



Shopping and dining comprise the business interests of Dan Osbrone and Elizabeth Cutter-McNeece.

Downtown Pride:

Small Business Owners Strive to Make a Difference

By Tom Schuman

Celebrating its historic past is a point of pride for Vincennes residents. Downtown is the focal point of many of the activities. Helping lead the organizational charge, while striving for an improved economic climate, are a pair of small business owners.

Elizabeth Cutter-McNeece and Dan Osborne are co-presidents of the Central Business Association. Cutter-McNeece operates the Purgatory restaurant, which serves the luncheon crowd as well as area catering needs. Osborne owns the Something Special retail outlet.

Downtown signs point to tourism options.

Downtown business districts throughout Indiana have changed over the years. Most maintain strong professional service providers – lawyers, bankers, insurance offices – and Vincennes is no exception. But its status as the oldest city in Indiana (founded in 1732 as a French fur trading outpost), first headquarters of the Indiana Territory (in 1800 with U.S. president-to-be William Henry Harrison as governor) and site of the George Rogers Clark National Historic Park is a force that remains in the community.

A series of festivals and special events dominate downtown weekends – whether it's one of the many parades down Main Street or a gathering at Patrick Henry Square. The Spirit of Vincennes Rendezvous each Memorial Day weekend re-creates and celebrates the surrender of the British to Clark in 1779. Civil War Days are a fall tradition, with numerous other events taking place on an annual basis.

Vincennes residents love a parade, notes Cutter-McNeece, who moved to the area after getting married. Her husband, Marc McNeece, is a native of the city who currently serves as president and CEO of the Knox County Chamber of Commerce. With the community celebrating its 275th anniversary in 2007, more celebrations are on the way. A Mardi Gras festival will return after a lengthy absence and bilingual signage is planned to celebrate the French heritage.

"The more festivals you have, the more foot traffic you create, so we hesitate to turn anything away," Osborne comments. "We do notice during festival-type events a totally different crowd for us. They don't usually buy, but we get them in the door. It's



amazing the number of people (from Vincennes) who say, 'Wow, I didn't know you were here.' ”

Business front

Osborne says the store's large bridal registry brings in a great deal of customers. Something Special is also known for its holiday extravaganza, “transforming the whole store into a Christmas wonderland.” Throughout the year, the mission is to “try to be a whole little mall in one store.”

Two blocks down Main Street, Purgatory customers include the business crowd as well as the tourists, who comprise approximately 40% of the diners. Cutter-McNeece added wireless Internet capabilities several years ago, complementing the eclectic atmosphere and distinct menu offerings.

Other specialty retailers call the downtown area home. Stability and variety are two of the goals.

“There's fluctuation in some of the start-ups that come and go, although more are staying longer,” explains Cutter-McNeece, who adds that the number of empty storefronts that artists paint in preparation for the annual Christmas Stroll (a nighttime parade that attracts as many as 20,000 people) decreased dramatically from 2004 to 2005. “I'd like to see more family-style dining and evening hour entertainment.”

That may come, in part, in the Pantheon theater, the place where famed entertainer Red Skelton saw his first show, according to Cutter-McNeece. Closed for more than 40 years, it is being rehabilitated into a multi-functional venue for shows, concerts, plays and meetings.

Being involved

While running a small business is a full-time job in itself, the co-presidents of the association are always seeking more active involvement. Membership has increased to 50 in a downtown area that encompasses about 85 operations.

“More people are seeing outside their four walls. They realize how their business impacts what's around them,”

Restoration of the Pantheon theater is ongoing.



The Christmas Stroll is one of many annual downtown events.

Cutter-McNeece states.

Osborne adds, “Several new businesses (owners) are showing more enthusiasm. The general public, the average person comes to a parade and just assumes it happens. They don't realize the amount of work it puts on merchants. If all would chip in and do a few extra activities, what a great thing that would be.”

He defines volunteering as “rent for the space you take.” Cutter-McNeece, when asked why she is so passionate about the community and its efforts to improve, offered insanity as an answer. But, on a serious note, she adds that she and her husband determined, “If we were going to stay here, we were going to try and make a difference. We didn't want to sit around and complain and not do anything.”

More on the way

Other projects that Cutter-McNeece and Osborne have helped make happen (with others) or are still working on include:

- Downtown speakers (mounted on existing poles) that provide music throughout the day and a communications outlet for the parades and other special events
- Fresh Air Flicks that debuted earlier this year. Residents and guests are invited to gather at Patrick Henry Square with a semi truck donated by Bestway Express serving as the movie screen. Food and fun activities precede the show
- Spokes for Folks is a community bicycle program in which the two-wheel transportation will be made available for guests and visitors to pedal to the various historical and architectural sites. Bicycles that are confiscated within the city will be painted, refurbished and maintained, with up to six rack locations for easy “parking”
- A Main Street program application to the state (local matching funds have been raised) to pay for new sidewalks, planters, lighting and other improvements

The city is also planning a riverwalk extension that will more conveniently connect the downtown with Vincennes University.

No matter the project or event, Osborne and Cutter-McNeece will be there to assist.

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Elizabeth Cutter-McNeece, Purgatory, at (812) 886-6791

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