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Studers' downtown business challenge draws 40 entrants

Neil Johnson Jun 24, 2016



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JANESVILLE—Janesville resident Andrew Osmond has been hand-making ice cream out of his house for years, mostly for friends and family members.

For years, it's been enough for Osmond to please friends who eat his offbeat flavors—ice cream he makes from fresh-grown strawberries, sweet corn and mixed with odd combinations of mostly local ingredients in a humble Cuisinart ice-cream maker.

Suddenly, Osmond finds himself competing against three dozen local entrepreneurs who are vying this summer to win retail space and thousands of dollars in startup capital in a contest that's part of a private revitalization project in downtown Janesville.

Osmond is one of 40 entrepreneurs in the Block 42 Business Challenge, a contest that former health care industry consultant Quint Studer and his wife, Rishy Studer, launched in late May to help redevelop a mini-block of circa-1851 commercial properties the couple bought late last year on North Main Street.

The Studers are deep into an aggressive, multi-million dollar renovation that their daughter, Janesville resident Bekki Kennedy, says will rejuvenate the storefronts inside and out and blend some of the oldest original commercial architecture in the city with and sleek, new treatments.

The space the Studers plan to open to the winner of the business challenge is intended to gel with the overall theme of three other specialty shops the Studers are planning to open in Block 42 by late August.

The Studers conceived the business challenge as a set of incentives to draw out entrepreneurs with ideas that would fit the flavor of their redevelopment, Kennedy said.

She is the contest's lead organizer.

The business challenge is organized as part contest and part educational business development seminar. It's a partnership between the Studers, UW-Whitewater business and economics faculty and local business folks.

The challenge offers to one winner a \$40,000 payout that would cover a blend of startup capital and free and sharply reduced rents for three years in the 1,100-square-foot retail space at 117 N. Main St.

That payout would be a considerable leg up for any fledgling entrepreneur because it can be difficult for small businesses to get financing to cover startup and the first few years of rent.

It might explain why 40 people have entered the contest.

“We hoped we could get interest of more than a handful of people interested in bringing their business plans or dreams to the table. But this? Forty people? It's really blown us away,” Studer said.

The Studers ran a similar contest a few years ago in Pensacola, Florida, where the couple live.

In an interview last year, Quint Studer said the Florida contest drew enough contestants with solid ideas and business plans that five of the finalists eventually opened shops in downtown Pensacola, even though they did not win the contest.

Kennedy says she's seeing the same thing happening in the Janesville challenge.

“Now you've got a group of 40 people who are suddenly thinking about what the new face of commerce and business in downtown Janesville could look like. They're thinking about how it could work and whether they'd fit in.

“Think about it this way: That's 40 potential businesses, but more than that, it's people and their ideas and dreams. You have to have that before you have anything. And I'll bet a chunk of these business challenge competitors would not have thought about downtown at all without a contest like this.”

Until a panel of contest judges gets business plans from the contestants and whittles the pool of 40 to six to eight finalists, none of the contestants necessarily know a thing about their competitors' business plans.

The winner would get the option of applying an award of \$25,000 to pay for range of startup costs, including a custom build-out of their shop space.

Kennedy said the contestants have business plans that range from small-plate restaurants to niche or boutique retail shops.

In the Block 42 spaces to the north of the business challenge space, the Studers plan a coffee, wine and cheese shop; a specialty grocery store featuring artisan breads and olive oils; and a chop salad restaurant. That would be similar to a string of successful retail shops that Rishy Studer has developed in downtown Pensacola.

The business challenge space until a few months ago housed Main Street Saloon, but Kennedy said the tavern owners opted to move out as the Studers' plans for the rest of the mini-block took shape.

The business challenge space would be ready for the contest winner to move in late this year, Kennedy estimates.

Osmond agreed to break confidentiality to talk to The Gazette about his entry in the business challenge.

Osmond, who is a parole officer in Beloit, has no business background but has often thought about applying his talents full time, producing and selling all-natural ice cream flavors.

Osmond said his boss at work, who eats a share of the Osmond ice cream, has encouraged him to pursue the dream of opening a niche ice cream shop.

Osmond said he's seen how commercial revitalization projects have transformed parts of downtown Beloit, and he was excited to see a similar effort starting in downtown Janesville.

"I felt like I was at that cliff. I think I know what I'm good at, and I think I know what I'm meant to do. But, you know, do I jump?" Osmond said.

Osmond said if he doesn't win the challenge, he's walking away with weeks of learning from local business leaders and university economics experts who have helped shape an idea of how he might transform his love for ice cream into an enterprise.

"I've had friends of friends find out about what I do. I get more and more calls and messages for my ice cream. I know it's good. Now, this contest. It's got me feeling more confident, more rooted," he said.

"This is a big jump for me, maybe. But maybe it's not such a big jump. Either way, I want to make the leap."