IN FOOD & AGRICULTURE SEMIFINALIST ACCUTEMP PRODUCTS



# Technology accelerates food prep during pandemic

BY SUE CARPENTER  
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From the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, food service shifted to more and more carry-out, drive-thru and delivery orders. With this switch from in-person dining, many restaurateurs could not keep up with demand for this type of ordering.

In 2020, AccuTemp Products in New Haven filled the order with its innovative XLR8 upper heated platen. The patent-pending attachment for this AccuSteam griddle creates an upper heated platen that enables the operator to cook both sides of a product at the same time, doubling the production of hamburgers in the typical restaurant, resulting in drive-thru window times of less than 2½ minutes versus a wait without this device of 5 minutes.

"This product offering was in development prior to the pandemic, however, I accelerated the development cycle during the pandemic to get this and other products completed," AccuTemp President and CEO Dale Taylor said. "During the pandemic, we invested over double the amount of typical engineering research and development expenditures and were able to launch a project for In-N-Out Burger, and another for White Castle this year, as well as the XLR8 product."

AccuTemp invested in professional project management and took a disciplined approach to development using a Stage Gate project management system that allowed them to simultaneously manage several projects, while ensuring each one was being adequately validated to ensure customer performance requirements were met, Taylor added.



AccuTemp's innovative XLR8 speeds cooking time up to 75%, giving customers faster service.

The XLR8 decreases cook time by up to 75%, resulting in the most even heat coupled with the fastest temperature recovery in the industry. The XLR8 also includes the ability for the operator to adjust the time, temperature and compression placed upon a product

for perfect results every time.

Since its inception, AccuTemp introduced its first connectionless steamer to the marketplace in 1993. The company has continued to innovate and provide solutions to its partners that increase production, provide

less maintenance and down time, and improve energy and water efficiency. Their products improve production of protein products like burgers, pork, chicken that are cooked on the company's award-winning AccuSteam griddle.

CONTRIBUTED

**INNOVATION IN REAL ESTATE SEMIFINALIST  
TYLER SECRIST, SECRIST MARKETING GROUP**



# Tyler Secrist enjoys many talents and challenges

**BY JEFF JONES**

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"I'm just doing it different," Fort Wayne resident Tyler Secrist explained. He has built a formidable business, Secrist Marketing Group, that includes real estate and marketing.

"To verbalize it is just tough," he said. "To sell real estate, you used to just take listing photos, put a sign in the yard, put it in a magazine, put it out, and that was it."

"Nowadays, the type of content I'm creating, these are graphics, they're stories, they're reels, they're videos. It's all these different platforms that I'm creating."

Secrist, 27, describes his style as "very cinematic," often with dramatic music.

His videos range from 15 seconds to 5 or 6 minutes, depending on the topic and subject matter. Counting Secrist, a team of four produces content.

Those efforts have paid dividends. In 2020, he sold 82 homes, producing \$14 million in sales volume.

In 2020, he was selected to Fort Wayne Business Weekly/KPC Media Group's Forty Under 40.

Born in Auburn, Secrist moved to Fort Wayne at age 18 when he went to college on a soccer scholarship at Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne (now Purdue Fort Wayne).

Secrist returned to the family business, Secrist Lawn Care, after college.

"I got into real estate through my success in the family business. They gave me the capital to start investing," Secrist said. "I was flipping homes and I built a couple of spec homes."

"It was at that point I realized, 'Man, I need to get my real estate license' so I didn't have to outsource these commissions."

At age 23, Secrist obtained his real estate license, joining Century 21, and said his brokerage business "just exploded."

"The growth of my family's business, my real estate business, and now my real estate firm and marketing business has just been the way I market each business."

"I've got this knack or notoriety for the way I create content," Secrist explained. "I specialize in content creation whether it's photo or video and I put it out there."

"I think what's caught most people's attention is the quality of the content," Secrist said. "What that's done for me is it's allowed me to sell whatever it is that I'm selling, whether that's a home, whether that's a lawn treatment program or whether that's a marketing campaign for a business that's hired us."

"I just have this knack for getting people's attention on whatever it is that I'm trying to get attention on."

Secrist said he paid attention to where people who getting their information.

"I noticed where everybody's attention was," Secrist said. "Everybody was using traditional mediums when they did market, and I realized there was no value prop. The cost per prospect was just awful."

"I realized if I could create content where people were actually looking



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

**Tyler Secrist enjoys creating stories through his business, Secrist Marketing Group, that focuses on real estate and marketing.**

**smg**  
**SECRIST MARKETING GROUP**  
**smg**

— social — it's free unless you run paid ads. I was able to create such great content.

"I organically have a massive reach, and that's kind of what has played in the growth of my brand," Secrist said. "I created awesome stuff, I put it where people were looking, and they paid attention."

Secrist's work can be found on all of the major social media platforms: YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and Snapchat.

"I don't stray away from traditional mediums, I just allocate my time and efforts to where I see fit, essentially," he added. "It's allowed me to reach more people faster."

Secrist views himself as something of a trend-setter.

"When I got into the game, nobody was doing video," he said. "When I went from nobody to selling \$10-\$20 million worth of real estate a year, naturally, you're going to catch attention, and people are going to look at what you're doing to see what and if they can implement in their business to

try and get similar results.

"I have noticed, within the last 12 months, people are trying to do what I'm doing. There's an IT factor," Secrist said. "I've got a style and the way I distribute things. I have noticed people trying to emulate some of the stuff I'm doing in their businesses."

Looking ahead, he wants to "triple-down" on the use of YouTube.

"I think YouTube is an underpriced and under-valued medium, where, if done right, could really change the landscape," Secrist said. "I think it's already changing the landscape, but nobody's doing it locally."

Diversification has been an asset.

"I've come to realize in my company's success, in my family business and in my success in my real estate business, that I'm very good at a lot of things," he said. "I had to create something that could encompass all of those tools, which is why I started my company, Secrist Marketing Group."

"I realized I could do anything," he said. "I've got experience in flipping homes, in building new construction.

Secrist Marketing Group is now a licensed general contractor by the state." His brother, Chase, an engineer, just passed his general contractor test.

"I had to create something that could encompass everything," Secrist added. "It's a real estate firm and marketing company."

"My true passion is creating content and developing. That's where my heart lies," he said. "I love flipping homes, I love building homes, and I love everything that has to do with the creative side of all of that."

"Being a real estate agent, I love helping buyers and sellers purchase their homes and sell their places, but I envision Secrist Marketing Group becoming a large entity that helps people buy, sell, build and create."

The future is now, Secrist said. It's important to be at the forefront or be left behind.

"With all of this new technology, things are going to move even faster," he said. "If people don't adapt to these technologies and just try to do whatever they can, that's going to be their ticket to being successful."

"You've got to consistently challenge yourself and try out things," Secrist said. "It's OK to fail. What are you doing that 99% of other people aren't doing?"

## Tyler Secrist

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INNOVATION IN CONSTRUCTION & ENGINEERING  
SEMIFINALIST  
KENNETH K. JONES, JONES PETRIE RAFINSKI, INC.



# JPR designing for Northeast Indiana's future

BY STEVE GARBACZ

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When it comes to architecture, design and urban planning, being forward-looking is imperative to the process.

What works now is important, but equally as important is what works for a community several years down the road, too.

For a design and engineering firm like Northeast Indiana's Jones Petrie Rafinski, having an innovative mindset comes with the territory. But one thing separating JPR from many other firms in the field is simply how diverse it can be, ranging from municipal wastewater projects to cutting-edge commercial opportunities to impressive professional sports stadiums.

Innovation is implicit in many of the projects that come through the firm, JPR Director of Design Andrew Cunningham said, as the firm works with communities that are often looking to reinvent, revitalize and reenergize themselves.

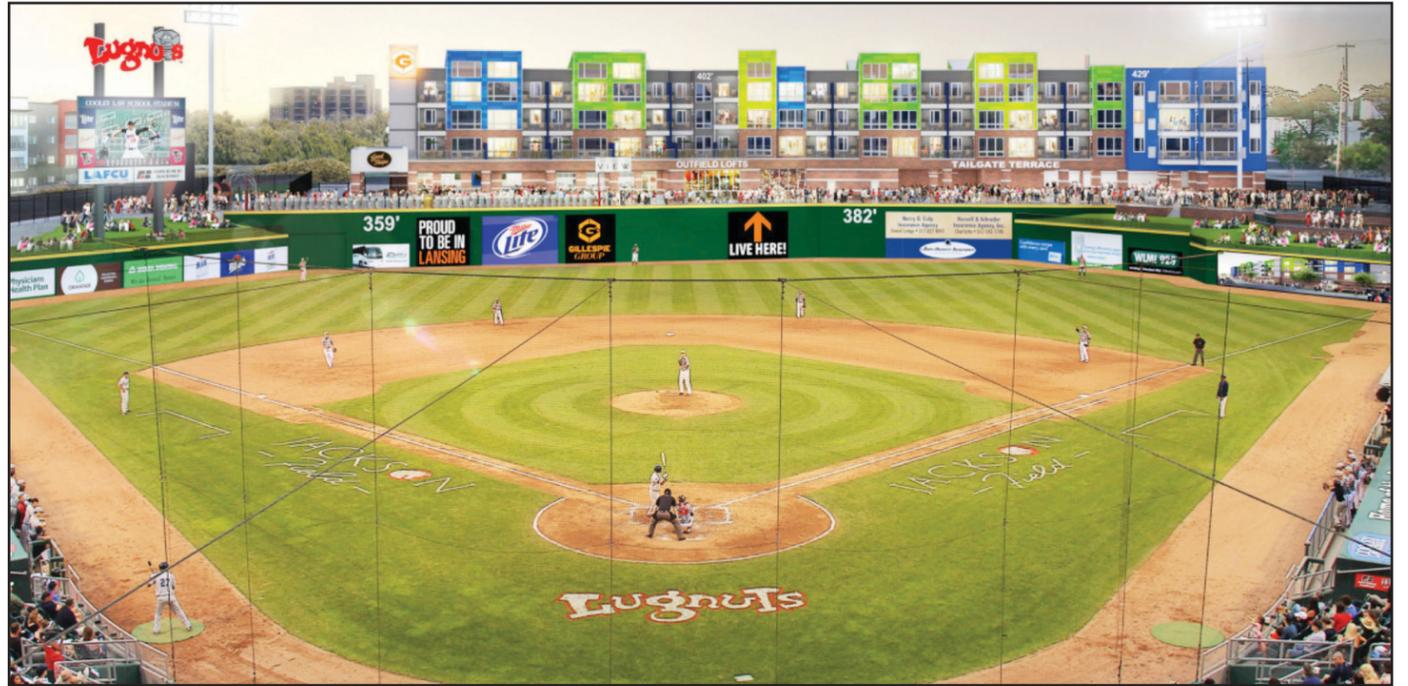
"Staying on that leading edge of things and staying up with 'What are the things that are pushing the limits?' is important to us to stay relevant," Cunningham said.

But before you even start talking about the diverse projects that JPR has helped usher in, the firm itself is built to handle not just conceptual design, but also a lot of the implementation that it takes before shovels hit dirt.

JPR is a "full-service" firm, Cunningham explains, that offers customers numerous services in-house, which helps keep one team on the project during those important prebuild steps.

"We really try our best to keep all or as many services as we possibly can in-house, and those services include architecture, engineering, landscape architecture, planning, surveying and GIS as well as environmental," Cunningham said. "So we can help control the quality and cost and timeline as best as we can."

Having all of those departments under one umbrella gives JPR not just a



This photo shows Cooley Law School field in Lansing, Michigan, where design firm Jones Petrie Rafinski developed a 4-story mixed-use building that sits in the park's outfield.



diversity of experience wherever a client may need them in the process, but also has allowed JPR to take on an extremely diverse portfolio of projects over the years.

"We have an extremely wide range of clients, mostly in the municipal and commercial sectors, but our project types really can range from a regional water or wastewater project to a new commercial building or even professional sports stadium," Cunningham said. "We have a pretty wide, broad range."

In those many different sectors, JPR

has worked on some unique and innovative projects. Again, forward-looking is key, and the firm works with clients who are wanting to do something new in their field.

In the utility sector, JPR has worked with communities to bring wind turbines to their local energy portfolio, is helping along a 160-acre solar farm in Elkhart County — right now one of, if not the biggest such projects in the region — and has helped design some unique renewable projects like the one at Culver Duck Farms in Middlebury.

"We worked with them and developed a process where we were able to take the waste product in that facility ... and placing it into an anaerobic digester to create enough energy to run the entire facility," Cunningham said.

Streetscape and community revitalization projects have been big in recent

## Jones Petrie Rafinski

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years and JPR has worked with numerous communities around Northeast Indiana to develop plans that renovate and reinvigorate their worn-out and outdated infrastructure in a new way.

For example, in Decatur, JPR helped design a renovation of Madison Street, a project that not just fixed up this downtown area but also added a modern amenity in removable bollards that can allow the city to easily shut off traffic in order to host events.

See JPR, Page A15



This conceptual drawing shows design for developments that are part of the Elkhart Riverfront District, which was designed by Jones Petrie Rafinski.

CONTRIBUTED

# JPR

**FROM PAGE A14**

“They can shut that space down and become a live music and performance space, it’s really become an incredibly popular space and a concept that is taking hold,” Cunningham said.

After designing the riverfront district in Elkhart, JPR is now working on a similar project with the city of Goshen, helping that community take advantage of its natural resources and partnering with government and private businesses to spur new development.

And, in South Bend, JPR has been involved with the Union Station project, repurposing the old 1-million-square-foot former Studebaker complex for new modern uses for business and residential space, a project not too different from something like Fort Wayne’s massive Electric Works project.

Over the years, JPR has also developed a niche business in working with professional sports stadiums, with a specialty in minor-league baseball, but beyond just building a field and seats for spectators, the firm has also had opportunities to implement new developments in tandem with sports projects.

For example, at Cooley Law School Stadium in Lansing Michigan, the home

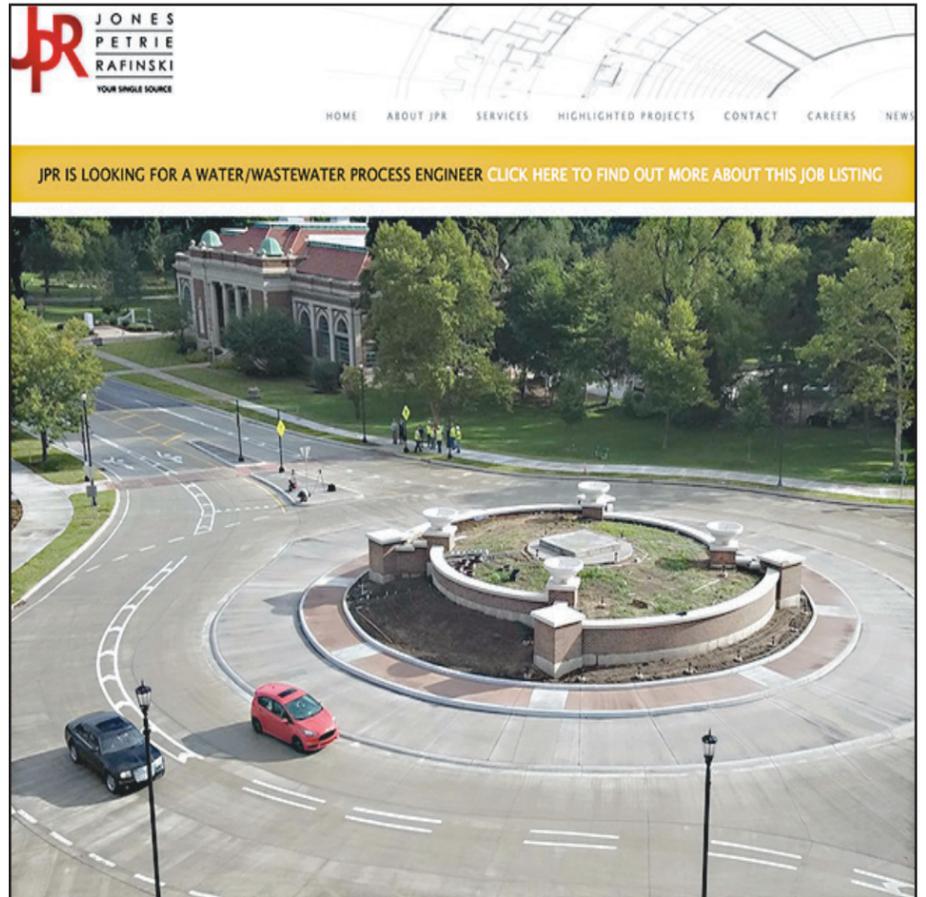
of the Lansing Lugnuts, JPR designed a four-story mixed-use building that sits just 20 feet behind the outfield wall and contains first-floor commercial use and upper-level condos overlooking the ballpark, something that had never been done before inside a stadium, Cunningham said.

Whether it’s a streetscape design for a downtown in a small community like Kendallville or creating an award-winning renovation of the South Bend Cubs’ home ballpark, JPR continues to innovate and position clients for results now and long-term.

A community may not have all the resources to make their dreams a reality right now, but JPR prides itself on helping them plan, design and get to where they want to be when they want to get there.

“That sustainability aspect of not time-stamping something and also not pigeonholing a community into this piece of technology or infrastructure that may be outdated down the road,” Cunningham said.

“We have to be very forward-thinking in how do we master plan this out logically knowing they can get started today and make an impact today, but knowing they may not be able to achieve the end result for years to come.”



SCREEN CAPTURE OF WWW.JPR1SOURCE.COM



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INNOVATION IN HEALTH CARE & FITNESS SEMIFINALIST  
SETH FIFER, CROSSFIT ANGOLA



# CrossFit Angola offers guidance on the road to fitness

BY HAILEE LEPLEY

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ANGOLA — CrossFit Angola co-founder Seth Fifer has always had a passion for health and fitness.

Fifer tried CrossFit for himself in 2015 and admired the exercise style and sense of community that accompanied the fitness regimen. He started coaching part time in 2017 before moving to full time in 2018 at the gym in Coldwater, Michigan.

In 2019, Fifer and his partner, Cody Ringle, finally made the decision to open a CrossFit facility in Angola.

Fifer had tried other fitness routines over the years, but what he loved best about CrossFit were the results and the people.

“When done properly, CrossFit will get anyone results and is the most effective way to train the body to be healthy, fit, and strong for life,” he said. “People of all ages, fitness levels, jobs, backgrounds, etc come together and have a common goal: to improve their quality of life by increasing their health and fitness and to have fun in the process.”

It is this sense of community that Fifer feels is one of CrossFit’s most appealing qualities.

“In CrossFit gyms around the world, you can walk in and see people cheering each other on, giving one another high-fives, and



AMY OBERLIN

CrossFit Angola co-founder Seth Fifer says members always work with a coach to get their desired results.

working together without any judgement,” he said. “People in the gym become friends and ultimately a part of this large community of people that are positive and encouraging of one another no matter where they

are in their fitness journey.”

CrossFit also appeals to those who prefer guidance on their journey to fitness. Members are always led by a coach to ensure their desired results, whether they are

training individually or in groups, learning more about nutrition or even designing their own personal program.

CrossFit seeks to innovate the fitness field by increasing accessibility of its regimen. Coaches are taught to scale any of their movements or workouts to the level necessary for an intended individual. This way, newbies and experienced members alike are receiving regimens that suit their specific needs.

“In any CrossFit gym around the world, you can walk in and see a young and fit adult working out next to the middle-aged person working out next to an elderly person with zero experience,” Fifer said. “No other modality of exercise has been able to help such a large spectrum of people improve their health and fitness.”

CrossFit Angola specifically has recently launched a youth strength and conditioning class that targets local middle and high school age students.

“We are really excited to start working with these young adults to create healthy habits young,” Fifer said.

He also hopes to explore corporate wellness and how to help companies build healthier employees.

“It always feels good knowing what we do day in and day out makes a bigger difference in people’s lives than we realized.”

INNOVATION IN BANKING & FINANCE SEMIFINALIST  
LYNN REECER, NORTHEAST INDIANA TALENT ATTRACTION



# Northeast Indiana Talent Attraction does its homework

BY LISA ESQUIVEL LONG

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Northeast Indiana Talent Attraction rolls out the red carpet, sort of speak, for its clients’ job candidates.

Even before picking up a job candidate at the airport, as is needed sometimes, owner Lynn Reecer and her two employees have done thorough research.

“We get the candidates to say yes,” Reecer said.

While NEITA received the semifinalist in the Innovation in Banking & Finance category, as Reecer wrote in the nomination, “The industry this company is in, is not even listed as a category ... YET!... When companies struggle with getting their first pick of candidate, high turnover, and retention issues, they turn to NEITA to not only get the candidate to say ‘yes’ to the job, but to stay.”

They help companies save money. One company, for example, contacted NEITA after it brought in 19 job candidates, and not one accepted the position.

Reecer, who co-founded Reecer Properties, a part of Encore Sotheby’s International Realty since 2019, saw a need for other services related to real estate.

“I called it recruiting and relocation services,” Reecer said.

When she started in 2010, she didn’t even charge for the additional services. The goal was to get a company’s job candidate to fall in love with Northeast Indiana and buy a home.

The Dayton, Ohio, native knows what it is like to be a “trailing spouse.” When her physician husband was recruited from Indianapolis to return to his hometown of Fort Wayne in 1993, she had a baby and found herself very lonely in the smaller city.

“You need to recruit their whole family,” Reecer said of job candidates.

She came to know Fort Wayne as “a better place to live” and had the “bloom where you’re planted” mentality. She got involved in the community, including co-founding Aboite New Trails in 2001.

Reecer sounds like she has the personality for the work.

“I love people. I get my energy from other people,” she said.

NEITA primarily serves companies that are looking for executives, physicians, nurses and others.

“What’s so unique about what we do is matchmaking,” Reecer said. “We try to be involved from the moment the candidate is interviewed on the phone.”

They don’t give a “canned tour,” but a personalized introduction to the community for them and their spouse, partner, children and even parents living with them.

As the company’s website says, “When needs are met, jobs are filled.”

Even after the job candidate is hired, NEITA follows up with them, becoming their “first friend” to help them get settled into the community.

Need a dog groomer? Does your and railing partner need help to find a job? “We’re really connected,” Reecer said.



CONTRIBUTED

Karen McMahon, senior director of operations for Northeast Indiana Talent Attraction, and NEITA founder and CEO Lynn Reecer think of themselves as matchmakers between job candidates and the region.

## PAST RECIPIENTS



# INNOVATION AWARDS HALL OF FAME

We've brought back Greater Fort Wayne Business Weekly's Innovation Awards. We've honored over the years many companies, individuals and organizations from across the region for their innovative ideas, products and services.

Past winners are:

## 2006

SensoryCritters.com  
BeniComp Group Inc.; Bank of Geneva  
Schwartz Biomedical  
Rubber Innovators LLC  
Foundation for Art and Music in Elementary Education;  
Science Central  
Digital AV  
RealtyFlex Corporate LLC  
Stop & Shred  
Zoom Information Systems  
Innovator of the Year — Rubber Innovators LLC

## 2007

Sorbashock LLC  
HomeFree Systems LLC; Wells Fargo  
LacPro Industries LLC  
Superior Manufacturing, a division of Magnatech Corp.  
DeSoto Translations & Marketing Inc.  
NAI Harding Dahm  
Crazy Pinz  
Effect Web Media  
Innovator of the Year — LacPro Industries LLC

## 2008

NewsMogul LLC  
Solstice Medical LLC  
Tippmann Industrial Products Inc.  
Star Financial Bank  
Basic Elements Design LLC  
Fort Wayne Outfitters and Bike Depot

Intrasect Technologies  
Innovator of the Year — Solstice Medical LLC

## 2009

DigitalHydraulic LLC  
StrokeCareNow Network  
USCombatGear  
Financial Education Solutions  
MSKTD & Associates Inc.  
Build A Computer  
TrustBearer Labs  
Innovator of the Year — Digital Hydraulic LLC

## 2010

Honor Education LLC  
OrthoPediatrics  
Whitley Steel Products & Fabrication  
Summer's Sky LLC  
Pathfinder Services Inc.  
The Green ABC's  
Indiana Metropolitan Area network Inc.  
Innovator of the Year — Honor Education LLC

## 2011

PYPLine LLC  
Be Adaptive Equipment LLC  
Tippmann Engineering  
Cirrus ABS  
Commercial Filter Service Inc.  
Average Joe Artisan Bread LLC  
Group Dekko  
Innovator of the Year — Be Adaptive Equipment LLC

## 2012

OFabz Swimwear  
Rusher Medical LLC  
Mudd-Ox Inc.

Lendingahand.net  
The Summit  
Annie Oakley Perfumery & Studio  
Allied Payment Network  
Innovator of the Year — Annie Oakley Perfumery & Studio

## 2013

Engine Research Associates  
Senior Lifestyle (DBA, Harbour Assisted Living)  
Rudy's  
Tuthill Corporation, Tuthill Engineering  
GMS Distribution  
3Rivers Federal Credit Union  
TransWorks  
Innovator of the Year — Engine Research Associates

## 2014

Indicator  
Memories of You  
League for the Blind and Disabled  
Fleet Feet Sports Fort Wayne  
Advanced Media Integration  
MKM Architecture and Design  
Innovator of the Year — 3BG Supply Co.  
Innovator of the Year — Adaptek Systems Inc.

## 2015

excellon Technologies Inc.  
Stryke Industries  
Granite Ridge Builders  
The Game Annex  
Levitate  
PRP Technologies LLC  
Allied Payment Network  
Extension Healthcare  
Systems Process Inc.

# This could be you

Nominations are open for NEXT YEAR'S Greater Fort Wayne Business Weekly Innovation Awards. Go to [www.kpceventbuzz.com](http://www.kpceventbuzz.com) to nominate a company or group that has shown innovation.



FILE PHOTO

Here's a look back at the winners of the 2011 Greater Fort Wayne Business Weekly Innovation Awards. In front from left are, Matt Nickols of Cirrus ABS, Brian Kyler of Be Adaptive Equipment and Sharon Wearley of Commercial Filter Services. In back from left are Graham Bredemeyer of PYPLine, Scott BonAmi of PYPine, Dan Hayes of Group Dekko, Jason Daenens of Commercial Filter Services, Bob Wearly of Commercial Filter Services, Dan Tippmann of Tippmann Engineering and Joe Bellavance of Average Joe Artisan Bread.



FILE PHOTO

Elton Bishop, founder of DigitalHydraulic LLC, reacts after being named the Innovator of the Year at Business Weekly's 2009 Innovation Awards luncheon.



FILE PHOTO

Jeff Erickson of Engine Research Associates accepts the Innovator of the Year award at Business Weekly's Innovation Awards event in 2013.



FILE PHOTO

The League for the Blind & Disabled's 2014 Innovation Award in the Customer Service category is seen.

# Every child deserves the chance to succeed.



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In response to COVID-19-related learning disruptions, MLK has been exceptionally adaptive and innovative:

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- **Developing pre-recorded videos of Montessori lessons**
- **Offering after-school virtual enrichment session for students**

With **your** support, MLK students can continue to develop the skills they need to keep pace — academically, socially, emotionally, and developmentally — with their peers from more advantaged environments and enter school ready to learn.

To make a gift or learn more about the school, please visit [mlkdreamschool.org](https://mlkdreamschool.org).

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Business Weekly



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