



# John Lefever:

## Taking Risks Pays Off for Community

By Symone Salisbury

Odyssey Travel is the only business of its kind in downtown Columbia City.

**J**ohn Lefever, president and CEO of STAR Insurance Agency, loves a challenge. The philosophy that he “isn’t afraid to try new things” has influenced his business and community-related contributions to Columbia City over the last 30 years.

He bought a downtown travel agency and launched a marketing promotions company, for instance, without related industry experience. Both have been successful. Further, under his leadership, Whitley County became Indiana’s first rural county to establish enhanced 911 telephone service. Lefever also oversaw Passages, Inc., an organization dedicated to the mentally impaired.

A member of both the Fort Wayne Metro YMCA and Whitley County Community Foundation finance committees, he also is former president of two non-profit organizations: the United Way of Whitley County and the Whitley County Economic Development Corporation.



**BizVoice®:** Tell us about your work with Passages.

**John Lefever:** “Passages is (designed) for developmentally disabled persons, both physically and mentally. It’s a terrific organization. We established four or five different group homes in Whitley County (during his role as president in the 1980s). I’ve stayed pretty close to them (the organization).”

**BV:** How did you become involved with Odyssey Travel?

**JL:** “It was owned by a local guy who was in the process of moving it to Fort Wayne. We decided there needed to be a travel agency in town and put a contract together with them and got it started. We purchased that agency in 1993 and kept it until January 2006.”

**BV:** You also entered foreign territory, so to speak, by forming Developmental Concepts. What was the impetus?

**JL:** “As we were doing different advertising and wanted people to handle it more effectively for us, we decided to start Developmental Concepts and put our daughter-in-law in charge. She does promotional products, design work on brochures and works with several non-profit organizations, including Junior Achievement,

to put marketing materials together for them.”

**BV:** Why are you so passionate about helping the developmentally disabled?

**JL:** “When I was in college, I had a final project as part of my education major (a career Lefever originally pursued) and actually wrote a pretty lengthy paper to set up a training program for developmentally disabled children. What I learned was that they were some of the nicest people, and I thought ‘that’s a lot better than what I see in a lot of people.’ So I kind of got involved in that.”

**BV:** Youth organizations can have a tremendous positive impact on communities. Describe your role, with your wife, in helping to start the Whitley County Family YMCA.

**JL:** “There was no indoor swimming pool anywhere in the county other than a few private ones people owned (in 1996). We sat down with the Fort Wayne Metro YMCA and said, ‘We really want to look at this as an outreach program.’ One of the first things they did was organize youth soccer. We didn’t have a youth soccer program here. We had 130 kids in the first sign-up (session) in the spring. They had about 250 kids in the program in the fall and that program has continued to grow.

“They completed an expansion (of the facility) about a year and a half ago, and they’re in the process of taking the youth soccer model they did here and doing it in Bluffton.”

**BV:** Which accomplishments make you most proud?

**JL:** “I think one of the biggest ones was establishing the 911 service in Whitley County. The first day of full operation was September 11, 1991 and we kicked it off at 9:11 a.m. I’m (also) very proud of being involved in the YMCA. When you have 15% (of the people) in the total county that are members, that’s a pretty great integration.”

**BV:** What is one of the biggest business challenges you have faced and how did you overcome it?

**JL:** “Learning this (insurance) business in 1981. Going into it cold, truly not having much of a business background and having to learn that in a relatively short amount of time. You just have to say, ‘I don’t have any choice. I have to learn this.’”

“When I first joined Estlick-Girvin Lefever (which later merged with STAR Insurance Group), the premium volume we were doing was about \$500,000 and this year should be in the neighborhood of \$32 million, so (there has been) a pretty significant change.”

**BV:** Columbia City has experienced economic setbacks in recent years. One strategy to help the area rebound is to draw



**John Lefever's community contributions in Columbia City and Whitley County have been as diverse as his professional pursuits.**

workers from outside the community. What do you see as its strategy for attracting new talent?

**JL:** “I think the challenge for Columbia City is not unlike challenges for a lot of rural communities. It seems like really talented young people go away to college and just don’t come back because the opportunities haven’t been here in the past. I think there are some opportunities here now. We have a great set of manufacturing facilities on the east side of town, including Steel Dynamics and UnderSea Sensor Systems. Probably the difference is if you had your choice for entertainment, would you come to Columbia City or would you go to Broad Ripple? It’s just not quite the same.”

**BV:** Do you see any changes on the horizon regarding entertainment options?

**JL:** “I would hope that we see some more advances in Columbia City’s future, particularly more in the social area. Years ago, there was a movie theatre here in town. It disappeared and now there is a new movie theatre (Bones Theatre), so that’s another opportunity where we could do something locally.”

“It’s a little difficult because you’re looking at a county with only 32,000 people and for a lot of (cities), that’s not even a subdivision. That’s not even Fishers. But there are opportunities in Fort Wayne (located approximately 20 miles east), particularly for entertainment.”

“From an employment standpoint, there are lots of opportunities there. Twenty miles from here is the orthopedic capital of the world (Warsaw). Biomet, DePuy and Zimmer are there in addition to several other small, spin-off industries. (He notes that many individuals live in Columbia City, but commute to jobs in Fort Wayne or Warsaw.)

“We’ve been very lucky with investment in the community. In the last 12 years, close to a billion dollars has been invested in Whitley County in manufacturing jobs.”