



Jessica Holland chats with intern Micah Hamsher in the open meeting space of The Refinery, which was once a pool hall.

By Matt Ottinger

REFINED CO-WORKING

Marion Caters to Entrepreneurial Diversity

Finding a new use for a building that once housed a pool hall could be considered a challenging endeavor.

But The Refinery Business Center, a co-working space that opened in 2015, is racking up members and opportunity for Grant County entrepreneurs. Founder and executive director Shelby Bowen, a real estate development veteran and Marion native, took a cue from Launch Fishers after seeing it in operation. The Refinery, however, serves a different type of clientele than the archetype to the south.

“Our core demographic is an older group of people,” explains Jessica Holland, director of community relations. “We don’t have a lot of young people saying, ‘This is my first job and I’m going to start a business.’ When you walk into a place like Launch Fishers, you think, ‘Oh, these guys are hip and cool.’ But here, we have some members working traditional jobs.”

The Refinery’s first member, in fact, was a cleaning company. It now caters to about 40 members in a variety of fields.

Getting over overhead

Leah Lanning stands next to a tall table covered in a pile of clothes, wrapping up a phone conversation. She then reveals she’s setting up a show for her 10-year-old daughter, who just launched a boutique and also uses The Refinery.

But sorting clothes is just one of Lanning’s duties within The Refinery’s walls. She’s an account executive for Burkhart Advertising, for whom she manages billboards in Grant and Wabash counties. Furthermore, she also serves as a marketing consultant for The Refinery itself.

She explains many of Marion’s business professionals don’t have funding for overhead expenses and using The Refinery for work and meetings relieves that pressure. Lanning has also run a photography business for 15 years and learned that lesson firsthand.

“I had a 3,000-square-foot studio in downtown Marion and was working myself to the ground just to keep my storefront open,” she recalls. “I was reluctant to join for about a year because I was worried about the professionalism, wondering how my clients would perceive me in a co-working space when they’re investing \$6,000 in their creative portraiture. I got over that quickly because of how well

co-working has been accepted in other communities.”

An Alexandria resident, she appreciates the space’s many amenities.

“It’s very convenient for me to have a landing place with internet access and a printer between appointments versus sitting where most outside sales reps sit – the McDonald’s parking lot or Starbucks,” Lanning comments.

Feeling secure

Carl Nichols, a financial advisor with CFD Investments and Creative Financial Designs, is a 30-year veteran of his industry and has operated out of The Refinery since shortly after it opened.

“When the economy went bad in 2008, things were pretty ugly,” he states. “To reduce expenses, I ended up moving my practice to my home. Once things recovered, I felt like we could get a commercial office. I wanted something affordable but with the amenities I needed – but didn’t want to be

hidden in a remote office downtown.”

He noticed a sign in the window publicizing The Refinery’s available suites.

“I was happy to hear what the pricing was,” he remembers. “Other (types of business) can just operate in the (open area), but in my business there’s a level of security involved and privacy so I needed locking doors and things like that.”

He has since moved into a larger office within the building and plans to add a part-time staff person. In addition to the conveniences offered within The Refinery, he lauds the Indiana Coworking Passport, which allows members to work at any of Indiana’s more than 40 in-network co-working spaces. He mentions meeting with clients in Fort Wayne, Lafayette and Avon as a bonus amenity.

“If you have a client that’s out of town, you can find a professional location to use and it’s worked out really well.”

Secure surroundings have also benefited Jason Lowmiller, a Marion resident who

operated his cybersecurity consultancy, Lowmiller Consulting Group, out of The Refinery for about six months. He’s still a member but works more from home during the summer to be with his children and because he’s traveling increasingly to meet with clients.

He appreciated the quietness of the space and took advantage of the ability to hold conferences at no cost.

“I was offering free trainings on Wednesday mornings for the Security Plus (certification) using material I paid for,” he points out. “We had six or seven students and ran that for seven or eight weeks. It was set up well for what we needed.”

He warns that others in the community shouldn’t let such a space go to waste.

“I don’t know that Grant County is really taking advantage of it,” Lowmiller offers. “It’s great for people to use and some IWU (Indiana Wesleyan University) students are using it. However, I don’t know if much of the community really knows what it is or what it’s for. But it does give people in the community a place to work out of rather cost effectively.”

Lighting the spark

To be sure, a connection to IWU does keep youthful energy permeating through The Refinery. Part of its funding comes from the university and via the Big Idea Grant from the Community Foundation of Grant County.

“We’re a non-profit and most of our money is from those two grants but we also use membership payments,” Holland notes. “We hope that in five years we’ll be sustainable just through membership payments. We’re pretty on track for that trajectory. Right now we have about \$30,000 from the Community Foundation and \$15,000 from (IWU).”

“There’s a huge emphasis on entrepreneurial and business endeavors and that’s trickling over to the younger students (at IWU),” Holland, an IWU graduate and Marion native, continues.

That’s evident in Spark Tank – a new business plan-oriented competition held at the space in January via partnership with IWU. The winners, Tyler and Beka Thompson, earned \$2,000 to be dedicated toward their project – a video game called “Cat Tails.”

“(Cat Tails creators) then launched a Kickstarter that asked for \$3,000 but raised about \$15,000. They’re set to sell their game in December and they’re very excited,” Holland offers.

Galvanizing the area’s young people in tech and entrepreneurship possibilities is also a focus. The CoderDojo program incorporates trainings from Eleven Fifty Academy as part of The Refinery’s Cool Coding Awareness Week activities.



Leah Lanning has a role in several business activities. The Refinery helps her to handle many initiatives while under one roof.



“Our group is mostly fourth graders and we have anywhere from six to 20 kids,” Holland notes. “They come every month and we do a coding event here. We started a second CoderDojo at the library so we’re reaching two different groups of kids. We probably have 35 to 40 kids throughout the semester who get to do hands-on coding and building video games. In Marion, that’s not a common thing for kids to want to do when they grow up because it’s not what their dads did, so it’s another option.”

A growing space

Members are welcome to hold events at the facility and community outreach is encouraged.

“Occasionally we’ll host seminars,” Holland reveals. “This month we’re doing ‘Champagne and Shopping.’ We have a lot of direct sales people in Grant County – like with Mary Kay, for example – who have no real central place to go. We’re hosting this event to help them interact with other people who are also selling.”

Growing its member base is a priority at The Refinery, which offers an annual membership for \$350 (or \$30 per month if one doesn’t want to make a yearlong commitment). Steep discounts are also offered for IWU students and private office space is available for an additional cost.

“A lot of our members work other jobs and come in on the weekends,” Holland says. “But sometimes when people come in during the day, there aren’t a lot of people in here so there’s not a constant flow of people working in here. I’d love to have people in here all the time using it as their daily office space. Some just use it when they need it.”

For the time being, educating the public is front and center.

“I think our biggest challenge is trying to explain what co-working is,” Holland concludes. “It’s not a common thing or a well-known concept in Grant County. Getting them to understand what the space is and how they can use it is the challenge. Sometimes people say, ‘Well, I don’t have an app.’ You don’t need to have an app to be a member. We want to help anyone who wants to start a business.”



The Refinery benefits residents of all ages with “speed networking” for adults and a CoderDojo experience for students.



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