

By Katie Coffin

Mike and Penny Wickes played a combined one round of golf in their lives before adding the Hartley Hills Golf Club to their business portfolio.



Couple's Business Crusade Energizes Community

Penny Wickes recalls the moment she walked out of the community center on Hagerstown's Main Street to emptiness on a Saturday night.

She leans forward in her chair and playfully pounds on the table in the Precision Wire Assembly lobby, setting the record straight on how she and her husband of 38 years ended up owning several businesses in the small Wayne County town.

"He's always the driver! He's the wheeler and dealer," she exclaims, her soft voice rising just so with laughter. "And after the deal is done and gone, he's off onto something else, and I'm there trying to figure out what we're doing with it!"

Mike Wickes sits back quietly in his chair, the hint of a smile on his lips and in his eyes. It was that night he suggested they buy the vacant building that had previously housed widely popular Welliver's Smorgasbord and re-open the restaurant, now called Willie & Red's.

That was the first of several suggestions to come that have now made them "restaureuring, real estate developing, antique shop managing, community center operating, golf course-owning wire harness manufacturers."

Though they make light of their situation –

"She says we'll work until we're 70, but I told her we'll be dead if we do that," Mike quips dryly – it's not an exaggeration to suggest they have almost singlehandedly kept the community afloat and helped catalyze a movement to revitalize the downtown.

"If they hadn't stepped up, I'm not sure who would have," offers Jeff Huffine, co-founder of IronGate Creative, a small business on Main Street. "When you ask what would have happened (if they hadn't opened Willie & Red's), I think for one we would have lost another part of our identity as a community, and two I think it would have had a ripple effect on small businesses here."

Starting a legacy

Mike and Penny's story begins on a double date ... though they were not with each other. Nevertheless, they hit it off and got married in 1978, the same year Penny graduated from Hagerstown High School. Job openings were scarce at that time, so an employment agency placed her with a wire harness company.

A short time later, the manager of that company began his own endeavor and Penny followed him. When he decided to sell, a major customer told Penny if she started a company, she could have its business.

Penny and Mike relocated to Tennessee to launch Precision Wire Assembly because it

was halfway between their customer in North Carolina and their family in Indiana. They operated there for seven years until the lack of a talent pool in the South and persistent encouragement from family and community members convinced them to return to Wayne County.

They set up shop in a warehouse that was formerly a Dana Corporation plant, one of many companies that was part of the manufacturing industry's exodus from the town years prior. Because no homes were for sale in Hagerstown at the time, they spent the first few months sleeping on the floor of the office under Penny's drafting table.

"It was an absolute disaster when we moved because we were in full production, and we got up here with no one knowing how to build any of our products," Penny recalls. "The only people we had was us, my brother and sister-in-law and my nephew, and then a couple other people came up from Tennessee. There were less than 10 of us, and at that time we were running seven days a week, 24 hours a day."

From there, an onslaught of community-benefitting business opportunities have come their way.

They got into the real estate business when one of their tenants – Manchester Industries – outgrew their building. Faced with the threat of Hagerstown losing a good



Precision Wire Assembly was the beginning for Penny and Mike Wickes, who have expanded into other businesses to benefit their community.



employer, Mike and Penny built a 100,000-square-foot plant for the company in what is now Hagerstown Industrial Park.

They acquired the community center when Mike traded for it with a motor home he and Penny already didn't have time to enjoy. Now, The Meeting Place is a space where locals can convene for a birthday party, baby shower or any friendly gathering.

Rising from the flames

Next came their headfirst dive into the restaurant business.

"Come on, Red, we're buying that!" is an exclamation Mike has made on several occasions.

Penny tousles her graying hair and says, "Red" is what he called me. I'm not so red anymore. My dad is a redhead, and everybody called him 'Red.'"

"Willie" was the late Guy Welliver's nickname, the founder of Welliver's Smorgasbord, and it makes up the other half of the restaurant's brand, Willie & Red's.

After months of revamping the building that had fallen into disrepair, Mike and Penny opened the new-yet-familiar eatery on Thanksgiving Day 2010.

"That was a major mistake because everyone walked through the door expecting it to be run as smoothly as Welliver's," Penny recalls, vowing to never open a business on a holiday again. "We were all new, so that didn't go very smoothly. We didn't have the smorgasbord – it was all menu – and of course people were expecting the smorgasbord. You take baby steps; you can't do everything. Everyone wanted us to open, so we did what we could."

Business was great until May 2012 when Penny received a phone

call from an employee saying smoke was billowing out of a vent and lights were flickering. An electrical fire had started on the roof. Penny watched as volunteer firefighters worked to save the building in which she and Mike had invested so much. Mike refused to go to the scene.

The biggest problem in the aftermath was water damage and mold. They had two choices: rebuild or demolish. Penny says it took them only 15 minutes to decide they needed to save it for the town.

"I've been to several places around the state, and when I say I'm from Hagerstown, people ask, 'Is that restaurant still open?'" shares town council president Rick Cole, who also helped put the fire out. "After the devastating fire, anybody could've walked away from it, but they chose not to. They chose to bring it back to life."

Six months and \$2 million later, Mike and Penny opened the restaurant again ... on Thanksgiving Day (Mike's idea).

"Kill me again! Two times now!" Penny exclaims, conceding this holiday opening went more smoothly.

The smorgasbord is once again the staple of Hagerstown and an economic anchor for the community. Out-of-town foodies will even fly their private planes onto the grass runway at Hagerstown Airport just for dinner at Willie & Red's, and Penny will serve as their personal chauffeur.

"Welliver used to do it. He'd go pick (visitors) up in a Cadillac limo or something. I have a (Toyota) Scion," she laughs. "We have fun with that."

Teeing off more business

They quickly found Willie & Red's was not enough to draw people to town, however.

The building that adjoins their restaurant came up for sale, and they couldn't stand the deserted eyesore across the street. Mike's wheels

were turning, and despite Penny's pleas that they had enough on their plates, they purchased both buildings and converted them into shops.

Customers of the Shoppes of East Main can find products with local ties, like Abbott's Candies and TedCo Toys, as well as antiques, furniture and novelties Mike has acquired over the years.

As soon as Mike and Penny got the shops running, the struggling Hartley Hills Country Club was going bankrupt and preparing to close.

Penny had never played golf; Mike one time. They had only seen the entire course once – on a “dark and rainy night” when their accountant drove them through it before the purchase.

They spent the last two years renovating the clubhouse and cart barn, and they're trying to open a restaurant on-site as well.

“When you have a town the size of Hagerstown, you can't afford to lose anything,” Penny laments. “You try to get the quality of life items in a town like this and

you just can't. You're not going to draw them in, so you have to sustain the ones that are already here.”

Down the road

A visit to Hagerstown now will reveal a friendly, transforming town that locals clearly take pride in. Penny hopes the progress remains steady.

The Heart of Hagerstown is a new development to convene local business owners to promote the Hagerstown area. Huffine and the Wickeses are both part of the effort.

“It's hard being in business in a small town, so you have to depend on each other to create a draw,” Huffine shares. “If everyone is rallying together, you have a better chance of surviving in a small business in a small town. We have to remember we're not competing against each other; we're competing against regions.”

Penny describes recent visioning meetings, where big ideas for the future ranged from adding bike trails to embracing the town's

floodplain and building lakeside homes. While she can't attempt to guess what the extended future holds for Hagerstown, five years from now she hopes it's a “thriving place where people want to visit and live.”

Mike and Penny are doing their part to reach that vision. Together, their businesses employ about 100 people in a town of under 2,000, and they say that's what keeps them going.

“We've always tried to do a good job with whatever we do. We want it to be top-notch. We want the town to be proud of it,” Penny remarks. “The golf course, I hope, will be our last (business) for a long, long time. I'm up to 20 hours a day most days. I have to sleep sometime!”

Mike interjects wryly, “There's an empty gas station up the street, and I told her we need to buy it and put a dairy in there.”

Penny quickly exclaims, “No, we are not doing that. He's just crazy!”

RESOURCES: Mike and Penny Wickes, Precision Wire Assembly, at www.pwawire.com | Jeff Huffine, IronGate Creative, at www.irongatecreative.com | Rick Cole, Hagerstown Town Council, at www.hagerstown.in.gov