

A large indoor climbing gym with multiple colorful walls (orange, white, blue) and a climber. The walls are covered in various colored climbing holds. A climber is visible on the white wall, and another is on the orange wall. The gym is well-lit with overhead lights.

# ERIE READER

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### **The Ascension of Fifth and State**

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gym and new apartment housing*

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*Two renowned urbanists visited Erie to  
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**Publishers and Editors-in-Chief**  
Brian Graham & Adam Welsh

**Managing Editor**  
Erin Phillips

**Photographer**  
Jessica Hunter

**Contributors**  
Jonathan Burdick, Aaron Mook, Ben Spегgen

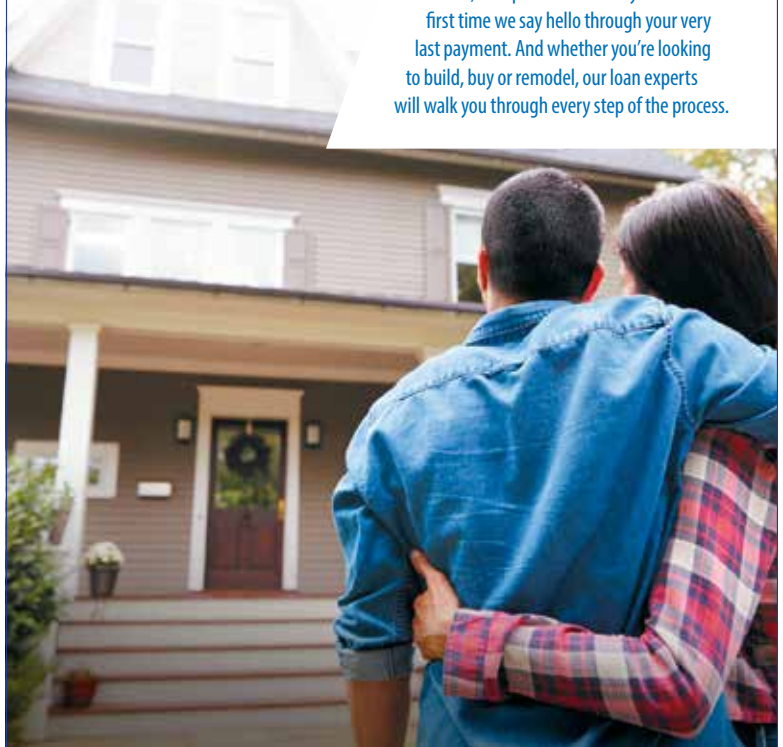
**Cover Photo**  
Jessica Hunter

**Cover Design**  
Nick Warren

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**Michael Carmosino**  
NMLS#: 2028250  
814.314.8229



**Angela Diver**  
NMLS#: 925184  
814.314.8234



**Angela Potter**  
NMLS#: 1139701  
814.314.8237



**Nancy Enterline**  
NMLS#: 715776  
814.314.8243



**Kimberly LeCorchick**  
NMLS#: 1451558  
814.314.8242

### LIBERTY ST.

### ALBION

### WEST 12TH ST.



**Jennifer Bond**  
NMLS#: 715778  
814.314.8233



**Craig Dombrowski**  
NMLS#: 1239699  
814.314.8230



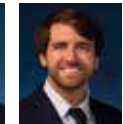
**Tammy Baker**  
NMLS#: 930658  
814.314.8247



**Alicia Wieczorek**  
NMLS#: 1826127  
814.464.2860



**Michael Kitts**  
NMLS#: 478625  
814.314.8247



**Andrew Blakely**  
NMLS#: 2403041  
814.464.2871

### EAST 38TH ST.

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**Debra Mealy**  
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## The Ascension of Fifth and State

New facility boasts expansive climbing gym and new apartment housing

By: Erin Phillips

Downtown Erie has undergone a slew of transformations since European colonists first set up shop in 1795. Once a dirt and cobbled path leading to the all-important port of Erie, State Street has grown and changed with the times but has always remained the main artery of our city.

The northwestern corner of Fifth and State has also gone through its fair share of changes. At one point, its mid-1800s architecture was consistent with nearby residential buildings, townhouses, and small shops. But in the 1930s, with the ever-increasing ownership of automobiles, the commercial and residential building on this corner was eliminated for the installation of a service station. Some from older generations may recall filling up or having a tire repaired at Penn Drake Service Station (or later Caughey Amoco), which occupied that corner of 5th and State for decades. Then, in 1983, a McDonald's franchise moved downtown (some time after the first McDonald's opened in Erie 23 years earlier at 4319 Peach St., and made itself a sensation) and that restaurant became a part of the fabric of our younger generations' downtown memories.

Cut to Oct. 31, 2019. The then-nascent Erie Downtown Development Corporation (EDDC) had much grander ideas for the property, monopolized by a fast food giant and its parking lot for 36 years. The group purchased .438 acres of land comprising the McDonald's and adjacent block for \$3.85 million dollars and just a few days later it was a thing of the past.

Ryan Hoover, experience director for the EDDC, reminisces, "After just opening 42 apartments, the Food Hall, Public Market, Bricks, and the Shops at 5th & State, it was hard to fathom that more was on the horizon. I had a bit of a wakeup call last January when (then CEO) John Persinger reminded me that the apartments were opening in the spring. And here we are to-

RYAN HOOVER



**The brand new building occupying the space on the northwestern corner of Fifth and State has been in the works since 2019. This spot now contains 30 apartment rental units as well as a state-of-the-art rock climbing gym, Ascend Erie.**

day with this stunning new building, now home to a climbing gym and 30 beautiful apartments, 80 percent of which are already occupied."

The "stunning new building" to which Hoover is referring is one of the biggest construction projects Downtown Erie has ever experienced and is now home to the aforementioned apartments, and, of course, the much-anticipated Ascend Climbing Gym, a 28,000-square-foot space housing multiple rock climbing walls and boulders of varying heights and difficul-

ties. Before the building was even constructed, business partners with Ascend Climbing committed to building this space in Erie and partnering with the EDDC to see the vision come to life. The Pittsburgh-based company's Erie gym features "50 foot lead climbing, top-roping, and auto-belay walls, ample bouldering terrain, a tranquil yoga room, an array of fitness equipment and climbing training tools, slacklines, a retail store featuring today's most trusted brands, your favorite concessions, modern restrooms with showers,

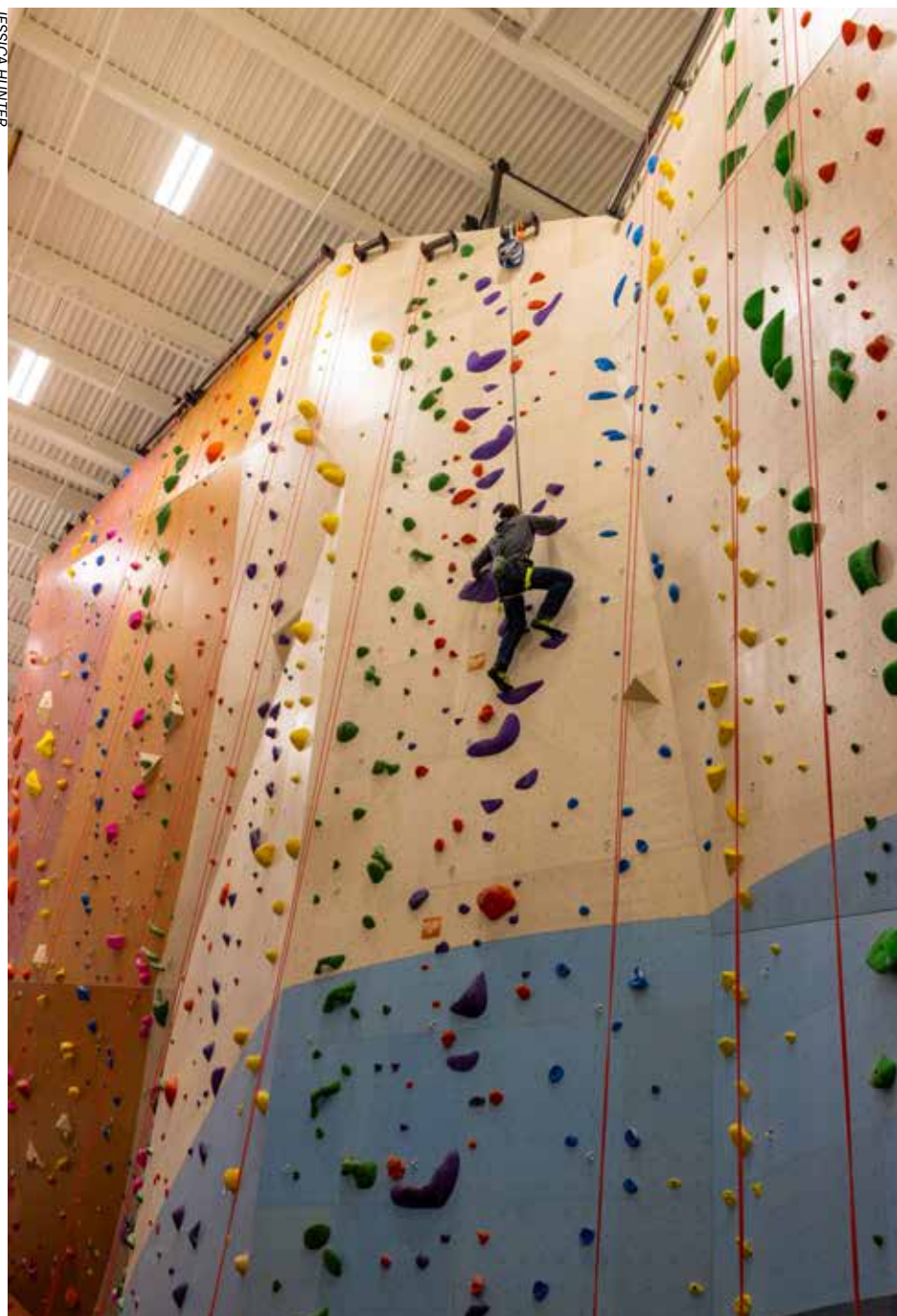
changing areas, and gender neutral options, comfortable lounge space to relax, work, and socialize, and of course, tons of glass and natural light.”

If you're walking down State Street, you'll notice climbers trying out their skills through that remarkable glass, on Ascend's 24-foot wall. This smaller wall (deeper within the building is their second, much larger, 52-foot climbing wall) is referred to as their "development zone" and is intended to be used by those learning to climb, or for team retreats or birthday parties. There is an area for everyone, whether you're just starting out or are a seasoned climber. The idea is that beginners will learn alongside experts, which helps the newbies pick up tips, learn new techniques, and build confidence.

If you're new to rock climbing or would just like to check out the gym before committing, Ascend has many options available. One can purchase a single day pass, a 10-pass punch card, or memberships at varying levels of time commitment (three months, six months, or annual). And Ascend has all the equipment and expertise necessary, so first-timers needn't be intimidated by this seemingly daunting activity. Ascend describes their ethos, "We aim to make climbing as approachable and accessible as possible. We truly believe climbing is for everybody. This Erie facility was designed to suit all types of climbers: beginners, outdoor crushers, competitors, those who have adaptive needs, groups, youth, and families."

Ascend's mission statement reflects their inclusivity and their goal to help as many people as possible realize the health benefits and all-around fun that climbing can be, while also providing an example of ethical business practices: "Our business will not just be run to make a profit, but to also be a benefit to its employees, members, the immediate neighborhood, and the region. We seek to create a sustainable business model, focused on longevity and capable of growing morally and responsibly. We see ourselves as part of a larger climbing ecosystem within the communities of Pittsburgh, Western Pennsylvania, and America. We take our roles as climbing ambassadors very seriously, and we support causes that affect our sport such

JESSICA HUNTER



**Ascend's massive 52 foot climbing wall totally utilizes the 28,000 square foot space of the newly constructed building at Fifth and State. Climbing equipment is available to use or purchase at the gym, so you can safely work your way up to the summit.**

as land access, environmental stewardship, local legislation, and human rights."

These big-picture ideas come back around locally, as well. As founder of Ascend Climbing Paul Guarino comments on the company's involvement in Erie's downtown revitalization, "We are eternally grateful to the Erie Downtown Develop-

ment Corporation and the Erie community for welcoming Ascend. This facility represents a meaningful next step – we are truly and genuinely optimistic about Erie, Ascend, and our collective future together."

The EDDC feels that same sense of optimism. Hoover goes on to explain, "I believe

## FEATURE

RYAN HOOVER



An example of one of the 30 apartments within the newly constructed building at Fifth and State, this one has a particularly striking view of the city skyline. While these apartments are currently at 80 percent capacity, the EDDC has a few units available to new tenants.

the new Ascend Climbing gym is an excellent example of what the EDDC is set up to do – bring about transformational change in the heart of Downtown Erie. Drive up State Street now, and you'll see this new building proudly standing at that corner, welcoming guests of all ages to interact, play, climb, and make new memories. Not only is this a visual transformation, but it's also a generational one. This is a space where adults will bring their kids, and multiple generations of guests will have fun together."

*A membership to Ascend Climbing covers your entry to the Erie facility and is also valid at the company's other facilities located in Youngstown, Ohio, and Pittsburgh. Ascend Erie hours are Monday through Friday from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m., and weekends from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. You can find more information at [ascendclimbing.com/locations/erie](http://ascendclimbing.com/locations/erie)*

*For more information on apartment rental within the Ascend building or about any of the EDDC properties, visit [flagshipcity-district.com](http://flagshipcity-district.com)*

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## Keller Williams: Elevating Erie Real Estate with Purposeful Growth

Prioritizing people, teamwork, technology, and inclusion for success



JESSICA HUNTER

**K**eller Williams is a unique company in the real estate industry – it is a company built *by* real estate agents, *for* real estate agents. Founded in Austin, Texas in 1983 by Gary Keller and Joe Williams, Keller Williams has expanded exponentially to become the largest real estate company in the entire world, with offices on nearly every continent and a presence in over 50 countries. While the local Keller Williams branch is not yet the biggest real estate company in Erie, local team

leader Tom Jones comments, “just give us a little time.”

Established in Erie in 2016 and with an office off of Zuck Road in Niagara Village, the local branch of the global company is succeeding by doing that which Keller Williams has done all along: adhering steadfastly to the company’s mission. The philosophy of Keller Williams is referred to as their **MVVBP** (which stands for Mission, Vision, Value, Belief System, and Perspective) and is all-encompassing in its scope of supporting

the real estate agent’s needs above all else.

Overall their mission statement is: to build careers worth having, businesses worth owning, lives worth living, experiences worth giving, and legacies worth leaving. This statement emphasizes the holistic approach to business that Keller Williams has built: it is key that the real estate agents representing their company feel fulfilled in all aspects of their career choice and the tools they are given through Keller Williams totally support

The local Keller Williams team, pictured here outside their office on Zuck Road, brings the ethos of the global company to Erie by embodying the mission of its founders: to build careers worth having, businesses worth owning, lives worth living, experiences worth giving, and legacies worth leaving.

that fulfillment.

When Tom Jones, team leader of the Erie Keller Williams Group and realtor with over 35 years of experience, reflects on these values, he feels a personal and emotional connection, “As a grandparent, every time I look at our mission I see my grandchildren. We really believe that our real estate agency is a business that was built so that we can take care of our families, ourselves, and our clients. Our job is to take care of the people we work with and focus on what is important.”

And for Keller Williams, many aspects of their business practice reflect this sense of importance. One major component is making sure that agents are supported in all aspects of the real estate business. Keller Williams has one of the most competitive compensation programs available, they offer ongoing, extensive training programs, and are on the cutting edge of utilizing technology in a way that streamlines all processes and makes the listing, buying, and selling of properties as smooth as possible. Within their **MVVBP**, Keller Williams clarifies that they are, in fact, “a technology company that provides the real estate platform that our agents, buyers, and sellers prefer.” This commitment to staying on the precipice of new technology puts Keller Williams a step ahead of other real estate companies.

Inclusion is also a strong value for Keller Williams, and the company makes efforts to create space and support for veterans, LGBTQIA+, wellness, DEI, as well as over 15 other communities. Keller Williams hosts bi-monthly training sessions on how best to serve both the agents and their clients across their spectrum of needs and experiences.

Community service is another area of importance to Keller Williams. Locally, the agents of Keller Williams are always looking for ways to help those in need in the Erie area. They are currently in the midst of a partnership with the City Mission and the Upper Room of Erie for their “Blizzard of Blankets” drive. So far, Keller Williams agents, with the help of many of their clients, have collect-

ed over 500 winter coats and blankets (spearheaded by Ron Kleppick of the Fred Amendola team), that will soon be distributed to those in need by local real estate agents and the folks at the Upper Room. The agents also volunteer with local women’s centers to collect “Miracle Meals,” which provide full turkey dinners for distribution within women’s support groups in Erie during the holidays (an activity created by Melissa East and Cherie Bishop). They’re planning to host a toy drive for Toys for Tots with an appearance by the big guy in red at the Keller Williams office. They regularly

must benefit from any real estate transaction or it is considered unsuccessful. Integrity which means always doing the right thing; Customers always come first; Commitment in all things; Communication: seeking first to understand; Creativity and seeking ideas before results; Teamwork, achieving more by coming together; Trust and establishing an honest relationship from the start; Equity, prioritizing opportunities for all; and Success which translates to results through people.

The founders of Keller Williams have gone on to publish multiple books shar-

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**“As a grandparent, every time I look at our mission I see my grandchildren. We really believe that our real estate agency is a business that was built so that we can take care of our families, ourselves, and our clients. Our job is to take care of the people we work with and focus on what is important.” -- Tom Jones, team leader.**

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host blood drives, school backpack and school supply drives, and more. They’re constantly looking for ways to give back to the community.

Building a sense of community within the Keller Williams family is within their mission’s scope. The group hosts a yearly “Family Reunion,” that was traditionally held in the birthplace of the company, Austin, Texas, but this year, their participation rate in this event has grown and finding a venue to accommodate so many employees lands them in Las Vegas. They are expecting upwards of 30,000 people in attendance, which speaks not only of their success, but to the enthusiasm Keller Williams inspires within their employees.

Keller Williams’ **MVVBP** statement goes on to include 10 tenants of their Belief System designated as **WI4C2TES**. This includes: Win-Win or no deal, which means that both the client and the agent

ing their theories on successful business practices, finding what works through real estate. Tom Jones’s personal favorite is *The ONE Thing: The Surprisingly Simple Truth About Extraordinary Results* which encourages readers to find that “one thing” in life that is worth working for and focus completely on the success of that thing.

For Keller Williams, that “one thing” is focusing on *people* above all else: satisfying the needs of the agents and clients while never sacrificing one relationship for another. And the results of this focus are clear to see: Keller Williams is one of the most successful real estate companies in the world. And here in Erie, they are growing more and more each day.

*If you’re interested in learning more about the local agents of Keller Williams, have questions about listing or purchasing a new property, or are interested in joining the agents of Keller Williams realtors here in Erie, please visit [kellerwilliamseriepa.com](http://kellerwilliamseriepa.com).*



## Stairways Behavioral Health Launches Innovative Employee Assistance Program

Transform your workplace: new opportunities for employee well-being

**T**he New Opportunities Employee Assistance Program (EAP), is an affiliate of Stairways Behavioral Health located at 2185 W. 8th Street in Erie. Stairways is a local behavioral health provider primarily serving publicly-insured individuals with mental health and substance abuse needs through a variety of treatment and support programs.

However, the EAP program is different, as local *businesses* are the customer. Currently, EAP serves 50 businesses mostly within Erie County, totaling over 7,000 employees, as a wellness benefit to address personal problems before they cause more disruption for the employee, and possibly deterring work performance problems. EAP empowers employees to manage stress, enhance mental and physical well-being, and opt for healthier lifestyle choices. For employers who contract with EAP, employees and members of their households have access to free, professional therapeutic services to identify or address underlying issues. EAP consists of a confidential assessment, a brief intervention, and referrals. Often issues identified can be resolved within several EAP sessions. Sometimes a referral to longer-term therapy may be recommended.

Stairways recognizes stressors can easily snowball into larger problems, and businesses can lose valued employees when this occurs. As behavioral health experts, they recognize the importance

JESSICA HUNTER



**Becky Clark, Stairways Behavioral Health Director of Treatment Services and Employer Assistance Program, is helping to spearhead the organization's Employee Assistance Program that will help thousands of local employees manage stress and improve their mental and physical health by utilizing free professional therapeutic services.**

of maintaining our workforce is and how much it can negatively impact businesses when well-trained, skilled em-

ployees, Stairways continues to pursue their mission of over 60 years: to assist persons with mental health care and addiction needs in their recovery.

Mood disturbances, relationship issues, excessive worry, and other issues are difficult and can be very disruptive – but help is available and recovery is possible. If you recognize a problem, reach out to a therapist, your primary care provider, or your company's EAP program.

*If you are an employer considering EAP, please call 814-878-3433, or email us at [EAP@stairwaysbh.org](mailto:EAP@stairwaysbh.org)*

**Stairways recognizes stressors can easily snowball into larger problems, and businesses can lose valued employees when this occurs. As behavioral health experts, they recognize the importance of taking care of our emotional health and getting help for problems which impact us all.**

of taking care of emotional health and getting help for problems which impact us all. They also recognize how import-

employees are lost. By offering businesses access to a local EAP to provide confidential, professional and affordable op-

## Turn Your Startup Dreams Into Reality With Ben Franklin's TechCelerator

Local startup bootcamp offers education, funding, and guidance for local entrepreneurs

If you've ever watched ABC's popular reality show *Shark Tank*, you're likely one of many viewers who has thought, "Hey, I think I could be one of these entrepreneurs." You already have the idea or maybe even *ideas* — if only you had the experience, capital, and maybe a little guidance along the way.

Enter Ben Franklin Technology Partners of Central & Northern Pennsylvania, an initiative of the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development. With their Winter Erie TechCelerator program — open to and free for residents of Erie County — they provide aspiring entrepreneurs with a supportive, educational, and empowering program to help make those startup dreams of yours a reality and ensure you have the information needed to decide if it's the right time to take that next step in starting your business.

Unlike the cutthroat *Shark Tank*, the TechCelerator Startup Bootcamp is a 10-week online course designed to nurture a thriving local startup culture and bring together a community of like-minded entrepreneurs. The program will teach you how to develop a pitch deck for funding opportunities through classes utilizing the Canvas Learning System and Zoom, with a time commitment of between five to ten hours each week.

Topics covered will include business models, funding options, value propositions, operating and startup costs, basics of financials (balance sheets, income statements, and cash flows), basics of legal, how to get, keep, and grow your customer base, and much, *much* more. Bootcamp also involves weekly group sessions with content experts and collaboration with an experienced business mentor for one-on-one sessions to assist you with the individual needs and challenges of your specific startup.

Even better? The course ends with your very own pitch presentation to a



**Past TechCelerator Participant Winners collect their Boostpoint funding after completing Ben Franklin's TechCelerator Startup Bootcamp and pitching a winning idea during their culminating presentation.**

group of accomplished judges with a chance to earn as much as a \$15,000 award to help launch your startup.

If this sounds too good to be true... it's *not*.

"[The TechCelerator] has been an incredible journey, and much of our growth and progress is thanks to their support and guidance," describes Hema Ravindran, founder of KiposTech and Grand Prize Winner of 2023. "The classes and coaching sessions have not only enriched my knowledge but have also given me countless memorable moments."

Drew Piispanen, founder of Dolphin Studio, didn't snag the grand prize, but still found the experience and support

extremely helpful. "I feel more confident to be able to succeed in the future — and I couldn't have done it without [the TechCelerator's] help," he says. "Ben Franklin is a much-needed resource for this area, and I'm happy that it exists the way it does."

Entrepreneurs have pitched proposals as versatile as disinfection systems, workforce platforms, chatbot consulting firms, high-quality hunting and fishing equipment, and even a farm matching microbreweries with hops and grains.

*It all starts with an idea. Apply now at [cnp.benfranklin.org/techcelerator](http://cnp.benfranklin.org/techcelerator). The deadline is Dec. 8, 2023 with a class start date of Jan. 9, 2024*

## Hansen's Errand Service: Your Trusted Ride for Any Occasion or Need

Reliable transportation services provided throughout Western Pennsylvania

**F**or many, driving can be a challenge. It can be hard to find reliable transportation when you either don't have a vehicle or cannot drive for a variety of reasons – and the limitations of local public transportation don't do much to alleviate this struggle. Fortunately, Hansen's Errand Service offers courier services and multi-purpose transportation in 14 different counties, including Erie, Warren, Venango, Bradford, Oil City, Crawford, Corry, Union City, and beyond.

“Our goal is to transport people anywhere they want to go,” says Peggy Allin, owner of Hansen's Errand Service. “We take people to the hairdresser. We take them to the airport. We take them out to dinner. We take them to medical appointments in Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Buffalo. We help people continue to live their lives when transportation is unavailable to them.”

The *service* part of Hansen's Errand Service is broad in the best possible way. Hansen's not only provides transportation to those who may not (or cannot) drive, such as the elderly, but also to those who simply want a more trustworthy option than Lyft or Uber.

“All of our vehicles are marked, so people know when they see the blue Hansen logo pull up, that's their ride. Their loved ones don't have to worry about who they're going with. And that's without getting into how great our drivers are – we get a lot of compliments on our drivers,” Allin says cheerfully.

Hansen's has also found niche purposes for their 12 vehicles – quite the growth from the single-vehicle business Allin purchased in 2006. In fact, some of Hansen's most popular clientele are those looking for a wedding shuttle to get guests from their hotel to the venue, the reception, and back safely.

“Clients love our wedding shuttles because not only are they convenient,



**Hansen's Errand Service provides reliable, safe transportation solutions for a multitude of needs and serves over 14 counties throughout Western Pennsylvania. From delivering groceries or prescriptions to senior citizens to providing wedding shuttle services, Hansen's is up to the task.**

but they keep people from drinking and driving,” Allin says. From weddings to wine tours and weekly rides to work, Hansen's Errand Service prides itself on providing friendly, convenient, and professional transportation to anyone who wants or needs it.

This is all before we even scratch the surface regarding Hansen's courier services. “Of course we deliver prescriptions, we deliver groceries, but we also deliver machining parts. In fact, we pick up medical supplies and deliver them to Sewickley every week!”

In addition to personal courier services, Hansen's also serves a number of local businesses – but serving the community is nothing new for Allin. “In a previous life, I was self-employed with my husband and we were the nation's largest landscape and snow plow contracting firm. He did snow removal for the 2002 Olympics in Salt Lake City. So after 25-plus years of serving the com-

munity with snow removal, I'm happy I get to continue to do so with transportation services.”

It's nearly impossible to cover the full breadth of offerings provided by Hansen's Errand Service – even as our conversation comes to a close, Allin manages to mention more opportunities such as inter-office mail and liquor runs for restaurants – but those interested in becoming a driver or wondering about their convenient transportation by appointment should visit their website, [hansenerrandservice.com](http://hansenerrandservice.com). Or call their office, where you may even speak to Allin herself; even as the owner of the company, you can still find her giving rides and occasionally answering phones.

“I really do owe so much of our success to our wonderful drivers and office staff. I couldn't do it without them.”

*Hansen's Errand Service is located at 2904 Pittsburgh Avenue in Erie. (814) 455-1960*

## Lessons from Richard Florida and Bruce Katz

Two renowned urbanists visited Erie to discuss the future of the American city

By: Ben Speggen, Vice President of the Jefferson Educational Society

In some ways, it might feel like it was yesterday – the ghost of our past hanging close as a 3-in-the-afternoon shadow. In other ways, it might seem like a decade ago – a blurry mirage off somewhere miles in the distance. In reality, it's been little over three-and-a-half years since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, but perhaps it *feels* that way because the pandemic has distorted our perception of time and, no doubt, left an indelible impact on how we work, live, play, and connect.

In March 2020, did we yet know we were on the precipice of the unknown? Or was it by April? Or sooner? Maybe later? What's Zoom?

Was it when the mandatory shutdowns were ordered? When we learned which businesses were essential, and therefore which ones were not? Or was it the shelter-in-place directives? The 9/11-sized death tolls, daily? Am I six feet from you? Are you six feet from me?

Regardless of your specific *when*, you know the story, of course, and know that then came the mourning of loved ones lost, the hope the vaccines brought, the reopening of schools, businesses, and attractions, the return to travel, the declaring of the *end* of the pandemic, et cetera.

You know, then, too, the inseparable tales of public health and economic crises.

What businesses pivoted? What does pivoting mean? Who didn't make it? Who's new? Do you have your camera on or off during this Teams meeting? When can I go back to the office? Do I ever need to go back to the office? Should we move out of the city and get some land in the country? When will we be *back* – and what does *back* mean?

You also know, then, of course, the myriad headlines – some alarming, some taking gleeful delight – that major metro regions were experiencing mass exoduses.



The nearly two year old Flagship City Food Hall represents one of the examples of a connectivity point that urbanist Richard Florida stresses are key for downtown revitalizations throughout America.

What then is the story of the American city today as we near the end of 2023 and welcome 2024 and approach the fourth anniversary of COVID-19 pandemic?

That story, it turns out, is one we've heard and told before: The rise and fall – and then rise again of the American city.

Famed urbanists Richard Florida and Bruce Katz were recently in Erie, telling that story live on the campus of Gannon University as part of the Jefferson Educational Society's Global Summit. Part of that story includes Florida admitting he's come to change his view.

On stage in front of some 300-plus attendees, the author of the seminal "Rise of the Creative Class," which has begot a series of additional critically acclaimed

works, told the audience it's not that he no longer agrees with what he argued 20 years ago and has since – that post-industrial cities stand to experience revivals, renaissances, and virtually any other r-word signaling rebirths or rejuvenations thanks to an increased presence of knowledge-based workers, intellectuals, artists, and other, well, *creative* types. It was in Pittsburgh, where he was a professor at Carnegie Mellon University for nearly two decades, that he was arguing against massive public investments in stadiums and the like that he, in his own words, "believed that at the time (they) were not important to attract the creative class."

But a once-in-a-century pandemic with its complex and complicated implications

has a unique way of recalibrating one's focus.

"I believe that on the global scale, and on the local scale, destinations and attractions are much more important than I originally believed," Florida told the audience. "And I think my argument against destinations and attractions was a bit of a mistake."

Florida cited a new study, which he's since reported on for CityLab, by Paul Levy and his team at Philadelphia's Center City District that examined the state of 26 American downtowns. All but one, it turns out, have more residents living there today than they did in early 2020. In fact, America's downtowns have recovered to 111 percent of pre-pandemic levels.

Why then are attractions more important today than the proverbial yesterday? Workers are returning to the office – some more quickly than others – but the in-office occupancy rate, on average, nationwide, is still just roughly half.

What's more, Florida cited the study that

found that on an average day, residents account for 11 percent of activity in downtowns. Workers generate 27 percent, but the overwhelming majority – 62 percent – comes from visitors.

"That's telling you something – that downtowns are really the gathering places in our communities," Florida told the Global Summit audience. "Destinations, attractions, are really important to galvanize your community as a gathering place or as a center of connections."

The *center* of connections is the next chapter in the rise and fall and rise of the American city.

Katz asked Florida whether he thought the sudden rise of remote work was cyclical or structural. Florida believes it is the latter, and "is a phenomenon related to a larger trend, which is digitalization and the fact that we can work online, learn online, buy things online."

The biggest impact of the pandemic won't be on how we live and where we live, Florida continued. It will be on cen-

JESSICA HUNTER



Local coffee shop Ember + Forge represents an organically fostered connectivity point that gives visitors a destination while also providing a space where locals can connect.

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**Renowned urbanists Bruce Katz (left) and Richard Florida recently spoke at Gannon University as part of the Jefferson Educational Society's 15th annual Global Summit. Florida's point of view on the success of urban cores has shifted since the start of the pandemic, and his talking points resonate locally.**

tral business districts. "My view is that the traditional central business district is one of the last relics of the Industrial Age," he told the audience.

The first relics – factories – moved out of cities in the '70s and '80s, and were replaced with "the packing and stacking of people in office towers." Now, we're learning we needn't do, or rely on that to create vibrant, healthy downtowns.

"When I wrote *Rise of the Creative Class*, the subtitle was *and How It is Changing the Way We Live, Work and Play*. I would like to take that title back. It should be: *How It is Changing the Way We Live, Work, Play, and Connect*. What cities really are, are connection machines. It's no longer a central business district. It's a central connectivity district."

Examples he cited from a walk around Erie's downtown near and through Perry Square just before his mid-day event: the Flagship City Food Hall and the nearly opened Ascend indoor rock-climbing gym.

Like co-working spaces, they're a space to bring people to, and connect them, in downtowns. "People that work from home don't work from home," Florida relayed. "They work from co-working spaces, libraries, restaurants, cafés, or a friend's house. We are social animals; we crave connec-

tion."

What might cities have that's even better? "A waterfront," Florida added.

Erie – with its food hall, its rock-climbing gym, Radius CoWork, Ember+Forge, its stunning waterfront, etc. – has all that, and more. None of which – aside from a waterfront – it had some 20 years before when Florida last visited Erie, let alone a decade ago.

In the hour-plus they spent discussing the future of the American city on stage together, Florida and Katz had, of course, many other observations:

The funding "firehose" brandished by seemingly carefree investors in the federal government, leaving cities to play the role of strategists. Fortune favors the bold – and favors even more the bold with a plan.

- Of the 31 tech hubs announced, 40 percent are in America's heartland, Rust Belt, or anywhere *not* along either coastline where the technological economy has been largely concentrated until now.

- The return to making *big* things. Like electric cars. And the batteries that will power them. And how America's re-shoring, and that that doesn't mean a stop to international trade but rather a re-evaluating of international relationships and partners.

- How some cities, like St. Louis, are addressing equity by creating jobs in historically underinvested-in areas largely populated with minority communities.
- How climate change is leading to climate migration, and how cities are addressing climate change at the local level.

The opportunities and the optimism. The challenge and the American spirit of determination. The cautions worthy of being offered, even when people might not take them seriously.

"My caution to every place I've gone in the past 10 years – I've said the same thing and been laughed out of the room – think now about how you keep your housing affordable," Florida told the Erie audience.

He talked about being in Nashville a decade or so ago, and folks laughed. Later, it was Bentonville, Arkansas, where they, too, laughed.

"You know what I did last year?" he asked the Erie audience. "I wrote the affordable housing strategy for Bentonville, Arkansas."

Continuing on while drawing the event to a conclusion, Florida reiterated the assets present and being leveraged in Erie's downtown toward continued growth: a strong employer (Erie Insurance), a downtown campus (Gannon University), local philanthropy empowering transformational projects (the Erie Community Foundation), and attractions (the Food Hall, the rock wall, etc.), and more.

"Think about how you maintain and keep your community, the kind of community in which your kids and other young people can afford to buy a house and live in in the future," the son of a Newark, New Jersey factory worker who dropped out of school in the seventh grade to make a living told the audience. "That would be my single most important recommendation: to make sure that your place remains affordable for future generations."

*Ben Spегgen can be contacted at [bSpeгgen@ErieReader.com](mailto:bSpeгgen@ErieReader.com), and you can follow him on Twitter @BenSpeгgen.*



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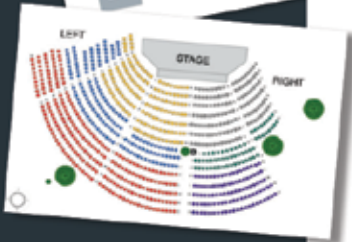
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