



# A DAY IN THE LIFE OF DOWNTOWN FORT COLLINS



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Courtesy of the Downtown Development Authority

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# Downtown Fort Collins rises early

Old Town Square comes to life early in downtown Fort Collins, the rising sun producing a warm glow as crews clean the plaza and water flower beds in preparation for shoppers, diners and workers.



CHRISTOPHER WOOD  
BIZWEST  
CO-PUBLISHER

As the morning progresses, those shoppers, diners and workers usher in an increasing vibrancy, not only on Old Town Square but throughout the district of the Downtown Development Authority.

Fort Collins' downtown represents one of the gems not only for Colorado's urban environment, but also for downtowns nationwide.

Downtowns represent the heart and soul of a community, providing a central gathering place, a spot for shops, eateries, offices, arts and entertainment.

Each of those elements is present in downtown Fort Collins, which is one reason that BizWest partnered with the Downtown Development Authority to produce "A Day in the Life of Downtown Fort Collins," a print magazine and website — [www adayinthelifeofdowntown.com/fortcollins](http://www adayinthelifeofdowntown.com/fortcollins) — to capture some of the stories of downtown and its people, places and things.

This mirrors an earlier project for downtown Greeley, and it's been a fun endeavor for BizWest's talented team of editors, writers, graphic designers, photographers and videographers, including both staff and freelance contributors.

The print magazine provides a sampling of the content, with many more stories, photos and videos online.

BizWest would like to thank Matt Robenalt, executive director of the DDA, and Jala Curtis, the DDA's business marketing and communications program supervisor, for their support, insights and ideas for this project.

And we'd like to thank the many business owners and employees who allowed us into their establishments to hear their stories. We couldn't possibly tell every story that deserves to be told downtown, but we hope that readers enjoy the project.

Don't forget to stop in at some of the retailers and restaurants featured in these pages — and those that are not!



## A DAY IN THE LIFE OF DOWNTOWN FORT COLLINS

### Table of Contents

Success at its core	<b>2</b>
City leaders embrace downtown as 'special place that connects people'	<b>4</b>
Alley Cat Coffee	<b>6</b>
On the Bandwagon	<b>8</b>
The 'beer' brand sticks to downtown Fort Collins	<b>10</b>
Day never ends at Silver Grill	<b>12</b>
It's a chocolate store. Or a drug store.	<b>14</b>
Sharing a roof	<b>15</b>
New tech, nostalgia	<b>16</b>
At Vortic Watch Co., 'It's about time'	<b>18</b>
Mutual benefit	<b>20</b>
'Hippie commune'	<b>22</b>
Established 1868	<b>23</b>
Spicing it up	<b>24</b>
'May the Most Fun Win'	<b>26</b>
Bookstore's staff on fire for joy of reading	<b>18</b>
The Cupboard's never bare	<b>30</b>
Scooping up family memories at Kilwins	<b>32</b>

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# Success at its core

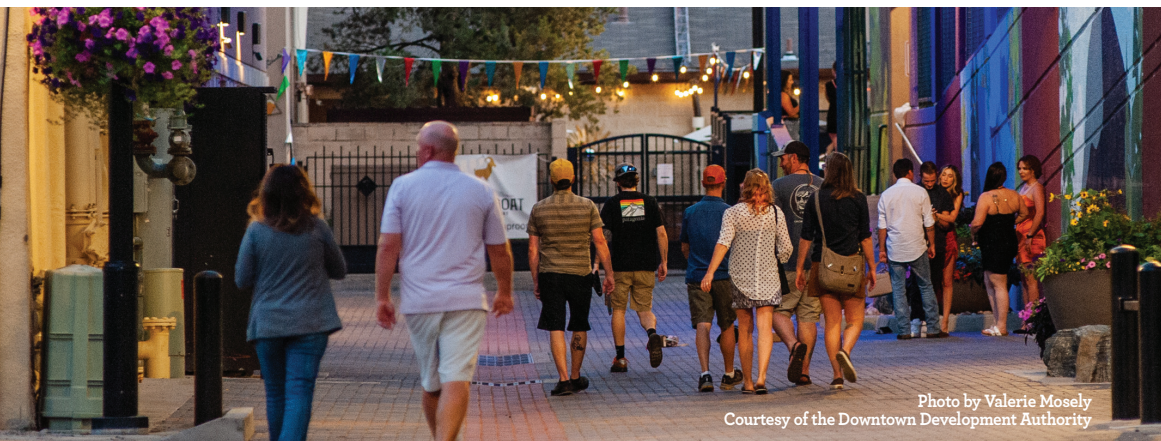


Photo by Valerie Mosely  
Courtesy of the Downtown Development Authority



**Matt Robenalt,**  
executive director of the  
Downtown Development  
Authority

## Combination of living, working, playing, fuels vitality of downtown district

By Ken Amundson  
kamundson@bizwest.com

The transformation that early adherents of downtown Fort Collins had hoped would occur has, for the most part, happened. Downtown became a neighborhood with residential developments melding with commercial establishments creating a culture that sets it apart from much of the rest of the city. Or from many other cities.

“Concentrating people in a commercial district creates a neighborhood that ebbs and flows beyond when businesses are open,” said Matt Robenalt, executive director of the Downtown Development Authority. “There’s a lot of round-the-clock activity, late night music, early morning trash pickup.”

Quoting a survey, Robenalt said “people are staying downtown two times as long as they did 10 years ago.”

Downtown Fort Collins is, for most residents living there, complete. There’s a drug store, three grocery stores, a hardware store, places to buy household necessities and “lots of things you don’t need but desire,” he said. He noted, however, that the “healthy offering for women’s clothing” is not

counterbalanced with similar offerings for men.

### Defining the district

Downtown Fort Collins is a sprawling district that extends far, far beyond the Old Town Square geographic center where much of the on-street activity happens summer or winter. Its boundaries are not easy to describe. Imagine reading a metes and bounds property description; the DDA boundaries are like that, with parcels added over time to meet economic conditions.

It stretches generally south to Mulberry (or Laurel near Colorado State University), north to Vine Drive, west to Meldrum Street, and east to Ninth Street and Lemay Avenue, but with a commercial addition east of Lemay and west of 12th Street.

None of the boundaries are straight lines and almost none follows a street exactly.

There are carve-outs of single-family neighborhoods. “Buckingham is considered ‘in close’ but it’s not in the district,” Robenalt said. Residential neighborhoods that did not want to be included and taxed were excluded from the original boundary approved by voters in 1981.

New inclusions in the district — 20 so far, are by voluntary request of owners. The DDA levies a five-mill tax on properties in the district to support its activities.

Still, the district has seen a “huge increase in residential” in recent years as multifamily developments petitioned to be a part of the district or redeveloped property already in the district.

“We’ve had 25 to 30 years of fast-paced investment in the district, and not a lot of large parcels remain,” he said. “A lot of the low-hanging fruit has

been plucked from the tree. More difficult things remain.” Rising interest rates, also, have stalled some projects.

The district includes all of the historic central business area and some, but not all, industrial zones. The 100-acre Woodward Inc. is included.

### Development, redevelopment

Development occurs within the district, often using public/private partnerships. “Developing property, either new or rehabilitated, comes with a higher per square-foot cost in the urban core,” he said. Public involvement of the DDA can help incentivize development or redevelopment.

Robenalt cited the first redevelopment project — when the late visionary Gene Mitchell conceived the notion of transforming decaying and blighted buildings into Old Town Square. The square serves as a pedestrian friendly gathering space between street-level retailers and restaurants. A performing arts stage allows what seems like near constant entertainment — if not scheduled then pop up in the form of impromptu guitar solos or folks pounding out tunes on a painted piano, which is part of the city’s Art in Public Places program. Kids climb on sculptures mounted above padded foundations or dodge streams of water from a water feature as their parents finish their ice cream cones on the patio.

Meanwhile above the square on the upper floors of buildings that are connected from one end of the block to the other, about 100 separate enterprises maintain their offices and try to conduct business as they watch the activity below.

“The city learned lessons from that (the square redevelopment) and has repeated it 130 times in the past 40 years,” Robenalt said.

“The tool we use (tax increment financing) is available only when a private owner makes an investment that raises the taxable value of the property. We don’t invest all the increment but set some aside for other purposes, such as enhanced alleyways, Old Town Square (maintenance), redevelopment in the River District.” The amount of the increment that is invested in a project will vary. The district “puts in enough so the project results in an outcome that we want to see, without giving away the farm,” Robenalt said. Some projects have been declined, he said.

The DDA has invested in cultural projects to benefit the community. In the 2010s, it bought a warehouse on Vine Street that is now used by nonprofit performing arts groups — five are there now — for rehearsals, set construction and so forth.

Robenalt described as “incredible” the support the downtown has received from the Bohemian Foundation and its founder, Pat Stryker.

“She deeply cares about downtown, and the Bohemian Foundation owns multiple properties downtown with ideas for future redevelopment,” he said.

Bohemian’s interest in the music scene has “changed the direction of the night-time economy,” he said.

Among the elements of the music scene is the Music District at 639 S. College Ave. The five-building, one-acre campus serves as a place for musicians to gather and develop their talents. It provides work spaces, interactivity with other musicians, access to resources such as studio space, connections with mentors or marketing professionals or intellectual property attorneys who can help turn the amateur into a professional.

It’s been so popular that it is at capacity and has a waiting list for others to participate, according to Melissa Reese, general manager of the district.

### University connections

Colorado State University is not in the downtown district, but businesses on the north side of Laurel Street are included. The student presence, of

course, is part of the economic engine that helps businesses in the district thrive, whether it’s a game day or not.

The CSU president’s house, now occupied by Amy Parsons, is on Mag-nolia, which is within the downtown district.

Robenalt said the downtown and CSU have maintained a close connection and have regular meetings to stay in touch. There are no active projects with the university, although the partnership between the downtown and the Powerhouse Energy Campus is ongoing. The Powerhouse is at 430 N. College Ave. Sometimes called the engines lab, it works to create more efficient, environmentally friendly engines as well as things like cleaner cookstoves to replace those used in many parts of the third world.

“We pay attention to things that we both have interests in,” Robenalt said.

Downtown businesses benefit from student spending, which tends to peak during the height of sports seasons. When the CSU Rams are out of town, sports bars become the popular hangouts for fans to watch their team.

### Businesses new and old

Like any downtown, businesses come and go, college towns no exception. Fort Collins has a number of long-term businesses that have endured through generations.

The oldest downtown business is not a traditional mainstream retailer. It’s Hubbard Feeds, formerly known as Ranch-Way Feeds. It has been in continuous operation since 1868, or 155 years. Ranch-Way sold to Hubbard Foods, a division of Mankato, Minnesota-based Ridley USA Inc. in 2016. Hubbard continues to sell the Ranch-Way branded feed.

The second oldest is a traditional retail store, City Drug. At 209 N. College Ave., it anchors the north end of what most towns would call main street. City Drug roots extend to 1873, or 150 years.

Other businesses downtown are not that old, but it’s not hard to find those that began their origin stories in the 1940s, 50s, 60s and 70s. Jewelers, cooking and kitchen stores, spice shops, art galleries, restaurants, a garden shop, ice cream parlors, book stores, boutique clothing stores, and service businesses such as real estate and insurance all make their homes downtown.

### The lure

With the draw of a wide variety of retailers, the slowed traffic on U.S. Highway 287 (College Avenue), the entertainment, the youthful presence of college students, the thousands of flowers growing in hundreds of planters, what else is needed to bring shoppers downtown?

The DDA and its partners have found ways to continually feed the engine — literally — that supports downtown.

Every third Friday, downtown merchants mount the Fort Collins Foodie Walk, a self-guided tour of culinary shops, restaurants and others offering samples. It runs from 5 to 8 p.m.

On the first Friday of the month from 6 to 9 p.m., a self-guided Downtown Fort Collins First Friday Art Walk takes center stage where over 30 art- and culture-related businesses invite those with interests in art to view the latest exhibits or activities.

Downtown Summer Sales and holiday promotions play to the seasons, as does Downtown Bon Appetit Week, a winter culinary celebration promotion in which chefs show off their creative offerings. In the winter after the holidays, Great Plates of Downtown promotion will be mounted again, from March 1 to 14, Downtown Fort Collins’ award-winning dining promotion and fundraiser returns for its 19th year. It is intended to spur restaurant activity at a normally slower time of the year.

Hungry yet?

# City leaders embrace downtown as ‘special place that connects people’

## Downtown benefits from generations of leadership, and work isn’t done yet

By Dallas Heltzell  
dheltzell@bizwest.com



Fort Collins Mayor  
Jeni Arndt



Fort Collins City  
Manager  
Kelly DiMartino

**T**he city’s leaders are united in their love and visions for downtown Fort Collins.

“It really is a special place that connects people in so many ways,” said City Manager Kelly DiMartino.

“The power of connecting in a space is powerful,” added Mayor Jeni Arndt.

They’ve devoted much of their lives to helping make it, and the city that surrounds it, even better.

DiMartino has lived in Fort Collins for more than a quarter century, coming from Grand Island, Nebraska, in 1997 and starting with the city as communications and public involvement coordinator. She rose to become assistant to the city manager, assistant city manager, senior assistant city manager, deputy city manager, and then interim city manager before securing the top job in July 2022. She holds a master’s degree in business administration from Colorado State University.

Fort Collins has been home to Arndt since she was three weeks old, when her parents moved there from Boulder because, even in 1964, they felt Fort Collins was a great place to raise a family. She attended Moore Elementary

School, Blevins Junior High and Poudre High. Even as she lived away – in college, in the Peace Corps in Morocco, and living and working in Mozambique, she always called Fort Collins home and moved back with her husband, Channing, and three children, and now lives three blocks from where she grew up. After more than three terms in the state Legislature, Arndt was elected mayor in 2021 and is seeking re-election.

Both serve on the governing commission for Northern Colorado Regional Airport, where panelists recently elected Arndt co-chair. And both believe the sky’s the limit for downtown Fort Collins.

“I look at the history of Old Town and think how innovative it was, how scary for its time that plan was” to create a pedestrian mall, “and how visionaries knew what it was to bring it together,” Arndt said. “The power of connecting in a space for pedestrians is powerful. Businesses thrive, and it’s the coordination and collaboration between the public sector and our vibrant and energetic private sector that has really made that go.

“Look at all our special events, shopping, dining, flowers, alleys, pianos, fountains,” she said. “It’s very deliberately designed for the town we want to be.”

A big attraction, DiMartino said, “is the mix of great locally owned businesses, shops and great restaurants, but also the ability to sit on a park bench next to beautiful flowers and just soak in the experience. There’s a natural



**A map shows the boundaries of the Fort Collins Downtown Development District. Courtesy City of Fort Collins**

vibrancy because of the investment the city has made. Just look at the kids playing in the fountain.”

During the COVID-19 pandemic with all its fears and restrictions, Arndt said, “Old Town provided a really necessary mental wellness spot. It still does. Yes, it gets rowdy on Friday and Saturday nights, but it also can be peaceful and tranquil.”

From random musicians to venerable venues and organized concerts in Old Town Square, DiMartino hailed “the role of music downtown. I do see us being a place that continues to foster that ‘music city’ environment – both impromptu and more organized places.”

She also credited efforts to connect downtown to the Cache la Poudre River to the north and east. “That’s a very special element,” she said. “As the river district continues to blossom, that’s something we will be attentive to as well.”

DiMartino said she’d like to encourage a downtown that “integrates seamlessly” into the river district, the Poudre River Whitewater Park and North College Avenue.

“Growing up here, we had our backs to the river. It just wasn’t a thing,” Arndt said. “Now it’s more open. We’ve got a pedestrian walkway down through the river district to the river. Before, we couldn’t even imagine downtown extending onto Linden Street.

“It’s the same idea that drove that innovation in the first place.”

How to keep the vibe going?

“Continue to build and enhance,” DiMartino said. “I think about the way as a city we do that is to invest in public spaces, encourage a mix of uses, and recognize that the market and private sector play an important role.”

Arndt added that one key is for downtown not to rest on its laurels – and she didn’t mean Laurel Street on the district’s southern edge.

“The city’s really growing and changing,” she said, “so we need to be as forward looking as our forefathers were.”

And maintenance can’t be overlooked, she added, “because it’s fun to be focused on shiny things instead of fixing the sewer. We don’t want to love Old Town to death.”

The city council has played a crucial role, they said.

At its Oct. 17 meeting, it approved the fiscal year 2024 budget for the Downtown Development Authority, including \$6,435,066 for public and private investments and programs, \$1,477,626 for DDA operations and maintenance, \$9 million for revolving line of credit draws and \$9,431,611 for the DDA debt service fund. The ordinance set the 2024 DDA mill levy at 5 mills, unchanged since tax year 2002.

Part of the revision to the city’s land-use code that won final approval at the same meeting was adding more residential uses to the area “instead of just doing suburb after suburb,” Arndt said. “That’s not sustainable.”

DiMartino pointed to the concept of “micromobility. We have to rethink how people are sharing those spaces. And how do we make sure downtown supports the infrastructure for bikes and pedestrians.”

Arndt noted that “parking in our most dense areas needs some reimagining,” and DiMartino added that “toward the end of this year, we’re coming to City Council with a new model of parking services. Demand management, the way our system works, is not necessarily a financially sustainable approach or creating the most traffic for businesses.”

Expanding public transit, especially into the evening hours, can help, DiMartino said, noting that on Sept. 29, the MAX fixed-guideway service along the Mason Street corridor resumed Friday and Saturday evening service.

“We really had to scale back that service during COVID, and then it’s been a challenge to recruit and retain drivers,” she said. “We’ve made some progress there. As staffing improves, we will look at other nights of the week.”

Consolidating city services will help as well, she said, including updating a “very dated” city hall and pursuing a general civic center master plan.

DiMartino sees a future for the heart of Fort Collins that is “continuing to see a diverse set of people enjoying downtown, with thriving small businesses, robust and integrated transportation and a built environment that honors the area.”

“For me,” Arndt added, “I think about the triple bottom line: economic, environmental and social. This is a place where we can really model that.”



The Alley Cat has become “an alternative library” for students.

Levi Tassin for BizWest

# Alley Cat Coffee

## Digital nomad makes coffee shop his own

By Dan England  
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**C**onnor Williams graduated in computer science and thought he might be what he called a digital nomad. South America looked like his first stop.

And yet, he said this from a booth inside Alley Cat Coffee as students sipped drinks, laughed or buried their noses in laptops.

“I’ve spent so much time here,” Williams said. “If the choice was to have it close or sell it to someone random, I didn’t really have a choice, in my mind.”

Williams, 27, calls the cafe founded by his father, Mark, his second home. He was home-schooled, and most of his lessons took place at the counter.



Williams





**Alley Cat Coffee**  
120<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> W. Laurel St. Fort  
Collins, CO 80525  
970-495-0123

He said his father, Mark, talked him into taking over, but all it really took was a little reassurance.

He hesitated, he said, because he was afraid of the responsibility. Jumping into it helped, as well as making a deal with his business partner and friend, Hunter Horsfall: Horsfall could handle the bar downstairs if he managed the coffee house. They still trade off at times. He backs up Horsfall during concerts. One of his main jobs, he said, seems to be sweeping up broken glass.

Williams said the vibe is “an alternative library,” meaning it’s one of those coffee houses where students go to study together. There is a quiet room without music for more serious students, but even there, it’s stocked with art supplies that customers donate. In the noisier section, students crowd tables with their laptops in every booth. Students are most of his business, and he’s learned to like it that way.

“I’d love it to be busier,” Williams said. “But I don’t want to cut out students.”

Saturdays are good, he said, and when there are midterms, he’s packed every night. Winters are generally strong. Summers are slower.

“We have busy weekends and weekdays are pretty chill,” Williams said, “but we are trying to figure that out.”

He handed out free chai cards on campus at the beginning of the school year. He gave most of his 1,000 away to freshmen until he found a graduate student party and dumped his last 200. He got 300 cards back, which made him happy. He doesn’t like to advertise on social media and leaves marketing to a couple of chalk messages on campus.

“The best thing I can do is try to make it a good experience,” Williams said, “and hope they come back.”

He knows he’s young to own his own business, but he considers that an advantage. He likes his employees: They’ve made the adjustment much easier. He’s run the place for four years now.

“I’m only a few years older than most of my workers,” he said. “I know what they want.”

Perhaps another country will beckon him away one day, but for now, he’s glad his father pushed him into the family business.

“I don’t know if I’ll do this for 20 years,” Williams said. “But honestly I’m happy where I am right now.”



# On the Bandwagon



## Store scores retro sports apparel downtown

By Shelley Widhalm  
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**M**ost of the business at Bandwagon Retro Sportswear Apparel relies on downtown foot traffic as tourists and locals stop in to support their favorite sports teams.



## Bandwagon Retro Sports Apparel

19 Old Town Square, #137  
Fort Collins, CO 80524  
970-689-3270

What they find, though, isn't the typical sportswear, since the majority of the sports apparel and fan gear on the shelves, racks and walls is embossed with retro logos.

"My motto is if you don't need it, we've got it," said Wayne Weldon, owner and manager of Bandwagon, 19 Old Town Square, Ste. 137. "People come in here with no intention of buying anything. A high percentage tend to buy something, since they're so intrigued."

Weldon opened a sports apparel store in Fort Collins in 2018, calling it Rocky Mountain Retro until 2021, when he changed the name to Bandwagon to better fit the unique nature of his offerings.

"They call it hopping on the bandwagon when you start following a team that's hot, so it's the perfect name for a store," Weldon said.

Weldon started in the sports apparel business in 2010 when he opened The Vault on King Street in Charleston, South Carolina, followed by stores in Mount Pleasant and Greenville. He also spent nearly 30 years managing golf courses in Myrtle Beach.

"I just love sports and memorabilia, so it was a perfect fit," Weldon said.

As a University of Northern Colorado graduate, Weldon felt the call of the mountains and wanted to return to Colorado, so he moved to Fort Collins but couldn't keep The Vault name when he sold his businesses. In his Fort Collins store, he started out with the help of his girlfriend, but now has two employees, one part- and one full-time, and he's seen his business grow every year.

"The product lines have expanded as it's become more and more successful," Weldon said. "We started doing jerseys, knick-knacks for teams like those coffee mugs, and the banners have been a big hit."

Weldon sells sports apparel and fan gear from the NFL, MLB, NHL, NBA, NCAA and others, representing a wide range of teams from most sports divisions, plus defunct teams such as the Denver Bears.

"We do just about all the major leagues . . . and about all the professional teams," Weldon said. "Hardly any place goes that deep in teams."

Weldon's merchandise represents sports from 60 different colleges and universities. He has shirts, hats, jerseys, banners, knick-knacks, championship plaques and framed copies of original Super Bowl tickets.

"It's all new merchandise made to look old," Weldon said. "Few companies still do retro logos."

Retro logos have character to them with more complex, intricate drawings, but now the newer logos are being simplified, he said. For example, the Hawkeyes had a detailed line drawing of a bird that has since become an abstract representation with shapes to look like a bird with a massive beak.

"The new just doesn't have it," Weldon said.

Weldon also sells apparel with rock 'n roll and pop culture images, including Grateful Dead, the Beatles, Elvis and John Denver. His entire store is decorated with sports memorabilia and antiques from old Coke signs to 1950s-era TVs and radios, old games and toys, and cereal boxes

Wayne Weldon at Bandwagon.

Levi Tassin / For BizWest

depicting famous athletes, plus framed photos and newspaper clippings of sports history.

"I'm kind of a collector. I never throw anything away," Weldon said. "I got a shrine back here: old photos, my personal memorabilia from my childhood, family items, pictures, autographs from famous people and Masters memorabilia."

Weldon likes being surrounded by sports and history, listening to good music all day and meeting customers, he said.

"My typical day is interacting with the folks who come in, talking sports and possibly ordering and looking for unusual merchandise," Weldon said. "I spend a lot of time looking for cool logo things."

Weldon keeps those things "neat and tidy," using cardboard squares to fold the shirts and hanging everything in an orderly fashion.

"We get a lot of comments on how pristine the shirts and everything are folded. It's a lot of work to keep up with," Weldon said. "It's a lot of shirt folding, just a lot of ordering and searching for cool products. That pretty much takes up the day."



Founder Scott Smith transferred ownership of CooperSmith's Pub & Brewing to three trusted employees, from left, Chris O'Mara, operations manager, Dwight Hall, president, and Sandra Langton, managing partner.

Levi Tassin for BizWest

# The 'beer' brand sticks to downtown Fort Collins

All right. The next person who says "Napa Valley of Beer" has to scrub out all the barrels.

By Thomas Hacker  
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**B**eer as a brand for the city of Fort Collins, and downtown especially, has been raising its profile year-over-year for the past three decades. It began when Scott Smith enclosed stainless steel fermenting tanks in a glass room near the center of Old Town Square in 1989, opening CooperSmith's Pub & Brewing.

The progression since then has been never-ending, with some craft brewers, notably New Belgium Brewing Co. and Odell Brewing Co., expanding to become beer-and-ale theme parks as much as breweries. Other, more modest enterprises occupy the nooks and crannies that make up the smallest of the small downtown commercial real estate listings.

**CooperSmith's Pub & Brewing**  
 5 Old Town Square,  
 Fort Collins, CO 80524  
 970-498-483

The brew houses bloom and fold like morning glories, with some popping up brightly in unexpected places just as others fade into local craft brew history. No wonder, then, that someone would invoke Napa Valley in describing the beer-centrism that now characterizes the city.

“Are we still the newest?” asked Salt Road Brewing LLC founder/owner Scott Ficarra as he walked from the brew house into the tap room at his brewpub in a low brick building on Old Firehouse Alley between Linden and Chestnut streets in Old Town.

Salt Road opened in April, and remains the newest — at least as of this writing. However, a six-month span without a new craft brewery in Old Town qualifies as a lull, so by the time this sentence is read Salt Road might be No. 2.

The two bookends, with iconic CooperSmith's as the oldest, and Ficarra's new Salt Road venture the newest, provide some illumination of the craft brew landscape without having to make excursions to the other 25-or-so brewers operating in Fort Collins.

“We're coming up on our 35th year, and that's kind of a big thing for any restaurant,” CooperSmith co-owner Dwight Hall said, unconsciously shifting focus to the food for which the business is known as much as the craft beer.

Hall is among three owners, all of them long-time employees who were picked by founder Smith in 2014 to take the reins with their investments to purchase the business. Hall serves as president, Chris O'Mara as brewing operations director and Sandra Longton as managing partner and front-of-the-house specialist. The titles notwithstanding, the three are co-equals in running the business.

“We are a team, not a hierarchy,” Hall said.

This day in downtown's life, Sept. 23, also notched another gold medal for CooperSmith's at the Great American Beer Festival, the national craft brewing convention held in Denver. The gold medal in the festival's pro-am competition recognized CooperSmith's role in taking an amateur brewer's recipe and scaling it up to a market-size batch under the name “She Fancies Herself A Little Bit French.” (Yes, that's really the name.)

With a track record 1/70th as long as CooperSmith's, Salt Road founder Ficarra has a narrower business window to measure his success.

“We started out real strong, but the summer was quite mellow,” he said, making it clear that “mellow” translates to “slow.” “All the other breweries around Fort Collins were reporting the same. But this fall we're doing great.”

The drum Ficarra beats to separate his brew from the rest is in the word “local.”

“Our main focus is producing beer with local resources,” he said. “While we're brewing new and interesting experimental beers, we're also showing that Colorado has become a premier place for brewing ingredients.”

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 DECEMBER 7-10, 2023  
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BALLET NORTHERN COLORADO  
 FORT COLLINS SYMPHONY  
 City of Fort Collins  
 Colorado Creative Industries



# Day never ends at Silver Grill

Iconic restaurant bustles, even during off-hours

By Christopher Wood  
[cwood@bizwest.com](mailto:cwood@bizwest.com)

A day in the life of the Silver Grill Cafe begins long before the restaurant opens its doors at 7 a.m.

By the time diners have entered the eatery at 218 Walnut St., staff have already arrived by 5:30 a.m., preparing grills and getting stations set up in preparation for opening.

But even that is not the start of the day, which actually begins the night before, with bakers working overnight to prepare the Silver Grill's iconic cinnamon rolls, typically arriving by 8:30 or so and working through the night.

The restaurant closes after lunch at 2 p.m., but the day continues.

"By the time everybody filters out and we finish cleaning up for the day, it's around 3:30 or 4 o'clock," said owner Alan Jantzen.

"Then our janitorial crew will come in. They will — basically from top to bottom, from front door to back door — clean the entire restaurant, and what a blessing to have them because they do an amazing job. This is a busy place, and we make a mess



Alan Jantzen and his wife, Jackie, provide an old-style diner experience at the Silver Grill Cafe.

Levi Tassen/For BizWest



### Silver Grill

218 Walnut St.  
Fort Collins, CO 80524  
970-484-4656



### Bakers at the Silver Grill begin work the previous evening to prepare the restaurant's iconic cinnamon rolls.

Levi Tassen/For BizWest

throughout the day.

“About the time they’re leaving, our bakers come in,” he said, “and our bakers — depending upon the day of the week, the time of the year — we’ll give them orders for what we need for cinnamon rolls, and they’ll start baking.”

Bakers work from six to 10 hours, depending on demand, which picks up during the holidays.

“About the time they’re leaving, here we are showing up for the next day’s business,” Jantzen said. “It’s a pretty interesting dynamic for a business that’s only open 7 to 2, as to what the public sees ... there are not a lot of people who realize that we really operate 24 hours a day. The life of Silver Grill never stops.”

And those cinnamon rolls? Jantzen said the restaurant averages about 12,000 sold per month, including for in-restaurant diners, takeout orders, corporate orders and special requests for holidays or other functions.

“That’s just what we’ve sold,” Jantzen said. “I’m not going to tell you how many that my wife and I consume.”

Jantzen and his wife, Jackie, purchased the Silver Grill from longtime owner John Arnolfo in December 2021, drawn by the nostalgia that the restaurant evokes.

“We’re both small-town kids,” Jantzen said. “I’m from Nebraska, she’s from North Dakota, and we have a lot of fond memories going to our local diners with relatives, Grandma and Grandpa, and what that meant to us and what those places meant to our communities. So we wanted to bring that sense of our hometown here to Silver Grill. Our mission is that this feels like a hometown diner that you remember, from wherever you are from, and when you walk through our doors, it feels like you’re going back in time to recreate those memories with your family or your special group.”

Those childhood memories are pervasive throughout the Silver Grill, with generations of families having frequented the restaurant over its 90 years.

“I think it’s a very special place for a lot of people, who, for 90 years, have built memories here with families, loved ones. It’s nearly every day that somebody will stop me here in the restaurant and say, ‘My father introduced me to this place,’ or ‘My grandma introduced me to this place.’ ... ‘We would eat there every morning before Dad went to work and before I went to school.’ Those extra memories just permeate throughout the entire community that we have here. It’s become one of those places that people like to come to show people from out of town.

“In this wonderful downtown that we have, this busy, bustling urban environment that we have, you can step back in time a little bit here and enjoy a bit of a reprieve from the busyness of our downtown.”

As Jantzen speaks at 10 a.m. on a Saturday in September, the restaurant buzzes with dozens of conversations, the clinking of dishes, the sound of forks and knives on plates, wait staff taking orders.

But as the hours progress, the sounds of customers will give way to the quieter sounds of the janitorial staff, and then the bakers, and eventually the daytime staff and customers, as the day begins anew.

# It's a chocolate store. Or a drug store.



City Drug is the second oldest business in town.

Ken Amundson/BizWest

## City Drug is the second oldest business in town

By Dan England  
[news@bizwest.com](mailto:news@bizwest.com)

Barbara Wilkins can certainly help you with your prescriptions. She's a certified pharmacist for City Drug, one of the few independent drug stores left in the region. But you get the idea she would prefer to sell you some chocolate.

Wilkins knows as much about the wine, coffee and, yes, chocolate from Bulgaria, Austria and Germany as the common medications that customers need to have filled. The Kruegermann red cabbage is the best she's tasted. The German Riesling wine isn't as sweet, and yet it's delicious. The honey tastes better than here. There are fish rubs she loves. The sausages are very tasty. The coffee isn't as acidic and easier on sensitive stomachs. She's not a salad person, but she loves the dressing they carry here. They also have herring.

"The herring smells a little," Wilkins said, "but it's really good."

This isn't just a sales pitch. Wilkins uses and loves the products, but then again, there is a certain amount of family pride contained in what City Drug sells from Germany and the countries surrounding it. Barbara's mother, Sylvia Wilkins, owns the store and still works the counter. She is also a refugee from Germany who came over with her husband, Charles, during World War II.

When they started City Drug, Sylvia wanted to sell some products from home. Charles reluctantly agreed and gave her half a shelf. Now it's as much of the identity of City Drug as the prescriptions: There are two whole aisles devoted to European products.

"People want it," Sylvia said, and that includes Americans (who especially seem to like the sausages), but many of their customers are from Germany or the area, Sylvia said.

Barbara works Saturdays and her brother works Sunday. She doesn't mind working weekends, especially if it's steady but slow enough to let her catch her breath, as it was that day, she said.

Barbara takes obvious pride in what the store offers. It separates it from CVS or Rite-Aid or Walgreens, she said, even with drug stores (including the national chains) basically being small retail outlets and grocery stores. CVS won't carry German food, she said. City Drug also offers health products that are hard to find, such as a huge selection of braces and mastectomy bras (it even has a fitting room in the back).

The store also seems to act as a museum of sorts to drugstores of the past. It has several displays of old drug bottles her father once used and a giant jar full of pills. Barbara wants to host a game where the customers can guess how many pills are in the jar. They also have a display of rubber ducks: Those are so popular that the store put up a sign telling customers they're not for sale.

But it's the overseas treats that get the store the most attention. Sylvia hoped in late September that the recently discounted prices would get her the shelf space she needs once again: Christmas is coming, and she orders a lot of special chocolate for the season. There were already some Santas displayed on a shelf.

"Mom finds the cutest chocolate things," Barbara said.

### City Drug

209 N. College Ave.  
Fort Collins, CO 80524  
970-482-1234



# Sharing a roof



Brenna Freestone-Gilbert and her husband, Caleb Gilbert, run two of the four stores in the facility. Brenna runs the florist shop; Caleb has the comic store. A bakery and a wine shop fill out the store.

Ken Amundson/BizWest

## It's a store that hasn't made up its mind what it is

By Ken Amundson

kamundson@bizwest.com

**H**igh rent? A cluster of businesses in downtown Fort Collins has found a solution that works for them.

An eclectic mix of four businesses with no common thread — other than a desire to make ends meet and to attract a disparate group of customers that might have an interest in something other than what they came ready to buy — has gathered in a space at 155 N. College Ave.

Visitors might see a wall of comics first. Or maybe a showcase of baked goods.

Or maybe they might look to the back and see the flowers displayed in coolers, or a collection of wines to the side.

The vision: a gathering place where people can sit and read a modern comic book, wait for flowers to be arranged, sample a wine or learn how that wine might pair with a cupcake.

Each business, its own limited liability corporation, shares the space equally, pays rent and other expenses equally, and works to drum up enough business to make the collaboration viable.

So far, it's working.

Bloom Floral Boutique, operated by Brenna Freestone-Gilbert, had a wedding to decorate last month. Turns out, Mystic Moon Bakery also does wedding planning. A marriage of another sort resulted.

"We operate a lot on handshake," said Freestone-Gilbert. She said the partners did sign a simple, internet-derived memorandum of understanding,

but since they are all in the space each day, they work through any issues in real time.

The floral shop came first. Freestone-Gilbert and her husband, Caleb Gilbert, had been living in New York until the pandemic, when they decided to move back to Colorado. Freestone-Gilbert took over the flower operation from her mother in law.

Caleb Gilbert, a production designer with a sculpture degree, had enjoyed reading comics as a kid.

"Reading comics brought a lot of joy," he said. He discovered that some of the modern comics from independent publishers were better than the mainstream. That doesn't mean he avoids the Marvel and DC Comics titles such as Batman, Spiderman, Superman, Wonder Woman, Avengers and Black Panther along with other popular titles, but he likes the independents better. And he'll occasionally design a cover for some of them.

When not selling titles, he also serves as technical director of OpenStage & Theatre Co. Inc.

"I've got my creative outlet, and my nerd outlet," he said.

The other businesses, Mystic Moon Bakery, recently relocated from Loveland to the space along North College Avenue in Fort Collins.

Blendings at the Hillside Vineyard completes the mix. It specializes in wine blends; at present it can sell for home consumption but is not able to serve at the store.

That may change as the partners work to clear regulatory hurdles.

Still, "It's a great solution for high rents," Freestone-Gilbert repeated.

**XBloom Floral Boutique, Mystic Moon Bakery, Hillside Vineyard, and Beedas Comics**

155 N. College Ave.  
Fort Collins, CO 80524

# New tech, nostalgia



Patrons take in the options at Pinball Jones. Dallas Heltzell/BizWest

## Subterranean world exists below Old Town at Pinball Jones

By Dallas Heltzell  
dheltzell@bizwest.com

Outside on Old Town Square on a glorious fall Saturday afternoon, kids play in the fountains, musicians strum their guitars, environmentalist speakers exhort their listeners to action, shoppers gaze through merchants' windows and tourists take in the scene.

Take a steep flight of stairs down to a subterranean doorway, however, and it's a different world.

Here at Pinball Jones, hallways are lined with brightly colored lights and images of the newest technology in gaming machines, their sounds blending into a delightful discordance as players rack up the points.

Pop-culture icons gaze out at the kids of all ages as they feed coins into the slots. Look, here's Indiana Jones. Over there is Willy Wonka. Other machines sport images of Elvira and her Party Monsters, Star Wars characters, Jurassic Park dinosaurs, Spider-Man, the Simpsons and even the Sopranos. Older players recognize James Bond, Dirty Harry and the Twilight Zone.

Unless their parents tell them, youngsters might not realize that the game called "Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy" is a tribute to the title of Elton John's ninth studio album, released 48 years ago. But then Mom and



Dallas Heltzell/BizWest

**Co-owner Aidan Lancaster shows off some of the old-time pinball machines at the Pinball Jones arcade in Old Town Fort Collins.**

Dad might be reliving their own childhoods with a game of Pong, Pac-Man or even air hockey.

Or they might be in the back room, where a row of ancient classic pinball machines beckon and a bar serves up a rotating selection of 12 local brews on tap, local craft ciders and cocktails or non-alcoholic sodas.

“We try to keep as many machines from different eras on the floor as we can,” said co-owner Aidan Lancaster from behind the bar. “They’re pumpin’ ‘em out these days. Several major manufacturers make them.”

The arcade opened 12 years ago, and Lancaster has worked there for seven.

“I’d say there’s more younger people involved now than there were when I started,” he said. “A lot of that might have to do with the fact that people who played pinball when they were young now have children of their own. Their parents bring them in, and then they get into it as they get older.”

The clientele changes depending on the time of day, he said. “There are a lot more families in the afternoon, and then people out for the evening.

“Our demographic is not necessarily college kids, and that’s intentional on my part because my capacity’s not very high, so I have to make sure that the people who are in here are going to be well-behaved and spending money.”

How does he control who comes in?

“By making things more expensive,” he said. “It’s not like I have any \$2 beers down here.”

However, he added, “that’s always been the demographic as long as I’ve worked here. It’s been people who live in town, people visiting from out of town. Our main demographic is 29 to 50.”

Lancaster appreciates the memories the machines generate, even though they might not mean as much to him personally.

**Pinball Jones**

107 Linden St.  
Fort Collins, CO 80524  
970-224-0725

“I kind of missed the boat,” he said. “I’m 34. I had played them before, but it wasn’t part of what I grew up doing.”

He does remember a sort of taboo that was associated with them.

“A lot of the laws surrounding pinball machines were gambling laws until only recently,” he said. “I’m from Arkansas, and they still do have really hard-core gambling laws associated with these machines.”

The popularity of visiting a pinball palace has ebbed and flowed.

“It died off in the early 2000s, a lot, and I think that was because of the rise of video games at home,” Lancaster said. “But I think people came to understand that there’s not a good digital substitute for it. If you want to play pinball, you’ve got to play it on a physical table. There’s a lot of video-game versions of pinball, but it’s all about feeling the table.”

After all, getting a feel for the table is how Tommy Walker, the “deaf, dumb and blind kid” in The Who’s popular 1969 song and rock opera, became a “Pinball Wizard.”

“It’s definitely re-entered the cultural collective consciousness,” Lancaster said. “There’s been a lot of representations of pinball in the movies and media recently. It’s been interesting to see it. I think a lot of it has to do with ‘80s nostalgia,” such as that depicted in “Stranger Things,” the science fiction horror drama television series on Netflix that is set four decades ago in small-town Indiana.

“And the music and people’s nostalgia for the ‘80s whether or not they were alive during it,” Lancaster said. “There’s definitely a subculture that is gaining more and more recognition.”

Technology has even brought the interactivity of online games to pinball arcades.

“One of the major manufacturers, Stern, has been integrating achievement and experience points, so you kind of save your character as you go through the game,” Lancaster said. “The newest game it just released is Venom, which is part of the Marvel universe. If you log in through a QR code on the game, and then you play it, the stronger your character gets. There are online leaderboards, and you get achievements, and there’s a social media aspect to it. It saves it to your own personal account, so you could play anywhere you find the machine. Typically we have a leaderboard up that shows everybody’s high scores for the month from those games.”

Just like a bowling alley, Pinball Jones also hosts leagues and tournaments. It all adds up to a fun family escape, Lancaster said.

“We’ve gotten busier and busier every year.”



# At Vortic Watch Co., 'It's about time'

Christopher Wood/BizWest

R.T. Custer leads Vortic Watch Co. in Old Town Fort Collins.

## Fort Collins watch company winds up for next venture

By Christopher Wood  
cwood@bizwest.com

“It’s about time.”

That could be the motto for Vortic Watch Co., a downtown Fort Collins business for which time is of the essence. Vortic transforms vintage pocket watches into wristwatches, restores old watches as heirlooms or makes entirely new watches as Colorado Watch Co.

“It’s about time” could reflect the start of a typical day at 7 a.m., Monday through Thursday.

It could represent the first tasks of the day for some of the employees, who wind a series of 20 or so watches that are being tested for accuracy.

It could reflect times past, when a series of watchmakers led to U.S. dominance in the watch-making industry.

And it could reflect a determination to revive that industry in the U.S.

“It’s about time.”

At Vortic’s headquarters at 324 Jefferson St., employees work at various tasks during the day, winding, testing and assembling watches; running 3D printers for producing cases and other parts; fulfilling orders by placing finished watches in custom, Vortic-branded cases provided by Fort Collins-based Otter Products Inc.; scanning the web for estate auctions or

### Vortic Watch Co.

324 Jefferson St,  
Fort Collins, CO 80524  
855-285-7884

other sources of vintage watches; or working on design or marketing of the company's products.

Vortic's story began in 2013, when Penn State University students R.T. Custer and Tyler Wolfe came up with the idea of creating a 100% American-made watch.

They quickly realized that it was easier said than done, as watch movements — the tiny, intricate mechanisms that make watches run — are no longer made in the U.S., but rather in Switzerland, Japan, China or India.

It wasn't always that way. The U.S. once led the world in watchmaking, and many of those products from a century ago sit in dresser drawers, in antique stores or in pawn shops.

Their solution? Rebuild those old American pocket watches into wristwatches, manufacturing any needed parts using 3D metal printers, but reusing the original movements, and other parts of the original watch.

As Custer and Wolfe relocated to Fort Collins, Vortic took off, initially producing watches from a condo in Midtown, then in a space at the Innosphere incubator on East Vine Drive, then at Jessup Farm.

Demand was so good that the company in 2022 moved to its location at 324 Jefferson St., occupying 8,500 square feet, where it employs about 10 people.

Custer begins a tour of the company's operations in a room with a framed poster on the wall depicting "The Great American Watch Companies." The poster includes once-popular brands of pocket watches, including Illinois Watch Co., Elgin Watch Co., Rockford Watch Co., South Bend Watch Co., Hampden Watch Co., Hamilton Watch Co., Ball Watch Co., Waltham Watch Co., Seth Thomas Watch Co.

The poster provides both a history of the American watchmaking industry but also reflects an inventory of watch brands that the company seeks out through estate auctions, pawn shops and other sources.



Christopher Wood/BizWest

**Vintage watches are transformed into wristwatches at Vortic Watch Co., with constant testing to ensure that they keep accurate time.**

"Those companies made about 100 million pocket watches in the U.S. between about 1850 and 1950," Custer said. "And today, most people have no idea that we were the Switzerland of the world for that 100 years."

Sometimes, owners of heirloom watches will bring them to Vortic for repair, seeking to have them restored after they've languished in drawers for decades.

But most of the watches that the company obtains are transformed into wristwatches, with the company using the U.S.-made movements, manufacturing new parts as needed, and transforming them into wristwatches that cost anywhere from \$2,000 to \$12,000.

The company made as many as 400 watches in one year, but that proved to strain Vortic's resources, and the company has settled on producing 300 of those watches annually.

But time is not standing still for the company. It recently launched a new line of wristwatches under the umbrella of the Colorado Watch Co. Those watches use as much material and manufacturing in the U.S. as possible, including Colorado.

"Now, to scale the company and grow, we're going to come out with more brands and different styles of watches and different brands over time," Custer said, explaining the Colorado Watch Co. strategy.

The watches are aimed at a younger, active demographic and cost far less than Vortic models, beginning at about \$1,000.

While watches under the Colorado Watch Co. brand can't be touted as "Made in the USA" because of strict federal requirements for that designation, they are promoted as "Built in America."

The Federal Trade Commission uses a vague requirement that "all or virtually all" of a product must be made domestically to qualify as "Made in the USA," a far stricter threshold than many other countries employ. Switzerland's "Swiss Made" label, for example, requires that at least 60% of production cost must be from that country.

Even though Colorado Watch Co. products are 87% U.S. by cost, they don't qualify for the designation "Made in the USA" label but instead are touted as "Built in America."

The company already has surpassed its goal on Kickstarter to launch the brand, raising more than \$320,000 out of a \$250,000 goal.

As orders for Colorado Watch Co. come in — including new models funded by the Kickstarter campaign — workers at Vortic undoubtedly will get even busier.

But they have time on their side.



# Mutual benefit



Woodward makes use of the old barn on its new campus in downtown Fort Collins.

Courtesy of Woodward

## Downtown, Woodward thrive on each other's contributions

By Thomas Hacker  
[news@bizwest.com](mailto:news@bizwest.com)

For a measure of what the downtown presence of technology company Woodward Inc. means to Fort Collins businesses, look no further than the Back Porch Cafe on the southwest corner of Lincoln and Lemay avenues.



## Woodward

1041 Woodward Way  
Fort Collins, CO 80524  
970-482-5811

The 101-acre Link N' Greens Golf Course (the name played off its Lincoln Avenue location) was available for \$15 million, or a whopping \$150,000 per acre. After a decision to put most eggs in the downtown Fort Collins basket, Woodward purchased the land in early 2013.

So began a three-year development and construction process that defined the company's relationship with downtown, and vice versa.

"Because Woodward chose to locate there, it gave us all the reasons to make a concerted effort for Lincoln corridor improvements," said Matt Robenalt, executive director of the Fort Collins Downtown Development Authority. "All of the beautiful street connections that we have in place came out of that."

Woodward was the beneficiary of DDA improvement grants that defrayed costs of campus entry features and relocation of a major Platte River Power Authority high-voltage line that bisected the property.

Fort Collins benefitted immediately from Woodward's donation of 30 acres of land arching across the parcel's southern tier — almost a third of the land purchased — for the development of Homestead Natural Area, tying Woodward's campus to the Poudre River Trail and adding another direct route to Old Town's amenities.

Woodward also invested \$2.9 million in renovating the cavernous, 150-year-old Coy-Hoffman barn on the original homestead, turning it into a unique conference and meeting space that is a favorite among the company's employees.

No matter how much money Woodward invested in its downtown location decision a decade ago, the biggest and most enduring benefit to the city is the investment that Lincoln campus' employees make in the district's businesses, and in their purchases and leases of downtown residential property.

While the city of Fort Collins and Larimer County each have more downtown employees than Woodward does, the company is by far downtown's largest private employer and is likely to remain so with expansion in the forecast.

Gendron, who retired as Woodward chairman, CEO and president in early 2022, said the results of the company's commitment to downtown line up exactly with his original intentions.

"We had two goals with that decision," he said. "No. 1, we wanted to ensure that Woodward would have the talent that we needed going forward. Second, we wanted to enhance the city. I think we've done both of those things."

The homey, breakfast-and-lunch restaurant is about 300 feet from the two Woodward buildings where 1,100 people are employed; it is a prime beneficiary of Woodward's 2013 decision to build its headquarters and a manufacturing campus on the eastern flank of downtown Fort Collins.

"On every weekday, we'll have Woodward people in here," co-owner Gene Fiechtl said. "They are really the major contributors to our business."

The Back Porch Cafe's location on Woodward's literal doorstep is just the most visible example of how the company's workforce bolsters the fortunes of restaurants, retail stores and property owners throughout Fort Collins' urban core. Likewise, in symbiotic fashion, the urban attractions that the city offers have given Woodward a clear competitive advantage.

"We looked all over Northern Colorado, and our due diligence required us to look outside the region, too," said Tom Gendron, the former Woodward CEO who guided the building of his company's new headquarters campus.

"We had to think, first, about what would enable us to attract and retain top talent," he said. "We knew that our new people, those with high-level professional, technical and operational talent, would want to have all the urban amenities nearby. They would want to have great restaurants, great places to live and all the other things that downtown Fort Collins offers."

Woodward was formerly known as Woodward Governor Co., a company that in the 1950s manufactured controls that kept aircraft engines from revving too fast, and not much else. It opened its first Fort Collins factory almost 70 years ago and became the city's first major industrial employer.

Today, Woodward Inc. (Nasdaq: WWD) is a cutting-edge provider of control systems for a broad range of applications from aerospace to global shipping to energy generation, and its Northern Colorado presence has grown with its broadening range of products.

Stakes were high for both the company and the city as Woodward scouted the territory for a new headquarters site. The company in 2007 moved its headquarters from Rockford, Illinois, to its Fort Collins site at Drake Road and Lemay Avenue.

Hemmed in at that location, the company and new CEO Gendron looked abroad.

# 'Hippie commune'

## Trimble Court Artisans celebrates 1970s roots

By Ken Amundson

kamundson@bizwest.com

**T**he self-described “hippie commune” on Trimble Court just off Old Town Square in Fort Collins has proved to be as enduring as any business downtown.

It dates to before Old Town Square — 1971 to be exact. It's the oldest continuously operated art cooperative in the state and among the three oldest retail cooperatives in the nation.

That's according to Trimble Court Artisans' long-time president, Diane Findley, who joined in 1976 when she graduated from Colorado State University and never left.

“I had just graduated, and I was wandering around Old Town looking for a free concert,” she said, describing a common ritual of college-age people. “I came across Trimble Court and fell in love,” she said. The gallery is at 118 Trimble Court.

“All these years, and free concerts are still just out the front door.”

When Trimble was founded, landlord Martha Trimble, now deceased, charged \$1 a year rent in order to help get the cooperative off the ground. Landlords since that time have also been helpful, she said.

Findley is an artist who creates hand-painted greeting cards. She's one of about 50 artists who use Trimble as their retail base of operations. While it's rare to see the artists actually performing their talents in the space, patrons will encounter artists on every visit.

That's because of the financial arrangement to which the artists agree, which includes a commitment to share in staffing of the store. Member artists also agree to split their sales with the cooperative: 35% is directed



Christopher Wood/BizWest

Tucked away in an alley lies Trimble Court Artisans, the oldest art co-op in the state.

to the co-op and the artist keeps the rest.

Most congregate art stores charge 50% or 60%, Findley said. The reason Trimble can have a lower commission is because of the work commitment. “Someone behind the counter will be trying to work the cash register,” Findley joked.

Patrons wander through the aisles and see all manner of artwork available to buy. “Stained glass, blown glass, fused glass, jewelry, pottery — low fire and high fire —, woodworking, Colorado landscapes, crocheted wire, painted silk, collage work, fine art such as paintings and prints, metal work, handmade greeting cards...,” Findley listed as she walked through the store.

At 69, Findley isn't the oldest member of the cooperative. “There are no age restrictions. Our youngest was nine,” she said.

Members include architects, landscapers, teachers, a bartender, a research scientist, she said.

“This goulash of members come together and are supportive of each other. When someone sells a big item, a \$500 painting, we run up the flag,” she said.

Trimble is open varying hours but generally 10 a.m. until 6 p.m. most days; it's open longer on weekends. “It's only closed on Christmas and sometimes half the day on the Fourth of July,” she said. Fall tends to be a slower season, so the hours might be adjusted then, too. But during the holiday season it might be open longer.

While a co-op legally, it's hippie commune roots also come forward, at least annually. “At the end of the year, if we have any money left, we divide it up based on each artist's sales. And we start from scratch the next year,” Findley said.

### Trimble Court Artisans

118 Trimble Court  
Fort Collins, CO 80524  
970-221-0051



# Established 1868



Ken Amundson/BizWest

Day after day, downtown's oldest business operates.

## Ranch-Way Feeds ranks as oldest downtown business

By Jeff Thomas  
[news@bizwest.com](mailto:news@bizwest.com)

**E**arly on a perfect September Saturday morning, Ranch-Way feeds, the oldest business in downtown, is eerily quiet.

The retail outlet that once serviced pet owners and hobby ranchers across Northern Colorado has now been closed for four years. But make no mistake, the business here, though owned by a midwestern company, is still viable, servicing backyard critters to the land's biggest feedlots across Colorado, Wyoming and Nebraska and even into New Mexico, Utah and Oklahoma on occasion.

"If there's a hungry cow, it's gotta eat, ... and we'll feed it," says Nara Freemyer, sales director for Ranch-Way Feeds, now a subsidiary of Hubbard Feeds of Mankato, Minnesota.

On a week-day morning, or the occasional Saturday, work starts early here, as the production crew starts at 6:30 a.m. with the fleet of semi driv-

ers eager to get on the road before traffic hits the downtown location. In all, the feed operation has about 30 employees, though it is about eight to 12 employees understaffed, Freemyer says – and probably had about 50 employees when it still had the retail outlet.

The operation began in 1868 as a flour mill on the banks of the Poudre River and was known as the Lindell Mill. That mill was rebuilt several times before converting to feed production in 1948. The operation was sold to Hubbard in 2016.

The red buildings and dry cribs are the remnants of the original feed operations, which displays the historical marker. Since the retail outlet is gone, the few visitors at the operation are probably on a historical tour of the downtown, as the business remains the oldest downtown business still in operation.

### Ranch-Way Feeds

546 Willow St,  
Fort Collins, CO 80524  
800-333-7929



# Spicing it up

**Not one but two spice shops make their homes downtown**

**By Jeff Thomas**  
*news@bizwest.com*

**B**y mid-morning, things are getting pretty spicy in Old Town Fort Collins, where the two spice shops located only a block away from each other both bustle on a perfect September Saturday.



Mortar and pestle set at Old Town Spice. The shop does a tremendous business in procuring its spices wholesale, and then mixing and bagging its own distributed blends. But it also offers the tools that foodies need to mix their own spices.

Levi Tassin for BizWest



**Old Town Spice Shop**  
Owner Sean Godbey said the spice trade is one of the world's oldest businesses.

“When you think about it, the spice trade is one of the world’s oldest professions,” said Old Town Spice owner Sean Godbey. And just as salt is such a basic need that it was once used as currency, these shops have been staples in downtown business since they were both started within months of each other in 2010.

Godbey said he and his family took a long look at creating their store, including going the franchise route taken by Susan Kirkpatrick, the first owner of Savory Spice, but declined to buy a franchise with the extremely successful Savory chain. Kirkpatrick, a former mayor of Fort Collins, tells a slightly different version of this story (it was a competitive situation, she said) but the end result is that downtown consumers have the best spice options from two very different business models.

Kirkpatrick, who was coming off a stint on Gov. Bill Ritter’s cabinet, said the decision to go with the Denver-based Savory Spice was based on sound business fundamentals, mainly the need of a dependable supply chain.

“Starbucks institutionalized that supply chain for coffee, but that had not been done in the spice business,” she noted after a BizWest video interview.

And that worked out for Kirkpatrick, and is also working out for Chris VanDenBerg, who bought the store along with his friend since childhood, Chris Grattino, in 2021. “It’s one of the most successful Savory Spice stores on the Front Range (there are nine),” VanDenBerg said. VanDenBerg is new to the spice game, but Grattino was the long-time owner of the Aurora franchise.

Godbey ended up with a strikingly different business model for his store, including resisting his more entrepreneurial brother who thought that franchising stores was the way to success. Instead, he built business relationships with importers, created his own grinding and mixing facility and built a business that relies more on distributing its own spice blends.

Early on his client list included the CSU dorms and kitchens. However, he rapidly expanded that list to include many other spice shops, restaurants, beer

crafters and distilleries. In fact, the company turned the table on brewers, who made beer tasting like coffee, and has a coffee brand – Hopped Up Coffee – that is based on gourmet beers.

Today, Godbey distributes across the nation and has extremely close relations with the importers he does business with; in fact, he has considered getting into the import business himself. The retail outlet is still very important to the overall revenue scheme, he said, with distributing, online sales and retail accounting for about equal thirds of the business.

Savory Spice is not without its own distribution business, but VanDenBerg acknowledged that retail is the more important business sector. He said a solid group of employees are largely responsible for its continued success, especially as he continues to work remotely for a tech management firm based in Dallas.

VanDenBerg and his wife, Julie, actually decided to move to Colorado from Dallas when their daughter, Grace, enrolled at Colorado State University. Their son, Trace, soon followed them up to these cooler climes.

The connection to downtown, VanDeBerg said, has been one of the more rewarding aspects of the store ownership and that includes his relationship with Godbey, which is friendly. Both stores participate in the the Fort Collins Foodie Walk, which Godbey co-founded.

“We’re all promoters of the whole downtown business (scene) and the foodie business,” VanDeBerg said. “And the retail food business downtown is a great thing.”

**Old Town Spice Shop**  
130 S College Ave # A,  
Fort Collins, CO 80524  
970-493-7206



# 'May the Most Fun Win'

At The Wright Life, 'fun sports' drive business longevity

By Jeff Thomas  
[news@bizwest.com](mailto:news@bizwest.com)

For some reason it's hard to fathom a flying disc-driven (dare we say Frisbee?) store lasting 42 years, even so close to a college campus. But that's why a visit to The Wright Life isn't just a visit to a sporting store dedicated to more "fun" sports, it's a bit of the history of how those sports have evolved in Colorado, as well.

The Wright Life founder Bill Wright, operating under the motto 'May the Most Fun Win,' has discovered that the most fun is helping others find it.

Chad Collins/BizWest



**Bill Wright found a niche with disc and board sports.**

Chad Collins/BizWest

**The Wright Life**  
200B Linden St,  
Fort Collins, CO 80524  
(970) 484-6932  
wrightlife.com

And as the motto of the store goes, “May the Most Fun Win.” But it’s hard to say this all was planned out.

“I came to school here (Colorado State University) in 1976, and I was all through playing baseball,” said Wright on a laid-back September Saturday afternoon. Instead, he found a small but dedicated group of disc enthusiasts who seemed, well, to be having a lot of fun.

That group became a club – the still existing Grateful Disc Frisbee Club – and sponsored the first national Frisbee competition in Fort Collins in 1979.

By 1980, participation in disc sports found Wright traveling through California in a VW bus, competing, and winning, national freestyle events. But sooner or later making a living, and living in a VW bus, gets a little weary, so in 1981 he and his brother, Rob, started the sports shop, initially splitting the focus between discs and more “normal” sports, such as backcountry skiing and racquet sports such as tennis.

“What we found is we weren’t selling much in those normal sports,” Wright recalled. Soon the shop evolved into a split between discs and board sports, both snow and skate, and his girlfriend, now wife, Holly, had replaced his brother, presumably to pursue more “normal” means to earn a living.

Bill Wright continued to push disc sports, including ultimate, but also went on to push Frisbee Golf, by first approaching CSU and then municipalities and schools across the state to build courses. Soon they moved up to ski resorts, and as Bill recalled, the crowning achievement: the 18-hole course on Aspen Mountain, which of course, required a trip up the lift.

“We laid it out so it was a pretty normal course on the front nine, fairly level on the top of this hill,” he said. “But the back nine goes up and down the ski trails, so you have some enormous throws down the hill. Of course, you have to come back up.”

From the beginning, the company was distributing disc products around the country. Online sales and distribution continue to account for more than half its revenue.

But Wright also pushed the board sports hard, as well. In the early 1980s

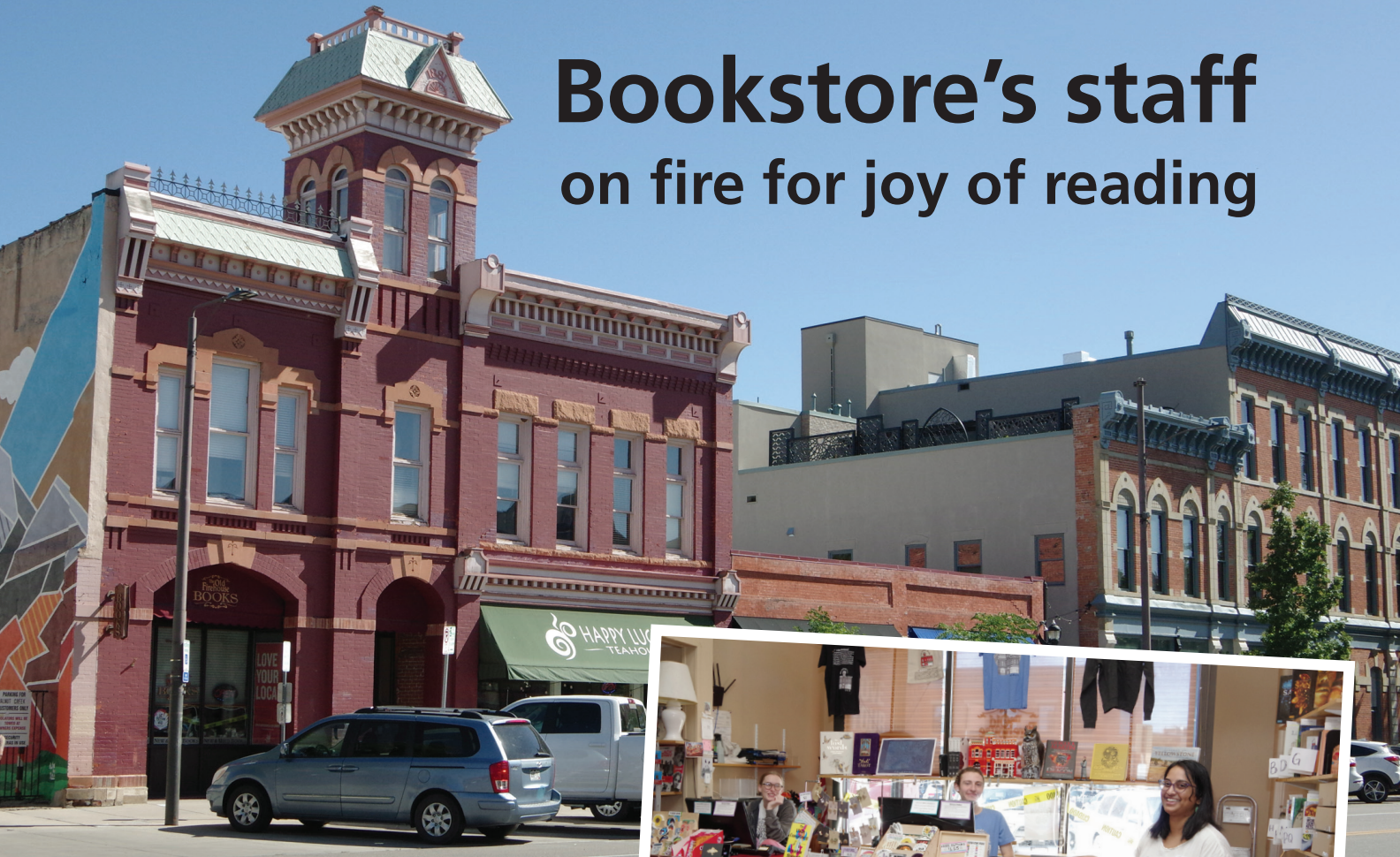
he brought some top national skateboarders to town for demonstrations, turning Walnut Street into a half-pipe and assorted other board tricks, such as handrails. This predated the establishment of Old Town Square by a few years.

The couple has owned the building for most of the life of the business, so they’ve seen plenty of ups and downs, including a few recessions and COVID, Holly Wright said. But their luck and the consumers’ love of fun has seemed to hold out.

“Right before COVID we decided to remodel the building to put another business on the bigger storefront (on Linden Street),” Bill Wright said. “That was good timing.”



# Bookstore's staff on fire for joy of reading



Old Firehouse Books takes its name from the historic firehouse building into which it moved in 2009.

Store manager Revati Kilaparti, right, and her staff welcome customers to Old Firehouse Books.

Chad Collins/BizWest



## People still turn out to buy ink on paper

By Dallas Heltzell  
dheltzell@bizwest.com

A typical Saturday at Old Firehouse Books has a variety of stories to tell.

It starts at 9 a.m. with “people starting the day early and quietly,” said store manager Revati Kilaparti. On Wednesdays and Saturdays, she said, “we’re open extra early for a low-sensory hour for people who don’t want a lot of music, don’t want a lot of light, so it’s a little quieter.”

Then there’s an influx of “people killing time,” she said, waiting to be texted that their restaurant seats are available at crowded nearby breakfast spots such as Silver Grill, Snooze or Ginger and Baker.

“During the day, it’s more students and families.”

The store’s primary demographic is “probably more older and middle-aged, a lot



**Aisles of shelves contain new and used books at Old Firehouse Books.** Chad Collins/BizWest

of 30s and 40s and families coming in," she said, "but we're also getting more students" from Colorado State University. "We have a 15% discount for CSU students."

Then there's "a good amount of teens who are looking to hang out or for something to do," Kilaparti said. "A lot of tourists too."

Some younger readers have turned to their Kindles and audiobooks, but she said many still love actual books.

"They're very excited and enthusiastic about it," she said. "If they're coming in here, they read, so I guess we have a special demographic. We get the young people who like to read. It's not a hard sell for them. I haven't noticed a decrease, and we try to make the place welcoming for them to come in, by themselves or whatever."

Kilaparti said she has worked at Old Firehouse Books "off and on" for 15 years, including the moment in 2009 when the store, known as the Book Rack when Bill Hawk opened it in 1980, moved into the spot at 232 Walnut St. and changed its name to reflect its new home, a historic firehouse with its distinctive architecture.

Hawk started the Book Rack by selling and trading used paperbacks. His wife, Maggie, and daughter, Marta, pitched in and grew the business for more than two decades. The store was sold in 2001 to current owners Dick Sommerfield and Susie Wilmer, who also owned Book Rack stores in Greeley and Cheyenne. They increased the stock of used books, began ordering new titles, and moved the business to 1801 S. College Ave. in 2002, then to its Old Town location seven years later. Kilaparti said Sommerfield built the bookshelves.

"Now we are mostly new books," she said, "and we're a much larger space, a lot more books that are looking to the future, a lot more queer books, and a lot more of the pulse that is going on around us."

That's reflected in the store-sponsored book clubs that anyone can join,

## Old Firehouse Books

232 Walnut St.  
970-484-7898

including the Informed Citizens Book Club, Traps and Trenchcoats Mystery Book Club, F\*#@#d Up Book Club and Queer & Loathing Book Club.

"I love indie bookstores in general," she said. "It really reflects the people who shop here, the people who live here. What people are reading changes, and we've changed a whole lot since we first opened. I like that we change with the conditions."

There's also space for book signings by local authors, but for more national touring writers, "we can't fit a few hundred people in the store," she said, "so sometimes we have to go to the library, we partner with them, or we get an event space, or go to one of the hotels."

An example is popular romance author Ana Huang, who Old Firehouse Books hosted on Oct. 25 at the Fort Collins Marriott.

One thing that has changed is a book's price.

"We don't set the prices of the books," Kilaparti said. "That has been a difficulty with the prices of everything like paper and stuff going up. So we urge people, 'If you buy a book, just buy one a month from us and we'd really appreciate it versus you going on Amazon.'"

Between inflation and changing reader habits, many independent and chain bookstores have closed. Denver's iconic Tattered Cover bookstores just filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, and the Book Lovers Emporium, a fixture in south Fort Collins for decades, announced it would close on Nov. 19.

But Kilaparti remains optimistic about Old Firehouse Books.

"Business is pretty good, and I think we're increasing every year," she said.

"I really like working here," Kilaparti said. "I really like that we have a personality as opposed to a lot of bigger businesses. We try to be here and listen to what people need and want.

"We have a good time."

# The Cupboard's never bare

Iconic Old Town store focuses on customers

By Christopher Wood  
cwood@bizwest.com

Customers quickly file in as doors to The Cupboard open promptly at 10 a.m. on a Saturday morning in September.

Some will seek a specific kitchen gadget, others a favorite specialty food or an item of home decor. And some will enter the store at 152 S. College Ave. not knowing what they want, but leaving satisfied with an unexpected find. And their tastes — and sometimes special requests — help drive what's



Levi Tassin for BizWest

Jim Hewitt's The Cupboard reaches iconic status in downtown.

carried in the store's inventory, as evidenced by The Cupboard's very existence as a place for kitchenware.

It was actually customer demand that influenced The Cupboard's emergence as a kitchen store, soon after its founding in the Northern Hotel building in 1972, said owner Jim Hewitt, who purchased the store from his father, founder Carey Hewitt.

The Cupboard's location — once a car dealership, later a J.C. Penney store — has achieved iconic status in downtown Fort Collins, ranking as a destination stop for local residents and visitors alike, in part because of listening to customers.

"I think The Cupboard really started to fill a niche because customers were asking for items that were not found in Fort Collins and that they could use for





food, coffees, candy, cutting boards, pottery and other items.

The Cupboard employs 28 team members, with about half of them working as buyers, helping to identify new merchandise to include on the store's shelves. That research can be done online, in trade magazines, in other stores, at trade shows, or through meeting sales representatives who visit the store.

"We will find a lot of new products or things that you can't find other places," Hewitt said.

Some days at The Cupboard are busier than others, of course.

"There's always ebb and flow during the time of the year and during the time of the week," Hewitt said, "and today's a Saturday, and Saturdays will be our busiest day as far as customers and foot traffic."

For some of The Cupboard's employees, the day begins at 6 a.m., hours

the kitchen," Jim Hewitt said. "It started out about macrame and pottery and wooden spoons, until that developed into a kitchen store because people were asking for it.

"And so that's one of the reasons that it's a kitchen store today because the customers really wanted things that they couldn't find in other places."

The Cupboard's website describes the early shift in focus:

"The small store first carried a variety of baskets, pottery, and a few kitchen tools (the first sale was three wooden spoons for \$.95). Per customer demand, The Cupboard turned its focus to the kitchen. After three expansions, The Cupboard is now one of the largest independent kitchen and home stores in the nation."

The Cupboard has become a source for a variety of locally made products as well.

"We try as much as possible to support the local community and artisans," Hewitt said, with the store stocking locally made



**The Cupboard**  
 152 S. College Ave.  
 Fort Collins, CO 80524  
 970-493-8585



## Grinding coffee is a daily task at The Cupboard.

Levi Tassin for BizWest

before opening. Those employees will be working on displays, with others arriving at 8 or 8:30, vacuuming, doing computer work, or performing other tasks to get the store ready. Some will be busy grinding coffee to give customers tastes of local offerings.

As customers arrive, some invariably will leave with kitchen tools, which Hewitt said are The Cupboard's "bread and butter," its biggest category, followed by food.

And some customers will fill out one of the store's "special request cards," seeking a specific item that they can't find anywhere else.

"We try to fill those requests as much as possible," Hewitt said.

After all, that's how it all began.

# Scooping up family memories at Kilwins



## Sensory experience draws customers, memories

By Lucas High  
lhigh@bizwest.com

**H**olli McElwee's memories of Kilwins in Old Town start with her dad.

The ice cream and sweets shop was "such a special place to me personally" during her time as a Colorado State University student, she said. "I'd come in here to buy peanut brittle to take back to the itty bitty town where I'm from (in southwest Colorado). I'd eat it and play cards with my dad over the holidays. Unfortunately, he passed, but I had such special memories of the peanut brittle and being here" in Old Town.

Fast-forward a few years and McElwee was back living in Fort Collins, working in marketing and making new family memories at Kilwins with a daughter of her own.

Then, in August 2022, the South College Avenue ice cream shop that first opened in 1996 closed its doors. Franchise owner Nora Hill attempted to sell the business before and during the COVID-19 pandemic before retiring last year, a decision coaxed along by her California-based landlord's decision to raise the rent significantly.

McElwee, at the urging of her daughter, saw an opportunity and pounced.

"I was looking through (my daughter) Frankie's school work. I came across a paper, phonetically spelled, (that said,) 'My mommy is going to



Holli McElwee, the owner of the Kilwins in Old Town Fort Collins, makes nonpareils on a Saturday afternoon in September.

Carlie McGuire/BizWest

own Kilwinz. I luv their ice cream and chocolate.' She was so proud of this," McElwee said. "It was at that moment I knew I needed to make the leap to become an entrepreneur and create delicious products and priceless experiences for others to share with their own family and friends."

McElwee bought the local franchise rights and reopened Kilwins in its rightful place in Old Town this spring.

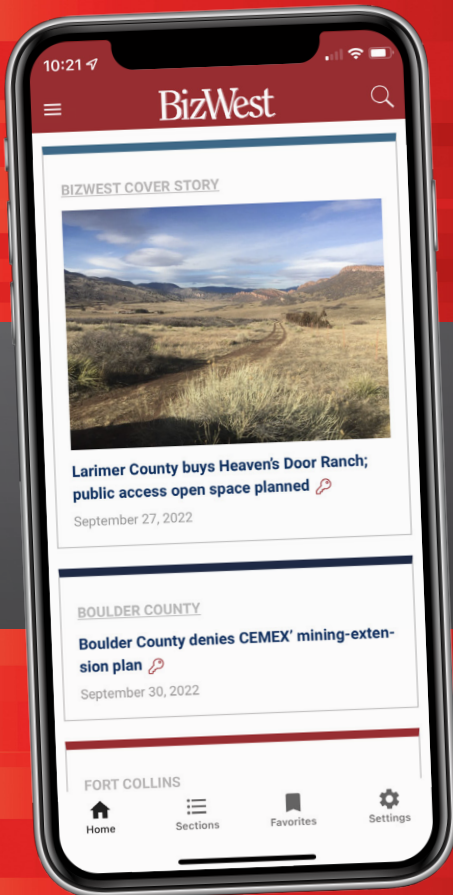
"It's the memories here: the smells, the excitement" that make it "an integral part of Fort Collins," she said. "People come here to have happy memories and experiences together, so we're excited to bring it back."

The revived ice cream shop now employs nearly 20 people, she said, a "mixture of high school and college students," including people from whom "it's their first job, maybe the first time they've mopped a floor," alongside "a Colorado State University softball player, someone who's studying to become a veterinarian, a criminology student."

In a college town with no shortage of raucous nightlife, Kilwins "is a place to come after you've won a little league soccer game, it is a place for grandparents to come and pick out their chocolates. It's for anybody and everybody, and it's very wholesome," McElwee said.

### Kilwins Fort Collins

114 S. College Ave.  
Fort Collins, CO 80524  
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