



**EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR'S
REPORT
FOR
MARCH
2023**



ADVISORY*ADVISORY***ADVISORY***ADVISORY***ADVISORY**

ECGRA to Award Beehive Network Grants
Successful Program Catalyze Small Business and Entrepreneurial Growth with Funding and Support

CONTACT: Kate Philips
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ERIE, PA — Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority (ECGRA) will continue investment of local share gaming funds and ARPA funds across Erie County with an awards reception on Friday, March 3rd at 10:30AM to present the latest round of the NWPB Innovation Beehive Network grants to local recipients.

Following the reception, the Jefferson Educational Society will be [hosting an event](#) to give the public an up close look at the NWPB Innovation Beehive Network.

Beehive funding is designed to catalyze 501(c)3, nonprofit organizations such as universities to participate in the economic development system of Erie County. Beehive grants provide vital matching funds to encourage the development of entrepreneurial support services at local institutions that have this purpose in their mission.

WHAT: Beehive Network Grants Award Reception

WHO: Dr. Perry Wood, Executive Director, ECGRA
Beehive Grants Recipients

WHEN: March 3rd, 2023

TIME: 10:30am

WHERE: Jefferson Educational Society
3207 State Street
Erie, PA 16508

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Perry Wood

From: Mary Wassell <wassell@parkerphilips.com>
Sent: Wednesday, March 8, 2023 1:09 PM
Cc: Kate Philips
Subject: RELEASE: Infinite Erie Expands Leadership Team



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

NEWS*NEWS***NEWS***NEWS***NEWS***NEWS***NEWS***NEWS**

Infinite Erie Expands Leadership Team

Delivery Teams Assigned to Cross-Sectors, Projects

CONTACT: Kate Philips
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ERIE, PA (March 8, 2023) – Infinite Erie, formed and funded by Erie Insurance, Erie Community Foundation, and ECGRA, announced new membership to the Erie Action Team and introduces the Delivery Teams charged with managing implementation across focused Playbook priorities.

By coordinating inclusive growth strategies to deliver transformative change, Infinite Erie was organized across public, private and civic leadership to implement [Erie's Investment Playbook](#) and position Erie to attract & secure more public and private sector funding than like-size regions.

“Our desired outcomes can only be achieved when the regions leaders are working in unison toward a collective goal,” said Karen Bilowith, President and CEO of the Erie Community Foundation and chair of the Erie Action Team. “Right now, that means implementing the 35 priorities identified in the Playbook — and as an extension of the Erie Action Team, the Delivery Teams will work to drive Infinite Erie forward.”

The Erie Action Team serves as the steering committee for Erie's Investment Playbook, and is comprised of public, private, and civic leaders that are driving Erie's economic and community development efforts. The Delivery Teams will work with the Erie Action Team to help determine specific needs, costs, funding sources, and next steps on investments and strategies — putting plans into action.

“By having community leaders on the same page and agreeing to follow a road map for strategically pursuing funding opportunities, Erie County is already winning,” said Kim Thomas, Executive Director of Infinite Erie. “And now with inclusive representation on both the Erie Action Team and Delivery Teams, Infinite Erie will better serve all of Erie County as a catalyst for equitable and inclusive growth and deliver transformative change.”

To ensure ongoing collaboration and inclusion, a leadership representative from each of the Delivery Teams will sit as a member of the Action Team. The new Erie Action Team members are Mike Ferritto, Governor Josh Shapiro's Northwest Regional Director, Gerald Blanks, CEO of GEEDC, and Tina Mengine, CEO of the Erie County Redevelopment Authority; initial Delivery Teams will be led by Rhonda Matthews, founding board member of Erie's Black Wall Street; Boo Hagerty, president of the Hamot Health Foundation; and Gary Horton, founder and CEO of Urban Erie Community Development Corporation. Additional members will be appointed as other Delivery Team leadership is identified.

Below is a breakdown of the full team.

- City of Erie Mayor Joe Schember
- Karen Bilowith, President and CEO, Erie Community Foundation (chair)
- Chris Marsh, Chief Diversity & Community Development Officer, Erie Insurance
- Perry Wood, Executive Director, ECGRA
- Ferki Ferati, President, Jefferson Education Society
- James Grunke, CEO, Erie Regional Chamber & Growth Partnership
- Gary Lee, Chief Administrative Officer, Diverse Erie
- Mike Ferritto, Governor Josh Shapiro's Northwest Regional Director
- Gerald Blanks, CEO, GEEDC
- Rhonda Matthews, founding board member, Erie's Black Wall Street
- Boo Hagerty, President, Hamot Health Foundation
- Gary Horton, founder and CEO, Urban Erie Community Development Corporation

The Erie Action Team will empower the collaborative work of the Delivery Teams. Rhonda Matthews will lead the Inclusive Entrepreneurship Delivery Team. Boo Hagerty will lead the permanent supportive housing and homelessness initiative; and Gary Horton will lead the Burton School Revitalization Delivery Team.

Through the collaboration and coordination of inclusive growth strategies, the Erie Action Team and Delivery Teams will put the Infinite Erie plans into action to serve as a catalyst for equitable and inclusive growth and deliver transformative change.

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PP

January 2023

Meeting with Executive Director
Ongoing Social Media Management
Ongoing Consulting
January Comms

IMPLEMENTED

7 Total January posts
4 Total graphics created

IN PROGRESS | 2023 Grant Releases and Graphics

Holiday Graphics
Press Release and Distribution
Anchor Building
Renaissance Block
Multi-Municipal Collaboration
Press Events
Small Business Recipients
Special Events

IN PLANNING

Parks Fields & Trails 2 year report
ECGRA Playbook
Roadshow Tours
2022 Annual Report

February 2023

Meeting with Executive Director

Ongoing Social Media Management

Ongoing Consulting

February Comms

IMPLEMENTED

- 8 Total February posts
- 3 Total graphics created
- Strategic Marketing Planning with Kate Philips and Executive Director

IN PROGRESS | 2023 Grant Releases and Graphics

- Holiday Graphics
- Press Release and Distribution
 - Beehive Network
 - Anchor Building
 - Renaissance Block
 - Multi-Municipal Collaboration
 - Special Events
- Press Events
 - Beehive Network Recipients
 - Special Events

IN PLANNING

- Parks Fields & Trails 2 year report
- ECGRA Playbook
- Roadshow Tours
- 2022 Annual Report

IN MEMORY

Jean Joyce was the Mercy Center for Women's inaugural board chair. She would also become a volunteer, donor, and our friend.

JEAN
JOYCE

1930 - 2022



"Your life was a blessing, your memory is a treasure, and you are loved beyond words and missed beyond measure."

Community garden receives funding, wins national award



Out of 4,000 entries for the State Farm Neighborhood Assist program which awards \$25,000 each to worthy community projects nationally, the Mercy Center's "Care and Feeding of our Neighbors" project was one of just 100 winners.

Erie County Gaming and Revenue Authority (ECGRA) provided initial funding for the project which is located adjacent to the Mercy Anchor Community Center.

The State Farm Neighborhood Assist grant will enable the Mercy Center to complete the community garden project which will include areas for fresh fruit and vegetables, a meditation garden, mural-painted retaining wall, and park benches. The new community center will also offer ongoing classes in gardening and nutrition to residents and neighbors.

State Farm **Neighborhood Assist**



"We are grateful to so many people for this project," says Jennie Hagerty, executive director at the Mercy Center. "Our project was up against thousands from across the country, and State Farm felt ours was worthy to place it in the top 200."

From there, it was a social media blitz to obtain votes, as only the top 100 would receive \$25,000.

"We're grateful to ECGRA, to all of our supporters who voted for us on social media, and of course State Farm. We're thankful to Yardmaster, too, who has been doing the work and donated and a pear tree, a symbol of longevity, fruitfulness, and strength," she said.

PEDAL for
MERCY

BECAUSE LIFE'S A JOURNEY

09.10.22



Our second annual Pedal for Mercy is set for Sat., Sept. 10 at Penn Shore Winery & Vineyards in North East, Pa. Cyclists can choose to bike the 12-, 25-, or 50-mile course in beautiful wine country. Afterwards, riders will enjoy a catered meal outdoors in the

winery pavilion with live music. Those who register by July 31 will receive an event t-shirt. To register, volunteer or sponsor Pedal for Mercy, visit mcwerie.org.

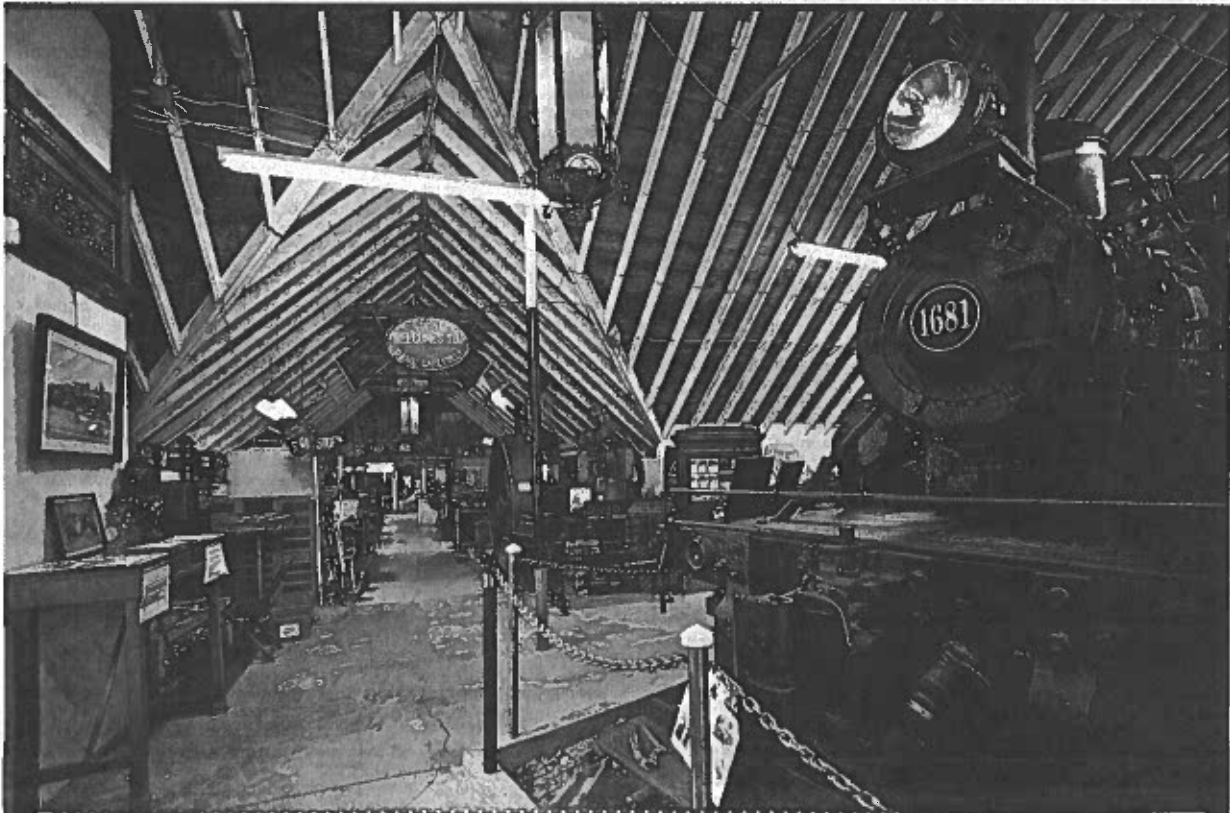
Thank
you

Tom - the ECGRA Board

Thank you very much for approving
our grant application of \$50,000!

This generous grant will allow us to
fully upgrade one section of trail on
the Corn Junction Greenway Trail. We look
forward to showing how great it will look!

Sincerely Kimberly Newlin
Northwest PA Trail Assn



TOP: The Climax 1681 Class B steam locomotive, built in 1927, sits in the Corry Area Historical Society Museum, which was built around the locomotive. FILE PHOTO/ERIE TIMES-NEWS FILE

REBUILDING A COMMUNITY

BACK ON TRACK

How pride, volunteers and ECGRA restored downtown Corry

It was some 30 years ago, but I remember like it was yesterday. Working as a reporter for the Corry Journal, I was driving through the community's long-disinvested downtown when something caught my eye. I immediately pulled over, and stared up at a three-story building that had been freshly painted in three-color Victorian style, the brick façade now an eye-catching mauve, and other architectural features I'd never noticed now popping with complementary colors.



Your Turn
Steve Bishop
Guest columnist

The Schrecengost family's initiative was a salvo of hope for a downtown that, like so many across America, had been hammered by decades of changing shopping patterns fueled by increased mobility, malls and the emergence of big-box stores.

Downtown property owners became increasingly dependent on undercapitalized mom-and-pop entrepreneurs whose ventures — and rent — came and went. That sporadic income was unhappily measured against the cost of maintaining century-old buildings, with unsurprising results.

It wasn't that towns like Corry weren't trying. One well-intentioned but ill-fated initiative in the 1970s was to combat the malls by creating Corry's own downtown mall environment. That was "accomplished" by erecting steel canopies over the length of the downtown's sidewalks.

The canopies with their steel support posts cast the storefronts into shadow, causing mo-



This mural, shown on Sept. 14, 2020, celebrates the Corry and the Climax Manufacturing Co. The mural is on the south side of a building in the first block of North Center Street in Corry. CHRISTOPHER MILLETTE/ERIE TIMES-NEWS

torists to peer intently in an effort to ascertain what was hidden within, and stymieing façade improvements. I recall an architect lamenting some years later that the structures cut the downtown's historic buildings off at the knee.

Then there were the downtown trees, again, well-intentioned, but the wrong varieties, such

as flowering crabs that dropped red berries on the sidewalks. They persisted for years, until the late Leo Jackman emphatically and unilaterally took a chain saw to the tree in front of his clothing store.

The sidewalk canopies and trees were ultimately removed, and appreciation for the turn-of-the-century buildings slowly reemerged. The city stepped up to bury the downtown's overhead wires, install period lampposts and lay brick-accented sidewalks, but the fundamental return-on-investment problem persisted. That is, until a seemingly unrelated development occurred some 30 miles away in Summit Township in 2007. A casino.

With all due respect to the tumblin' dice at Presque Isle Downs & Casino, more important was the attendant formation of the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority (ECGRA). Suddenly, a vital change-agent became available to the county's beleaguered communities.

Money. Through such well-considered and well-funded programs as ECGRA's Mission Main Street and Anchor Building initiatives, with some local matching funds, communities could start to ever-so-slowly interrupt the decline.

See TRACK, Page 2B

Track

Continued from Page 1B

We started in Corry with relatively easier initiatives, if for no other reason than we were a bunch of volunteers and new at this community development stuff.

Benches, flower planters and lamp-post banners started to give the downtown some much needed color and texture.

We "graduated" to things like sidewalk interpretive panels to show off the community's remarkable history, and then to — wait for it — sidewalk trees! Yeah, plenty of people remembered the

tree debacle from years before, and pushed back, but the unrelenting hard-scape of brick buildings to concrete sidewalk to blacktop street cried out for more texture, and with professional tree advice and installation, we persevered.

Our overriding goal was to create an environment where downtown property owners felt they weren't in the fight alone, that investing in their buildings just might make sense, an environment where entrepreneurs could feel optimistic, and where residents and visitors alike were drawn to wander and shop.

We saw the fruits of that vision in 2016 when, organically, several downtown merchants came together to form the Corry Downtown Business Association. The merchants began organizing

events like their trademark "First Fridays," where on the first Friday of each month from May to December the downtown is alive with activities and the stores stay open late, giving people a reason to come downtown again.

This all took years. It was incremental. There were logistics and hurdles, and overcoming understandable and ingrained skepticism. Critically, a new generation of Corry leaders has emerged to take this foundational work to the next level.

Taking a drive on a summer day through downtown Corry — recently added to the National Register of Historic Places — with the trees getting some size, and flowers, benches, historical markers, interpretive panels, sidewalk

tables and chairs, new facades, interesting and eclectic stores, and the beautiful Climax Locomotive mural overlooking the two rail lines whose junction in 1866 there is hope and momentum.

That same downtown railroad property is now in community hands with plans for a park that will celebrate Corry's past and future. If the park needs trees, I'll buy one for Leo Jackman.

Steve Bishop hails from Union City, spent 15 years as a newspaper reporter, editor and columnist, and 22 years with the Corry Higher Education Council before retiring. He now moonlights in community development work, and writes from his home in Pittsfield, Warren County.

Downtown UC building to get facelift as owners invest in 'Mission Main Street'

BY STEVE BISHOP
Contributing writer

Downtown Union City building owners continue investing in their commercial properties, while taking advantage of funding designed to spur just such activity.

More than a half-million dollars has been ploughed into those properties in conjunction with a borough-run façade program since the borough first included it as part of an Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority "Mission Main Street" application in 2018. That includes \$221,510 from ECGRA, \$6,500 from the Union City Community Foundation, and \$290,285 from property owners.

◀ See Buildings, P.2



Chloe Forbes/The Corry Journal

Built in 1889 and originally known as the Odd Fellows Building, the building at 21 N. Main St. is now the home of Kim's Townhouse and will see exterior improvements as part of the "Mission Main Street" façade program involving the borough and Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority.

Buildings

(Continued from front page)

Kim Stine, owner of Kim's Townhouse and the historic former Odd Fellows Building at the corner of Main and Market streets in which the tavern and restaurant are located, is utilizing the façade program for the first time this year.

She's investing \$50,000 in the 134-year-old building's exterior, including a \$12,000 grant from the façade program, to repair the parapet at the top of the building, clean and re-point bricks, paint trim and other related work.

That's on top of installing a new roof and two new furnaces in recent years, and extensive interior remodeling through the years as well, she noted.

Owning such a building "is never a cheap deal," she said, but noting once this work is completed "the sky is the

limit, hopefully" for the building's exterior.

"It was a pretty standard application," she said of the façade program, noting that Borough Manager Cindy Wells worked with her. "The process itself wasn't difficult."

Wells noted that 14 downtown buildings have benefited from the program since 2018, for such things as painting, signs, awnings, siding, windows, doors, interior ventilation and structural reinforcement.

For 2023, ECGRA has made \$98,000 available, of which \$60,700 has already been committed for six projects that with matching funds from the property owners will total \$117,380. The borough still had \$37,300 in matching funds available at last count, with up to \$12,000 available for individual projects and a minimum 25% match required from property owners.

North and South Main Street proper-

ties are eligible for the program. A committee consisting of Wells, Union City Pride president Terri Migliaccio, Erie architect Dave Brennan and Preservation Erie board president Melinda Meyer serve on the committee that reviews each application.

"We review the application to see how it compares to the Historic Preservation Plan and structural assessments," Wells said. "We want it to fit as best possible into the two plans. We will make suggestions and may ask for more information as to the project. A decision is made after that."

Wells said it's heartening to see the investments made by downtown property owners.

"They really want to make improvements in Union City and are willing to invest their own money to have that done," she said. "They realize building appearance has a huge effect on their business."

'Believe in yourself'



"It was not easy, for sure. There were some hard days, very hard days, but I wouldn't change anything about it."

Sean Johnson
Learning Ladder Early Child Care Center

Dana Woodson reviews the days of the week with a class of 3- and 4-year-old students at the Learning Ladder Early Child Care Center, 2502 Peach St., last month. Woodson is the lead teacher for the center's pre-kindergarten program. **MATTHEW RINK/ERIE TIMES-NEWS**

A Black-owned Erie business' tips for success

Matthew Rink
Erie Times-News
USA TODAY NETWORK

Dana Woodson leads a line of little people to the blue carpet in the next room. They plop down, some sitting crisscross applesauce while others extend their legs and point their small shoes toward the ceiling.

They gaze up at Woodson, curious about what they'll do next.

Woodson leads the class of 16 3- and 4-year-old students in a singing of the "days of the week" song, then asks them to describe what the weather was like on this Wednesday morning, and finally asks them to count aloud with her the number of boys and girls among the group.

"You're right," Woodson says with glee to the boys and girls. "There are 16 friends today. Sixteen. Woo."

It's a typical morning inside the Learning Ladder Early Child Care Center, 2502 Peach St., a Black-owned business that began taking shape a decade ago in Kenya and Sean John-

son's basement. The couple started the center "out of necessity" in 2013 when Sean, 40, and Kenya, 39, who was in graduate school at the time, were regularly caring for a half-dozen nieces and nephews.

'Very hard days'

Kenya, who was also pregnant at the time, wanted a source of income. Sean, who had been working as a home health aide and who had launched a real estate business with the purchase of his first rental property coming in 2007, pitched the idea of starting her own business.

"He had mentioned (the idea) a few times because we knew another childcare provider that had just started," said Kenya, who received a bachelor's degree in psychology in 2005 from Edinboro University of Pennsylvania. "Around that time I went back for my master's and he kept saying, 'why don't you just do child care?'"

See BUSINESS, Page 4A

Business

Continued from Page 1A

"It was not easy, for sure," Sean said. "There were some hard days, very hard days, but I wouldn't change anything about it."

Within two years, Kenya was caring for eight children. It was time to expand. Sean and Kenya began leasing first-floor space at the former concert venue Forward Hall, which at the time was partially occupied by McLane Church.

That's when they took a risk and put faith in themselves: They invested \$70,000 to make improvements to a building they didn't own, taking out a second mortgage on their home to do so.

"We used every dime of it," Sean said.

Coming to a crossroads

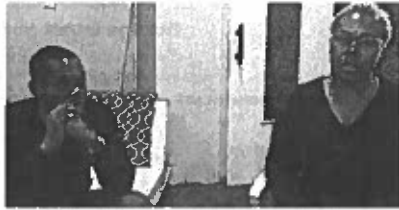
They started the Learning Ladder, officially, in 2015 with the eight children Kenya was watching at home. Within two months they had 27 kids enrolled. And by the end of the year, the business was at capacity with an enrollment of about 60 kids.

"Kenya really cares about their education, teaching them, and instilling in the kids what we instill in our own children," Sean said.

But then they found themselves at what Sean called a crossroads. The building's owner was anxious to sell, but the couple didn't have the \$165,000 to buy it.

Even though Sean had slowly expanded the couple's real estate portfolio — today they own 25 units on 15 properties — they had difficulty acquiring a bank loan. Two local banks denied their applications.

"We had a rude awakening," Sean said. "I had real estate. We had 50, 60 kids enrolled. Kenya was making income and I think two of the local banks denied us. It was at the point where we could have lost our center. We could have truly lost our center. And the little bit of money that we used to re-



Sean Johnson, 40, and his wife Kenya Johnson, 39, who own the Learning Ladder Early Child Care Center at 2502 Peach St., talk about the growth of the business since its founding in 2013 and the challenges facing child care providers like themselves. MATTHEW RINK/ERIE TIMES-NEWS

model in here, the guy could have just took it and sold the building out from under us."

Sean and Kenya Johnson believed they had hit a color barrier with prospective lenders.

"These banks, it isn't black-and-white what they write on these papers. There is a lot of gray," he said. "Whoever's making that decision ... they hold your life in their hands."

That's when Bridgeway Capital stepped in with funding that helped the couple grow their business. Headquartered in Pittsburgh, Bridgeway Capital is a community development financial institution, which, unlike a bank, is a private, non-profit entity that provides low-interest loans to low-income, low-wealth and other disadvantaged people who otherwise might not qualify for traditional bank loans. It opened its Erie office in 2012.

At the time, Bridgeway Capital was working with two other businesses in the neighborhood, Dapper Don's Styling Lounge and French Maids. The Johnsons worked with then-Erie Region Director T.J. King of Bridgeway Capital.

"It was the best thing that ever happened to us," Sean said. "He worked us through the loan process so easily. We only had to end up putting 5% down on the \$165,000 and then he gave us historical credit for the two years that we were paying rent. We only had to come up with maybe like \$7,000."

Bridgeway Capital, Sean said, is integral to the Black, Indigenous and People of Color community and anyone

struggling to start or grow a business in the area.

Making changes

Most of the children enrolled at the Learning Ladder receive a subsidy for their care through the state's Child Care Works program. Parents pay a small copay. The United Way of Erie County picks up the tab through a scholarship for other children to get care at the Learning Ladder — those who might not otherwise qualify for the state subsidy.

In addition to the pre-kindergarten program for 3- and 4-year-old children, Kenya Johnson also has an after-school program for kids up to age 12. They can work on school assignments inside the facility's classrooms or get exercise in the gymnasium.

In August, however, Kenya made the difficult decision of ending the Learning Ladder's program for toddlers and infants. Kenya said the industrywide shortage of childcare workers, especially through the COVID-19 pandemic, has made it difficult to keep up with the child-to-staff member ratios required by the state for infants and toddlers.

"When I first started I had infants to (age) 12, but infant and toddlers require more staff and they require much more attention," she explained. "I was only operating with just enough staff, and if somebody called off, if somebody needed some time off, then it kind of put us in a bind of ratio issues and not being in compliance with state regulations."

Calculated risks

Sean and Kenya Johnson say they've learned a lot along the way. Here are recommendations that they have for other minority business owners.

"Start with the education side," Sean said. "You have to learn some of these things, whatever field you're trying to be in. If I want to do real estate, I'm going to figure out how these loan officers work. I'm going to figure out how property managers work. I'm going to figure out how accountants work. I don't need to know everything that they need to know, but I need to have an understanding of what they're doing."

People need to "immerse" themselves in whatever field they're trying to break into, he added.

"At the beginning when I started, it was mixed with a little luck, but as we were starting to make income and things started growing, I needed to know how to control this monster that we're creating," he said. "I started to submerge myself in the books and podcasts and anything that I could get my hands on."

Kenya said it's also im-

portant to "get uncomfortable."

"I know for me, I was shy, even starting a business," she said. "I didn't like want to talk to the newspaper, didn't want to do interviews. I was very uncomfortable. And I'm still adjusting to that, talking in front of people. I know sometimes people don't want to go into unfamiliar places, but there is always somebody who was better than you, who knows more than you. So if you don't put yourself in those places, you'll be stagnant. You won't grow, so just get uncomfortable."

Sean also said aspiring entrepreneurs need to believe in themselves and take risks.

"It may be more calcu-

lated risks," he said, "but believe in yourself and believe in your dream."

Kenya Johnson said she's proud of the quality of care that she and her 11 staff members provide the children. They've received a four-star rating from the state as a result.

"I go by those standards and I go above and beyond," she said. "It's a joy and a rewarding feeling when parents come to me, even when I don't have space, and they say 'can you put me on the waiting list? I'll wait as long as I can to get in.' They always hear good things about us. That fuels my fire."

Matthew Rink can be reached at mrink@timesnews.com or on Twitter at [@ETNRink](https://twitter.com/ETNRink).

Apartments to help people in need

Mercy Center for Women is opening 13 residences

Kevin Flowers

Erie Times-News USA TODAY NETWORK

Ashley Davis needed to find a safe haven.

The 36-year-old Erie resident went to the Mercy Center for Women – which provides transitional housing for homeless women and children – in July after she said she let “my life go down a bad path with people who were not really healthy for me.”

Davis said her environment included “being around domestic violence and the wrong kind of people who weren’t really going anywhere or doing a lot for themselves. And I wasn’t taking very good care of myself.”

She found additional motivation to make life-altering changes in first-time motherhood. Davis’ son, Domenik, is now 9 months old.

“When I found out I was pregnant, he became my motivator to do something better for myself,” Davis said. “I got sick of where my life was going.”

Both Davis and the Mercy Center will make another significant transition on Wednesday.

Davis and her son are among the tenants who will begin moving into 13 new two-bedroom apartments at the Mercy Anchor Community Center, located at the former Holy Rosary School building at 1012 E. 28th St.

Each of the fully furnished apartments features a kitchen, full bath, stackable washer and dryer and other amenities.

The \$4 million project has been in the works since 2017, and is partially funded by a state tax-credit program. The Mercy Center reached an agreement in 2019 to buy the 39,000-square-foot Holy Rosary building from the Holy Rosary

See APARTMENTS, Page 2A

Continued from Page 1A

Parish for \$300,000.

Jennie Hagerty, the Mercy Center’s executive director, said tenants can live in the new apartments for up to two years as they work to gain stability and independence.

Applicants will pay varying rents based on their income and/or the government assistance they receive, Hagerty said.

Men, including single fathers, are also eligible to apply for the new units, she said.

Tenants also must agree to abstain from using alcohol and drugs (unless prescribed by a physician). Any violation will result in immediate termination of a tenant’s

lease agreement.

Hagerty said the Mercy Anchor Community Center will not only support tenants moving toward self-sufficiency, it will also serve as a resource hub for the surrounding community.

An official ribbon-cutting ceremony will likely take place in early May, Hagerty said.

“We want this to be a housing unit where everybody is welcome,” Hagerty said. “We’ve had other agencies refer people to us.”

In addition to the new apartments, the complex features a gymnasium; an exercise room; a technology hub and meeting room with 20 computer stations and a conference room; a thrift store; a food pantry; a Dress For Success Erie location, where women can obtain gently-used and nearly-new professional clothing for employment/ job interviews; and various case management services provided by AHN Saint Vincent, UPMC Western Behavioral Health at Safe Harbor, and Sarah Reed Children’s Center.

The building will also host other programming including Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings; GED classes; art instruction; work readiness programs; a community garden, and a foster grandparent program that gives older Erie residents the opportunity to help local children with reading and social skills.

“We’re not just serving the people who will live here,” Hagerty said. “With the services that will be on site, the food pantry, the opportunity to take GED and literacy classes and other things, this is an opportunity to share with so many other people.

“We have a poverty rate of about 22% in this neighborhood,” Hagerty said. “We can provide food, housing and career support to people. We want to be a resource for this community.”

Erie Mayor Joe Schember called the Mercy Center project “Incredible. I’ve toured it a few times, and it’s beautiful inside. It’s going to provide a lot of support to people who need help getting their lives back on track.

“And it’s not just for the residents,” Schember said. “This is going to support that entire neighborhood.”

Tax credits, other funding

Hagerty said funding for the project includes a \$300,000 state grant from the Pennsylvania Housing Affordability and Rehabilitation Enhancement Fund; \$200,000 from Erie Insurance; a \$150,000 grant from the Erie Community Foundation, and \$100,000 from the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority.

The bulk of the project’s financing was raised privately, she said, including \$750,000 from an anonymous donor.

The Mercy Center’s project also includes \$613,125 in financing from Pennsylvania’s Neighborhood Assistance Program, a statewide tax credits program administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development.

NAP financing allows businesses to directly invest in community development projects or nonprofits. In exchange, those businesses get a percentage of their financial investment back through state tax credits.

According to DCED guidelines, NAP financing must serve distressed areas or support neighborhood improvement. Eligible examples are affordable housing programs, community services, crime prevention, education, job training or neighborhood assistance.

Participating businesses can receive state tax credits of between 55% and 80% of their donation amounts, depending on the type of contribution and other factors. The program also allows for multi-year funding commitments.

Accudyn Products, American Tinning & Galvanizing Co., Calypso Enterprises, Erie Insurance, Marquette Savings Bank and Northwest Bank are among the local businesses that invested in the Mercy Center project via NAP financing.

DCED Secretary Dennis Davin lauded the Mercy Center project when he visited the Holy Rosary school building in December 2021.

“This one is one of our best programs because it’s businesses investing directly into community projects,” Davin said at that time.

“Not only does it incentivize corporate contributions to much needed community projects,” Davin said, “but it also helps form and build relationships between the private sector, nonprofit sector and community leaders.”

As community support and compassion merge to create new opportunities, Davis — who will move into the Mercy Anchor Community Center soon with her infant son — feels fortunate and motivated.

Davis plans to pursue a career in medical billing and coding, a field she studied years ago at the now defunct Erie Business Center.

“This place is a godsend,” Davis said of the Mercy Anchor Community Center. “With being a new mom, everything is new to me. But the Mercy Center has been like family. I have a brand-new start in a brand-new place, and it’s amazing to be given that.”

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“With being a new mom, everything is new to me. But the Mercy Center has been like family.” Ashley Davis

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Millcreek land buys clear way for smart growth



Your Turn
Perry Wood
Guest columnist

Millcreek Township is the second largest municipality in Erie County and 12th largest in the commonwealth. It is a significant population center of residents and companies that generate an enormous impact on the region it calls home, much like all similarly-sized municipalities. But Millcreek has a significant distinction that sets it apart from big cities in Pennsylvania — Presque Isle State Park. This natural asset is also an economic asset that welcomes more than 4 million visitors into Erie County each year — that's more than Yellowstone National Park.

As a funder of economic and community development projects across Erie County, the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority has been following the public process of implementing Embrace Millcreek, the township's comprehensive plan since it was adopted in 2018. This plan took a major leap forward when the township's leadership launched an approach to redeveloping large swaths of the West Eighth Street commercial corridor — now known as the Presque Isle Gateway District.

This past summer, the ECGRA staff and board members were joined by County Council members and crisscrossed Erie County, meeting with elected officials, business owners, and nonprofits in the revitalization space. Borough and township managers, entrepreneurs, investors, and volunteers working to revitalize Main Streets, neighborhoods, parks, and historic buildings are common themes we documented in our reporting. In Millcreek, we found a structural consensus on the



The Millcreek Township General Authority voted 4-1 on Jan. 30 to buy the former Bel-Aire Hotel and former Joe Root's Grill as well as three other sites for almost \$7.2 million in order to develop the area. ED PALATTELLA/ERIE TIMES-NEWS

importance of revitalizing a corridor that stretches from the city of Erie into Millcreek and acts as a gateway to one of our most precious regional assets: Presque Isle State Park.

This dense strip of businesses is a mixed bag of blighted or soon-to-be-blighted building stock. Perhaps the most striking observation was the extent to which this high-volume corridor was underrealized. The corridor is classified as a low/moderate income census tract. From an economic development perspective, it is underutilized. That's a simplistic way of saying that the corridor could be yielding a significant tax base for the township but is unable to develop new construction with older building stock in the way.

From the perspective of a Millcreek resident who has visited Presque Isle since I was a kid from my hometown of Franklin, it's sad to see this corner be-

cause it doesn't reflect the experience visitors should expect when driving into what I believe to be one of the best family destinations around. Reimagining West Eighth Street and Peninsula Drive as a village-style gateway is a moment of optimism as a new generation of kids make their way in the back seat of their parents' car through the threshold of what will become their own cherished family memories.

Millcreek Township is making progress on the project while moving the township's economic development assets forward as well. The newly created Millcreek General Authority is the right vehicle to guide the redevelopment. Subject to the laws of public accountability, best practices and countless successful examples from across the commonwealth show that the authority can work independently and in concert with the township, without added risk

to taxpayers. The authority is the ideal quasi-public sector vehicle to broker real estate acquisition and disposition of land for maximum public benefit. To develop this corridor, site control is the first step. The township is well on its way to realizing that goal.

This project also offers a window to an important collaboration between the city of Erie and the township. West Eighth Street plays host to businesses in both municipalities, which creates an opportunity for continuity of co-branding through physical improvements and signage. It is a chance for both to improve this iconic street's image and functionality and grow the commercial tax base.

An additional point of pride should be that the project fits what Charles Buki, author of Erie Refocused, would call a "middle markets" approach. Focusing on places that are beginning to feel the effects of blight and could decline further is a smart use of resources. A bulwark against the tide of blight, the Gateway could be a significant factor in stabilizing the residential neighborhoods to the north of the iconic corridor.

Many Millcreek supervisors, past and present, deserve praise for having foresight to listen and create a comprehensive plan that reflects the ends of the community and voice of residents, and the courage to continue to see it through. Putting all the pieces in place to make a measurable comprehensive plan like Embrace Millcreek is difficult work — implementing one is something that requires leadership and political fortitude. Now part of the Infinite Erie Playbook, this project is well-positioned to draw in more funding from state and federal sources and should be celebrated as one of Erie County's plans in action.

Perry Wood is the executive director of the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority.