

AUTHENTIC ELKHART

Values, Heritage Among Key Attributes

By Charlee Beasor

Elkhart County is often referred to as the RV Capital of the World. But there is much more to celebrate, according to two county business leaders.

Bernie Beer, president of McCormick Motors, and Amy Heckaman, program director for the Sullivan Group, Inc., highlight the strong value system of hard work, a rich Amish heritage, a thriving agricultural industry and low cost of living.

McCormick Motors

Bernie Beer, president
1255 W. Market Street, Nappanee
www.mccormickmotors.com

Bernie Beer grew up in the Nappanee area. As the youngest of seven children, he opted for a profession other than farming. He started as a salesman with McCormick Motors in 1961 and has been president for almost 20 years. The General Motors dealership offers personal vehicle sales and service, as well as commercial van and truck sales. It employs around 40 people.

Beer highlights the low cost of living in the county.

“There’s no other place I’d sooner live, and I’ve traveled all over the world,” he asserts. “To summarize Elkhart County, and I know this is a fact, for what you can make and what you can live on per capita, there’s no place like it. That’s as I see it, but you’ve got to be willing to work. Elkhart County does not tolerate laziness.”

BV: What have been the lasting impacts of the Great Recession?

BB: “The one thing that helped balance

this (recession) was the agriculture. The farmers did very well during that and kept it from being a total disaster. I think we’ve rebounded about as well as any place around. The lasting impact would be that people aren’t making the money they were making before the Great Recession. A lot of people lost their credit during the Great Recession.”

BV: What is it about Elkhart County that helps businesses and people prosper?

BB: “The work ethic. There are strong family ties for the most part in Elkhart County and they’ve always had a labor force here that’s just about second to none. They’ve always built things, and they build them well. There is a strong Amish and conservative base. Strong work ethic; people get to work on time and turn out a lot of products.”

BV: What makes you optimistic about the future of your company?

BB: “Optimistically, our workforce here is going to attract some pretty good industry. Being a General Motors dealer, there are not many left in markets our size. I see growth potential with us.”

BV: How does the rich heritage and culture make Elkhart County a great place to live?

BB: “Well, we’re sitting right here on some really fertile farm ground; we’ve got successful farmers. The Amish and the conservative community and the vast majority of people probably have the Amish somewhere back in their family tree. Those people tend to stay put and try to maximize the potential of where they grew up and lived. They are expert networkers among themselves. Elkhart County is really good at that. I see that as one of our biggest strengths. There is no better labor than the conservative workforce.”

BV: What are the hidden gems?

BB: “Right here in Nappanee, we’ve got a strong Amish heritage. Amish Acres, which is known nationally, is well preserved. It’s much the same thing in Middlebury, at the other end of the county. Our county park system is very good; you’ve also got the national recreational vehicle hall of fame.

“And people just love to come to the small towns in Elkhart County and experience the conservative lifestyle. The fast food places and modern grocery stores that have hitching racks; that is a hidden gem for most people, but it’s a way of life for us.”

Sullivan Group, Inc.

Amy Heckaman, program director
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Heckaman has been with the company for 18 years. She isn’t an Indiana native (Ohio was home), but has been in the Elkhart County area for almost 20 years.

“I grew up in a small town that’s similar to this area and I do appreciate being able to live and work in a smaller community where family values do mean something,” she offers. “There is a sense of community locally. That’s why I enjoy living here.”

Kerry and Paula Sullivan started Sullivan Group in 1978 as a screen printing and embroidery company. Over the years, it has branched out



McCormick Motors President Bernie Beer cites the small community feel as one reason for the longevity of his employees. The least senior person on his sales staff, for example, has been at the dealership for eight years.

to include marketing solutions, web-based online store programs and corporate apparel, marketing and advertising. Sullivan Group, which employs about 20, is in the process of adding several people.

BV: What have been the lasting impacts of the Great Recession?

AH: “Back in 2008, we had to lay off several employees and we have been feeling the effects up until just now. Our business has picked up over the last several years quite a bit. Just like any other business, we are running on a lean staff, so we have recently been hiring for several new positions.

“The lasting effect to me has been how the business has changed in general. One employee who wore one hat, now wears six to 10 hats.”

BV: What about Elkhart County helps businesses and people prosper?

AH: “To me, where we are located within the county, it’s a sense of community. We have a lot of customers in Elkhart County, and several customers nationwide and worldwide as well. The customers that are local, there is just a little bit different sense of lifestyle here compared to the pace (for example) in Los Angeles.”

BV: What makes you optimistic about the future of the company?

AH: “It’s tough for us to hire employees, which is a good thing, because it means the economy has picked up and people are working. Within the business world, budgets are being released and people are spending again.”

BV: How does the rich heritage and culture make Elkhart County a great place to live?

AH: “It’s definitely a different core set of values in this



Sullivan Group, Inc. started as a screen printing and embroidery company in 1978 and has blossomed into a full creative marketing suite with national and worldwide customers.

community and this county compared to other areas. I travel a lot for my job and I see a lot of different areas, communities. The core values here are what makes it different.”

BV: What are the hidden gems?

AH: “Definitely within Nappanee, it is Amish Acres. And obviously in Elkhart County there are places that are similar to Amish Acres. Some other things include the park systems and the restaurants within Elkhart County. When people come to visit us here, we are a very small town, so we typically support local businesses here. But if they’re looking for other restaurants or a larger park or something else to do, we’ll direct them to different locations.”

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