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# INSIGHT

THE BUSINESS JOURNAL OF THE QUAD-CITIES

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**Keyvan Rudd** of the Quad City Steamwheelers at Vibrant Arena on Monday, October 9, in Moline.

*Katelyn Metzger*

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# Defying expectations, the labor market muscles forward



**MARK GRYWACHESKI**

## Economy

Mark Grywacheski is an expert in financial markets and economic analysis and is an investment adviser with Quad-Cities Investment Group, Davenport.

**I**t's quite remarkable to consider the sheer magnitude the American consumer has on the U.S. economy.

In fact, consumer spending drives roughly 68% of our nation's total economic growth. Consumers that are optimistic in their job security tend to spend their money much more freely, which ultimately powers our economy forward. Any increases in consumer demand for goods and services must be accompanied by an increase in production and employees to meet that demand. For employees, this translates to rising wages and greater disposable income. For companies, economic growth means greater corporate profits.

In 2022, the U.S. economy averaged a highly robust 399,000 new jobs per month. By January, 2023, the national unemployment rate had fallen to 3.4%, a 54-year low. Truly exceptional numbers. But the general consensus on Wall Street was that the economy, along with the labor market, would gradually weaken over the course of 2023. Even the Federal Reserve, America's central bank, was expecting the unemployment rate to climb to 4.6% by year-end.

Despite the rather dire projections, the labor market has remained defiantly resilient. In September, the national unemployment rate

held firm at 3.8% while the economy added 336,000 new jobs, up from August's gain of 227,000. There were also roughly 9.6 million unfilled job openings across the nation. This is below the all-time high of 12.03 million set in March, 2022, but still 23% higher than the February, 2020, pre-pandemic level of 7.76 million.

To be fair, the pace of job growth has moderated. So far this year, the economy is averaging a solid 260,000 new jobs per month, 35% below 2022's blistering pace of 399,000 per month. Since December, 2022, the number of job openings has also declined by 1.65 million.

A 3.8% unemployment rate still conveys a strong demand by employers for qualified workers. This demand has kept employee wages high. In September, annual wage growth was reported at 4.2%. This is down from the 2022 average rate of 5.4% but still well above the 2019 pre-pandemic rate of just 3.3%.

The resiliency of the U.S. labor market, however, has not been equally distributed throughout the economy. At times, some economic sectors have fared better than others.

In early 2020, government mandates shuttered entire sections of the American economy, primarily the service industries, such as bars, restaurants, movie theaters,

hotels and the travel industry. This created a transformational shift in consumer spending, labor and resources away from services and into physical goods. For the most part, Americans were stuck at home and they loaded up on recreational and sporting goods, hobbies and home and garden supplies to occupy their time. In February, 2020, the Leisure & Hospitality sector employed about 17 million workers. Two months later, the Leisure & Hospitality sector had lost 50% of its labor force.

But as the economy reopened, consumer spending, labor and resources have shifted out of physical goods and back into services. Of the 2.339 million new jobs added so far this year, 2.13 million (91%) have been in service producing positions. Conversely, just 209,000 (9%) have been in goods producing positions.

Despite the labor market's many successes this year, the struggle is not over. Many challenges remain and cracks in the armor are starting to appear. High inflation and rising interest rates stubbornly persist all while the risk of economic recession remains front-and-center. But without question, the labor market, so far, has certainly outperformed the expectations set at the start of the year.

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# Full steam ahead:

## Steamwheelers' Keyvan Rudd leads on the turf, in the community

**GRETCHEN TESKE**

gteske@qctimes.com

**K**eyvan Rudd knew he was destined to make a difference. He just didn't know it would happen in his hometown.

Sports always kept the Davenport native busy. He started playing basketball and football when he was young. That only escalated during his four years at Davenport Central High School where he added track to his resume.

"All three, no breaks. Fall, winter, spring. All four years," he said.

Basketball was tough, but a challenge he embraced. High-jump came naturally, considering he's 6'3". But nothing spoke to him like the feeling of being on the turf and under the lights.

"Football's been my thing my entire life," he said.

Growing up, Rudd and his friend group stayed active in the community, and he even found a job as a ball boy with the Quad Cities Steamwheelers in 2008. That job would come full circle about a decade later.

But before that could happen, he had to graduate high school.

At 18 years old and with a clear vision of his future, Rudd had two goals: earn a scholarship and make it into the NCAA Football video game by ESports. In the end, he doubled down on his first goal and earned two scholarships to Minnesota State University, Mankato, where he played football and was an All-American high jumper for the Mavericks.

With success in sports carrying him through his young adult life, Rudd decided to dream big and find a way to make sports his full-time career.

"The goal was to get to the NFL. That's been my goal for as long as I can remember, but I always made sure I had a backup plan," he said. "I had two things in line: I was either going to work for Nike or I was going to play in the NFL."

With football being his first love, Rudd decided to give pro sports a shot. In college, he tried out for the American National Combine in Chicago. The combine is a single-day tryout that supplements the NFL National Scouting Combine, allowing athletes to show off their skills to recruiters for the NFL, XFL, USFL and CFL.

With the rest of the hopefuls, Rudd made it to the field, but a hamstring injury

prevented him from performing at his best.

"(It was) my one chance of actually getting in front of them fresh out of college when the scouts are really on you," he said.

"(After), that dream kind of faded away."

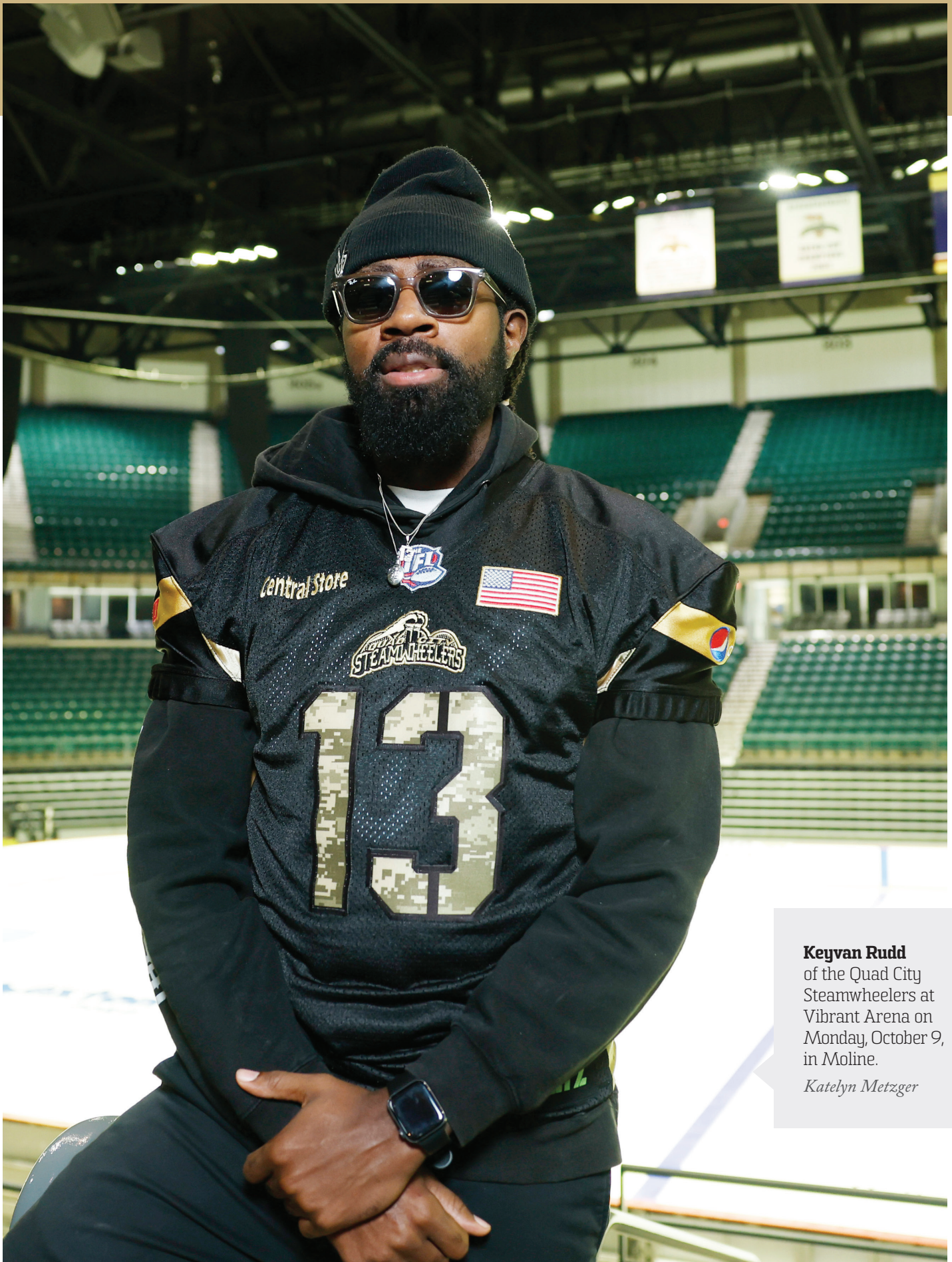
Refusing to admit defeat, Rudd returned to school and finished his track season by winning his third all-American trophy. At that time, his personal best in high jump was the standard for the Olympic trials.

"I kind of had a choice to make. I could either pursue track, or I could pursue football," he said. "My heart was always in football. I loved track dearly, but football was always on my mind. So that's what I did."

Rudd followed his dreams to the West Coast and bounced around various jobs until ultimately landing in Washington state. But, as quickly as the dream came together, another opportunity he'd had his eyes on came up.

"I finally landed my dream job with Nike in Seattle. But two weeks after I started, the Steamwheelers announced they were coming back," he said.

The Steamwheelers started in 2000 as a member of the Arena Football League's AF2. That year the Steamwheelers won the inaugural season championship with a perfect record of 10-0.



**Keyvan Rudd**  
of the Quad City  
Steamwheelers at  
Vibrant Arena on  
Monday, October 9,  
in Moline.  
*Katelyn Metzger*

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of the Quad City  
Steamwheelers at  
Vibrant Arena on  
Monday, October 9,  
in Moline.

*Katelyn Metzger*



On the team then was Shon King, who later went on to be the sixth coach in the franchise's history. His jersey was retired in 2009 and joined the championship banners hanging from the rafters of the arena.

That same year, the league went belly-up, and the team went dormant. It wasn't until 2018 that the team was purchased and revived as a member of the Champions Indoor Football (CIF) league. The following year, the Steamwheelers made the transition to the Indoor Football League.

With this in mind, Rudd had to weigh his options and decide if he was ready for yet another transition.

"The NFL didn't work but Nike is working," he said. "Now football is coming back, so I'm going to have to choose again."

The decision to go back to his first love

of football was essentially a no-brainer.

In 2018, Rudd flew back to Davenport to try out for the newly revived Quad-City Steamwheelers. After earning his contract, he signed with the team as a wide receiver.

For Rudd, going from a ball boy in high school to a ball carrier 10 years later was the full-circle moment he didn't know he was looking for. He always thought he was meant to go out in the world and do big things; it wasn't until he signed he realized the difference could be made at home.

"It felt great ... being surrounded by the community that raised me. People who got to see me play in high school came back and watched my play at a professional level," he said. "Most importantly, I get to impact the youth in my community. We've had some big names come out of

here, but being local and being able to play in front of the youth in the community has been super important to me."

In the NFL or NBA, the fan interaction is limited, he said. With the Steamwheelers, the fans, especially the younger ones, are up close and the first ones to receive a high-five after a touchdown or to play catch with the players before the game.

"Those are the things I like to do because they're going to remember that for life," he said.

For the first couple of years, things were smooth sailing. In 2020, the pandemic hit and the IFL ended up canceling its season. The Steamwheelers were among a handful of teams that filed for a year of dormancy when the league resumed play in 2021.

Two years with no football meant Rudd

had time to work on another project: his own brand. Armed with 13 years of experience in sports retail, he started working on logos and designs for his brand in November, 2019, not knowing how perfect his timing was.

"Once COVID hit sports was taken away from us, so that heightened my awareness because a lot of the people in the community know me as an athlete. I don't have that right now, so what else can they know me for?" he said. "Boom. Key Connect was born."

Rudd's retail business, Key Connect, is more than a play on his name. The message behind it is to unlock the best version of yourself and help others along the way.

"It means utilizing your own specialized key to connect with growing opportunities," he said. "The biggest message with my brand is that everyone has a key, but how are you using that to connect?"

Rudd said his own key is being a role model. And he uses that to open doors in the community, by mentoring youth.

One of his favorite collaborations is working with students at Rock Island

High School in the iJAG (Iowa Jobs for American Graduates) program. Rudd started working with iJAG in 2019 when he was asked to be the guest speaker at the graduation ceremony. The following year, he kept the same commitment and upped his game by gifting students merchandise from his brand.

Because students were attending class via Zoom, Rudd made as many personal deliveries as he could. His commitment to iJAG continued into 2021 where he designed a project where each student had to figure out how they used their key to connect and unlock their own potential by writing an essay.

One student was able to express themselves in a way they never had before, moving the teacher to tears, Rudd said. The other part of the assignment was to design a shirt they wanted Key Connect to make for the program.

In the end, Rudd again surprised the students by gifting them shirts from his The World Is Yours collection, "which symbolizes no matter their dreams and aspirations are that the world is theirs to

accomplish it," according to his website.

Outside of the classroom, Rudd has been lending his leadership to the community in other ways. In 2019 he worked with the football team at Davenport Central and in 2020 joined the staff for the season.

To reach those not in high school yet, Rudd also started the Key Connect Kids Football Camp. This year, nearly 80 kids turned out for the annual event.

Most people would find managing football, a brand and philanthropy a monumental task, but not Rudd. The opportunity to mentor and set a positive example was always locked inside him. He just had to find the key.

"Any way I am able to give back to the community and the youth, to give them a bigger message on what they want to do in life and how they can accomplish that, is pretty much the dream," he said. "I think it was always in me. I pride myself on my journey and how I overcame a lot of obstacles and how I was able to transform my character into the person I am today."



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Quad Cities River Bandits hitting coach **Ryan Powers** watches the batters box during the first inning, Friday, April 7, 2023, at Modern Woodmen Park in Davenport. *Nikos Frazier*

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Professional sports  
bring in thousands of  
fans, pour millions back  
into the community

**E**very guest who ever attended a Quad City River Bandits game at Modern Woodmen Park has probably run into Dave Heller. Whether they knew it or not.

As the team's owner, Heller makes it a point to welcome guests into the stadium before every game and thank them for coming when it's all said and done. While they bring money into the stadium, the team pours back into the community as well. And they aren't the only ones.

Annually in the Quad-Cities, sports have an economic impact that exceeds \$60 million. From college to professional teams, thousands of fans pour into the region every year, strengthening both the economy and community morale.

## QUAD CITY RIVER BANDITS, \$18.7 MILLION

A 2020 analysis by Visit Quad Cities estimates the River Bandits contribute about \$18.7 million in direct spending and economic impact to Davenport annually, based on a full, regular season. The Bandits have 26 full-time employees and about 200 part-time employees during the season, Heller said.

That counts crew members working the amusement rides, concession stands, food carts, ushers, ticket takers and security. The grounds crew alone is a staff of four or five, he said.

In the off-season, that team of full-time employees is still hard at work preparing for the upcoming season.

"The biggest thing is because of the supply chain issues that we have in this country, to get things in on time for when the season starts in April," he said.

Some of those things include supplies for the concession stands and carts and others are for the promotional giveaways the team sponsors yearly.

"We play 66 home games and I think there's usually between 40 and 50 nights that we're giving away something," he said.

Everything from pint glasses to T-shirts to luggage tags and backpacks goes out to fans, not to mention the fireworks shows that are a yearly crowd favorite.

Economics aside, there's another big way the Bandits give back to the community. And for Heller, it's a no-brainer.

"That would be our charitable work for sure," he said. "We have an enormous impact in the community in terms of the charitable stuff we do."

Every year the Bandits sponsor four college scholarships. The scholarships go to students at Augustana, St. Ambrose, Eastern Iowa Community College at the Scott or Muscatine campus, and Black Hawk College.

"Every single year we're making sure that one Q-C family can attend college without it costing the family a penny in terms of tuition," he said.

Adding all those scholarships up easily adds up to more than \$80,000. Of all the minor league teams in the country, the

Bandits have the single largest college scholarship program, he said.

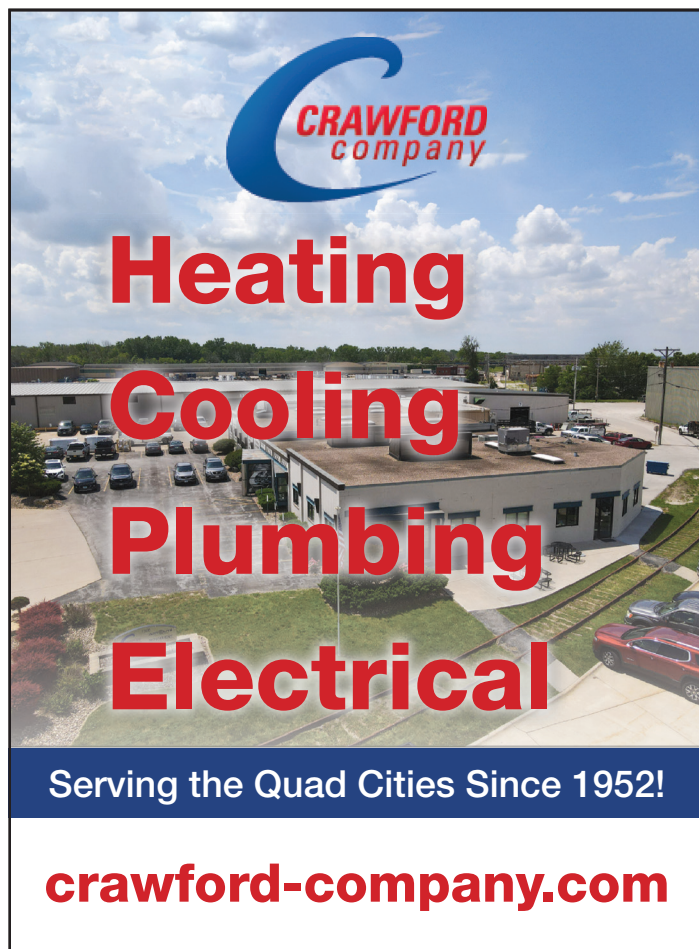
"If you think about it, what makes that really incredible is, if you think about all the places where minor league baseball is played like Indiana, Charlotte, Nashville, Brooklyn, San Antonio, Portland," he said. "These are all major league markets that play minor league baseball. And our college scholarship program in the Quad-Cities is bigger than any of them."

Providing those scholarships is not an industry standard, Heller said, but his own decision.

"This is me saying, 'This is important that we give back to this great community,' " he said.

Some of the work the team does is personal. Heller is a proud father to two sons, 15 and 13 years old. Both were born in the neonatal ICU at Genesis East and are the reason the Bandits help fund the program.

"I want to make sure that every family in the Quad-Cities has access to the same type of really impressive, compassionate, quality care that my children had when they were born," he said.



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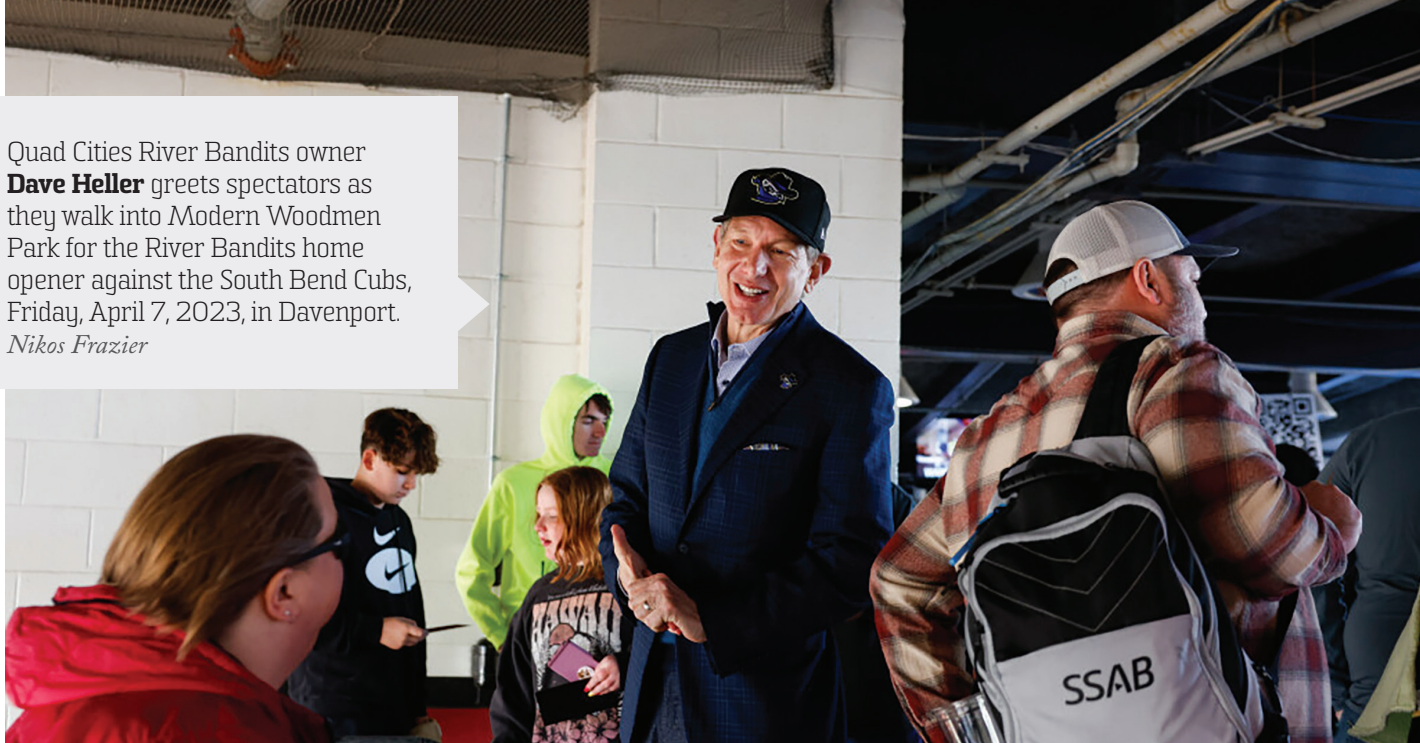
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Quad Cities River Bandits owner **Dave Heller** greets spectators as they walk into Modern Woodmen Park for the River Bandits home opener against the South Bend Cubs, Friday, April 7, 2023, in Davenport.

*Nikos Frazier*



And that's just the beginning of the Bandits' philanthropy work. Every year the team gives \$85,000-\$100,000 to Genesis Health System for a range of programs including the Flu-Free Quad Cities program that offers free flu shots to elementary school students.

"If we've learned nothing else from the pandemic, we know how important it is to be protected against viruses," he said.

Additionally, the Bandits donate money to pay for Camp Genesis. The week-long summer camp is dedicated as an outlet for kids who are dealing with cancer in their families, Heller said.

"It's so they can be with other kids that are going through the same thing and can understand and empathize with what they're feeling and be with someone else their age that they can talk to and relate with," he said.

Additionally, the team is the largest funder of the Family Connects program at Genesis, which sends a nurse home with a new mother in need. The nurse spends a week with the family, ensuring the baby can get a "healthy head start on life."

"We want to make sure it's the brightest future possible to explore their own talents and achieve whatever they want to achieve," he said.

Helping fund and sponsor programs in the region is all part of the mission of the Bandits, Heller said. Just as the team supports each other on the ball diamond, they do the same for team Quad-Cities.

"We want everybody to know that we are deeply invested and rooted in this community.

This team is such an integral part of this community," he said. "The Quad-Cities is in our DNA. It's who we are."

Part of that commitment is fighting to stay in the Quad-Cities, he said. In 2020, Major League Baseball went through a series of changes and cut 40 minor league teams. Iowa teams on the list included the Clinton Lumber Kings, the Burlington Bees, and the Quad-Cities River Bandits.

"We ended up being the only A Ball team in the entire country that was on that contraction that got off it," Heller said.

Clinton and Burlington have both kept their teams and are now in the Prospect League. The Quad-Cities, Heller said, were able to be saved with the help of legislators including Iowa Senators Chuck Grassley and Joni Ernst, former state Reps. Dave Loebsack (D-IL) and Abby Finkenauer (D-IA) and Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds.

"They all wrote letters to the MLB and made calls to the MLB encouraging them to keep the Quad-Cities," Heller said.

Local leadership in Davenport including Mayor Mike Matson and the city council also stepped in and made a financial commitment to bring Modern Woodmen Park up to the new standards imposed by the major leagues.

From 2013-2020, the River Bandits were an affiliate of the Houston Astros. In 2021, the Bandits had the opportunity to join a new affiliate, thanks to connections Heller had previously.

In addition to being the majority owner and managing partner of the Bandits, Heller also holds the same titles with the Billings Mustangs and the Wilmington Blue Rocks, a then-Kansas City Royals affiliate.

In 2020, the Blue Rocks became affiliates of the Washington Nationals but the Royals were not ready to give up their tie to Heller just yet, he said.

"The Royals wanted to be with me, wanted to continue that relationship," he said. "They said, 'We want to be in the Quad-Cities. We want to be with Dave Heller, and we want to be at Modern Woodmen Park.'"

The 10-year contract was finalized in February 2021. The move was not only important for Quad-Cities residents who wanted to see baseball kept alive, he said, but also for the Royals.

"The Royals will tell you that our ballpark is the finest facility in our entire system," he said. "The players are excited to come here and are usually blown away impressed by how beautiful the ballpark is, how amazing the views are, and most of all, how great the fan base is."

Those fans are what Heller said keeps him motivated and encouraged to make sure baseball will always have a home in Davenport and in the Quad-Cities.

"The best part of my life is that I get the privilege every game of being able to stand at the top of the stairs and get to welcome the best people in the world into our ballpark, Modern Woodmen Park," he said. "That's why I'm there at the beginning

of every game to welcome everybody in and at the end to say goodbye. I never take that for granted."

### **QUAD CITY STEAMWHEELERS, \$8.5 MILLION IMPACT**

Indoor football has a lengthy history in the Quad-Cities, but the story did not come to be without bumps in the road. The team was founded in 2000 and stuck around until 2009 when the team folded and Arena Football League's developmental league went bankrupt.

About 10 years passed before the current owner, Doug Bland, came on board. Bland grew up about 80 miles from the Quad-Cities and at the time was part-owner of the Dallas Marshals in Mesquite, Texas, which played in the Champion Indoor Football League.

"We redeveloped in 2018 and have been back ever since," said General Manager Destiny Brown. "We got knocked down in 2020 with the pandemic, made a championship run in 2022 and last year made the playoffs. I'd like to say we have

been very successful on and off the field."

The team is now part of the Indoor Football League and has grown its economic impact significantly in a short amount of time. A 2019 study done at the conclusion of their second season estimated the team's impact at \$7.3 million, Brown said. Four years later, their worth has grown and is estimated to be as high as \$8.5 million.

The Steamwheelers' home turf is Vibrant Arena at The MARK in downtown Moline. In addition to arena staff, area restaurants, hotels, casinos, printing partners, local apparel partners, and more benefit from the teams' presence. Having the team in the Quad-Cities puts money back into the community and allows for the season to repeat year after year.

Behind the scenes are four full-time employees including Brown. The assistant general manager, head coach, and owner round out the rest.

"For five to six months of the year, it's the four of us, and the other six months of the year we hire part-time employees," she said.

In a regular season, the Steamwheelers bring on about 35-40 part-time employees including the dance team and game-day staff that ensure the day goes smoothly. With the closest professional football team around being the Chicago Bears, the Steamwheelers' team takes extra care to make sure the experience is one to remember.

Season ticket holders live all throughout Iowa and Illinois, she said and will travel as far as three to four hours to get to games. That is in addition to the dedicated Steamwheelers fans that live in the region.

"This is a great place to get high-quality, top-caliber sports, especially being in the game of football and it being one of the most supported sports across the map," she said.

On the turf, the team prepares for the season early by recruiting and bringing the players back to the Quad-Cities. Coach Cory Ross creates a roster of 40 for training camp, and they are housed in a local hotel, Brown said.

After camp, the list is cut down to 25 players and they are put up in an apartment complex in the area that is dedicated to team members only.

"We not only provide them the housing, but the electricity, the internet, and 10-15 meals a week," Brown said. "They're fully taken care of with the

The Massachusetts Pirates vs **Quad City Steamwheelers** Saturday, April 22, 2023 at the Vibrant Arena at The MARK. *Gary Krambeck*



full expectation that they're here to play football because this league is to bring in talent that maybe didn't get the chance to go into the NFL."

The point of the IFL she said, is to give players the opportunity they need to sharpen their skills and move up in the game if they choose. Taking care of the living expenses and operations helps narrow a player's focus.

"We just want them to come in here and focus fully on football," she said.

Another way the Steamwheelers help ensure their players are well taken care of is by hosting a job fair at the beginning of every season, Brown said. By teaming up with IowaWORKS, the team brings in about 20-30 employers in what Brown refers to as a "reverse speed-dating experience."

Players sit at desks and the different employers come around to them, explaining what they have to offer. Brown said franchise does not want to detour any player from following their dreams, but instead wants to help them start careers if football does not pan out.

"We're not only building them as athletes, but as men," she said.

This program has worked well for the last several years and has even turned a few players into permanent Quad-Citizens. Between five and seven players have either purchased homes or found their own apartments in the area, choosing to live here full-time instead of just during the football season.

Many of the athletes re-sign as well, showing how committed they are to the team. Offering the chance to come back shows the athletes that the Steamwheelers are committed to keeping football in the area and strengthens the bond, Brown said.

"It gives them a reason to want to keep coming back whether football is going to be (a) forever (career) or not," she said.

Aside from the financial impact, the community connection draws players to the league and to the Quad-Cities, Brown said. Off the field, players have the opportunity to attend practices at various schools. That connection and role model opportunity speaks volumes to younger players, she said.

"We need the money to be able to provide the product and put the guys on the field to play the game, but what they are able to do when they are not on the field ... is the coolest part of what we are able to do as a franchise," she said.



A Steamwheelers player interacts with a fan during a home game against the Massachusetts Pirates, Saturday, April 22, 2023 at the Vibrant Arena at The MARK. *Gary Krambeck*

On the field, the Steamwheelers keep that same energy. Brown said they consider themselves a football family, and that extends beyond the franchise. At games, fans are able to be close and personal with players, sometimes able to "catch a player in their lap."

Touchdowns are not just celebrated by the team, but with the fans who are standing on the turf as well. That level of competition and excitement, right in the Quad-Cities, is what sets the Steamwheelers apart from any other football team that would take a few hours to reach.

"When you look at football and you look at it as a sport and the accessibility at a professional level in the Quad-Cities, without the Steamwheelers you have to drive (to get that)" she said. "This is Quad-Cities sports. This is professional level, high intensity. These athletes are next-level athletes and I think without the Quad Cities Steamwheelers, you don't get the impact."

The Steamwheelers' tenure in the Quad-Cities has been tough, Brown said, but now that they're back, they're here to stay. The team is committed to the community and the community returns that passion tenfold.

"I can't imagine a time without football here just because of the way our fans and our community respond," Brown said. "I don't think the Quad-Cities will ever let football fall again."

### **QUAD CITY STORM, \$25 MILLION**

Although the financial impact is strong, the Quad-Cities' minor league hockey team operates much like a small business, said Brian Rothenberger, president of the organization. Operations are divided into two parts: business and hockey.

On the business side, Rothenberger works alongside a director of operations, a director of marketing and three full-time staffers that handle ticket sales. Those six full-time positions are complimented by a part-time corporate sales representative and an accountant.

Like the Steamwheelers, the Storm call Vibrant Arena in Moline home. The season runs from October to April, which means players are contracted for that same time period, with head coach Dave Psenyczny working full-time year-round.

During the season, the Storm bring on an equipment manager, athletic trainer, and about 20 players. On game nights, an additional 10-20 hourly employees come



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**Quad City Storm** host the Knoxville Ice Bears in Moline Sunday, Jan. 26, 2020.  
Final Score: Quad City 6, Knoxville 3 *Jessica Gallagher*

in to, "help us make the wheels turn" Rothenberger said.

Players with the Storm come from all over, with the average age being about 24-25, he said. The average career span in the league is between two and three seasons. It may not sound like much, he said, but players who join the Storm all have one passion in common.

"They are really playing because they love hockey," he said.

Storm players are compensated and many hold summer jobs. Some are contractors and go home to work, then come back to the Quad-Cities during the season.

"While they're here, this is their job from October to April until there is a full-time opportunity that pulls them away from hockey," Rothenberger said.

If the team has a great season and not many are retiring, then the recruiting process is pretty limited, he said. This year not as many players are coming back which means staff have to work hard to showcase the amenities in the Quad-Cities such as the arena, staff, and communities.

The Quad-Cities is a great market in comparison to the others in their league,

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Rothenberger said, because it is one of the largest and has a solid support base that makes athletes want to join the team.

"Players who come here want to stay here," he said. "Those hardcore fans really revere the players, and all of those things really go a long way."

Like all organizations, paying the bills is important, but Rothenberger said he feels the biggest impact his team had on the area is uniting the region. Originally from St. Petersburg, Florida, Rothenberger then took a job in North Dakota before landing in Moline. Professional sports teams were present everywhere he went, but Quad-Cities

fans brought the passion.

"I like to think that we help to shape the identity of the Quad-Cities for people who live here," he said. "Here in the Quad-Cities, there are a ton of professional sports fans. The local teams are part of the identity in the Quad-Cities and help shape the community."

Having the Storm in the region helps create something for people to be proud of, he said. Since their existence in 2018, the team has given back more than \$500,000 to local non-profits.

"If we expect people to buy tickets and come to games, we feel that needs to be a reciprocal relationship," he said. "We

make a pretty concerted effort to give back to the community that supports us."

This season marks the fifth year for the team, but only the third season, as the pandemic halted gameplay. That was a problem for every professional sports team, but the Storm were already fighting a battle of confidence.

"When we first started, we were definitely fighting the notion that the Quad City Mallards were here for so long and are still loved by so many hockey fans. For a lot of people in the Quad-Cities, the Mallards were hockey," he said.

The Mallards were a staple in the Quad-Cities sports community from 1995-2018. With attendance dropping dramatically and the team suffering a losing streak, owners made the decision to cut the team completely.

But just as quickly as hockey went away, it came back. In May of that same year, it was announced the Storm were going to be the newest team on the ice. But not everyone was confident they were here to stay. In 2007, the American Hockey League came to the Quad-Cities, with the Quad-City Flames playing for only two seasons.

"A lot of people saw the Mallards leaving and this new team coming and went straight to that. 'Oh, they'll be here two years and then they'll be gone,'" he said. "We really had to fight against that, but we were fortunate to have the support of a lot of season ticket holders and really passionate hard-core fans that were there at every game."

Corporate support came in, too, and helped increase the sponsorship dollars, he said. Many local businesses were happy to see hockey back in the area and jumped at the chance to support it.

For the players who support and commitment helps keep them motivated and feel valued, Rothenberger said. A few players have even become permanent residents because of all the opportunities the region has to offer on and off the ice.

"The Quad-Cities has enough of the big city feel and enough of the small city charm and comfortability, that I think our players just really appreciate that," he said.



Quad City Storm's **Gregg Burmaster** (55) travels with the puck down the ice while playing against Fayetteville Marksmen in Moline, on Feb. 16, 2020. *Jessica Gallagher*



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# Cigar lounges burn a business niche in the Quad-Cities

Managing Partner **Eric Norton**, center, of The Drawing Room, is pictured with **Broc Nelson**, left and **James Dailing** on Tuesday, October 17, 2023. *Roy Dabner*

## GRETCHEN TESKE

gteske@qctimes.com

**C**huck Ripley is a man who means business. And he dresses to prove it.

His perfectly shined shoes cover green dress socks, hidden under tailored pants. A pressed, white button-down shirt is covered by a matching green vest and tie. The black suit jacket he wears shifts when he reaches for a cigar, and shined cuff links are visible on his wrist. His only other accessories are a wedding ring, round glasses, and his signature beard.

"That's the Wall Street in me," he said with a smile. "I worked on Wall Street back in the early 90s and cigars were really, really popular back then. So I've been in it since that time as an aficionado."

Fast-forward a few decades and the North Carolina native turned New Yorker moved to the Quad-Cities in 2010. After working in the area for some time, he went into business for himself when he purchased Cigar Social, 5161 Utica Ridge Road in Davenport.

"It kind of fell in my lap," he said. "I bought the first locker membership, and ever since then it was my place to come."

Six months after he became a member, the original owner Ryan Delf, asked if Ripley was interested in buying the business. Instantly, the answer was yes.

"I've always loved cigars and it's an industry here where there's not a whole lot of it. Especially at this level," he said. "It really is a passion, and I get to turn that into a business."

At the time, Ripley moved to the area, the cigar market in the Quad-Cities was essentially nonexistent. It wasn't until four years ago it began to establish roots.

"You had your tobacco outlets, you had your places where you could get your basics. But the actual aficionados didn't show up until about (three) years ago," he said.

When they showed up, they set up shop at 432 E. 4th Street in Davenport. Habano Cigar & Hookah Lounge opened in February 2020. The lounge is set up into three distinct areas with an indoor space for smoking, an outdoor patio, and a separate space for hookah.



**Chuck Ripley**, owner of The Cigar Social in Davenport, chooses a cigar from one of many humidors on Wednesday, October 11. *Katelyn Metzger*

A few blocks over in downtown Davenport, another cigar lounge opened up in September 2020. Much like Ripley, becoming the proud owner of a cigar lounge fell into Eric Norton's lap.

The owner of the Drawing Room at 320 E. 2nd Street, Norton doubles as an engineering team lead for Grace Technologies in Davenport by day.

He has been a cigar enthusiast since he was 18 and did a "deep dive" into the field at age 40. Norton studied everything from where the tobacco is grown to how the blends are created. Not too long after, he found himself in Central America on a cigar safari sponsored by Drew Estate, a Florida-based cigar company.

"It was a weeklong in the Nicaraguan fields where you learn everything from seed to sale," he said. "It was all-inclusive and I smoked like 39 cigars in three days."

When he got back, he started talking to other business owners about opening up a lounge, but there was hesitation with Habano being around the corner and having opened already. Not too long after, Norton received a call from the 2nd Street building's owners, asking if he would be interested in opening a lounge.

"It was always something that I wanted to do, but it came to fruition on its own," he said.

The name inspiration for the lounge came from across the pond. Drawing rooms were a popular staple in British homes.

"It's also a place you can retire to relax in a house," Norton said. "And you draw in a cigar, so it's a double meaning."

Leather couches, TVs and dark navy walls outline the lounge and give it an upscale feel. The colors, Norton said, are

homage to the building's former life as a Cadillac dealership.

### MASTER OF THE CRAFT

*Cigar Aficionado* is not only a popular magazine for cigar enthusiasts, but a self-appointed title. Those who reach this level have mastered the basics like smell, taste, lighting, and cutting, Ripley said, and many learn from the magazine itself.

"It's kind of like the Bible in a way," he said. "We used to call the Wall Street Journal the bible in the financial world. The *Aficionado* is certainly the bible for this industry."

Being well-rounded in the cigar world is important for Ripley and his five employees considering nearly 70% of first-timers ask for a recommendation. That may sound like a good question, but Ripley said it's much more complicated than it appears.

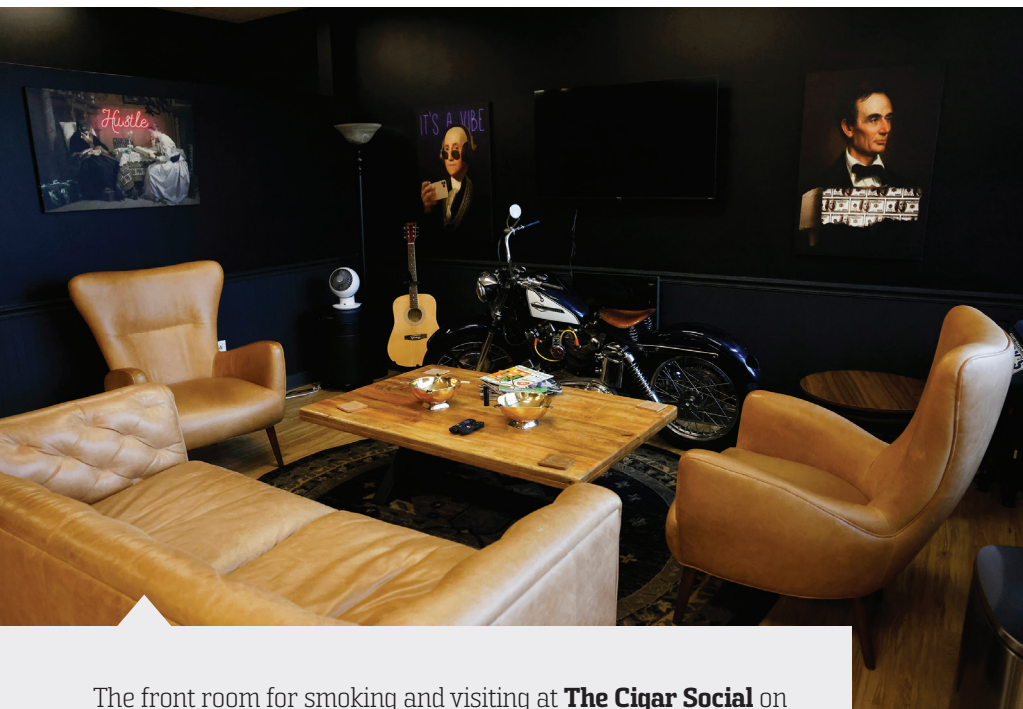
"My first question to them is, 'What are you looking for?'" he said.

A trained tobacconist, Ripley said, will know the origin and history of the cigar and how and where the leaves were grown. An aficionado will only be able to offer their opinion, but a tobacconist knows what questions to ask.

Ripley estimates he has 1,500 cigars in his shop and choosing the right one depends on a multitude of factors including: where and how long the person wants to smoke it, if they're looking for mild or medium, and what spirit they are pairing their cigar with.

Davidoff Cigars, for example, has an estimated smoke time right on the box. The other answers are best from an expert and personal experience.

"I need a lot more information, and that's



The front room for smoking and visiting at **The Cigar Social** on Wednesday, October 11, in Davenport. *Katelyn Metzger*

really why the lounge is so unique. You can come here and take a chunk of that question away by sitting here," he said.

Over on 2nd Street, Norton and two of his staff members are also trained tobacconists. They've received their certification through Tobacconist University and were the first three men in Iowa to do so, he said. With more than 700 different cigars in stock, that knowledge is crucial.

"(Tobacconists are) going to be able to walk through the different tobaccos, the regions, where they grow the plant, the different ways of harvesting the plant and why those harvesting and curing methods will give the cigar different flavor," he said, providing an example of that knowledge. "Nicaraguan soils are generally going to be a little sweeter, but if you go to Honduran you're going to have a little more earthy flavor," he said.

Countries near the equator are best known for their cigars because of the climate and the soil. Cuban cigars are regarded as the best because of the climate but Nicaragua, Honduras, Central America, Mexico, and the United States are all contenders.

Humidity also plays a large part in the flavor and production of cigars. To maintain those standards inside the lounge, owners replicate that with the use of humidors. At Cigar Social, Ripley has multiple stand up humidors filled with

different types and varieties of cigars.

To expand his reach, he has teamed up with various business owners in the Quad-Cities to place small humidors in bars and restaurants that have outdoor patio space. Edison's in Bettendorf is one example.

Ripley receives a call when the supply is running low and restocks it accordingly. The humidor is stocked with a variety of options, acting almost like a vending machine.

Over at The Drawing Room, Norton was previously using large humidor cases but installed a walk-in this past fall.

"I just wanted to give people a selection. We are very member-focused and want to build this up in the community," he said. "We think that cigar smoking is a great hobby and it's great for the community."

### **ANATOMY OF A CIGAR**

Cigars have two ends: the head and the foot. The head is the part that the smoke is drawn through and is capped off.

Before it can be smoked, the cap needs to be cut about 1/8 of an inch from the top. A faint line can be seen on the cigar, signaling where to cut. Cutting too deep causes the entire cigar to unravel. The foot, or bottom of the cigar, is the end that eventually gets lit.

A cigar has three main components: wrapper, binder, and filler. The wrapper is the part that consumers see and comes in a

variety of colors. Three of the most recognized are Connecticut, natural, and Maduro.

"Connecticut is very light, almost milky looking. Natural is more of a caramel color and then Maduro is your dark. It looks like a piece of light chocolate," Ripley said. "People have a misconception that the darker cigar is a heavy cigar, but not necessarily because of the tobacco that is in it."

The Connecticut wrappers are harvested from the state they are named for and natural wrappers are grown in a variety of countries including the Dominican Republic and Ecuador. Maduro leaves are grown in Nicaragua, Honduras and Cuba and get their color because of the high altitude in those areas.

The binder is layers of tobacco that help to hold in the filler. Its responsibility is to uphold the structure and integrity of the cigar while it's smoked. The filler is the tobacco in the center of the cigar, Ripley said and is where the flavor and fragrance come into play.

Norton said the shape of the cigar also affects the way it performs. A Parejo cigar is long and slender with a capped end. It keeps its shape from head to foot. A figurado, for example, can change in shape but generally tapers out at either end. Visually, the easiest way to spot the difference is figurados have torpedo or chisel-shaped ends.

"All this goes into the quality. So the old question, 'What do you recommend? Well (I need to know), what are you looking for?' Ripley said, listing several options: spiced, earthy, chocolate, cocoa, heavy chocolate with nutmeg infusion.

Ripley compares it to purchasing wine, saying a majority of people know they like red or white but not the fine details. Just like visiting a winery for a tasting, cigar lounges are able to offer a similar service.

"When people come into cigar lounges, they're overwhelmed," he said. "Literally, you come in and somebody will talk to you about what you like, cut it for you and off you go. Sit down and watch the game or whatever it is and you enjoy, you relax and unwind."

### **MEMBERS-ONLY, JACKET NOT REQUIRED**

All lounges in Davenport are open to the public during set hours. But for those who want a more personal experience, memberships are available.

Each lounge has different types of

monthly memberships available but the most basic at each allows for 24/7 access to the lounge.

Ripley said this is most popular at Cigar Social during the winter months because the luxury of smoking outside is eliminated with the cold. Members are allowed to bring up to three guests and have access to the lounge any time they want to smoke, watch the game, or even use the business suite in the back. A room is set up with couches, a printer, a mini fridge and a poker table for members to use how they choose.

"Membership definitely has its privileges," he said, adding the lounge even has a car service for members who purchase the first-class membership.

The highest membership at both locations comes with the perk of a private locked humidor to store cigars in. Norton said that unlimited access is especially nice for customers enjoying the nightlife downtown.

From record shops and other retail to fine dining, the buzz in the newly dubbed "Motor Row" is bringing in a whole new range of clientele at The Drawing Room.

Members include doctors, lawyers, business owners, and teachers.

"I don't think I've ever met a cigar smoker who was a real jerk," he said with a laugh. "It just brings everybody together."

Members at either lounge can bring in their own alcohol to enjoy, but owners can't sell it to them due to Iowa's food licensing policies and the Smoke-Free Air Act. Although not convenient, Ripley said this allows each individual member to curate the experience they want to have.

"What we sell here is an experience," he said. "It was not too long ago when there wasn't anywhere to go because you couldn't even leave your house. Now people are looking for a place where you come in and you have one thing in common when you walk through the door."

That commonality, Ripley said, is obvious.

"Chances are they like cigars so you have something in common with anybody before you go any further," he said. "You can come in here and you can make instant friends. It's a lot like a bar without having to drink. But you can do that if you want to."

## CREATING A COMMUNITY

With thousands of cigars to choose from, it's impossible to carry them all. Ripley said he refers back to *Cigar Aficionado* magazine often to see what they are promoting and uses that as one resource. The other is his own lounge.

"What I do, basically, is pay attention to what people are smoking," he said. "But as soon as I get that (magazine,) I know exactly what they're going to ask for."

Ripley has multiple humidors in his lounge, and one is dedicated to Padron cigars, known as a premium brand. The company promises a 30-day turnaround from "leaf to rolled," he said, ensuring the cigar is fresh.

Outside of Davenport, the next closest cigar lounge is in Des Moines. On the Illinois side, a couple exist in the Rockford area but the vast majority are in Chicago and its suburbs.

Ripley said Davenport has created a small haven for cigar enthusiasts who come in from as close as Cedar Rapids and as far as St. Paul, Minnesota when they're driving through town. Norton has

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Cigars that take a Halloween theme are pictured at **The Drawing Room** on Tuesday, October 17, 2023. *Roy Dabner*

seen similar traffic along with residents in the area who are curious.

"It can be intimidating walking into a cigar lounge. You walk into the humidor, see all the cigars in there and you don't know where to start," he said. "People who

say they don't like cigars probably haven't had a good cigar selected for them."

Anyone from a beginner to an aficionado is welcome, Ripley said. While some are not quite sure what they want to smoke, others know exactly what they want.

Typically Ripley can satisfy any request with the stock he has, but occasionally he gets stumped. In that case, he calls one of the two downtown lounges to see if they have the specific cigar in stock.

"They'll go there, they don't have what they're looking for and they'll come here. And they'll want something very specific," he said. "The tins of cigarillos, a lot of guys like that. I don't carry cigarillos, per se, but Habano does. So I'll just get on the phone and call down there."

Norton echoed that sentiment, saying he even trades memberships with Cigar Social. Even though they're all in the same business, they all have the same goal of creating a community.

"I think it's important to note that rising tides raise all ships, especially in the cigar community because there's not a lot of the general population that smokes cigars, and we'd like to grow that," he said. "We have to fight over one piece of the pie. We'd rather share the whole pie."

At the end of the day, it's all about the customer.

"There's plenty of room in the sandbox, there's no doubt about it," Ripley said.

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## Iowa's history with cigar manufacturing explored

### STAFF

Iowa began its history in the cigar-making business in 1856 with a small shop owned by Henry Gabriel in Burlington.

The shop was referred to as a "buckeye," a term used before the Cuban Revolution to describe a small cigar factory, according to *Cigar Aficionado*. The term came from the factory's use of tobacco from Ohio, the Buckeye State.

Despite the small shop size, it was ranked 13th of 22 other industries in the state, according to research from the University of Iowa. At the same time, the western half of the state was beginning to take advantage of the growing industry as well.

By 1868, John W. Peregoy in Council Bluffs opened a shop. Between 1862 and 1876, nine more cigar manufacturers opened for business in Des Moines.

For the most part, the cigar manufacturing shops were short-lived, small, and only employed between five and 30 workers. But, others found success and eventually turned into factories, specifically in Davenport, according to the University.

Nicholas Kuhnen, who started in Davenport in 1854, eventually expanded his business into one of the largest cigar factories in the state. By 1882, he employed nearly 300 women and men.

Ferdinand Haak, a local competitor, opened a shop in 1869 and by the 1880s employed 60 workers and produced 2 million cigars annually, according to the book *A History of Cigars in Davenport, Iowa* by Tom Quinn and Merle Vastine.

D. D. Myers of Dubuque opened his business in 1869 and by 1880 upgraded into a three-story business building and a similar-sized factory.

Cigars got their start here before the Civil War with entrepreneurs — mostly German immigrants — bringing tobacco in by rail in bales, boxes and barrels from southern Illinois, Wisconsin, and Kentucky.

Once here, the big leaves were torn into strips that were wrapped around other pieces of tobacco and placed moist into molds that were pressed and dried to give the cigar its uniform shape. The cigars were then packed into colorful boxes and shipped across the country. The early boxes were wood, usually covered in paper with lithograph pictures along with the manufacturer's name.

From 1861 through 1960, Davenport saw about 240 cigar manufacturers come and go, some small and lasting only a year or two, some large, lasting more than 50 years. At one time, Davenport was a cigar capital of the Midwest.

At its high-water mark in 1910, there were 34 manufacturers easily employing more than 1,000 people in total. The heyday in Davenport was from 1900 through the mid-1920s. In 1902, for example, the city had 60 cigar factories.

Two of the best-known manufacturers in the city were the Ferd. Haak company, located in what is now Tri-City Equipment, a big Redstone building at 527 W. 4th St., and the Peter N. Jacobsen Cigar Co., located in a building at the southwest corner of 4th and Harrison streets, that now houses H&R Block and the public defender's office.

In 1925, the Peter N. Jacobsen Cigar Co., one of the bigger establishments, made 250,000 cigars per week, employing about 250 workers.

Another manufacturer whose building still stands was M. Raphael & Sons, most recently known as Raphael's Emporium Antiques, 628 Harrison St. By 1945, there were just two cigar manufacturers left in Davenport, and the last one, F.C. Gremmel Co. at 908 W. 2nd St., closed in 1961.

(Top Left) When the Ferdinand Haak Cigar Manufacturing Co. went out of business in 1923, its factory at 4th Street and Western Avenue in Davenport became the new home of the Victor Animatograph Co. *Contributed* (Top Right) United Cigar Stores Company. Other businesses pictured include Regal Billiards & Bowling, Huot-Sears Shoe Co., Belles Fine Candies & Ice Cream, Raben Optical, Slater, Schiller Piano Co. *Contributed*



Owner **John Baker** is pictured at Cat's Eye Distillery on Wednesday, October 18, 2023. *Roy Dabner*

# Cat's Eye Distillery blends the old with the new in Bettendorf

**GRETCHEN TESKE**  
gteske@qctimes.com

**John Baker had no idea he would end up in the whiskey business. It just sort of happened.**

The founder of Cat's Eye Distillery, Baker got into the distilling practice in 2010 when his brother-in-law asked for his help opening a distillery in Van Buren County. Because Baker had prior experience owning companies, he agreed to help with the paperwork.

But it didn't take long for him to get involved in the distilling process. And that's where the story begins.

"We set it up, he showed me how the process worked and I fell in love with it," he said. "I took classes to learn different things,

but after four years we shut it down. I took all the equipment, brought it up here, and started Cat's Eye Distillery."

The unusual name has a deep meaning for Baker, whose passion is astronomy and whose hobby is astrophotography. The name started out as Cat's Eye Nebula, the name of deep-sky object NGC-6543, and what many consider to be the Hubble Space Telescope's greatest picture.

"Started out with that and then my wife and I started doing tastings in the grocery store and people would ask us the same question: where did that name come from," he said. "I'd explain it to them: It's deep sky object NGC-6543 blah, blah, blah."

After that, his wife Linda stepped in to assist with marketing. Their daughter had a cat named Maui, and Linda took a picture of his eye for the label. He became the mascot and his face is on every bottle. But, Baker's favorite sky object still makes an appearance on the back of the label.

He started with a 2,200-square-foot warehouse space at 3232 Bear Tooth Court in Bettendorf. It was a great place to begin, but a pattern began to develop rather quickly.

"Then we ran out of room and I rented out the place next door, another 1,100 square feet. Ran out of room and we rented that 53-foot trailer at the end of the drive; ran out of room so we rented those two trailers at the end of the parking lot," he said with a laugh.

Now, the warehouse is filled with more than 100 different barrels and is where all the magic happens, he said. That magic, specific to the Cat's Eye line, comes in the form of two main products: Essence of Iowa and Krupnik.

Essence is Baker's take on a hand-crafted whiskey derived from corn and is perfect for both beginners and refined whiskey drinkers. The team uses premium cuts from the hearts of the distillation run and age them in new charred oak barrels, according to its website.

Krupnik, a holiday favorite, is a honey-based whiskey that Baker remarked resembles "the taste of Christmas." The team uses the same cuts as Essence but adds honey, orange, lemon zest, cinnamon, and other spices. Usually, it comes in at about 55-60% abv., and can be sipped warmed, chilled, or right off the shelf.

Both products are available at Fareway and Hy-Vee stores on the Iowa side, and about 14 other states. In addition to the main two, the distillery has three other lines that stem from its newfound success in the sourcing and blending categories.

The company is co-owned by Baker's son, Jason Baker, and Gene Nassif, a whiskey enthusiast and lawyer in Des Moines.



Taste-testing bottles of inventory are pictured at **Cat's Eye Distillery** on Wednesday, October 18, 2023. *Roy Dabner*

The pair connected in an online whiskey forum in 2016 and Nassif joined the company in 2018.

At the time, only two products were coming out of Cat's Eye, but Nassif thought he could help put them on the map in a bigger way. People were beginning to come around to the idea of sourcing, and he felt this was a niche market Cat's Eye could capitalize on.



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"Sourcing is when you're getting the product from other distilleries, bringing it in, re-casking, re-aging or continuing to age the product, blending and ultimately bottling," he said. "A lot has changed from the days of Templeton, for example, and the controversy that surrounded Templeton Rye."

The popular distillery has its headquarters in Templeton, Iowa, and was advertising home-grown origins. In 2015, the whiskey giant settled three class-action lawsuits that alleged the whiskey was not "made in Iowa" as it was marketed but instead based on a spirit from LDI distillery (now MGP) in Indiana, according to the Des Moines Register.

The news made waves across the whiskey community and, "quickly transferred into an appreciation for people that seek out different spirits from all over the world, bring them in, and create new products with that. And that's the concept that we ran with," Nassif said.

This concept is popular among many famous distilleries like Johnny Walker and Alexander Murray which purchase casks of scotch, allow them to age, bottle them, and then release them to consumers.

"Our goal was to bring those concepts to American spirits, and now it is international spirits," he said.

The distillery's line, Obtanium, was born out of this notion of "obtaining" old barrels and either bottling them at barrel strength or blending them to create signature flavors. Nassif finds barrels from as close as breweries in Bettendorf to as far away as distilleries in Jamaica and has them shipped back to the warehouse.

"He has the nose for whiskey and he hobnobs with all the

brokers around the country and globe and we're able to purchase barrels of whiskey from different brokers at a decent price and are able to bottle them straight ... or bottle at barrel strength," Baker said.

Cat's Eye started with MGP distilled light whiskey; a fairly new product at the time. At the time, light whiskey was not on trend but in 2019 the spirit made a massive comeback. Light whiskey, Nassif said, is distilled between 160 and 180 proof and aged in uncharred oak barrels.

"In practice, it oftentimes comes in the form of a high-proof corn whiskey," he said.

Because it is distilled higher than a typical corn, wheat, or rye whiskey, it often has a sweeter, more delicate flavor, Nassif said. This holds up well for aging and makes a good base for blending.

Blending and re-barreling is a concept that is just starting to gain popularity again, but capitalizing on that has paid off for Cat's Eye in a very big way.

"We took Cat's Eye Distillery from being in Iowa and Illinois to now being in 14 states with Alaska and Texas coming online shortly," Nassif said. "We really spread out quickly and created a big national presence."

The way they accomplished that, he said, goes back to how he came in contact with the company: online. Cat's Eye currently does not have a taproom, although one is in the works for Des Moines. If all goes well, Baker said, Bettendorf will follow.

Until then, Cat's Eye will continue its online presence on Facebook and especially YouTube where other whiskey enthusiasts



A poster of the **Cat's Eye Distillery** label hangs on the warehouse wall on Wednesday, October 18, 2023.

*Roy Dabner*

try their products and help put them on the map, he said. But the venture into a niche market does not stop there.

Baker said custom barrel picks are popular among enthusiasts who want a blend all to themselves. Those interested will come down to the warehouse to sample different barrels and pick the ones they like.

Other times, Cat's Eye will ship out a few different samples and blend the ones the customer chooses. Those are then bottled, outfitted with a custom label, corked, and dipped in wax to seal them. All of those steps are done by hand by Baker, his son, and a third employee, Steve Dooley. Nassif handles the marketing and sales from Des Moines.

Looking back eight years ago to when it all started, Baker said he never dreamed it would grow as big as it has. When he first started it would take all night to bottle one barrel. Now, the team has it down to a science and can bottle a barrel in about an hour.

That has come in handy considering a 2022 winter release of Magi Rye, a blend of 21-year Canadian rye and a six-year MGP rye, made headlines in the whiskey community.

Fred Minnick, a renowned spirits writer, gave it a score of 93 and ranked it 25th on his list of 100 best whiskeys of 2022. Nassif said other whiskeys on the list included big names like Buffalo Trace and Heaven Hill, proving the little distillery in Bettendorf could compete with the best of them.

"We were up there with the best and very proud of that and all that we have accomplished," Nassif said. "We have really grown this concept of American independent bottling which is something that really has not been accomplished."



Owner **John Baker**, center, is pictured with **Jason Baker**, left, and **Steve Dooley**, in the warehouse at Cat's Eye Distillery on Wednesday, October 18, 2023. *Roy Dabner*

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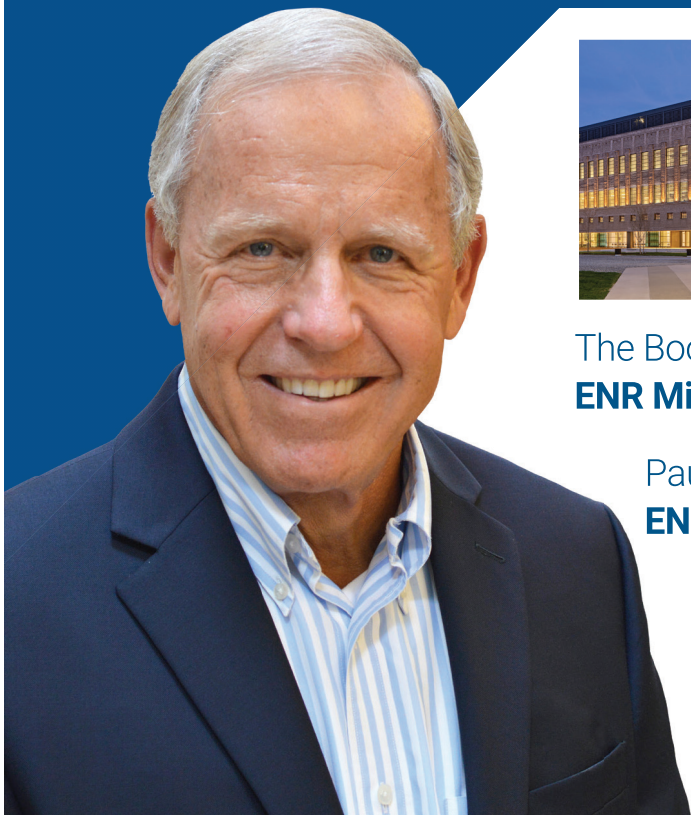


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An organ waits to be wired with optics at **Levsen Organ Company** on Friday, October 6, in Buffalo. The company builds consoles, wooden pipes, and wind chests all in-house. *Katelyn Metzger*

# The sound of music:

## Levsen Organ Company keeps tradition alive in Buffalo



**GRETCHEN TESKE**  
gteske@qctimes.com

**R**odney Levsen Sr. did not fall in love with music at first sight, but at first listen.

"I was in Madison School the first year after it opened, and we had a music teacher out there that was a great piano player," he said.

It was 1941 and Levsen was six years old. The music room at Madison was on the top floor of the school and was accessed by a large staircase.

"This lady would go in and she would, especially at the noon hour when we were all at lunch, play Warsaw Concerto, and she could really play it," he said. "The music would come out and roll around down the hallway. It just raised goose pimples on my arms and I thought, 'This is for me.'"

From there, Levsen's love of music grew and he took piano lessons throughout grade school. Once he reached high school, he found a job at a Presbyterian church in Davenport working in the maintenance department.



**Rodney Levsen Sr.** shows off his shop at Levsen Organ Company, which he and his wife, Colleen, built in the '80s, on Friday, October 6, in Buffalo. The company, which employs 10 people, builds, rebuilds and tunes organs. *Katelyn Metzger*

"Of course, they gave me a big key for the entire church, because I had to get into the various different rooms," he said. "And then when I finished, I took the opportunity to go into the sanctuary and turn on the organ and play it."

As Levsen tells it, "One thing led to another," and his love for the organ flourished. With his sights set on attending college, he searched for a job that would earn him a bit more money and landed one with a piano company in Davenport.

"I learned how to tune pianos and tune electronic organs," he said. "I decided that at some point in time, I would move out of piano tuning, and maybe get into the pipe organ field."

Once he got the hang of things, Levsen decided to branch out on his own and freelance his services. Word spread, and he soon began fielding phone calls from churches, asking him to look at their pipe organs.

Through that job, he landed another one. Levsen had to call the Wicks Organ



**Rodney Levens Sr.** at Levens Organ Company on Friday, October 6, in Buffalo. The company has built or rebuilt about 120 organs since its creation in the '80s. *Katelyn Metzger*

that wasn't going to work for very long," he said. "So we looked for the land and bought down here in Buffalo, built the building and that's how we got our start."

### LEARNING THE INS, LEARNING THE OUTS

Levens's oldest son, Rodney Levens Jr., got involved in the family business right away and is now the vice president of the company. He started working with his father when he was seven years old.

"I would go out and hold keys for him, hand him screwdrivers, stuff like that," he said, adding he learned the tuning process at about the same time. "I've been tuning for over 50 years now."

Levens said his son's interest in construction and woodworking is what got him in the door, and is a prerequisite for those looking for employment at the Levens Organ Company.

Company in Highland, Illinois, to order parts for the organs he was working on.

"The second time I called the vice president of the company got on the phone and said, 'Rod what kind of work are you doing up there? We're looking for a representative in Iowa and Illinois. Would you be interested?'" he recalled. "'I said well yes I would!'"

That phone call turned into a 10-year career as a representative where he sold

80 organs across both states. In addition, Levens served an apprenticeship and began tuning organs in the Quad-Cities metro area. Before long, his territory expanded to eastern Iowa and western Illinois.

In the late '70s, Levens decided he had the experience to go into business for himself, but with a twist. This time, he decided to build pipe organs from scratch.

"The first organs were built in my then new garage in Davenport, but I knew



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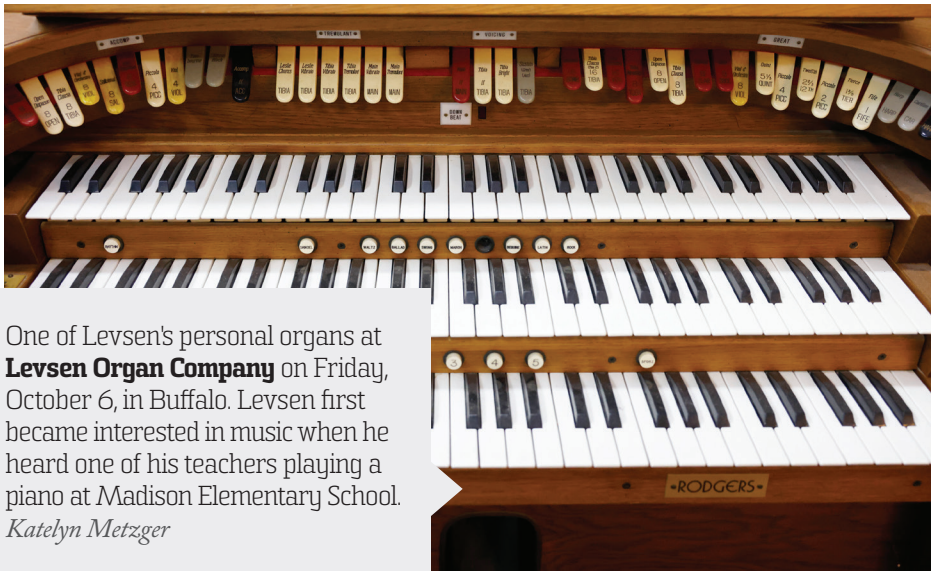
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**Rodney Levens Sr.** and his grandson and employee, **Dustin Levens**, chat in the woodshop at Levens Organ Company on Friday, October 6, in Buffalo. Levens's three sons also work for the company. *Katelyn Metzger*



One of Levens's personal organs at **Levens Organ Company** on Friday, October 6, in Buffalo. Levens first became interested in music when he heard one of his teachers playing a piano at Madison Elementary School. *Katelyn Metzger*

"There are 14 different skilled trades involved in building a pipe organ, and a master builder has to know something about all of those," Levens said. "Well, maybe a little more than something."

In order to master all those trades, an organ apprenticeship is an eight-year-long adventure.

In the early '80s, Levens got his first order for an organ. He had been tuning the existing organ at First Lutheran in Cedar Rapids when they called and ordered an upgrade.

Two years later, it was finished and installed. Once it was all in, Levens met with the organist, an old friend of his.

"He said to me, 'Rod what are we going to call this organ?'" he recalled. "I said well, I guess it's a Levens organ.' And that became our name."

By the late '80s, business was booming and the Levens Organ Company had as many as 18 employees. It now has 10, but

that even number is important, he noted, because organ tuning work is a two-person job. Building one from scratch takes even more help.

In the decades since he got his start, Levens estimates his company has built or rebuilt about 120 organs at the Buffalo workshop. A list can be found on his website.

That organ in Cedar Rapids has since been replaced with a larger one, but a number of other original Levens organs still exist. All pipe organs are custom-made, he said, which means no two are the same and emphasizes the importance of knowing all 14 skilled trades.

"They can be as small as two or three ranks of pipes and as large as 50 or 75 ranks," he said.

A rank, he said, is 61 pipes that will play the same tone character all the way up and down the keyboard, similar to a section in an orchestra. A 75-rank organ, then, would have more than 4,500 pipes.

Each pipe plays a single pitch and the variety allows for the organ to accomplish multiple at once. For example, if a church wants to be able to accomplish high-pitched, harmonic tones, it will need 61 flue pipes.

"It's like the difference between going to a hamburger joint or going to a cafeteria, where you have all these different things in front of you and you can select what you want," Levens said. "On a large pipe organ, it's sort of that way. You can select whatever tone colors that you want to create the sort of music that you're working with."

The more pipes and more ranks of pipes an organ has, the more versatile it can be. Each pipe is a different size, with the smaller pipes creating higher pitches and the larger ones creating lower pitches. Most organs are arranged diatonically, which means the larger pipes are in the middle and the smaller ones are at the end.

### THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

Over the last several decades, big changes have come to the organ industry. Fewer churches are being built, which would typically translate to fewer organs to build new ones. However, larger churches have shifted their focus to repurposing unused organs.

In the Levens workshop currently is an organ from a small church in Monmouth, Illinois. It was purchased by Notre Dame Catholic Church in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, and is being expanded and updated.

Pieces of the organ are spread out in the factory and are switched from pneumatic action to electric valves. Pneumatic organs were popular at the turn of the 20th century and had leather pouches that covered the valves to help control the airflow. Their life expectancy is about 15-50 years, depending on the environment.

"If there are acids in the air in a highly populated area, the leather lasts a very little time," he said. "If you're in a little country church out on the hillside where the air is pure, the leather will last 50-60 years."

Because the leather can wear out, many churches are opting for electric valves, which have a 100-year life span, Levens said. Additional ranks are going into the organ as well, bringing the total to 30, or about 1,800 individual pipes when completed.

More ranks mean more pipes, both metal and wooden. The pipes work the same way but different sounds are accomplished easier with different materials.

"Bright, harmonic sounds are a little easier to do with a metal pipe. Mellow, soft sounds are easier with a wooden pipe," he said. "Usually in a pipe organ, about one-third of the pipes are made out of wood. The rest are metal."

Restoration on the organ started in September and is expected to be completed next spring. To buy the same one brand new would cost about \$650,000.

"Notre Dame church is just pleased as pie that they can have this organ restored to like-new condition with all the new features, the digital control system, and 10 more sets of pipes we're adding to it," he said. "It's a little more than a quarter of a million dollars altogether, as far as the project is concerned. But they are delighted."

Once the restoration is complete, the parts and pieces will be carefully stacked on wooden crates and transported with Levsen's own truck. A large organ can weigh as much as 12-15 tons — equivalent to the weight of about three elephants.

## GETTING IN TUNE

Once the weather shifts from summer to winter, the focus of the business shifts to tuning. The Levsen Organ Company has more than 300 organs from coast to coast on its tuning rotation list.

Smaller organs can be loaded in about half a day, he said. Larger organs take two to three days to load. Once it gets to the church, the Levsen crew begins putting it together. Because they are so heavy, architects generally keep this in mind when the church is being built and reinforce the structure, or loft, for safety reasons.

Architects typically figure 400 pounds per square foot, he said. This is important for organs because they are spread out and the weight is distributed equally over the floor.

"If it has the capacity to hold the weight of people in the room, it has the capacity to hold the organ because the organ is spread out all over the place," he said.

The average pipe organ needs to be tuned twice a year — once in the spring and again in the fall when the weather changes. Organs are classified as keyboard instruments but have woodwind elements.

Air blows through the pipes to create the sound, but the pitch can be affected by the temperature in the room. If the room is too cold, the organ can go sharp. If too hot, it can go flat.

When churches turn off the boiler and turn on the air conditioning in the spring, for example, the organ needs to be re-tuned in order for it to adjust. The same rule applies in winter when the organ needs to be returned in a warmer environment.

"If you multiply that times 3,000 pipes, where each one of them is a musical instrument and to be in concert with each other, you need to have stable temperatures to make sure that everybody's going to be on the same pitch," he said.

Levsen said before his employees come to tune an organ, they ask the church to set the space at "worship temperature" for at least 24 hours. This allows the organ to get acclimated and stabilized in the new temperature to be tuned more accurately.

For the actual tuning process, some will use a digital device. Levsen, however, has been using the same thing for more than 60 years: his ears.

"It doesn't take anybody special," he said. "You just learn."

## FROM MEDIEVAL TO MODERN

Levsen said a big demand right now is digitizing organs to play by themselves because organists are hard to find. With this system, churches can share an organist without having one in the room during worship.

While the organist is playing, the music will be automatically copied onto a flash drive. When it's time for church, anyone can press the button and the organ will play.

"It's not a recording. There's no speakers or anything like that involved, it just plays the whole organ," he said.

The keys on the organ do not necessarily go down as if there were a ghost player, he said. Instead, the keys open and close switches to conduct electricity into the organ and turn things on and off. Now, that can be done digitally.

Pipe organs have a history reaching back to ancient Greece where they were powered hydraulically, according to Yamaha. Later, devices known as bellows were invented in ancient Egypt. Wedge-shaped, air would flow through the bellows when they were compressed.

The air would then travel up through the pipes and produce sound. In medieval times, organ blowers would accompany organists. Their job was to use ropes and levers to compress the giant bellows and create more air for the larger organs.

Now, organs are fitted with electronic motors that pump the air into the bellows.

In another part of the factory is the drafting room where another son, Gregory, has his office. The design work is all done there first before the blueprints are taken into the workshop.

The process that once was done by hand would be completed on large pieces of paper spread out on the office floor. Now, everything is done digitally — a massive time saver.

"We try to get all of our instruments, drafting wise, done mechanically on paper before we pick up a saw or a hammer because if it won't fit on paper, we can't make it fit with the saw or hammer," Levsen said. "Now we don't even have to use an eraser. We have a delete key."

## DECADES OF DEDICATION

In the workshop, employees know how to do everything from tune to making pieces to putting them together. The consoles, wind chests and wooden pipes are all built on-site. Originally, the plan was to build a metal pipe shop on the land as well, but that never came to fruition. And, it may be for the better.

"Pipe organ factories historically, have numerous, burned down because there's so much different stuff that's involved," he said.

The metal pipes have to be treated with fire and so do many of the wooden parts. The Moline Organ Company was active in the area from 1879-1891. After the Illinois-based plant caught fire, the company moved to Milwaukee. A fire up there brought them back down to Moline, Levsen said.

No disasters have been reported at the Levsen plant, and that's credited to being careful and meticulous in their work. With colder weather setting in now, employees are preparing to halt their work in-house to focus on tuning for the next several months.

"We don't do anything hardly at all in the shop (at that time), but when the tuning is over with we go back to working on the projects at hand," he said.

Those projects are what encourage Levsen to get out of bed in the morning and what keep him working at 88 years old. Because at the end of the day, his goal is to help people fall in love with music the same way he did as a student at Madison School.

"The overall thing is to make a magnificent organ that makes goose pimples on your hands when somebody plays it," he said.



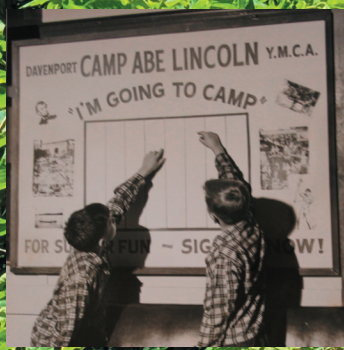
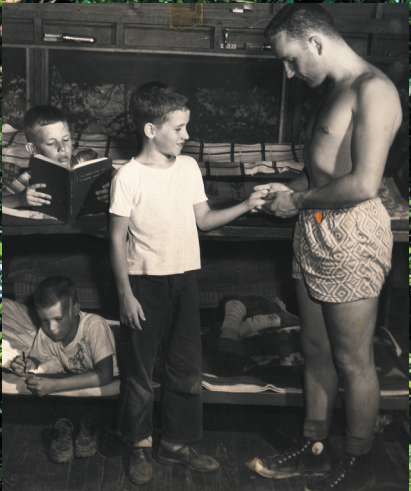
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## APRIL

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
					5 SB 6:30PM	6 SB 6:00PM
7 SB 1:00PM		9 WM	10 WM	11 WM	12 WM	13 WM
14 WM		16 PEO 6:30PM	17 PEO 6:30PM	18 PEO 6:30PM	19 PEO 6:30PM	20 PEO 6:00PM
21 PEO 1:00PM		23 SB	24 SB	25 SB	26 SB	27 SB
28 SB		30 BEL				

## MAY

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
			1 BEL	2 BEL	3 BEL	4 BEL
5 BEL		7 WIS 6:30PM	8 WIS 6:30PM	9 WIS 6:30PM	10 WIS 6:30PM	11 WIS 6:00PM
12 WIS 1:00PM		14 CR	15 CR	16 CR	17 CR	18 CR
19 CR		21 DAY 6:30PM	22 DAY 6:30PM	23 DAY 6:30PM	24 DAY 6:30PM	25 DAY 6:00PM
26 DAY 6:30PM		28 SB 6:30PM	29 SB 6:30PM	30 SB 6:30PM	31 SB 6:30PM	

## JUNE

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
						1 SB 6:00PM
2 SB 1:00PM		4 WIS	5 WIS	6 WIS	7 WIS	8 WIS
9 WIS		11 BEL 6:30PM	12 BEL 6:30PM	13 BEL 6:30PM	14 BEL 6:30PM	15 BEL 6:00PM
16 BEL 1:00PM		18 GL	19 GL	20 GL	21 GL	22 GL
23 GL		25 PEO	26 PEO	27 PEO	28 PEO	29 PEO
30 PEO						

## JULY

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
	1 CR 6:30PM	2 CR 6:30PM	3 CR 6:00PM	4 CR	5 CR	6 CR
7	8	9 PEO 6:30PM	10 PEO 6:30PM	11 PEO 6:30PM	12 PEO 6:30PM	13 PEO 6:00PM
14 PEO 1:00PM		16	17	18	19 SB	20 SB
21 SB		23 CR 6:30PM	24 CR 6:30PM	25 CR 6:30PM	26 CR 6:30PM	27 CR 6:00PM
28 CR 1:00PM		29 PEO	30 PEO			

## AUGUST

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
				1 PEO	2 PEO	3 PEO
4 PEO		6 WIS 6:30PM	7 WIS 6:30PM	8 WIS 6:30PM	9 WIS 6:30PM	10 WIS 6:00PM
11 WIS 1:00PM		13 BEL	14 BEL	15 BEL	16 BEL	17 BEL
18 BEL		20 LAN 6:30PM	21 LAN 6:30PM	22 LAN 6:30PM	23 LAN 6:30PM	24 LAN 6:00PM
25 LAN 1:00PM		27 WIS	28 WIS	29 WIS	30 WIS	31 WIS

## SEPTEMBER

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
1 WIS	2	3 BEL 6:30PM	4 BEL 6:30PM	5 BEL 6:30PM	6 BEL 6:30PM	7 BEL 6:00PM
8 BEL 1:00PM						

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# 4 in '24:

## Four projects we're watching in 2024

### STAFF

Big things are planned in the Quad-Cities for 2024. Take a look at what we're keeping an eye on in four Quad-Cities communities:

#### BETTENDORF: SWINGING FOR THE FENCES

The TBK Bank Sports Complex, built in 2017, will see big changes next year.

East of the complex, developers plan to build a 100,000-square-foot building to house indoor turf fields. Per an agreement with the city, the indoor turf fields must be completed by Dec. 31, 2024, a year later than the original deadline.

And, the changes aren't just happening on the turf.

The indoor, year-round spaces lend themselves to a variety of uses including baseball, softball, soccer, football, and lacrosse. This is a change from the previous plan, announced in early 2022, to build outdoor fields next to the under-construction Iron Tee Golf Range, which is on track to be completed by June, 2024.

The year-round entertainment venue promises 58 climate-controlled outdoor hitting bays for golf as well as a full bar and year-round activities for kids and families. It will also feature a 10,000-square-foot video-gaming space that will include virtual reality mini-golf as well as multiple event spaces.

Next door to the Iron Tee Golf complex will be a \$17 million hotel. Frontier Hospitality Group of Bettendorf announced in August it plans to develop and operate a



Frontier Hospitality Group of Bettendorf has revealed plans to build a \$17 million, 80-room hotel near the TBK Bank Sports Complex. The new **SpringHill Suites** by Marriott hotel will be adjacent to the new Iron Tee Golf located in the northeast quadrant of Middle and Forest Grove Roads.

*Contributed*

new SpringHill Suites by Marriott hotel in the northeast quadrant of Middle and Forest Grove Roads.

Construction on the new hotel next door is set to begin in 2024 with a goal for the 80-room hotel to open in early 2025. The SpringHill Suites project is expected to create more than 25 permanent jobs and approximately 100 construction jobs.

## DAVENPORT: BRINGING THE BIG SCREEN DOWNTOWN

The latest addition to the booming Motor Row district in downtown Davenport has been much anticipated for months, and we're anxious to see how it progresses in the new year.

The Last Picture House is the work of Scott Beck and Bryan Woods, Quad-Cities natives and film writers most known for their movie 'Quiet Place.'

Taking up the corner building at 325 E. 2nd St., Davenport, the two-story movie theater, social lounge, and cocktail bar was developed by Beck and Woods' partnership, Cinema Paradiso LLC.

The movie theater project was awarded a Destination Iowa grant for \$600,000, making up 16% of the total project investment of \$3.7 million. Destination Iowa is a federally funded state grant program geared toward projects promoting destination-building and tourism.

The theater shows everything from summer blockbusters to cult classics and foreign films, and a 35mm projection of



Construction on **The Last Picture House** in downtown Davenport was a much anticipated project the last few years. *Contributed*

old productions that can't be seen any other way. Once the weather warms up in the new year, the rooftop will offer chances for outdoor screenings.

## MOLINE: WINGS UP TO THE EAST

Quad Cities International Airport is expanding its reach with a new flight to Charlotte.

The North Carolina-bound service via American Airlines was announced this summer, with the inaugural flight taking off on Dec. 20. Charlotte Douglas International Airport (CLT) comes in as the sixth-busiest airport in the nation with 43 million visitors annually, according to enjoytravel.com.

Flights will be available seven days a week, twice a day, at 6:50 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.

According to the Charlotte Regional Business Alliance, the largest employers in the Charlotte area are in the fields of advanced manufacturing, financial services, logistics, life sciences, and innovation economics. In the 2023 Q1 report, the alliance announced the region saw capital investments of \$2.2 billion and an increase of 1,500 jobs.

The economic growth of the Charlotte metro is one reason this flight has been in the works for years. It originally was to take off in 2020 but was thrown off track by the pandemic. American Airlines showed renewed



A worker refuels a Trans States Airlines plane at the **Quad City International Airport** Tuesday, November 5, 2019. *Kevin E. Schmidt*

interest, however, because of the success of business travel between Moline and Atlanta on Delta Airlines.

According to the Charlotte airport's website, it routinely sees about 114,000 arrivals and departures a day.

## ROCK ISLAND: NEW BUSINESS IS ON TAP

Out with the old and in with the brew. A new Geneseo-based brewery is set to make its new home in Rock Island in 2024.

Constructed in 1914, the pearly Palladian cathedral in Rock Island's Broadway Historic District was once the home of the First Church of Christ, Scientist. Most recently, it housed the Karpeles Manuscript Library Museum, which displayed a portion of the Karpeles family's collection of over a million historical documents.

In the 2024, the historic limestone-laden edifice is set to be home to burgers, sodas, and brews. The Karpeles Museum closed in October and sold its space to Great Revivalist, a Quad-Cities brewery that started in Geneseo before expanding to Clinton.

Great Revivalist CEO Richard Schwab said the brewery is tentatively aiming to open in the summer of 2024, with its signature beverages and hand-tossed pizzas on the menu. Brewing in historic buildings is nothing new for Great Revivalist — its Clinton location sits in a former Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, built in 1898.

The Karpeles Museums, which had 14 locations across the country, were opened by David Karpeles, in 1983.



The Karpeles Manuscript Library Museum in Rock Island on Sunday, March 5, 2017. The museum recently moved and will be reopened as **Great Rivatalist Brewing** in the new year. *Andy Abeyta*

David and his wife, Martha, opened the museums with the belief that attendance should be free to make education widely accessible.

When David died in 2022, his children took the reins of the 10 active locations. With so many locations nationwide — from southern California to upstate New York — it wasn't tenable to keep all the branches open.

The organization has planned to shrink down to five active locations, with their primary museum in St. Augustine, Florida.

# TOP LAWYERS IL QUAD CITIES AREA BASED UPON A SURVEY OF THEIR PEERS



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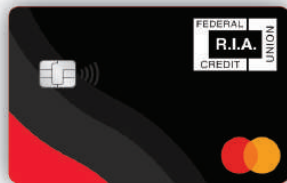
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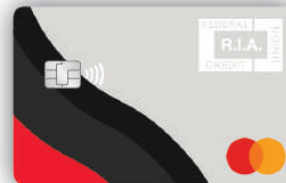
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