

LIVIN' IN LAKE

Leaders Like Location, Leisure

By **Symone C. Skrzycki**

It was 1969.

During this time of turbulent – and triumphant – change, 16-year old Patti Komara embarked on a personal and professional milestone of her own.



Patti Komara's passion for gymnastics and love of children has propelled Patti's All-American to success since its inception 46 years ago. "I've always said that kids are the neatest people," she remarks.

That's the year she began teaching tumbling in her mother's garage. Today, she's president of Patti's All-American – a sports facility providing gymnastics, dance, swimming and a fitness-based Gym-N-Learn educational pre-school. It serves 1,300-plus students.

Komara is one of three Lake County business leaders sharing her perspective with *BizVoice*[®] regarding working – and unwinding – in Indiana's second-largest county.

Questions posed:

- What's the biggest or best business advantage to being located in Lake County?
- What's one area of improvement you would like to see?
- What makes you optimistic about the future of your business?
- What's your favorite recreational or leisure activity in the county?
- Tell us something about the county or your community that most people don't know.

'I need people and I need energy'

MonoSol LLC, a Kuraray Company, manufactures film products based on water soluble polymers. Headquartered in Merrillville, it operates manufacturing facilities in LaPorte and Porter County as well as Japan and England.

Founded in 1953, MonoSol joined global specialty chemical company Kuraray Co., Ltd. in 2012. Products include dishwashing detergents (e.g., Cascade and Finish) and laundry cleaning agents (such as Tide Pods, All and Gain).

Regarding the merger, president and CEO P. Scott Bening proudly asserts, "It was very clear that we were going to stay here (based in Merrillville)."

"The folks in this region are by and large hardworking and very competitive. Right now, the energy costs are great in this region as well and that's very important for our business. I need people and I need energy to be able to build what we build."

MonoSol employs approximately 500. Bening points to the county's proximity to Chicago and Indianapolis as a strength.

"We're in a fairly accessible area and we have visitors every week. We have people coming from all parts of the world, internal and external, and we're in a position where they can get here and it's not an arduous process to try to visit one of our manufacturing facilities or our headquarters. That's very important to us."

Komara seconds that.

"If I took a demographic study of my customers and how many of their parents work in Chicago, it would be very high. That means I have people who have higher income and higher education levels," she contends. "That benefits me because I'm definitely not a service business that's a necessity. I'm a service business that's a luxury."

Scott Ourednik is a sales manager at Pete's RV Center. Its Schererville location has 25 employees.

"We're headquartered in South Burlington, Vermont, and (during an acquisition five years ago) we were looking for dealerships that would be central in the Midwest to ship campers all across the country," he recalls. "What's nice about our Schererville location is that we're right by Elkhart, where they manufacture all the campers. That makes us really competitive to ship all across the country."

Ourednik adds that Lake County's size is a strength.

"It's definitely a big population as well, which is nice. In Vermont, there's 600,000 people in the whole state; there's 600,000 in Lake County alone. You get all walks of life out here, which is nice for hiring purposes and employing people. There's a plethora of people to pick from."

Waves of change

Like all counties, there is room for improvement. Enhancing mass

transit remains a top concern.

“Mass transit is a big hotbed. If we only could get a train inside the South Shore – to really be able to get trains into the city. Someday, going to Indianapolis would be outrageously cool,” Bening declares with a laugh.

Ourednik expresses a desire for a change in perception.

“We’re kind of lumped in as part of Illinois and as part of Chicago,” he reflects. “And we’re on the central time zone instead of the eastern time zone. I feel like we’re kind of segregated from the rest of the state. It would be nice (for people to know) that we do a lot of business all over – not just in the Chicago area. We get people driving up from all over Indiana to purchase from us.”

Ourednik also would like to see more small retailers and restaurants in Lake County.

“When I go up to my Vermont dealerships, you get a lot more mom and pop small businesses. We could use more of that out here instead of the big, national chains that are moving in.”

Looking to the future

Komara’s passion for gymnastics – and Lake County – is infectious. She’s proud of her staff and her students, and is optimistic about the future of Patti’s All-American.

“All three towns in our tri-town area – Dyer, Schererville and St. John – have 20% of their population under age 15. That bodes well for my business. I have that opportunity to grow,” she comments.

“The recession in 2008 didn’t affect me very much because people will do anything



Innovation takes shape at MonoSol’s Indiana operations.

for their children. In this particular business, we’re not recession proof, but we are somewhat recession resistant.”

Ourednik shares how the battered RV industry’s recovery from the recession inspires him.

“Looking at national trends in my industry, RV sales are going up and up,” he explains. “2008 was a rough year in RV sales, and Elkhart County had the highest unemployment rate in the nation. More and more every year, business is getting better and better, and more people are starting to realize how affordable campers are and how much fun camping is.”

Surf, sauerkraut and the symphony

Komara chuckles when asked about her favorite leisure activity.

“If I said to the majority of people, ‘What do you like best (about living in Lake County)? Is it the fact that you can be at a beach in 40 minutes?’ The rest of America goes, ‘What? Indiana has beaches? I thought it was just cornfields.’ I can be sitting on a beach 40 minutes from my house.

“But the coolest thing to me about living in Lake County is Pierogi Fest! You talk about leisure and fun and what’s different about us than somebody else – no other county in America has Pierogi Fest. It’s the last weekend in July and it draws hundreds of thousands of people to Lake County.”

Fittingly, camping is a favorite pastime for Ourednik.

“Working at an RV dealership, one of the perks of the job is that you get to take campers out,” he remarks enthusiastically. “There’s a lot to do in Northwest Indiana as far as camping.”

Bening cites “the fact that we’re only 50 to 60 minutes from the (Chicago) loop and we’re not all farmers here” as a key advantage that people outside Lake County may not realize.

“The idea that we could go to a hockey game, a baseball game, a football game, the symphony (which he enjoys immensely) or wherever and you’re there in an hour door to door as opposed to going from the northwest suburbs of Chicago. It will take you half the distance (from Chicago) and twice as long.”



Pete’s RV Center – an authorized dealer, parts and service provider – houses 250-plus units at its Schererville location.

RESOURCES: P. Scott Bening, MonoSol LLC, a Kuraray Company, at www.monosol.com | Patti Komara, Patti’s All-American, at www.pattisallamerican.com | Scott Ourednik, Pete’s RV Center, at www.petesrv.com