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INSIDE WISCONSIN

## **Tom Still: Beloit revival example of how civic-minded patrons can change a town**

TOM STILL | Wisconsin Technology Council president Jan 20, 2018



Tom Still



Jamf founder Zach Halmstad views construction of the Confluence Arts Center from a top floor suite in the Lismore Hotel in downtown Eau Claire last summer. Halmstad's holistic approach to workforce and community development has been hailed as a model for Wisconsin.

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JOHN HART, STATE JOURNAL

BELOIT — For those who have watched the 1946 movie classic, “It’s a Wonderful Life,” a memorable character is Henry F. Potter, the richest man in town and a malevolent banker who wants to own everything and everybody. The hero of the film, George Bailey, is given a heavenly chance to see what his beloved town, Bedford Falls, would have become had George never been born and a dingy “Pottersville” took its place.

I’m betting many people in Beloit are happy Diane Hendricks was born and helped to turn a rusting factory town with a Pottersville future into a techy version of Bedford Falls.

Hendricks is the matriarch of ABC Supply, the national roofing and building supply company, and one of the wealthiest, self-made women in America. Along with her late husband, Ken Hendricks, she built ABC Supply and several affiliated companies, Hendricks Holding and Hendricks Commercial Properties.

Thanks to investments and more from those resources, Beloit has turned a corner on recovering from the loss of factories that once built paper-making machines and diesel engines. Where empty post-industrial buildings stood, a mix of hotels, restaurants, upscale apartments, a performing arts center and mixed retail, commercial and manufacturing space has taken its place.

A central fixture is Irontek, a co-working space on the Rock River that has become home to about 20 tech-based companies, including Comply365, FatWallet and AccuLynx. One of the nation's top-ranked tech accelerators, gener8tor, has offices there, as well. A partnership has been established between Irontek and the Beloit School District to help train younger students in disciplines such as computer sciences.

Not that Beloit doesn't still have its problems, poverty pockets included, but it stands out as a RustBelt recovery story. Fortunately for Wisconsin, there are other examples:

In Eau Claire, Zach Halmstad of software company Jamf is also giving back to his hometown. In addition to Jamf's downtown Eau Claire building, which captures a Silicon Valley techie feel with distinct Wisconsin twists, Halmstad has invested in three other projects that are turning a once-tired downtown into a destination spot for northwest Wisconsin.

Chief among them is the Confluence Arts Center, so named for its location near the confluence of Eau Claire's major rivers. It's a \$45 million performing arts and civic center funded so far by a mix of state, local and private dollars, including a reported \$500,000 from Jamf.

Its effect on Eau Claire's downtown is already being felt through redevelopment of older buildings and other plans that will attract people and dollars. They include the 112-room Lismore Hotel and the 30-room Oxbow Hotel, two downtown properties tied to Halmstad and other investors, including Grammy Award-winning musician Justin Vernon, also an Eau Claire native.

In La Crosse, Logistics Health Inc. founder Don Weber and Weber Holdings have invested heavily in that city's riverfront, once an eyesore and now a magnet for visitors and other companies. The Weber Center for Performing Arts, which opened five years ago at a reported cost of \$8 million, bears his name.

In Madison, the contributions and investments of Pleasant Rowland (American Girl and other ventures) and Jerry Frautschi, who hails from a family of entrepreneurs, led to the construction of the Overture Center; the rebirth of The Edgewater hotel; and the overall transformation of the 100 block of State Street. Epic's Judy Faulkner has quietly supported community causes and has signed The Giving Pledge, a charitable effort launched by Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffet.

Throughout its history, Wisconsin has been shaped by entrepreneurs whose names are still reflected in the companies and even the cities they founded. Today's crop is continuing the tradition of working to ensure there are more Bedford Falls than Pottersvilles.

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Tom Still is the president of the Wisconsin Technology Council. Email: [tstill@wisconsintechcouncil.com](mailto:tstill@wisconsintechcouncil.com).

