

By Molly Brush
Photography by Martin Boling

Spencer resident Denise Sudol remembers the moment she realized the town she loves needed help. Several years ago, as she was flipping through the pages of the *Spencer Evening World*, the local newspaper, Sudol saw a photograph of Spencer’s first responders on the downtown courthouse square. In the background stood the square’s commercial buildings—and they looked terrible. The structures were dilapidated, and many were vacant with broken and boarded-up windows.

The stark reality reflected in that image hit her hard.

“That was the thing that got me involved,” she says. “That’s the thing that lit the fire. I thought, ‘I don’t know if I’m sad or pissed off, but something needs to be done.’” →

Spencer, Indiana, 2017: A vibrant downtown seeing an economic renaissance thanks to an influx of retail shops, restaurants, and other small businesses.



Spencer Reimagined

A Small Indiana Town Strives for Vibrancy Again



Spencer, a town of about 2,300 that serves as the Owen County seat, was once an economically vibrant community and home to many thriving local businesses.

“Back in the day, this place was so busy and so hopping and so happening,” says Denise Sudol, a Spencer business owner. “You hear people say, ‘When I was a kid, you could come to the square and spend all day here because there was so much to do.’”

But like many small towns in Indiana and the U.S. as a whole, Spencer saw its fortunes change in the last decades of the 20th century. The population began to decrease, and those who remained often had to commute to other towns and cities for employment. When the Indiana Department of Transportation combined state roads 43, 46, and 67 into one thoroughfare cutting through the town, economic activity shifted from downtown to that high-traffic corridor where chain stores and fast-food restaurants sprouted.

Spencer’s economic decline continued into the first decade of the 21st century. But in 2012, something happened that would change its fortunes once again. That year, Bloomington-based Cook Group announced it would fund the restoration of the town’s historic Tivoli Theatre, which sits on Washington Street, one block northeast of the square.

Commissioned by renowned sculptor and Spencer native Ernest Moore Viquesney, the Tivoli first opened in 1928 to great acclaim. For decades, the theater was a popular attraction, drawing area residents to downtown Spencer for movies, live theater, and musical performances.

But two fires in the 1980s took their toll. Business, along with the condition of the theater, began to decline, and the Tivoli

closed in 1999. It remained shuttered for 13 years, until Cook Group began the restoration project. It was completed in 2013, and reopened that same year. Today the Tivoli shows first-run movies and classic films and also hosts live performances, much as it did during its heyday.

Not long after the theater started up again, the Owen Valley Winery opened a tasting room next door, giving moviegoers a place to enjoy a glass of wine before or after a show. Further, the Tivoli’s restoration sparked an economic renaissance that has seen the addition of numerous local businesses, including Jit’s Thai Bistro, All About You Salon and Spa, and Diamond K Sweets, a gourmet fudge shop.

“It’s just amazing what’s happened,” says Marilyn Jackson, tourism director of the Sweet Owen Convention and Visitors Bureau. “When my husband and I moved here in 1977, this downtown was full. But like a lot of small towns, it just went away. To see what’s coming back is wonderful.”

Among those who were motivated by the Tivoli’s success were Denise Sudol and her husband, Mike.

“The theater renovation was the catalyst for everything else that happened,” she says. “We decided to buy a building and do something.”

In 2012, the Sudols purchased a building on Main Street that once had been home to *The Agricultural Epitomist*, a farming publication popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At one point, the second and third floors of the building had been converted to apartments, which the couple remodeled and turned into lofts. They plan to open a sports bar on the first floor within the next couple of years.

The Sudols went on to buy seven more downtown buildings that they have renovated or plan to renovate. They opened The Dragonfly Gallery, a gift shop and art gallery, in one of those buildings in September 2015. The night before the grand opening, though, they found themselves in a tight spot. Construction had fallen behind schedule, and the shop was nowhere near ready to open. But just as they were starting to panic, an army

of volunteers arrived to pitch in, staying until 8 a.m. to assemble display cabinets, unbox and label merchandise, and clean the shop.

That sort of generosity is typical of the Spencer community, Sudol says.

“They’re so kind and so friendly, and they really welcome you here,” she says. “In Spencer, it’s all for one and one for all. I’ve seen it time and time again.”

One of Spencer’s most popular new places is Main Street Coffee, located in the Languel Building on the northwest corner of the square. Owners Josh and Brianne Hogan, both longtime Spencer residents, bought the building in 2013 and renovated it with the intention of starting a shop to sell the handcrafted items they make with their seven children.



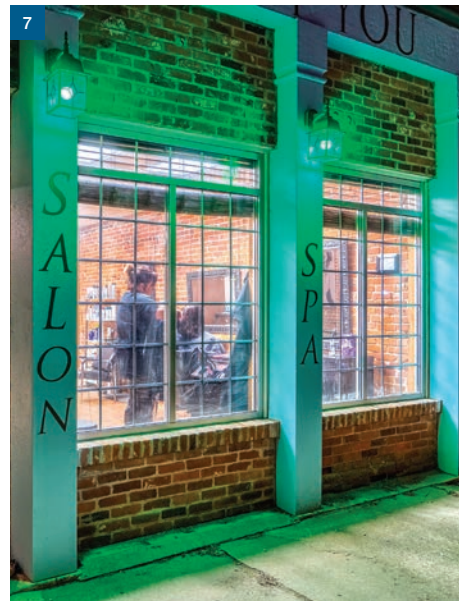
(above) The Tivoli Theatre first opened in 1928. Restored to its former glory by Cook Group in 2013, today it shows first-run movies and classic films, and also hosts live performances.

(opposite page):

1. Spencer town square during a town event in the early 20th century.
2. Denise Sudol, owner of the Dragonfly Gallery, which has been open in Spencer since 2015.
3. Marilyn Jackson, tourism director of the Sweet Owen Convention and Visitors Bureau.
4. Storefront of the Sweet Owen Convention and Visitors Bureau.
5. The Owen Valley Winery tasting room.
6. Diamond K Sweets, a gourmet fudge shop featuring Fudge O'Bits.
7. All About You Salon and Spa on Main Street.



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1. Main Street Coffee owners Josh and Brianne Hogan. 2. The two-story brick exterior of the Languel Building, home of Main Street Coffee. The nine-member Hogan family lives above the first-floor coffee shop. 3. The seven Hogan children: (front row, l-r) Ezra, Kalli, and Israel; (second row, l-r) Revival and Rhema; (back row, l-r) Junia and Jael. 4. The Spencer Pride community center on the south side of the courthouse square. Spencer is the smallest town in the United States with an LGBTQ+ center. 5. Jonathan Balash, co-founder and board president of Spencer Pride. 6. Unraveled Quilt Store owner Lisa Stantz. 7. The Unraveled Quilt Store opened in 2016 about a half mile from downtown Spencer on Fletcher Avenue with the help of a grant from the Owen Economic Development Center.



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When the Hogans opened the business in September 2014, they added a coffee cart to offer hot beverages to their customers. At first the shop was open only on Saturdays, but as word spread that there was a place downtown to get a good cup of coffee, people began asking them to open it on other days, too.

The business has grown, and the shop has evolved. Now Main Street Coffee is open Wednesday through Saturday, and not only sells the family's handicrafts and coffee, but also breakfast and lunch. The menu changes from day to day, although there are a few specialties that are offered regularly. Brianne says their customers enjoy trying new things and tell them they're glad to have a dining option that's not fast food.

"It's all homemade and made with love," she adds.

Running the business is a family affair for the Hogans, who live on the upper level of the Languel Building, directly above the coffee shop. Josh and Brianne work there full time, and their three oldest children—17-year-old Israel, 15-year-old Kalli, and 13-year-old Ezra—pitch in. So will 9-year-old twins Jael and Junia and 4-year-old twins Rhema and Revival when they are old enough. Not only do the kids get hands-on business experience, but they also get to know people in their community.

"They enjoy the interaction with people," Brianne says. "People come in just to see the kids. They have relationships with the customers."

Main Street Coffee has been so successful that the Hogans are planning to expand in 2017, increasing the seating capacity from 11 to 40. They say the support from the community has been "overwhelmingly humbling."

"A lot of people have watched us grow up from the beginning," Josh says. "I think a lot of people feel like they're a part of what we're doing, so we've really had people engaged."

The Hogans and the Sudols are members of Spencer Main Street, a community organization formed in 2015 to revitalize the downtown area. The group, along with town and county officials, local business owners, and area residents, worked with a team of consultants to create a master plan laying out a comprehensive vision for downtown Spencer.

In December 2016, Indiana's Office of Community and Rural Affairs awarded Spencer Main Street a \$500,000 grant from its Main Street Revitalization Program to implement some of the recommendations in the plan. With a matching contribution from the Town of Spencer, as well as additional funding from private donors, Spencer Main Street will invest \$1.1 million in improvements to downtown that include replacing sidewalks and curbs, installing decorative lighting, planting trees, and adding metal benches.

Though much of the revitalization effort has focused on downtown, Spencer's economic growth extends to other areas of the town as well. In April 2016, Lisa Stantz opened Unraveled Quilt Store on Fletcher Avenue, about a half mile northeast of downtown, with the help of a grant from the Owen County Economic Development Center.

Stantz sells fabric and other quilting and sewing supplies. She also teaches classes and hosts "open sew" events at the store. A lifelong Spencer resident, Stantz says she is delighted to fulfill her dream of starting a business that allows her to share her passion for textile arts with others in her community.

"I'm really grateful to have the opportunity to share this journey with people," she says.

But Spencer's progress goes beyond economic development. The Owen County Community Foundation, Owen County Soil and Water Conservation District, and Owen County Family YMCA are collaborating on a project that will create a multi-use path and trail system in and around Spencer. Called MYPath, it will connect McCormick's Creek State Park to the YMCA. The first phase was finished in 2016, and the project is scheduled for completion in 2020.

"Not only is it going to come through downtown, where people are going to see all the things that are happening, but it's also going to eventually [go out] to the state park," Jackson says. "We're going from the west side of town clear out to the east side of town on a path that somebody can walk on and see the White River."

The town is also home to Spencer Pride, a nonprofit organization that supports the town's LGBTQ+ community. Every year since 2007, the group has hosted the Spencer Pride Festival, an event that draws thousands of people to town.

Many of those visitors are surprised to find a thriving LGBTQ+ community in small-town Indiana. Jonathan Balash, co-founder and board president of Spencer Pride, relishes the opportunity to change

some people's perceptions about Spencer and introduce them to everything the town has to offer.

"People need to know we've got some phenomenal places in Spencer," he says. "I don't know anyone who's taken a chance on Spencer and regretted it."

In September 2016, Spencer Pride opened a community center in a 125-year-old building on the south side of the courthouse square, making Spencer the smallest community in the country with an LGBTQ+ center. The center features a volunteer-run shop that sells handcrafted items made by local artists and craftspeople, allowing people to support Spencer Pride while shopping locally. The shop also serves as a way for the organization to engage with the broader community and educate people about the rural LGBTQ+ community.

Spencer Pride plans to expand the center in 2017, tripling its size with the addition of space for meetings and educational events.

"We want to make it obvious and visible that this is an inclusive place where people can find support," Balash says.

Spencer's residents and business owners know there is still much work to be done to fulfill the vision of a fully revitalized community. But they are buoyed by the progress the town has made in recent years, and they're confident they're on the right path.

"It's not what it used to be, and it's not what it's going to be," says Main Street Coffee's Brianne Hogan. "But it's starting, and the people that are involved have such a passion to see life down here again." ✧

