

CENTRAL ILLINOIS Business

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A GROWING 'McFAMILY'

Don and Deanna Witzel celebrate 25 years as McDonald's franchisees in Vermilion County, with stable now at 7

From the editor's desk



Expansion is the theme of this issue, with a trio of businesses that are doing

just that, in different ways:

— Vermilion County McDonald's franchisees Don and Deanna Witzel, about to mark 25 years, opened their seventh location in Covington, Ind., in September 2021.

— Fisher National Bank is opening its sixth branch in Danville in July.

— And Mila Thomas Fuller is getting ready to mark four years since she switched gears from a career in education to open a Nothing Bundt Cakes franchise in Champaign.

Which reminds me, voting is almost closed for this year's People's Choice Awards, celebrating the best businesses in the area as voted on by you.

This year's voting period ends at midnight July 5. You can submit yours once a day until then by heading to news-gazette.com and clicking on the People's Choice banner.

We'll celebrate the winners with a special magazine and banquet around Labor Day.

— *Niko*

Niko Dugan is the Managing Editor of The News-Gazette. Reach him by email at ndugan@news-gazette.com or by phone at 217-393-8253.

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ON THE COVER

Vermilion County McDonald's franchisees Don and Deanna Witzel, who are set to mark 25 years in the McBusiness, are shown in the lobby of their North Vermilion Street location in Danville.

Photo by Robin Scholz

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TOP LAWYERS

CHAMPAIGN-URBANA AREA

BASED UPON A SURVEY OF THEIR PEERS



These **LEADING LAWYERS** have been recommended by their peers to be among the **TOP LAWYERS** in Illinois.

Jeffrey I. Cisco	Cisco Law PC	Champaign	217.991.0409	Crim Def: DUI; Crim Def: Felon/Misd; Nursing Home Negligence; PI: Gen; Work Comp
James D. Cottrell	James D Cottrell Law Office PC	Champaign	217.693.4905	Agriculture; Close/Private Held; Land Use/Zoning; RE: Commercial; Trust/Will/Estate
Larry A. Apfelbaum	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Workers' Compensation
Todd A. Bresney	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1520	Personal Injury: General
William J. Harrington	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Personal Injury: General
Robert M. Javoronok Jr.	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Personal Injury: General; Workers' Compensation
Kathy A. Olivero	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Workers' Compensation
John J. Waldman	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Workers' Compensation
Richard P. Klaus	Klaus LeFebvre & Wince LLP	Champaign	217.337.4700	Civil Appellate; Commercial Litigation; Personal Injury Defense: General
Thomas B. Borton	Livingston Barger Brandt & Schroeder LLP	Champaign	217.351.7479	Commercial Litigation; Medical Malpractice Defense; Prof'l Malpractice Defense
Kevin M. Toth	Livingston Barger Brandt & Schroeder LLP	Champaign	217.351.7479	Commercial Litigation; Medical Malpractice Defense; Prof'l Malpractice Defense
Joseph R. Wetzel	Livingston Barger Brandt & Schroeder LLP	Champaign	217.351.7479	Commercial Litigation; Medical Malpractice Defense; PI Defense: General
Nicholas M. Schiro	Schiro & Themer	Danville	217.443.1721	Personal Injury: General; Workers' Compensation
Rowan E. Themer	Schiro & Themer	Champaign	217.607.0750	Personal Injury: General; Workers' Compensation
William A. Peithmann	The Peithmann Law Office	Mahomet	217.586.6102	Agriculture; RE: Commercial; RE: Residential; Tax: Individual; Trust/Will/Estate
Denise Knipp Bates	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Elder; Real Estate: Residential; Trust/Will/Estate
Justin N. Brunner	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Civil Rights/Constitutional; Gov/Muni/Lobby/Admin; Medical Mal Def; PI Def: General
Eric S. Chovanec	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Employment: Management; Labor: Management; Workers' Compensation Defense
James D. Green	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Insurance/Insurance Coverage/Reinsurance; Personal Injury Defense: General
Richard R. Harden	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Medical Malpractice Defense; Personal Injury Defense: General
Kenneth D. Reifsteck	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Civil Appellate; Workers' Compensation Defense
Nathaniel M. Schmitz	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Close/Private Held Business; RE: Commercial; RE: Residential; Trust/Will/Estate
John M. Sturmanis	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Workers' Compensation Defense
Lott H. Thomas	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Trust/Will/Estate
John T. Wozniak	Wozniak & Associates	Urbana	217.367.1647	Trust/Will/Estate

These **EMERGING LAWYERS** have been identified by their peers to be among the **TOP LAWYERS** in Illinois who are age 40 or younger OR who have been admitted to the practice of law for 10 or fewer years.

Gina Couri-Cyphers	Kanoski Bresney	Champaign	217.356.1570	Personal Injury: General
Charles W. Sprague	Livingston Barger Brandt & Schroeder LLP	Champaign	217.351.7479	Medical Malpractice Defense
Nathan T. Kolb	Thomas Mamer LLP	Champaign	217.351.1500	Civil Appellate; Insurance/Coverage/Reins; Medical Malpractice Def; PI Def: General

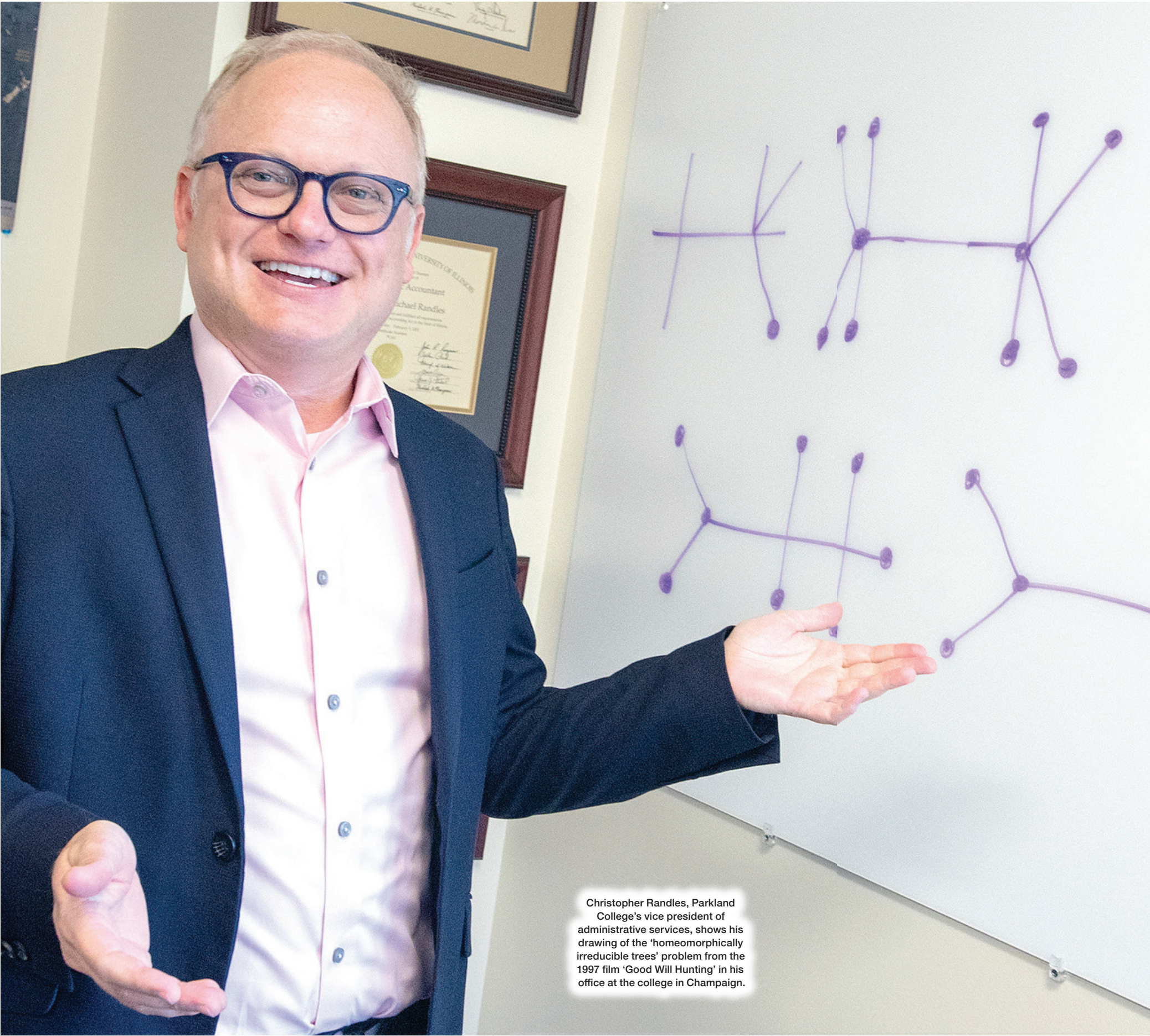
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Christopher Randles, Parkland College's vice president of administrative services, shows his drawing of the 'homeomorphically irreducible trees' problem from the 1997 film 'Good Will Hunting' in his office at the college in Champaign.

Christopher Randles

STORY Jeff D'Alessio PHOTOS Robin Scholz

His bachelor's degree is from the UI's Gies College of Business. But the most beneficial course **CHRISTOPHER RANGLES** took after finishing high school in Decatur came on the college campus where he's reported for work since the fall of 1994.

"Cost Accounting at Parkland College with Nancy Schrumpf," he says. "It was the only class I took outside of the U of I. While I'm very proud to be a U of I alum with an accounting degree, my experience with Professor Schrumpf was instrumental in my college success.

"Her class had about 20 students — compared to hundreds in U of I's cost accounting class in Foellinger Auditorium. The small class size allowed me to interact with her more than I had with any professor prior. The confidence I gained interacting with her and being successful in her class carried on throughout the remainder of my accounting classes at U of I."

Hired as a staff accountant 30 years ago this fall, Randles has spent half of his Cobra career as the vice president of administrative services and chief financial officer, serving under four of Parkland's six presidents.

A lifelong REO Speedwagon fan who lives on downtown Champaign's honorary REO Speedwagon Way with Zoe the French bulldog, Randles has been a proud Rotarian for going on 20 years — with a term as president coming in 2025-26 — and also serves on the boards of the UI Community Credit Union, Champaign County Crime Stoppers and Illini Rebounders.

The Mundelein native took time out to answer questions from Editor Jeff D'Alessio in the 229th installment of our weekly speed read spotlighting leaders of organizations big and small.

I can't live without ... New York City, REO Speedwagon, Krekel's and Diet Coke.

My one unbreakable rule of the workplace is ... never break the law.

My philosophy on meetings is ... short, sweet and to the point. Always end every meeting confirming everyone is explicitly aware of action items they are responsible for moving forward.

When it comes to the hardest thing about being a leader ... I'm not sure it's the hardest thing, but I think it's the most important: Remember that being an effective communicator with everyone you work with is the key to successful leadership.

My single favorite moment of all time in this job ... is yet to come, I'm pretty sure.

The three adjectives I hope my staff would use to describe me are ... honest, flexible and competent.

On my office walls, you will find ... pictures of my sister (Melissa), my nephews (Holden and Finn) and my French bulldog (Zoe). Plus, a map of my travels, my degrees and certificates, and a board with the graph theory problem from "Good Will Hunting."

As far as professional role models go ... Jon Surma was my predecessor at Parkland College. Without his mentorship, encouragement and support, I would have never had a 30-plus-year career at Parkland.

Ken Gunji is a man that introduced me to community service. He was instrumental in getting me involved in Champaign Rotary and Champaign County Crime Stoppers. He also introduced me to his wonderful



network of family and friends. He always looked to connect people and help everyone.

If I could trade places for a week with any other business person in town ... I'm hesitant to say I'd trade places with anyone, knowing everyone's job has its challenges. And my life and job are wonderful. But not every town has an NFL team owner and that sounds like a really cool job. So, maybe Mr. Shad Khan.

I'm frugal ... only in my professional role at Parkland College.

The first thing I do when I get to work most days is ... log on to Sirius Radio and enjoy my fountain Diet Coke from McDonald's.

For lunch ... I go off campus every day. I think it's important to have a change of scenery and reset for the afternoon. My go-to lunch spot is Dos Reales — and I don't need a menu: Speedy Gonzales with shredded chicken, cheese sauce on the enchilada, soft flour taco, rice and, of course, a Diet Coke.

How I wind down after work ... depends on the day, but it often involves an espresso martini or a Tito's and soda.

The last luxury in which I indulged was ... going with my girlfriend, Aimee Thomas, to Boston for the Illini's NCAA tournament games in March. It was a trip made on short notice, obviously. But,

it was a fantastic weekend.

We had the opportunity to explore the city between games with friends and other Illini fans. We were fortunate to have excellent seats for both games, surrounded by familiar faces from Champaign. I even ran into a classmate from high school. So cool. It was a really fun way to end such an exciting Illini basketball season.

The last book I read cover-to-cover was ... "Uniquely Human: A Different Way of Seeing Autism." And it was wonderful.

I'm up and at 'em every day by ... the fourth or fifth round of my snooze alarm.

When it comes to my exercise routine ... exercise? I'm hoping walking my dog, Zoe, downtown and in West Side Park counts as exercise.

The first job I ever had was ... delivering the local newspaper in Mundelein as a kid. But my first "real" job was working at Sears in Decatur.

My parents made me a deal: They would buy me a car — 1977 MGB — if I got a job and paid for all gas and repairs, a very costly deal for me. I still remember my mom driving me to Sears to fill out an application. I was hired on the spot and started the next day.

I had to have a high school buddy come over to help me tie my tie my first day. I ended up working at Sears in Decatur all through high school and in Champaign all through college. It was a great experience.

The worst job I ever had happened when ... I lived in the Orlando, Fla., area for a summer after graduation from U of I. I had a temp job for a computer hardware company. My job consisted of inputting handwritten warranty cards in a database while taking customer calls/complaints about faulty hardware. ❧

PICTURE THIS

Past winners and stalwarts in the agriculture community gathered in April at Riggs Beer Co. in Urbana to honor Steve Hettinger at The News-Gazette's annual Farm Leader of the Year banquet



Robin Scholz photos

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: 2023 Farm Leader of the Year Steve Hettinger chats with past farm leader winner Lin Warfel; attendees make plates at the buffet; Hettinger's grandchildren — from left, Lucy Marx, 7, Clara Allwien, 2, and Jack Marx, 5 — chow down.



Riggs Beer Co. was packed with attendees who listened and chuckled as Hettinger spoke after being presented with the award.

50 and full of potential

Champaign health-and-fitness-focused publisher continues to grow — and innovate — as it marks a half-century

STORY Jana Wiersema PHOTOS Robin Scholz

Human Kinetics CEO Skip Maier works at a standing desk — as you might expect of someone constantly surrounded by information about physical fitness.

His office is part of the publishing company's headquarters on Market Street, just south of Interstate 74, with the building featuring an indoor gym for employees as well as an outdoor courtyard with athletic courts.

The company's first headquarters, on the other hand, was much more humble.

"I can't believe it has been 50 years since HK was founded on our ping-pong table in the basement," said Rainer Martens, who founded the business with his first wife, Marilyn.

The couple created the business, which specializes in publishing content related to physical activity and sports, in 1974.

Current and former staff gathered in May to commemorate the business's 50th anniversary, though the official anniversary was April 1.

"It feels really satisfying," he said. "Not many companies make it to a 50th anniversary, let alone independent companies headquartered in the same place where they were founded with the same mission."

According to company officials, the story of Human Kinetics began in 1973, when Martens — then a kinesiology professor at the University of Illinois — hosted the North American Society for the Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity conference.

Martens recalls that the gathering was "a huge success," with 150 people filling up the mansion at Allerton Park.

"The academic papers presented about this emerging subject beckoned for them to be published," he said. "I submitted the papers to several publishers, but they were rejected because of an ill-defined market. So my late wife, Marilyn, typed up all the papers and we self-published it, which was the start (and we thought the end) of Human Kinetics."

At the time, the couple planned to publish just the one title — "Psychology of Motor Behavior and Sport" — as a service to their

colleagues, Martens said. However, they were asked to publish the conference proceedings for the next several years and eventually started the Journal of Sport Psychology in 1979.

Maier said Human Kinetics published its first book, "Physiology of Fitness," in 1977. Company officials said the title, later renamed "Fitness & Health," is still a "leading professional fitness book" and now in its seventh edition.

1977 also marked the business's first hire, Julie Simon, who had completed her doctorate under Martens.

In time, Simon "grew into about every position at the company," Martens said.



Human Kinetics CEO Skip Maier poses in the book-selling area of the publishing firm in North Champaign.



Founder Rainer Martens in front of the business's humble earlier offices shortly after its founding.

"In 1984, the company began publishing educational resources for the YMCA, doubling the company's sales," Human Kinetics officials said. "The following year, Dr. Martens left the university to dedicate his time fully to growing Human Kinetics. That same year, Human Kinetics acquired Leisure Press, a sport and fitness trade publisher, expanding the business beyond academic and professional markets."

Martens said when he decided to resign from the UI, many of his colleagues both locally and around the country thought he had gone crazy.

Some attributed the career change to being "corrupted" by money, but Martens said that was not the case at all, as he had to borrow heavily during Human Kinetics' early years.

"I pursued HK because I saw the need for the distribution of knowledge coming forth from the bountiful work being done in the sport sciences and all the practical applications derived therefrom," he said. "As HK blossomed in the 1980s and 1990s, the attitude of colleagues changed from bewilderment to gratitude, which meant a great deal to me."

Marilyn Martens, who suffered from type 1 diabetes, continued to help with the business as much as she could even as her health deteriorated.

"Marilyn passed away in 1991, and Julie became Julie Martens in 1992," Rainer Martens said. "I'm proud to tell people I've had two fantastic, committed wives that have played an enormous role in the development of HK, and in my personal happiness."

According to Human Kinetics, Brian Holding took over as CEO in 1997. It was around this time that Rainer and Julie Martens began reducing their time commitment to the business.

The couple moved to Ormond Beach, Fla., in 2005, and Rainer resigned from the board of Human Kinetics in 2018.

Maier began working for Human Kinetics in 2013, and took over as CEO in 2016 after Holding stepped down.



Statues of children playing and reading greet visitors outside Human Kinetics' offices in Champaign.

He was attracted to the culture, as well as the fact that its subject matter was something he had a personal interest in.

"It's very satisfying to know that we're publishing materials that are helping people lead happier, healthier lives," he said. "So I think just knowing that I play some part in that is very fulfilling."

While Human Kinetics may have only gone through three CEOs over the past 50 years, it has seen a number of other changes, officials said. In the 1990s, the business expanded to publish video, software and online education products.

"Like many industries, technology has revolutionized the publishing industry," Martens said. "The digitization of content has greatly facilitated the preparation of original content, making it easier and less costly to prepare a manuscript for production."

Another milestone came in 2005, when the business was sold to workers as part of an employee stock-ownership plan.

"Today, Human Kinetics has 170 employees in the United States and Canada and boasts annual sales of \$25 million, with over 2,000 different products currently available," officials said.

Maier also said the world of publishing has become "much more digital."

"The biggest challenge is the belief that,

because of the advent of the internet, information should be free," he said. "That includes educational information and general information. And so we're consistently battling against free information on YouTube and social media. So it's a challenge for us to be able to set apart the information that we and our authors create, specifically ensuring that it's at a higher level of vetted information."

Senior acquisitions editor Michelle Earle, who has been with the company for 20 years, said one of the ways it has evolved is how it uses social media to connect with readers and authors.

Marketing and social-media content manager Aaron Patterson said his work includes producing a variety of videos. Some focus on workouts or exercise techniques, while others feature interviews with authors. Patterson, who stepped into the role in 2022, said the position was a new one.

"I think the pandemic kind of helped start this position with the need for video content just so that we can get even more information out to our audiences," he said.

Maier said the company and the publishing industry both did fairly well during the pandemic, though working from home was an adjustment.

The long-term impact is that many Human Kinetics employees have opted to continue working remotely or in a hybrid format — including Patterson, who lives in Bloomington and works from home two days per week.

When asked where he sees the company going in the future, Maier replied, "We're going to continue going in the direction in which we always have. I think we just need to continue to change and adapt to the needs of the marketplace — expectations of students, expectations of coaches, expectations of athletes and professionals. As long as we're willing to adapt and change and meet their needs, I think we'll continue to be successful for many years to come." ❌

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By LAURA WEIS
CIB contributor

Rebuilding your network post-pandemic

Yes, it's 2024, and we are still talking about the impact of COVID-19 on the workplace. The pandemic has caused an undeniable workforce shift. Numerous articles and newly coined buzzy phrases such as "quiet quitting," "The Great Resignation," "coffee badging" and "bare-minimum Monday" have appeared to describe it.

The sudden pivot to remote work exposed employees to a new environment they never knew was possible. After experiencing that environment, workers discovered a new work-life balance they may have preached but hadn't practiced. And employees liked it.

When COVID-19 hit, there was speculation about which workplace norms would remain and which might fall by the wayside. At the pandemic's peak, few could envision a day when we would willingly shake hands again. Yet here we are, still shaking away.

Employees became "Zoomed out," and many longed for the day when we could meet again in person. Then we emerged from the pandemic fog, and even though we said we longed for togetherness, we have been slow to gather for professional activities.

In a study by an association of meeting planners, 73.3 percent of respondents said their events had lower attendance since the pandemic. This trend should concern employers, as it can lead to employees diminishing their professional networks. Employees choosing to opt out of professional networking events coupled with a higher percentage of remote workers can ultimately be detrimental for both employee and employer.

There was a time when an employee attended a volunteer opportunity or a networking coffee and the employer benefited from having their employee serve as a company ambassador. This signaled that the employee was invested and engaged in their job and employment.

Now that the emotional, mental and physical benefits of work-life balance have crystallized for many after the pandemic, it's vital to strike a balance so the scale doesn't tip too far into the life category and workers lose a critical tool in their professional career — their network.

For the small-business owner, a solid, cultivated network is a way for their business to grow organically. It is an opportunity to identify mentors who can be a sounding board on critical decisions. Your network is about whom you do business with, the vendors you trust, the hot sales leads versus the cold calls, and the partnerships and projects you collaborate on to grow your company and better the local economy.

For entrepreneurs, in addition to networks that create partnerships, client acquisition, and collaborations, regular interaction with industry peers can enhance one's reputation and credibility.

Your cultivated network could be as significant as your next paycheck. While no one wants to think about it, the harsh reality is we are all replaceable. In 2022, 54 percent of hiring came from referrals — not résumés online. Imagine being on the receiving end of a layoff notice. Ask yourself, who is in your network? If this isn't an easy answer, perhaps it is time to create a plan and foster relationships.

Networking can open doors to new job opportunities, promotions and career shifts. However, it can also be about sharing knowledge, exchanging ideas and gaining new insights. It becomes a platform for finding mentors, advisers and supportive peers.

Networking can be time consuming, and you may feel like you are creating superficial relationships — two factors that may even deter you from developing your network. However, it is important to remember that a professional network is not your circle of friends (although members of your network can be friends). It is a transactional relationship that serves multiple purposes, particularly in a professional context.

Small-business owners, managers and employees have several avenues to jump-start their networking efforts.

In-person networking, such as local meetups and industry socials, provides face-to-face interactions that can lead to immediate connections. Online networking through platforms like LinkedIn offers the convenience of building and maintaining relationships across the globe. Attending events and conferences allows for immersion in industry trends. Mentorship programs facilitate deeper, one-on-one relationships with experienced professionals who can provide guidance and open doors to new opportunities. Each method plays a role in creating a well-rounded and strong professional network.

Networking is a safety net for all professional, and professional networks are like Wi-Fi — invisible but essential. So whether you have your sights set on the corner office or revenue growth for your company, remember that your next big break could come from the person sitting across from you — virtually or otherwise.

While technological advances have changed the workplace, one thing hasn't changed: There will always be the need to work the room, even if that room is virtual.

Check out the Chamber's calendar at champaigncounty.org to find a networking opportunity that fits your schedule. 

Laura Weis, president and CEO of the Champaign County Chamber of Commerce, writes for Central Illinois Business magazine. Email her at LauraW@champaigncounty.org.



2024 The News-Gazette The People's Choice

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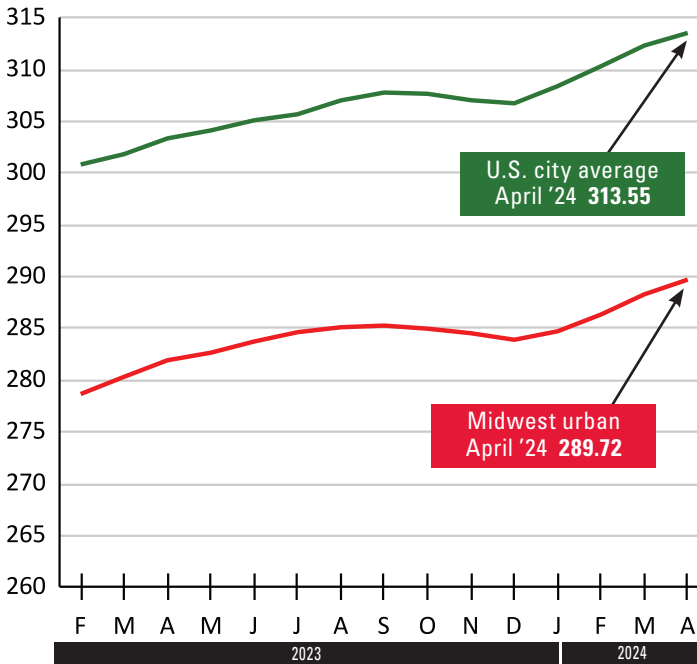
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INDICATORS

Consumer price index

The CPI measures average price changes of goods and services over time, with a reference base of 100 in 1982-84. To put that into context, a current CPI of 270.75 means a market basket of goods and services that cost \$100 in 1982-84 now costs \$270.75.



Amtrak total monthly riders

	April 2024	March 2024
Bloomington-Normal	18,941	20,525
Champaign-Urbana	19,627	21,255
Mattoon	2,325	2,599
Rantoul	360	345

Weekly grain prices

Prices for grain crops for the week of May 29, 2024. Figures are for this week and the percentage change compared with a year ago.

(b) = per bushel; (t) = per ton; (100 wt.) = per hundredweight

Grain	May 29, 2024	2023
Central Illinois Corn (b)	4.36	▼ -29.8%
Central Illinois Soybean (b)	12.21	▼ -9.2%
Central Illinois 48% Soybean Meal Rail (t)	408.00	0.0%
Hard Red Winter Wheat (b)	7.5525	▼ -14.6%
Truck to Kansas City		
Dark Northern Spring Wheat (b)	9.2275	▼ -7.2%
14% MN, Rail		
Soft White Wheat Portland (b)	6.6333	▼ -6.6%
Sorghum, Kansas City (100 wt.) Rail	4.6800	▼ -25.4%

Source: USDA Livestock & Grain Market News

Hotel/motel statistics

Total amount of revenue generated in Champaign and Urbana by hotels and motels for room rentals only.

TOTAL REVENUE		
April '24	March '24	Change
\$447,527.81	\$442,763.70	▲ 12.23%
YEAR-TO-DATE TOTALS		
2024	2023	Change
\$1,465,814.17	\$1,546,993.25	▼ -5.24%

Source: Cities of Champaign and Urbana

Prices at the pump

Average price per gallon of regular unleaded gas as of June 11, 2024.

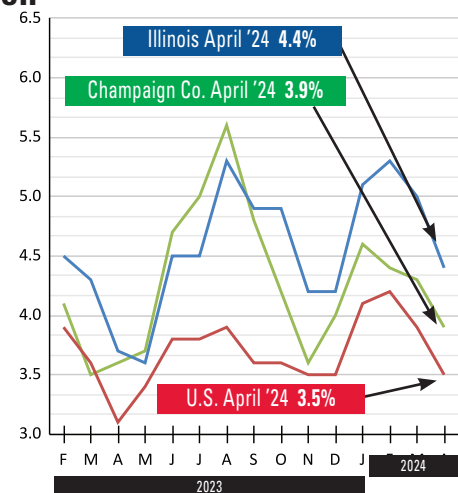
Area	June '24	June '23
Bloomington-Normal	\$3.51	\$3.66
Champaign-Urbana	\$3.48	\$3.62
Chicago	\$4.43	\$4.56
Danville	\$3.54	\$3.68
Decatur	\$3.40	\$3.45
Illinois	\$3.78	\$3.98
U.S.	\$3.44	\$3.59

Source: AAA

Unemployment rates for Central Illinois counties, state and nation

County	Labor Force	Jobless	April '24 (%)	March '24 (%)	April '23 (%)	Change Month (%)	Change Year (%)
Champaign	114,308	4,436	3.9	4.3	3.6	▲ -0.4	▼ 0.3
Coles	23,332	903	3.9	4.3	3.8	▲ -0.4	▼ 0.1
Douglas	10,244	329	3.2	3.4	3.1	▲ -0.2	▼ 0.1
Edgar	9,162	324	3.5	4.0	3.1	▲ -0.5	▼ 0.4
Ford	6,576	260	4.0	4.5	3.7	▲ -0.5	▼ 0.3
Iroquois	12,910	597	4.6	5.6	4.2	▲ -1.0	▼ 0.4
Macon	43,982	2,496	5.7	6.2	5.6	▲ -0.5	▼ 0.1
McLean	90,471	3,444	3.8	4.1	3.3	▲ -0.3	▼ 0.5
Moultrie	7,042	242	3.4	3.7	3.1	▲ -0.3	▼ 0.3
Piatt	8,989	309	3.4	3.9	3.3	▲ -0.5	▼ 0.1
Vermilion	31,702	1,678	5.3	5.7	5.1	▲ -0.4	▼ 0.2
Region	358,718	15,018	4.1	4.5	3.8	▲ -0.4	▼ 0.3
State	6,480,427	287,509	4.4	5.0	3.8	▲ -0.6	▼ 0.6
U.S.	167,484,000	5,894,000	3.5	3.9	3.1	▲ -0.4	▼ 0.4

Source: Illinois Department of Employment Security, U.S. Department of Labor. Figures not seasonally adjusted.



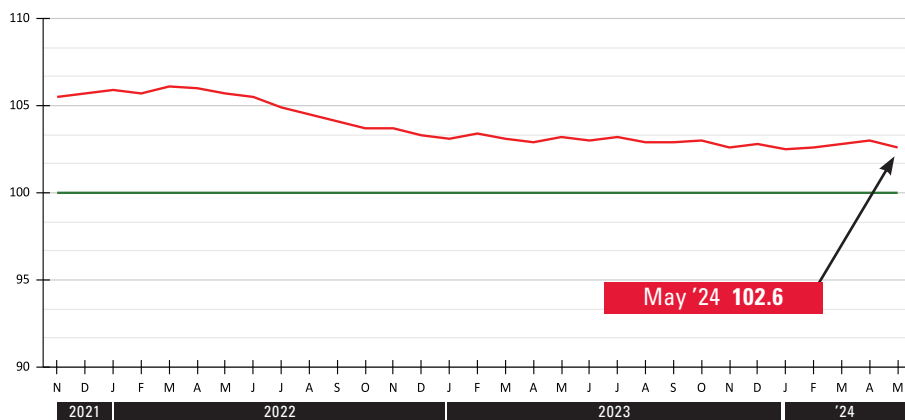
University of Illinois flash index

What is the flash index?

The flash index is an early indicator of the Illinois economy's expected performance. It is a weighted average of Illinois growth rates in corporate earnings, consumer spending and personal income.

An index above 100 indicates expected economic growth; an index below 100 indicates the economy is contracting.

Source: Institute of Government and Public Affairs, University of Illinois



Champaign County retail sales collections

	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	Change ('18 vs. '23)
Champaign	\$22,423,142.90	\$21,941,280.97	\$21,169,808.79	\$16,177,806	\$17,255,397	\$17,088,725	▲ 31.2%
Mahomet	\$1,349,874.56	\$1,270,175.71	\$1,168,075.53	\$803,904	\$735,564	\$761,147	▲ 77.3%
Philo	\$168,537.50	\$165,797.37	\$150,664.38	\$110,493	\$105,128	\$111,841	▲ 50.7%
Rantoul	\$1,942,623.56	\$1,863,869.32	\$1,890,124.30	\$1,595,889	\$1,525,491	\$1,435,536	▲ 35.3%
Savoy	\$2,956,401.11	\$2,774,294.31	\$2,819,845.62	\$2,414,976	\$2,323,105	\$2,434,367	▲ 21.4%
St. Joseph	\$362,727.36	\$349,775.82	\$316,934.00	241,633	\$235,632	\$239,371	▲ 51.5%
Tolono	\$258,874.61	\$255,139.44	\$224,679.43	\$172,196	\$152,373	\$198,891	▲ 30.2%
Urbana	\$7,496,995.63	\$7,216,138.34	\$6,584,831.41	\$5,478,433	\$5,584,667	\$5,210,233	▲ 43.9%
Unincorporated	\$1,678,985.96	\$1,608,766.99	\$1,489,034.06	\$1,089,562	\$1,371,459	\$1,427,403	▲ 17.6%
County total	\$37,564,803.18	\$37,445,238.27	\$35,813,998	\$28,084,892	\$29,288,815	\$28,907,515	▲ 29.9%

Source: Latest statistics available from Illinois Department of Revenue

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Home sales Total units sold, including condominiums, by most-recent quarter.

County							Median sales price		
	4Q 2023	4Q 2022	Pct. Change	2023	2022	Pct. Change	4Q 2023	4Q 2022	Pct. Change
Champaign	476	547	▼ -13.0%	2,211	2,588	▼ -14.6%	\$214,900	\$185,000	▲ 16.2%
Coles	127	123	▲ 3.3%	543	583	▼ -6.9%	\$125,500	\$110,000	▲ 14.1%
Douglas	24	33	▼ -27.3%	175	195	▼ -10.3%	\$139,500	\$95,000	▲ 46.8%
Edgar	33	24	▲ 37.5%	144	160	▼ -10.0%	\$67,700	\$88,450	▼ -23.5%
Ford	40	43	▼ -7.0%	156	168	▼ -7.1%	\$139,550	\$122,000	▲ 14.4%
Iroquois	52	73	▼ -28.8%	240	319	▼ -24.8%	\$105,950	\$112,372	▼ -5.7%
Macon	292	345	▼ -15.4%	1,248	1,485	▼ -16.0%	\$127,000	\$118,250	▲ 7.4%
McLean	480	559	▼ -14.1%	2,025	2,478	▼ -18.3%	\$220,500	\$200,000	▲ 10.3%
Moultrie	31	28	▲ 10.7%	112	149	▼ -24.8%	\$95,000	\$102,000	▼ -6.9%
Piatt	55	36	▲ 52.8%	203	221	▼ -8.1%	\$170,000	\$143,750	▲ 18.3%
Vermilion	144	176	▼ -18.2%	650	725	▼ -10.3%	\$103,000	\$94,500	▲ 9.0%
Illinois	29,711	32,102	▼ -7.4%	132,120	161,695	▼ -18.3%	\$260,400	\$242,000	▲ 7.6%

Source: Illinois Association of Realtors

Willard Airport passenger totals

Monthly totals	April '24	April '23	Change
Enplanements	7,896	5,146	▲ 53.4%

YTD totals	April '24	April '23	Change
Enplanements	24,307	20,322	▲ 19.6%
Annual totals	2023	2022	Change
Enplanements	70,355	63,128	▲ 11.4%

Primary Mortgage Market Survey

Freddie Mac surveys lenders each week on the rates, fees and points for the most popular mortgage products. The following are the average rates for the week of June 6, 2024, for the U.S. and for the North Central region, which includes Illinois, and the average rates for the U.S. one year ago. The Primary Mortgage Market Survey no longer publishes fees/points or adjustable rates, as of Nov. 17, 2022.

Mortgage type	U.S. June '24	U.S. June '23
30-year fixed	6.99%	6.71%
15-year fixed	6.29%	6.07%

Source: Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corp.

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Extra-value meals



RIGHT: Longtime McDonald's franchisees Don and Deanna Witzel talk shop at the North Vermilion Street location in Danville — one of seven in their portfolio. **ABOVE:** Among the many changes in the Witzels' quarter-century as franchisees: Touchscreen kiosks that allow customers to order and pay for their food without an employee's help.



Vermilion County franchisees Don and Deanna Witzel are set to mark 25 years of feeding their community

STORY Jennifer Bailey

PHOTOS Robin Scholz

DANVILLE

With more than 400 members in their “McFamily,” Don and Deanna Witzel say keys to their success include their employees, embracing their community and loving where they live.

The Witzels are one of many families who have helped shape the Vermilion County area.

On July 1, they will be celebrating 25 years of owning and operating McDonald's restaurants. They started with four, two in Danville — on South Gilbert Street and North Vermilion Street — one in Hoopeson and one in Oakwood. Now they have seven, after adding a third Danville restaurant at Main Street and Bowman Avenue, one in Georgetown and one in Covington, Ind.

“It's gone by fast,” Deanna said of the 25 years.

The Witzels hold customer-appreciation weeks with specials to celebrate the anniversary.



The Witzels remodeled the restaurant at 3195 N. Vermilion St. in Danville into a Classic Rock 'n' Roll McDonald's in 2007.

"In the past, we've always done special things on special days, and that was always very popular," Don said.

This year, they were finalizing what they're going to do to celebrate 25 years. Plans could include events with Balloons Over Vermilion and Danville Stadium.

Lifelong devotion

Deanna, 58, started working at McDonald's while in high school, serving as part of the crew at a Peoria location. When she was 21, a friend was moving to Las Vegas, so Deanna transferred to McDonald's corporate as an assistant manager. That's where she met Don, a Las Vegas native.

Don, 61, had been in Las Vegas since he was 2 months old, when his father, who was in the Air Force, was relocated there. He started working at McDonald's after high school, planning for it to be a summer job before starting a military career.

"But I loved it," Don said. He was 17 going on 18. "I was having a great time

and got promoted quickly, and the rest was history."

Don met Deanna while managing the McDonald's where she was transferred as an assistant manager. She worked for him for about three months.

"Deanna was already very good, but they had to place her," Don said.

She soon was then running her own restaurant.

Don and Deanna would go on to get married and have two children.

Deanna said she spent a lot of time in different departments in Las Vegas — marketing for awhile, then human resources, and both she and her eventual husband ran restaurants.

"At one point, I had all the McDonald's on the Las Vegas Strip, and I opened a lot of restaurants," she said. "I always wanted to own my own."

She said McDonald's officials in Las Vegas didn't really want them to go, but "we were determined that we wanted to be our own bosses and we wanted to own our own restaurants. That was a dream that we had had."

A fateful visit

They wound up in Vermilion County because of an ironic twist of fate.

"In order to try to find what we were going to buy and love, and raise our children, we just started looking at McDonald's all over the country," Deanna said.

She wanted to try to get close to home in Washington, Ill., and if possible, they wanted to raise their kids in the Midwest. Children Rob and Katie were 8 and 7 when the family first started looking.

The Witzels flew to Indianapolis to visit Deanna's aunt in Peoria, and were heading back to Indy on Interstate 74 to look at some restaurants when they stopped at a McDonald's to get a cup of coffee and use the restroom.

Deanna said she looked up at the big PlayPlace and told Don, "This is the kind of McDonald's I want to own."

"Unfortunately, a lot of ones we had looked at were not the best," Deanna said. "They were in areas that we didn't really want to live in, and so we really

struggled with that."

Don and Deanna said since they were company employees, they were sent to a lot of restaurants that were in poorer shape and needed a lot of attention.

"They knew we could turn them around," Deanna said. "But that really wasn't our dream."

They continued to Indianapolis and looked at different restaurants but didn't really feel like those were it, either.

Deanna said she then got on the phone, calling regional offices to see what other restaurants were for sale.

She reached out to a friend she had worked with in Peoria who was in St. Louis, who put her in contact with a licensing manager in the region.

When she saw three restaurants for sale in the 217 area code, Deanna said she knew that had to be close to her dad, who lived in Taylorville.

"I told Don, I said, 'I think we should go look at this. It's probably more than we can afford, but let's go

look at it,'" she said.

They ended up pulling into the parking lot of the South Gilbert Street McDonald's in Danville — the same one that had caught her eye when they stopped in while heading back to Indianapolis from Peoria.

"I just knew it was a God thing. It was where we were meant to be," Deanna said.

They agreed on buying that location and making it work, she said, and everything then just worked out.

By the time they had purchased the restaurants, the Oakwood location had just opened. When the deal was completed, that restaurant was 6 months old, so they ended up with four restaurants.

Putting in the work

Since then, they opened the restaurant in Georgetown, remodeled all of their locations, rebuilt the one in Hoopeston, opened the third location

in 2013 and opened their newest location in Covington, Ind., in 2021.

The South Gilbert Street McDonald's was No. 108 in the franchise's roster.

"So, it's one of the oldest," Deanna said about the location, which initially opened as a walk-up restaurant in 1959.

She and Don said former McDonald's CEO Ray Kroc started numbering restaurants at No. 26 instead of No. 1, because he didn't want people to know he was just getting started.

The Hoopeston location was the second McDonald's in Vermilion County, and the one on North Vermilion Street in Danville was third. It is No. 4551.

The North Vermilion Street McDonald's was remodeled in 2007. It used to face County Market and had a basement. Then it was remade into a Classic Rock 'n' Roll McDonald's.

The Covington, Ind., community has embraced the location that opened in September 2021.

"It's going very well," Deanna said.



An employee washes the sidewalk outside the North Vermilion Street restaurant.

She said Mayor Brad Crain wanted a McDonald's, but the Witzels initially turned him down three times, because they were having trouble finding space for a double-lane drive-thru. Crain then helped get additional property to make it happen.

"He was very determined. He's been a great partner," Deanna said. "They do a lot of great things. It's such a neat community with all different activities and events."

Employees and family

The Witzels said their number of employees, around 400, fluctuates some during the year. The winter months are a little bit slower, Deanna said.

But there's not a big difference, she said, with only about 20-30 positions changing out, if that.

Don said the total stays pretty consistent at about 425 to 430.

They also have several long-term employees who have been with McDonald's for two to three decades.

Longtime employee Craig Dixon, currently a supervisor, has been with McDonald's for 30 years. Mary McMasters, who works at the North Vermilion Street location, has been with the Witzels for all 25 years. Her coworker Lisa Cox has been there more than 30 years. Sara Rhodes has been with the Witzels for 22 years and is currently at the Hoopston location.

Several employees have retired too.

The Witzels appreciate their staff and team. Deanna said when they first moved here, she would write Christmas cards to every employee with messages. She still writes birthday cards, and they celebrate graduations with personal notes.

The Witzels recognize Employees of the Month and celebrate their anniversaries and have treat days and appreciation weeks.

"We really feel like they're part of our family," Deanna said. "We say



McFamily, but they really feel like they're part of our family. We appreciate them. We know that we couldn't do it without them. So they mean a lot to us."

Employee Mario Sanchez of Danville was cleaning windows at the North Vermilion Street restaurant in the bright sunshine one afternoon. He said he's been working there a couple years. "I like working here," he said.

The Witzels' son, Rob, now 35, has also followed in their footsteps. He started working at McDonald's in high school and is now an area manager. He was 10 when they moved to Danville.

Deanna said when they made the move, they didn't know anyone and didn't have day care for their kids, so

Rob and Katie came to work with them.

Their office, now on Boiling Springs Road in Danville, was upstairs at the South Gilbert Street restaurant at the time, and Deanna said Rob and Katie would argue over who got to make drinks and who had to clean the lobby. "I always lost," Rob said.

As they got older, Rob and Katie had uniforms and served as Ronald Rangers, monitoring the PlayPlaces, playing with the children and making sure they were clean. They also helped with birthday parties.

Rob said most of the time it was fun and he could have all the Happy Meals he wanted. He still collects Happy Meal toys.

Key to success

Don and Deanna say they can attribute their success to several things.

"I really think it's the people," Deanna said. "It's the giving back to the community. It's being involved and caring. I think being a part of the community."

One of the things that was really important to them when they moved to Danville was to give back to the community that supports their businesses — not only to show appreciation to their customers, but also to provide resources for their employees.

During COVID-19, the Witzels partnered with the Danville school district to provide food for students.

"We just really have been proud that McDonald's is a place where the community comes together," Deanna said. "When there's a need, we're the first person that they think of, and that really means a lot to us."

She said getting involved in her community is just part of who she is. "I like to be involved. I like to be able to help and make things better," she said. "This is home to us."

Don said, "We live here. We're part of the community as well."

The Witzels say they've always tried to live according to the Bible verse "To whom much is given, much will be required." When you've been blessed, you should share it with others,

Deanna said. She said they try to do that not only with their financial resources, but also their time.

The Witzels have helped the community financially and with mental-health and other initiatives, such as with the Step Up group. Deanna has also served on the boards of Vermilion Advantage including two stints as chairwoman; OSF Sacred Heart Medical Center; and the Vermilion Housing Authority. She was also elected to the Vermilion County Board.

"Step Up is really my heart," Deanna said.

The independent, nonprofit organization was started in 2017 to focus on addressing critical issues in the community, including parenting and families, substance abuse and mental health. Its mission is to bring the community together and identify and address current challenges facing the county. Step Up focuses on empowering growth and development and creating positive economic, educational, social and spiritual outcomes.

"We just have an amazing community," Deanna said. "People can talk about Danville and Vermilion County and be negative, but there's so many wonderful things. If there's a need, there's somebody to step up and fill that need."

Best-sellers; tasty Coke

The Witzels are used to getting questions about the food and drinks at McDonald's.

And McDonald's has its own secret recipe — for its Coca-Cola products.

Deanna said Kroc always made deals, and to be exclusive, he wanted something in return. With Coca-Cola, he sought a special formula only for McDonald's.

"It is different. I can't drink Diet Coke anywhere else," Deanna said.

The Witzels said the secret to why McDonald's soda tastes different involves the ratio of syrup to carbonation.

“There is something there. I don’t know exactly what it is because we’re not privy to that,” Deanna said. “That is a fact. It is different.”

As far as best-selling items at their restaurants, Deanna said each one is different.

For example, in the farming communities around Hoopeston especially, Georgetown and somewhat Oakwood, a lot of the larger sandwiches are the bigger sellers. In Danville, higher sellers are more along the lines of McChickens, and they sell a lot more breakfast items at the North Vermilion Street location with people on the go.

At the South Gilbert Street location, which has a PlayPlace, they sell a lot more Happy Meals and larger orders. “Every restaurant has it’s own uniqueness in terms of what they sell most,” Deanna said. All of the restaurants have their regular customers, too, who come every day.



Employees get food ready to serve in the kitchen area of the McDonald's on North Vermilion Street in Danville.

“That’s really special to us,” Deanna said. Don added that McDonald’s also has special limited-time offerings, such

as when it brings the McRib sandwich back for a few weeks. “That’s super popular and people get excited about it,” he said.

McDonald’s just brought bagels back, and that’s been very popular, Deanna said. A new McFlurry flavor right now is the Grandma McFlurry with butterscotch flavoring to remind people of their grandmas having butterscotch candies.

Menu never gets old

The Witzels pretty much eat McDonald’s everyday, Deanna said, adding that it’s at least five days a week. Sometimes, daughter Katie will pick up breakfast and bring them something. Their grandkids love it.

Deanna said they never get tired of the fries and other items. “Strawberry pie is my weakness,” she said. “It’s my favorite.” Seeing families enjoying themselves in their restaurants also touches her heart, she said.

The Witzels said the North Vermilion Street location is their busiest, having taken the crown from the South Gilbert Street McDonald’s, though sometimes during a holiday weekend, with more travelers passing by on I-74, the South Gilbert location will be busier.

The North Vermilion location has also hosted events, such as car shows, through the years, and each October, it hosts the Sheriff’s Showcase, where emergency vehicles are set up and there are demonstrations.

Looking ahead

The Witzels said every day is different when working. They float around to their restaurants. “That’s my favorite thing about what we do, is every day is different,” Deanna said. “We never repeat the exact same day.” She might include meetings with Vermilion Advantage, the housing authority or Step Up. She and friend Linda Darby are working on a community-resource hub. “It’s just always something; never a dull moment. We don’t sit,” she said.

She said she tries to watch TV once she gets home but usually goes to sleep. When she stops, she drops. The Witzels aren’t sure what the future holds. In their free time, Don and Deanna love to travel. Don achieved his goal of visiting all 50 states by age 50. When they travel, they check out other McDonald’s, too. Having two grandchildren now changes things as well, Deanna said.

“We’re just both crazy about the grandkids,” Don said. “If we don’t see them after like a day or two, we’re like ‘Get them on the phone.’” “FaceTime is the greatest thing ever,” Deanna said. Don said they love being there for their grandchildren, spoiling them and having fun with them.

Retirement may not be too far off. There have been conversations. “We are considering that. It’s hard to know when the right time is,” Deanna said. “But we’re not getting any younger.” They’ve been happy with the number of restaurants they have. “Six was always my magic number,” Deanna said, adding that they went one over. Don said with a laugh that when they first got to Danville, he thought they wanted to take over Illinois. “But the energy levels are different now,” he said. Deanna said you can spread yourself out too thin. “There are a lot of other operators that have a lot more restaurants. You can’t be as involved because you don’t physically have the time,” she added. Don said the neat thing is “we live in this county. We live in this town. I can’t imagine the operators that are spread over several towns. You don’t have that connection.” “We like the local connection. We like the personal connections that we have with people,” Deanna said. Don said it’s also neat to share their story with the younger, new employees. “We started at the bottom, we were crew people just like them,” he said, adding that if you do the best job you can, over time, you will see successes. Deanna said they share the hope that anything is possible if you work hard and don’t give up on your dreams. ✂

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Fisher National Bank

It just makes cents

Investing in asset growth — both physical and monetary — has paid off for what has turned into a financial institution

The main lobby of Fisher National Bank's Champaign branch on Staley Road near the Carle at the Fields development, which started as a loan-production in 2012 and was expanded to its current form in 2021.



Ryan Heiser joined Fisher National Bank in 2006 and was named president and CEO four years later.

STORY Dave Hinton
PHOTOS Robin Scholz

FISHER

Steady growth has been a hallmark of Fisher National Bank since the early 2000s. Founded in the small northern Champaign County community of Fisher in 1955, the financial institution remained a one-bank facility for close to a half-century.

But “after 47 years of serving the Fisher community, we decided it was time to grow,” President/CEO Ryan Heiser said.

The expansion started in 2002 with a small branch in a Mahomet convenience store that became a full-service bank four years later. In July, the bank’s sixth branch will open in Danville.

In between, the bank opened a loan-production office in Champaign in 2012, expanding it to a full-service branch nine years later. It also acquired Catlin Bank’s Catlin and Georgetown branches in April 2023.

“We’ve been growing a lot,” Heiser said. “We’ve more than doubled our size in the last four years. We managed to build in Champaign and are doing a remodeling project in Danville. We bought an old bank building, and we decided to invest quite a bit of money into it and to remodel it.

“We want our buildings to be something to be proud of to work in and for customers to walk into.”

He said the goal is not to become a mega bank, but to be one of the highest-performing banks in downstate Illinois.

Heiser’s banking career began in 1997 at Peoples State Bank in Mansfield. He joined Fisher National Bank in 2006 and was named president and CEO four years later.

He said of the role of a bank president, “You have to be a jack of all trades.”

“In a way, we’re kind of redefining the role as we go,” he said. “We still have good client relations and business development.”

Heiser said a great deal of time is spent mentoring staff, and an emphasis is put on “staying involved locally with our staff as much as possible.”

The bank’s executive team and its board of directors work well together with a unified vision, according to Heiser.

“We’ve all been committed to growing,” he said. “We want to serve the communities we live in. We’re evenly dispersed between Champaign and Vermilion counties.”

As examples of its growth, the bank’s total assets have increased from \$150 million to \$330 million since 2020.

“We did that through a unified team effort, a supportive board and a talented staff,” Heiser said. “We also try very hard to treat people the way they should be treated.”

Heiser was awarded Banker of



Branch Manager Jamie Birkey, right, chats with customer-service representative Santana Turner in the lobby of the building on Staley Road in southwest Champaign.



the Year in 2020 by his peers in the Career Development Division of the Community Bankers Association of Illinois.

He said the bank has a strong

commitment to family home loans, small-business banking and agricultural lending.

The bank also has wealth-management services and a financial adviser. ✂

Nothing Bundt Cakes

Learning curve



Nothing Bundt Cakes owner Mila Thomas Fuller chats with customer Ashley Connour of Mattoon while ringing up her order at her store in Champaign.

A career change in the middle of a pandemic? Piece of ... well, you know

STORY Jana Wiersema

PHOTOS Robin Scholz

CHAMPAIGN

In 2020, Mila Thomas Fuller opened her own Nothing Bundt Cakes franchise amid a worldwide pandemic — a fact that she acknowledges is “wild.”

“It was just a different way to approach

business,” she said. “But I think the beauty of it all is whenever you go into business, there’s always the things that are unpredictable.”

People “still needed a way to celebrate special milestones” during the pandemic, she said; it was just a matter of changing the method of delivery.



For instance, some people would take part in socially distant birthday parties where they would drive around and meet up with friends who would put cards, gifts and other goodies in their cars. Small Bundt cakes were a good fit for this, she said.

“The timing might not have been perfect, but it created an opportunity to really bring joy to people in the midst of a pandemic,” Fuller said.

Opening her own Nothing Bundt Cakes location was a career shift for Fuller. She had previously worked in education and instructional technology for several years, most recently as assistant director and interim director of online learning at the University of Illinois College of Education.

Fuller said education runs in the

family; her mother was a teacher in the Chicago Public Schools system for more than 30 years, and many of her cousins teach as well.

“Years ago, when I was working in education, my mom basically always said I caught on to technology really fast, so I started teaching teachers how to use technology,” she said. “And this was quite some time ago, but it was before technology was really fully integrated in schools.”

According to her LinkedIn profile, Fuller holds a bachelor’s degree in communications from the UI, a master’s in education, administration and supervision from Notre Dame of Maryland University, and a doctorate in education in instructional technology from Towson University.

Her résumé includes work with

the International Society for Technology in Education, Johns Hopkins University, the University of Maryland at University College, the Champaign-Urbana Schools Foundation, the National Council of Teachers of English and the Baltimore City Public School System.

Fuller said that her expertise in technology also comes in handy at Nothing Bundt Cakes, as she was able to use those skills to select systems that help increase productivity for hiring, scheduling and other processes.

In discussing how the career shift came about, Fuller explained she has relatives in Louisiana and would often visit Nothing Bundt Cakes during her trips there — and bring its baked goods back with her to Illinois.



When she initially inquired about starting a store in the Champaign area, the chain had no plans to expand to central Illinois. Not being one to give up, Fuller checked in periodically to see what their expansion plans were.

She estimated it was around 2018 when they said they were ready to expand into the region.

“I had done education and particularly education technology for so long that it was really exciting to be doing something different,” Fuller said.

One of her favorite parts of running the shop at 408 W. Town Center Blvd. is connecting with customers and hearing what occasions they plan to celebrate with its baked goods.

She also enjoys finding ways that the business can work with the community, such as helping with fundraisers.

“Whenever I dreamed about owning a business, it included having an environment that was fun and exciting, and an environment that had purpose,” Fuller said, noting that she also appreciates the team she works with.

She’s planning a “community-wide birthday party” for Sept. 6-7 to celebrate the shop being open for four years.

When asked what advice she would give to aspiring business owners, Fuller emphasized the importance of finding a good location, being flexible and “always ready for the unknowns,” having a good team, creating a solid business plan and “being ready to work.”

Being a business owner takes a lot of time, especially during the early days, she said. Fuller said she was able to keep going because “this is where I wanted to be.”

“I feel fortunate to have been in a field that I absolutely loved but also to have found something else that I love just as much,” she said. ✂

Addressing Champaign County's shortage of long-term-care beds



By JOAN DIXON
CIB contributor



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

The closure about a year ago of University Rehabilitation Center in east Urbana, formerly the Champaign County Nursing Home, prompted the creation of Advocates for Aging Care, a local group focused on addressing the shortage of long-term-care, skilled-nursing and rehabilitation beds in Champaign County.

About a year ago, a local group came together over concerns about the availability of long-term-care, skilled-nursing and rehabilitation beds in Champaign County. The concerns were raised after the closing of University Rehabilitation Center (formerly the Champaign County Nursing Home) in Urbana. Prior to that sale, Helia Healthcare and Heartland Healthcare were bought by the same company and closed. These three closures represented a loss of 463 licensed skilled-nursing beds. Skilled-nursing beds are used by patients when they are released from hospitals and not ready to return to their homes yet. They are also used by folks no longer able to live safely in their homes and those who need end-of-life care.

According to the state of Illinois, the projected number of skilled-nursing beds needed by 2026 in Champaign County is 748. Currently, there is a deficit of 337 beds. Due to these concerns, Advocates for Aging Care was organized to see what could be done. Initially, the thought was that a local developer could be interested in owning and operating a facility. Turns out, if it were that easy, it would have been done already. So much has been learned. With the support of the Champaign County Board, the group engaged the Champaign-Urbana Public Health Department to perform a needs assessment targeted to the demographics and needs of the older residents and family members.

These findings were very informative. Champaign County witnessed a population surge of 14.6 percent from 2000 to 2020, far surpassing Illinois' overall growth rate of 3 percent. While the median age in Champaign County only increased from 28.6 to 30.8, the 60-plus population in Champaign County grew by 67 percent. The 881 respondents to the study expressed that 14 percent of the older adults found themselves in a long-term-care, rehab or skilled-nursing facility. Of those, 70 percent said they experienced difficulty in securing placement. The issues were:

- Lack of facilities: 80 percent
- Limited services: 38 percent
- Staffing shortages: 38 percent
- Affordability: 33 percent

While almost all of the older adults in Champaign County (99 percent) have some form of health care, whether it is Medicare, Medicaid or Veterans Affairs Healthcare, a shortage of licensed beds becomes an issue for people of all socio-economic classes, regardless of the payor source, even if they have the ability to pay for themselves. There are 17 licensed assisted-living facilities in the county but only four skilled-nursing facilities: Accolade Health Care of Savoy, Illini Heritage Rehab in Champaign, Country Health in Gifford and ClarkLindsey in Urbana. The latter has redefined its business plan and is reducing its number of skilled-nursing beds. The implications of this critical shortage are obvious for the patients needing this level of care: lack of availability, lack of choice, having to go out of the county, distancing from their preferred health care organizations,

isolation from their families and friends. There is also a significant financial implication for the county. Millions of dollars are spent on this level of care that could be going to our local economy — most significantly, in the area of health care employment and supporting services. All of that is lost as patients are forced to go outside the county. Generally, older adults are healthier than in years past. The result is that they are living longer. This indicates that there will continue to be an increased need for skilled-nursing and rehabilitation services. It is time for the infrastructure and planning for these service to occur. Collaborative efforts need to not only address the current shortages but also focus on affordability, accessibility and quality in health care delivery for everyone, regardless of their financial situations. To that end, the Advocates for Aging

Care brought together a community collaborative including Carle Health, Christie Clinic, OSF Healthcare, three different departments at the University of Illinois, Parkland College, the health district, Champaign County Health Care Consumers, the Community Foundation of East Central Illinois and the United Way of Champaign County. The group is in the next phase of the process, having initiated a market survey with a national organization. This will dive more deeply into the need and opportunity for a successful provider to come to Champaign County. These results should be available in July. Those interested in learning more about the Advocates for Aging Care or wanting to access the Champaign County needs assessment can go online to advocatesforagingcare.org.

Joan M. Dixon is a member of Advocates for Aging Care, the Age Friendly CU steering committee and the board of the East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging.



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