

# Paying It Forward

## Entrepreneur Helps Local Businesses Get Started

By Matt L. Ottinger

**T**he town square in downtown Princeton looks like many county seats in Indiana. A courthouse is surrounded by a bevy of aging brick buildings – some in use, some vacant – as residents pass through on their way to work or a local restaurant, sometimes stopping to frequent a favorite store.

But Princeton resident and successful businessman Kyle Johnson has high hopes for the downtown area of his Gibson County home – and he’s funding those hopes with his own money, buying a dozen or so buildings in the area and renovating them into retail and office space for local start-ups.

Johnson, who has built health and safety company OnSite OHS into an operation spanning six countries, has only a high school education to his credit. He lauds the hard lessons learned early in his career, however, as catapulting his eventual success.

“I got the idea because I started my first company in 1994 in Evansville’s small business incubator,” Johnson says. “It came to fruition here because there was an old building available, and we bought the building from the city.”

He has been purchasing Princeton buildings and offering favorable rents to business newcomers. The pay schedule: rent-free for the first year, then 25% of the market value the second year, 50% in the third year and 75% in the fourth year.

According to Johnson, he won’t discriminate when it comes to who gets an opportunity.

“Anybody who wants to can give it a shot,” he reports. “I’m just trying to give them a leg up in that first year, which is very rough for a business. I know; this is the third business I’ve started.”

**Entrepreneur Kyle Johnson had a vision for not only his successful health and safety company OnSite OHS, but for his hometown of Princeton. He’s now working to fill vacant buildings with start-up businesses.**

### Clear focus on success

Johnson asserts there are many challenges in starting a business – chief among them being the fickle nature of banks in today’s economic climate.

“The biggest challenge is that banks are horrible; they’re not lending to anybody,” he claims bluntly. “I went to 10 banks before I found one that would do anything with us. Unless you have (money), they won’t lend it – and if you have it, you don’t need it.”

Marty Underwood, a journeyman optician who had a lab in Virginia to his credit, is grateful and enthusiastic to be launching his new business, Value Vision Optical, in downtown Princeton as part of the incubator program.

“The lease deal is very advantageous,” he notes. “It allows business owners to set foot in the market, especially if they are unfamiliar with the area. The rule of thumb is that the first three years are the hardest. Very few businesses start off from day one; it takes time for people to find you.”

Underwood explains he became aware of the opportunity from his real estate agent after buying a home in Evansville.

“(My Realtor) heard about this through the grapevine,” he relays. “Then (Johnson and I) discussed it and the benefits my business would offer the community. Then we just worked on terms.”

Value Vision Optical’s grand opening was in early February, and Underwood feels he’s on the right track.

“If there have been any surprises, they’ve been welcomed surprises,” he offers. “People welcomed me here, and it’s been nothing but positive feedback. Customers have been satisfied with what they’ve bought here.”

Underwood believes his business practices will intertwine



well with the values of his new community.

"I'll never recommend anything people don't need," he explains. "This business will live or die by the sword in terms of integrity."

Pass-Through Archery, a hunting and outdoor equipment store, is also located on Princeton's downtown square thanks to Johnson's assistance.

## Moving forward

Princeton Mayor Robert Hurst contends that the archery store isn't the only bearer of bullseyes from Johnson's efforts.

"This has been a real shot in the arm for downtown Princeton."

He says Johnson has purchased several buildings and is considering turning one into an incubator. Johnson, who has space for up to 15 businesses and 150 potential new jobs, also hires local contractors to renovate the buildings. With Johnson's help, Hurst contends that Princeton's business climate is definitely getting warmer.

"We've put in about 14 new businesses in town – some on the square, some on the outside of town, but it helps to have somebody from the community with interest in the downtown area," the mayor discloses. "A lot of downtowns are dying in not only Indiana, but other states."

Hurst cites Johnson's efforts as critical in the town's bid for the Stellar Communities program grant, a multi-agency state initiative designed to fund major projects in Indiana's smaller communities. Only two communities, Greencastle and North Vernon, were chosen to split the over \$30 million prize. Princeton's third-place finish, though, leaves the town hopeful for 2012.

"We finished third out of 42 cities; they cut it to 12, and then down to two and we just missed out on it," Hurst reveals. "It included restoration for downtown, a senior living center and a few other things."

"Kyle was instrumental in that; he attended the Stellar Community meetings, as well as our downtown revitalization committee meetings," he continues. "It's been good for the city. We're going to go ahead with our plans on renovation and hopefully get that Stellar grant in 2012."

Hurst suggests that Gibson County's overall economic situation remains slightly better due to the impact of Toyota, which employs nearly 5,000 people in the area. He says it was beneficial that employees were still paid when the plant hit hard times in 2009. (Toyota offered buyouts and reduced hours to employees instead of laying many of them off, and when the Princeton West Plant shut down for three months, employees still went through paid training sessions.)

In fact, Hurst notes that Toyota took part in the community's application for the Stellar Communities grant.

"We were one of the only communities that had a private buy-in," he says. "Hopefully in 2012, we'll get that commitment from them again."

He adds that Gibson County's position as the top coal-producing county in Indiana helped keep local mining employees on the job.

## Return on investment

Johnson is also mentoring the new businesses and anticipates his investments will pay off in the future as these



**Value Vision Optical and Pass-Through Archery – a hunting and outdoor equipment store – have found homes on Princeton's downtown square thanks to Johnson's support.**

businesses help to enhance the downtown business district and the appreciation of his property.

Johnson is somewhat surprised that more successful business owners aren't making similar strides in their own communities, and he hopes that will change in the future.

"I've never heard of anyone doing this," he surmises. "I think it's one of those things in a small town or community – that people need to give back a little bit."

In an earlier press release about his program, Johnson explains, "Everyone's been talking about stimulus dollars and government programs, but it's time for people in the private sector to step forward and lend a helping hand to other entrepreneurs."

Now, local business owners are taking that hand with a great deal of appreciation.

"For Kyle, taking a leap of faith in the community is a huge risk," Underwood asserts. "This is truly a fantastic program."

## INFORMATION LINK

**Resources:** Kyle Johnson, OnSite OHS, at [www.onsiteohs.com](http://www.onsiteohs.com)

Mayor Robert Hurst, city of Princeton, at [www.princeton-indiana.com](http://www.princeton-indiana.com)

Marty Underwood, Value Vision Optical, at [www.valuevisionoptical.com](http://www.valuevisionoptical.com)