

Having a thriving downtown is a goal of most cities and even small towns. But it can be a big challenge. The issue in most groups are forgetting the keys to a thriving downtown. The major key is people!

I grew up in a small town that had a downtown that had seen ups and downs. My Father is a second-generation business owner in that town. So I have an understanding and a desire to support small businesses and see downtowns thrive. Let me share some thoughts about a thriving downtown.



Dad at Gentry's Store's
75th



Gentry's Store



Dad & Mom drawing for
prizes

No I don't have all the answers and I'm by no means an expert. But allow me to share my credentials, as they are. We all have giftings and talents. Mine are helping and supporting. So I have an eye to see needs and individuals in crowds. As I said in the introduction, my family history has given me insight into the matter. But I think a big part of my insight is knowing people. Now I'll move on to my thoughts.

Downtowns were a focus of the community in years past. But thanks to people being mobile, we have urban sprawl. Businesses keep moving away from the center and the downtown starts to decay. The planners understand that to revitalize downtown it needs to be ecstatically pleasing and have events. They will say that having a good downtown is about people, but sometimes I feel that don't realize what that really means.

People are not customers, people are not residents, and people are not foot traffic. As much as they want to run statistics and give numbers, it will not give the full picture. It is a start but not the whole picture.

Having a thriving downtown is about people. You have to start rewarding the people who own small businesses and who have fought the hard, and many times losing battle, to stay downtown. You must recognize people who have fought to keep the legacy and history of a family business, around for generations, open. It is about supporting the brave, visionary people who dare, in challenging times, to see their vision of a new business in a classic location come to be. It is about drawing in and giving a forum to people who can share the history of the downtown and who support it coming back to life. Yes, it means spending money to fix things up to attract people. Yes, it means creating regular events supported by the local businesses to attract people. Yes, it means providing visible police support to give people the security they desire. But we cannot forget people are made up of individuals.

To have a thriving downtown, you have to speak to the hearts and minds of individuals. The downtown will begin to thrive when individuals stop going to businesses to shop and stop going to restaurants to eat. The downtown will thrive when individuals take ownership in their hearts and minds. They start going to their shops and their restaurants. They have a love for the food, goods and services offered and want to be a part of things. They connect with the owners and employees and develop friendships. They go downtown because it is a home away from home for them. Marketing campaigns are fine, but the best marketing campaign is personal invitations from one downtowner to a potential one.

A thriving downtown, that will last, does not happen in six months, a year or even three. Relationships are not built overnight. That is what I really want to point out. A thriving downtown is an individual building a relationship with one person, one business, and one block at a time. A thriving downtown is individual businesses supporting each other and the vision of the downtown, but not compromising their beliefs. A thriving downtown recognizes that people want more than just places to shop, learn, eat, be entertained and places to meet. They want all that and other factors that can't easily be quantified.



Skies over the Depot



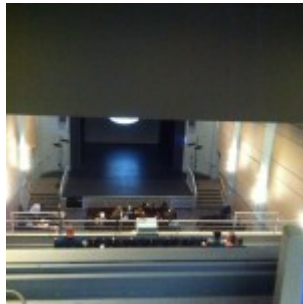
The Beautiful Depot



Downtown Burlington



Over by the caboose



Booth View



The Wedding

OK, I've shared my general thoughts and ideas. I'm grateful that you have stuck with me through this. I'm grateful you have indulged the statements of supporter and a helper and not a planner. But now move from the general to the specific.

Yes, I'm a downtowner! I've lived in Burlington since mid 1998. I've lived in downtown or the historic district just a few blocks away since early 2001. I've served and worked for Arts Alive Fine Arts Studio located downtown since 1999. I have seen a lot of changes in Downtown Burlington. The last few years have been exciting for me. It has been exciting for me because the changes have been good. Those changes have taken me from being a person who lives downtown to being a downtowner. It has gone from a place that I live to my hometown within my hometown.



Downtown Rain



Enter Through The Red Door



Rain from the porch



Any Number Can Die



Road to Company Shops



Cheeper By The Dozen set

Why have the changes started to take [Downtown Burlington](#) from location to community? The answer is quite clear, if you have read this far. It is about people. Sure Burlington has had its' miss-steps. Like I said earlier, the process of having a thriving hometown takes years. But I feel that we are on our way! There are many reasons I feel Burlington is doing a good job and making Downtown about people. The success comes because there are multiple reasons for people becoming a downtowner. While I have my reasons for being a downtowner, other people may have very different reasons. But they all are good because the focus is on building people into a community.

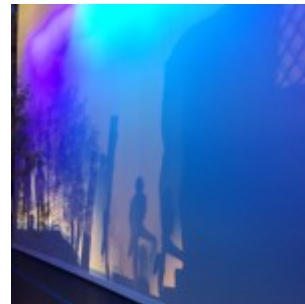
I want to share some of the reasons I'm a downtowner. Once again these are personal to me

and someone else may give you totally different reasons. But the fact they can give you different reasons means that Downtown is starting to thrive.

The first reason is [The Paramount](#). We have a unique theater space in downtown that provides community acting companies and studios a venue to express themselves. In a given year, there are musicals, dramas, comedies, dance productions, live music and award events at The Paramount. The Paramount allows the people of the community to shine and draws others to Downtown for the first time.



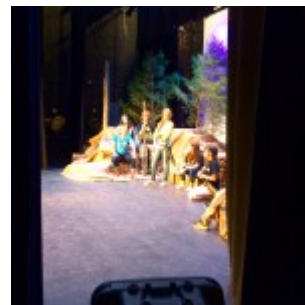
Paramount



Light & Color



Paramount set view



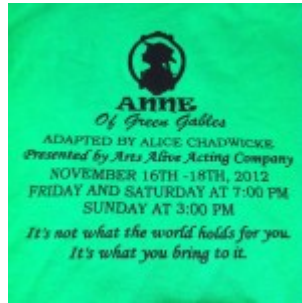
From the wings

The second reason is Arts Alive Fine Arts Studio. For 20 years, Arts Alive has been educating young folks in many styles of dance, theater, graphic arts and more. But the focus has been teaching youth how to do all to the glory of God. Arts Alive has participated in

Downtown events and uses the wonderful Paramount space to share. Students and families are here in Downtown and they shop, eat and support the area. (Updated 2017 Arts Alive may have closed but [Alamance Fine Arts Academy](#) has taken its' place and is thriving.)



Dancing in Downtown



In house production



Rehearsal time



Waiting in the hall



Burlington Parate



Arts Classes

The third reason [Fourth Fridays](#). This yearly program has been so good for Downtown. We have food trucks, local businesses and organizations with booths, and great local bands. It provides an environment for the whole family to come and enjoy Downtown. Once people come and experience what Downtown has, they come back and start to build relationships.



4th Fridays sign



Food Trucks



Love & Valor at 4th Fridays

The fourth reason is [Company Shops Market](#). Every thriving local community needs a place to buy good local groceries. Company Shops provides local farmers and producers a place to sell. It provides a place support our neighbors and buy quality, healthy food. Plus it provides a good place to eat and a spot for local bands to play. It is a co-op and that calls people to invest in Downtown by becoming an owner. Once people are invested in the Co-op they start to build relationships with other businesses.



Sidewalk at the Co-op



Music in the shop



Company Shops

Last but not least, is [The Blend & Co](#). We live in a coffee-house culture. The Blend provides

good coffee, tea, smoothies and more. The Blend provides an environment where people can gather to talk, study and work. The owners and employees make an effort to connect with the people and make it a great environment. Even though I only live a couple of blocks away, The Blend has become a creative space for me to blog, write out podcast scripts and connect with friends.

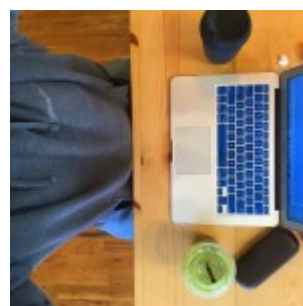
(note photos 2, 4 & 5 taken by The Blend & Co.)



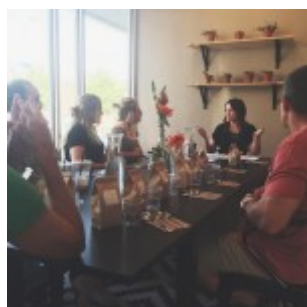
Proud to support them



Counter area



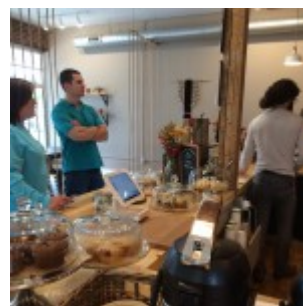
My workspace



Coffee class



Seating area



The Blend

You see now the reasons and the means to having a thriving downtown and my personal examples as to why Downtown Burlington is on its' way. Hopefully city planners and community leaders can see now that a thriving downtown is about people, individuals and

families, coming together to make a downtown their own. I also challenge people, you are the key to making your downtown thrive. You have to take ownership and commit to forming relationships. So get out of the house, get off the phone, and invest yourself in the lives and businesses of others. A thriving downtown is a community and that community is built one person at a time. So choose to be a downtowner!

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