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Around the Corner



Once in a slump, Bloomington's downtown district is out to prove that it's still a contender.

Story by Gail Gaboda '88

The Rev. Clinton W. Sears, Illinois Wesleyan's first president, forged a lasting bond between downtown Bloomington and the University's campus.

He built a sidewalk.

In 1850, downtown Bloomington was the hub of commerce and IWU was located in a grove north of town — a long, muddy walk on unpaved streets.

Sears saw the value of linking the fledgling campus to downtown, said Richard Wilson, IWU's 18th president, in his inaugural address this past spring.

“He even agreed to spend \$500 of his own money to build that sidewalk,” Wilson said, “so important was it to construct that connection between the town and the University.”

The relationship endured, and over the years downtown Bloomington became a retreat and resource for Illinois Wesleyan students. Because the downtown's popularity and economic strength have ebbed and flowed over the years, IWU alumni of different eras have drastically different memories of the district. Graduates of the 1940s and '50s recall a thriving retail center, while those from the 1980s likely remember the downtown bars and little else. But more recent graduates and current students have a new downtown to fill their memories: a hip, artsy district filled with specialty stores, art galleries, and distinctive eateries.

Students can study or chat over a latte at Coffee Hound, visit at their favorite watering hole, grab Chinese food at Golden Dragon or the Grand Café, browse the thrift shops, or take in a movie at the newly renovated Castle Theater. To earn extra cash, many students also work downtown at the various shops and entertainment venues.

In the warm months, there's a Farmers' Market, downtown festivals, and outdoor concerts. In the winter, there are art walks through downtown shops and galleries and special holiday events. Beautifully restored historic buildings grace the streets, and the McLean County Museum of History offers walking tours that showcase downtown's architecture.

To understand how far downtown has come, it helps to understand where it started. Officially chartered in 1850, with a population of 1,600, Bloomington's growth was fueled by the location of two major railroads — the Chicago and St. Louis — and grew into a busy center of commerce for McLean County. The Springfield lawyer Abraham Lincoln was a frequent visitor, riding the circuit to Bloomington and conducting business from the now restored Miller-Davis building on Main Street. Later, downtown became home to the county courthouse, a thriving retail district, and eventually internationally recognized companies such as State Farm Insurance Cos. and Beer Nuts.

Despite a 1900 fire that destroyed many buildings, downtown Bloomington continued to grow and flourish for decades. Up until the 1960s, everything one needed could be found there — department and dime stores, dentists, doctors, attorneys, hotels, and movie theaters kept streets busy from dawn to dusk. On weekends, the town square was the place to share news, gossip, see others, and be seen.

By the 1960s and '70s, downtown's importance was eroding. The coming of the interstates pushed business and housing to the east. Interstate Business Loop 55 (Veterans Parkway) became home to two indoor shopping malls, Eastland and College Hills, which drew both customers and merchants away from Main Street.

John Copenhaver '63 — a longtime area resident and former downtown business worker and owner — still frequented the remaining stores and services during this period of decline. But he also couldn't help but notice the number of businesses closing or moving out. "What I saw was a



In the summer and early fall, downtown comes alive during Saturday morning Farmers' Markets. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

slow deterioration of downtown.” Watching the area go through a slump was especially painful, he says, in contrast to his fond memories from his childhood and college years.

Once a building is unoccupied, “it doesn’t take long for it to look derelict,” Copenhaver observes. “There were a lot of those buildings downtown.”

An early turning point came in 1983, when downtown Bloomington was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The distinction helped the community rally around the cause of preserving its uniquely historic core as citizens began to ask what could be done to save the existing buildings.

Several downtown redevelopment plans were floated, but none took hold. Meanwhile, fires claimed several old buildings. Then, in the late 1980s, one local business made a significant investment in downtown by restoring a group of adjoining buildings on the north side of the Old Courthouse square.



At Heritage Enterprises' downtown headquarters, CEO Steve Wannemacher '73 consults with associate director of marketing Melissa Gadrinab Beaver '93. In the window behind them can be seen the Old Courthouse's restored dome. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

president and CEO in 2002.

Heritage Enterprises was a growing health-care services company and needed space for its central office. Its leaders — which included IWU trustee Craig Hart — saw new opportunity in the old downtown. In 1989, the former Roland Department Store was restored and is now home to approximately 70 Heritage employees.

The Heritage project inspired others to return downtown’s historic buildings to modern functionality by adding new materials that blend with the old. More importantly, the project exemplified an approach that favored restoration instead of tearing down and rebuilding.

“There were community leaders who felt it was important to be remaking downtown in a way that was consistent with a long-term approach to the whole environment we have down here,” explains Steve Wannemacher '73, a Bloomington native and Illinois Wesleyan trustee who became Heritage Enterprises’

“We should feel fortunate that, over the past 20 years, a lot of people have decided to preserve this,” says Greg Koos, executive director of the McLean County Museum of History, housed in the Old Courthouse that remains downtown’s centerpiece. “They have restored the most public of our arts: architecture. These are artistic landscapes. These buildings were designed by artists.”

According to former Bloomington Mayor Judy Markowitz, “There are many cities that are trying to do the same things we’re trying to accomplish — to rejuvenate life in the downtown, tastefully done.”

When Markowitz took office as mayor in 1997, downtown Bloomington had only a few restaurants and retail shops. “I grew up in the ’40s and ’50s knowing downtown Bloomington as the place to be,” she says. She went away to college and returned as a young mother in 1969, and found the mall had taken over. She didn’t go downtown much because there wasn’t much left to see.

As a city alderman, and then as mayor, Markowitz began to argue passionately for the need to return a sense of vibrancy to the city’s dying downtown district. “Every mayor has something dear to their heart, that they want to take hold of and develop and shape,” she says.

During her first term as mayor, Markowitz appointed a group of individuals who shared her commitment to a new task force, Uniquely Bloomington, which later merged with the Downtown Bloomington Association, an advocacy group. “It’s intelligent people who have a vision as to what it could be,” she explains. Those people included business owners, community leaders, and other citizens who invested interest, energy, and money into a renewed downtown.

The group helped to put downtown on the historic register and establish a façade grant program to rehab historic buildings. “We try to support people who want to come downtown,” Markowitz says. Building owners who have tapped into the grant program are now filling street-level storefronts with new retail life.

After two terms in office, Markowitz retired this year as mayor, leaving a more vibrant downtown — and some continuing controversies — as her legacy.

The controversy concerns two multi-million-dollar projects which were backed by Markowitz and approved by City Council, but which met with opposition from several residents who questioned the price and purpose. Markowitz makes no apologies, saying of the projects, as well as all the other downtown renovations, “I think it’s very positive and I’m extremely proud about what has happened.”

One of the projects involves the Bloomington Cultural District’s plans to renovate three blocks in the north end of downtown. The \$19.4-million plan focuses on the former Scottish Rite Temple (now the Bloomington Center for the Performing Arts) and the McLean County Arts Center.



An artist’s rendition of the \$37-million sports and entertainment arena. Named the U.S. Cellular Coliseum, the 7,000-seat arena is expected to lure more business to the downtown area. (Image provided by Central Illinois Arena Management)

The Scottish Rite Temple — originally built in 1921 to house the annual American Passion Play — was another historic downtown building in decline. When the temple became available for sale, the city bought it, Markowitz says, because “we were very concerned that someone else might buy it and tear it down. ... We saw it as a facility where the community could come together for events, music, and drama.”

The building — which has been the longtime home of the IWU Civic Orchestra — will be renovated into a modern, comfortable hall hosting regional music and theatre ensembles as well as nationally known performers. In addition, a Festival Park is being built for outdoor events and other facilities are planned to provide venues and outreach programs to display, perform, and teach the arts.

The project has been of special interest to the Illinois Wesleyan community, says Cultural District Executive Director Bruce Marquis, because of the University's long relationship with the publicly appointed commission that oversees planning in the cultural downtown area. "We're very happy to have a relationship (with the University) on many levels," says Marquis, "and look forward to strengthening that relationship with future programs."

The second — and more controversial — project involves a \$37-million sports and entertainment arena that is under construction on the southwest end of downtown. After the City Council approved the project, some local citizens successfully petitioned to hold a referendum on whether to withhold use of public money to fund the arena. The referendum passed but was non-binding, and construction of the 7,000-seat arena is expected to be completed by next spring.

Many residents remain skeptical of the project, believing it will raise property taxes. Commenting to the local media after the referendum was passed, Markowitz responded: "We have worked for four years to put this project together, to have it privately financed and to have investors (so that) we could work on a business plan where the revenue that the project would generate would pay off the interest on the bond. We are not going to the public for any tax dollars."

City officials say that revenue will come from concerts and special events, even a football team and ice hockey team, which the arena will host. So far interest has been promising — by early spring, all 24 suites in the arena were already sold out and 600 of the 800 VIP club seats had been filled.

Illinois Wesleyan junior Pete Bloom watched the arena construction progress over the spring semester. "That is going to be great for downtown," he says. He thinks the arena will attract students to sporting events and concerts while introducing them to all the other options that the district offers.

Markowitz believes that Illinois Wesleyan's close proximity makes downtown's resurgence mutually beneficial to both the campus and the city, and offers more opportunities for future collaboration. She remembers often consulting the late President Minor Myers jr. about downtown plans and receiving both his valuable input and his "moral support."

"There's been an open-door policy" with the University and the city, says Markowitz; a feeling that "we're talking to each other, that we're working together, that we're sharing problems and solutions."

That mutual involvement should continue to flourish under the leadership of President Richard Wilson, who, after assuming his new post in July 2004, made a trip downtown to visit with

Markowitz, who in turn introduced him to Catherine Dunlap, executive director of the Downtown Bloomington Association. In his inauguration speech, Wilson confirmed the University's historical commitment to the surrounding community — one that goes against the stereotypical “ivory tower” university that has little interest in the world beyond campus. “I am not certain that was ever true at Illinois Wesleyan,” Wilson said, “and it is certainly not true today.”

Commitment is one thing, but supporters of a revitalized downtown know it takes more than that to lure large numbers of people back to the downtown area.

While Copenhaver thinks it's unrealistic to hope that downtown will ever approach the status it enjoyed in its heyday, he does believe “that it could be tremendously vital as a different entity.” The building of the performing-arts center and arena, he anticipates, will attract other businesses such as hotels that will want to profit from the increased traffic.



Even if downtown never reaches the level of its former glory, it is undeniably blossoming into something new and exciting. But what remains one of its strongest selling points, say its backers, is the vivid sense of history it retains.

When restoration work began last year on the Old Courthouse building's distinctive limestone drum and copper dome, Wannemacher had a front-row seat to watch the progress from his fourth-floor office across the street.

“I think the dome restoration is a metaphor for what is happening in all of downtown,” he says. “The dome was renewed but the framework has been there for 100 years. That combination of newness and history is what makes all of this so exciting.”

Author Gail Gaboda '88 is specialty publications editor at *The Pantagraph* and has worked in downtown Bloomington for nearly eight years. She has an M.A. in professional writing from Illinois State University and is editor of *Business to Business*, a monthly magazine that covers topical business issues.

Coffee Hound's al fresco seating adds to the district's leisurely, cosmopolitan appeal .Enjoying the ambiance are (from left) Kellee Milligan '08, her father Dan Milligan '73, and Dan's brother Bob, whose son Greg Milligan is a freshman at IWU. (Photo by Marc Featherly)