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CHAMBER OF THE YEAR
2018

DES MOINES DOWNTOWN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE 10 YEARS

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An aerial night photograph of a city skyline. In the foreground, a large, well-lit park area features a winding path, benches, and young trees. A road with several cars is visible between the park and the buildings. The background is filled with various skyscrapers, some of which are brightly lit, against a dark blue twilight sky. The overall scene depicts a modern urban environment with a focus on public space.

“We were pleasantly surprised and felt we were heading in the right direction, we were doing something that people believed in and saw value in.”

Anne Moeller, the first president of the Downtown Chamber

Defining Downtown: Every good story has a beginning

On an unusually warm and cloudy September morning, nearly 100 businesses and community representatives gathered in the Cub Club at Principal Park in downtown Des Moines. The date was Tuesday, Sept. 23, 2008, and those who attended the public meeting were waiting to hear about the Des Moines Downtown Chamber of Commerce, the newest addition to the Greater Des Moines Partnership chamber network that extended throughout the metro area.

The meeting was the culmination of months of discussions, planning and work among various community leaders. This was a chance to celebrate the official coming-out party. A time when the fruits of many people's labors could be realized.

The expectation for the event was modest, so when those who turned out nearly packed the club, the excitement was palpable.

"We were thrilled, to put it mildly," said Susan Hatten, who currently works at Holmes Murphy and was on the original Downtown Chamber executive committee as the secretary. "We thought we may have just a handful of folks to support what we were announcing. Not only did we have media show up, but we had organizations come and early on stepped up as members."

Anne Moeller, the first president of the Downtown Chamber, spoke in front of the crowd. It felt like validation. Like all of the work had paid off, but there was much to

do before the chamber could grow into what it is today — a national award-winning organization with distinctive programs and leadership.

But every good story has to start somewhere.

"We were pleasantly surprised and felt we were heading in the right direction," Moeller said. "We were doing something that people believed in and saw value in."

UNDERSERVED, BUT NOT UNAPPRECIATED

The creation of the Downtown Chamber finds its roots in the late 19th century. There was increasing momentum among the business community in the city, and leaders were looking for a way to capitalize.

In 1888, that search led to the first chamber in Des Moines. It was called the Commercial Exchange and served as an association for businesses to promote Des Moines and its dealings. Over the years, that initial organization changed and morphed with the times. Today, the Commercial Exchange is cited as the beginning of the Greater Des Moines Partnership, which oversees 23 affiliate chambers of commerce throughout the Greater Des Moines region.

But the Partnership's purpose and model has changed, too, ever since it officially became an organization in 1999, when the Des Moines Development Corp., Choose Des Moines Communities and the Chamber Federation merged.

From 1999 until about 2007, the Partnership, as it does today, served as a regional community developmental

organization. But the model needed some adjustment. There was a network of affiliate chambers throughout the metro, but the Partnership was almost competing with its network, soliciting members and holding meetings and programs in direct competition with the local chambers.

“We wanted to be supportive of this larger group and entity,” said Mary Bontrager, then the executive vice president of community development for the Partnership. “We started conversations about how we could get out of the chamber of commerce business.”

The Partnership sought ways to create a dual-membership model — a unique idea, even today — allowing businesses to be a member of their local chamber and the Partnership through one membership. As leadership sifted through research and numbers to calculate how many members could revert back to their local chambers, they found a few holes in the system, particularly in downtown and on the west side of Des Moines.

Many of the businesses in those areas were already members of the Partnership and turned to that organization as their local chamber. But as the Partnership slowly moved out of the chamber business — instead serving as an oversight and regional organization — small businesses, like the many restaurants, boutiques and small firms that dotted downtown Des Moines, didn’t necessarily have a home.

It also created a problem at the Partnership’s monthly meetings with all of

its affiliate chambers, where downtown and the west side had no representation.

In response, discussions began in the middle of 2007 among the Partnership and community leaders to create a home base for those businesses that fell through the proverbial cracks.

“There was nothing for downtown, and downtown was becoming a community unto itself,” said Suku Radia, former CEO of Bankers Trust and one of the leaders involved in the creation of the Downtown Chamber. “We wanted to make sure it wasn’t overshadowed by the Partnership, so we wanted something truly defined for downtown.”

The search started for leadership to help guide this new organization and work to get it off the ground. Radia recommended Moeller to become one of the leaders of this new chamber — “I immediately told her we were going to support you in this role,” Radia said.

The search also found Tiffany Tauscheck, then with the Greater Des Moines Convention and Visitors Bureau. Tauscheck and Moeller recruited Hatten with Innova Ideas and Services. Mark Barkley of Robert Half Management Resources was recruited into the fold as well, rounding out the initial Executive Committee of the Downtown Chamber, according to a Des Moines Business Record article from 2008.

The new leadership started working hand in hand during the summer of 2007, meeting almost every day to create bylaws and goals to smooth over the beginnings of the Downtown Chamber.

The group researched and discussed with other chambers in the area to learn their methodologies.

“It was moving so fast,” Tauscheck said. “We were meeting and talking on a daily basis. We worked through setting up the model, our finances, just outlining a plan.”

In early 2008, the talks became more serious and moved quickly. From March until June, the Downtown Chamber leadership and the Partnership ironed out the chamber’s mission, goals, vision and budget. On July 1, 2008, the organization filed its paperwork and officially began. By that September announcement at the Cub Club, the board and volunteer leadership were on board. Member recruitment had already started, with the goal of reaching 100 members by the end of the first year.

Full operations of the Downtown Chamber began at the start of 2009, but the staff was already hard at work on crafting a message and boosting recruitment. Even through the recession of 2008, Des Moines’ downtown was steadily growing. It was up to the Downtown Chamber to connect new businesses with old and serve as a liaison for the community.

“As we saw the downtown area grow, we wanted to make sure we could support the various types of businesses and give them a resource to network and have a sense of community,” Moeller said. “That was our goal, to provide something that every business could get value from.”

CREATING SOMETHING

Growth didn't happen overnight for the Downtown Chamber.

After the Partnership converted to the dual-membership model officially in 2008, the Downtown Chamber was in charge of its own recruitment. Sure, it could sell the Partnership membership as a part of the package, but it was going to take some more convincing.

The Downtown Chamber worked to separate itself from the Partnership, providing programs that hit a niche in the community. The organization reached out to business leaders across downtown and held typical chamber events: ribbon-cuttings, workshops and more. But growth still came slow and steady.

"It took a good year for the transition [from the Partnership to the Downtown Chamber] to happen," Bontrager said. "It wasn't as if 100 downtown businesses sent a check and joined the Downtown Chamber in one day. It took some time and a lot of hard work on the part of these young leaders to reach out to those businesses."

As steady growth came, the Downtown Chamber board was still in charge of all of the work. Tauscheck became the second president of the organization in 2010, as Moeller moved on as a past president, where she still played an integral role.

But the work started to become too much for the board members, who were all leading successful careers of their own. In February 2010, the Downtown Chamber hired its first professional staffer, Brian Waller, as a part-time executive director.



"We were at the point where we had to appoint somebody who could allow the organization to truly grow," Tauscheck said. "We needed someone who would wake up every morning and the Downtown Chamber was what they were thinking about."

Waller, a Sioux City native, moved back to Iowa after leaving for Colorado to attend college. He started working in Des Moines with the Science Center of Iowa in 2003. When Waller saw all of the development happening downtown at the time, he wanted to be involved. He was an active member on the Court Avenue Business Association and the Downtown Community Alliance, an unrelated downtown organization that works closely with the Downtown Chamber.

In 2009, he received a call from Tauscheck.

"We needed someone who would wake up every morning and the Downtown Chamber was what they were thinking about."

Tiffany Tauscheck,
member of the first
executive committee



“She told me she couldn’t think of a better person for the job,” Waller said. “But they were only going to pay me for 10 hours a week.”

Waller was passionate about downtown, and he accepted the position in 2010. He eventually quit his job at the Science Center to focus 30-40 hours per week on the Downtown Chamber, even though he wasn’t a full-time employee.

His goal was to make the Downtown Chamber unique. He remembers confusion in the community about what exactly the organization was.

“I had to introduce what the heck the Downtown Chamber was,” Waller said. “There was confusion as to what the Partnership was and why this new chamber was created.”

Waller realized early on that he needed to implement something different to convince doubters. He wanted to create a signature event to differentiate the organization. That’s when he came up with the Journey, a program that gives CEOs a platform to tell stories, advice and more.

In the first year of the Journey, Waller persuaded Michael Gartner, owner of the Iowa Cubs, to interview CEOs in the community for one hour. The first year was a hit, with five CEOs participating, including Radia and then-Drake University President David Maxwell.

“That really legitimized us,” Waller said. “We had buy-in from those leaders that gave us the legitimacy of standing in front and leading our programming. People took notice.”

“There was nothing for downtown, and downtown was becoming a community unto itself.”

Suku Radia, former CEO of Bankers Trust and a pivotal leader in the creation of the Downtown Chamber.

Waller left the Downtown Chamber in late 2011, but he left the organization in a strong place. He was integral in building a foundation that fueled the success for the next executive director and future leaders.

“To think this organization didn’t even have a laptop, let alone a staff member,” Waller said. “To be that guy that went out and bought the first laptop for the organization. When I left it, I felt very proud and happy to be a little piece of that story to get it off the ground.”

TAKING OFF

Jennifer Chittenden was top of mind for more than one person.

At a time when Chittenden contemplated moving from her job at Tero International in 2011, she started asking around her professional network about new career opportunities. She served on the public relations committee for Central Iowa Shelter & Services, where Tony Timm, the president of the Downtown Chamber board at the time, was director.

She asked him to keep an eye out for new career opportunities. Chittenden did the same with Christina Moffatt, a former president of the Downtown Chamber. When the executive director job opened up, both Timm and Moffatt reached out to Chittenden — almost concurrently.

Chittenden applied, interviewed and was offered the job the next day, in September 2011.

“I always tell people that it feels like the natural fit to me,” Chittenden said. “It was a natural fit for my skills, my interests, and I come in excited to be at work and excited

to create something new.”

Chittenden credits Waller for building up a membership base in his year and a half as executive director. She had a foundation of about 100 members, but most everything else was a clean slate — “There were no anchors in the sand,” she said.

Chittenden immediately looked at ways to diversify revenue. Coming from a professional development background, she was drawn to programming. While the Downtown Chamber continued to grow in 2014, Chittenden and the board started to lay the groundwork for a large transition.

In years previously, the Downtown Chamber’s budget hadn’t cracked \$100,000, but it was time for a change. The board discussed ways to receive community feedback and created an outreach committee. The committee’s job was to reach out to members and learn about their wants and needs. The committee members asked questions about members’ businesses and what kept them awake at night.

“From that, we discovered so much,” Chittenden said.

During planning for the 2015 fiscal year, Chittenden brought the results of those discussions to the board, along with a budget that had increased by almost \$50,000. She asked the board to take a risk and implement new programming. The board agreed, and new programs began, including the award-winning Leadership Education and Advancement Pipeline (LEAP)[®] and Downtown Development Insights Group (DIG) programs.

Chittenden cites 2015 as the biggest transition in the organization’s history. And it took some trust on the board’s part to make it work.

“I will always commend the board for taking that risk with me,” Chittenden said. “Because if we had not, we would still be struggling in some areas. That was a big risk to say let’s do this wild, crazy, massive increase to the budget and make this programming happen.”

Three years later, the risk paid off on a national scale.

After finishing in second place for the honor in 2017, the Downtown Chamber was named the Chamber of the Year by the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE) in 2018. To make it even sweeter, the award was won at the organization’s annual conference in Des Moines — on the Downtown Chamber’s home turf at the Iowa Events Center.

In the 10 years since the Downtown Chamber started, the organization has been recognized as one of the most innovative chambers locally and nationally, with no signs of slowing down in the future.

“This is an organization that has been around for just 10 years, then rises to the ranks of winning this prestigious, national honor,” Bontrager said. “What they have done — not only in the growth of their membership but in their programming, which is on the cutting edge of chamber work — is nothing short of monumental.” ■

Growing grounds: Young professionals take advantage of what Downtown Chamber offers

One of the original drivers behind the creation of the Downtown Chamber was giving young professionals in Des Moines a chance to grow and learn valuable community and leadership skills.

Before the Downtown Chamber started in 2008, when the message for the organization was still being crafted, Suku Radia, then the CEO of Bankers Trust, was a key figure in the discussions. He sensed there was a unique enthusiasm among businesses downtown, but they weren't being served like businesses in other parts of the metro area, like Ankeny, West Des Moines or Urbandale. Radia wanted downtown to have its own identity — to capitalize on the area's continuous growth.

But he also had another purpose. He knew a Downtown Chamber would give young professionals at large and small businesses a chance to have their voices heard.

"This was going to give some development opportunities to the employees of the companies that were going to be involved in the creation of a chamber," Radia said. "If you are a young professional with some degree of ambition and don't think you can break into the circle of CEOs who are tied to big

corporations, there is this opportunity for you at the Downtown Chamber."

That opportunity was certainly evident at the beginning of the Downtown Chamber, which was headed by young professionals like Anne Moeller, who was the first president of the organization, Tiffany Tauscheck, a rising young professional then with the Des Moines Conventions and Visitor's Bureau, and more.

"I think that just happened by default because Suku reached out to Anne Moeller and me and helped nudge us along the way," Tauscheck said. "It was a great opportunity as a young professional, to grow and really make a difference in your community. Certainly Anne and me went out and recruited other young professionals to the board, like Susan Hatten and Marc Hollander, but it wasn't our sole focus or goal.

"There were just a lot of young professionals who were eager to get involved and help carve a path."

Whether it was intentional or not, the Downtown Chamber still serves as a growing ground of sorts for young professionals in the Des Moines community. Joe Benesh, who served as the president of the Downtown Chamber in 2014, remembers joining the organization for that reason in particular.

When he came back to Iowa — he's a native of Newton — in 2011 from Miami, Benesh saw the Downtown Chamber as a group of young, driven individuals.

“They were in my age range and had similar interests,” said Benesh, who was 36 at the time. “I think [the board is young] because there aren’t any barriers of entry. If you call any of the board members or Jennifer [Chittenden], they will find a spot for you. And if you put the work in and are serious about it, you can move into a higher position.”

Chittenden became the executive director of the Downtown Chamber in 2011 and had heard about the tradition of young professionals. She didn’t want to alter that, especially when she heard who the idea came from.

“When I started, I heard Suku [Radia] wanted to start the organization with a lot of young professionals, and I wanted to preserve that idea,” Chittenden said. “Suku is a smart guy, and if that was his intent, we had to make sure we had to keep that.”

Having a young board can also bring some challenges. For one, young professionals don’t have a lot of experience to draw upon. That caused some struggles early in Chittenden’s tenure. To mitigate those issues, Chittenden brought advisers onto the board with more experience serving on upper-level boards.

“We asked them to be silent members and ask questions when needed,” Chittenden said. “Then we started adding more experienced board members who helped us navigate those issues.”

Today, Chittenden said most of the board members are younger than 45.



She credits the Downtown Chamber’s reputation as a cutting-edge and innovative organization to the fact that it is made up of young professionals.

Plus, it doesn’t hurt to have a laugh here and there.

“It lends to a lot of the innovative culture and attitude that makes us a little more fun,” Chittenden said. “We’re not your grandpa’s chamber.” ■

“When I started, I heard Suku [Radia] wanted to start the organization with a lot of young professionals, and I wanted to preserve that idea.”

Jennifer Chittenden,
executive director of the
Downtown Chamber



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“We’ve got that natural contingent of businesses located downtown, but at the same time, there are business who join because they have clients here or want to support a healthy core for the city.”

Jennifer Chittenden, executive director of the Downtown Chamber

Membership increases fourfold: Businesses mirror urban interests

Because of the wide array of businesses in its service area, the Downtown Chamber's membership list consists of companies and organizations in many industries and of different sizes — large and small, nonprofits and boutiques, and many more.

The Downtown Chamber boasts nearly 400 members, and not all of them are downtown. Some of the businesses have employees or customers engaged in the area, or they may be invested in a lively downtown business community.

“We are really in a unique location, and that has been a benefit,” said Jennifer Chittenden, executive director of the Downtown Chamber. “We’ve got that natural contingent of businesses located downtown, but at the same time, there are business who join because they have clients here or want to support a healthy core for the city.”

When Brian Waller, the first executive director of the Downtown Chamber, started in 2010, there was a lot of confusion as to what value the organization could provide members. They were writing checks to the Des Moines Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Greater Des Moines Partnership and more. Why should they invest in the Downtown Chamber as well?

But as he explained the Partnership's newly implemented dual-membership model, the picture became clearer. And dual membership was actually a huge help in his recruiting efforts.

“Articulating to members was difficult,” Waller said. “Once they understood the

dynamic, they saw they could become a member at a low level and still get all of the resources of both the chamber and the Partnership. The bulk of our value was the Partnership membership.”

Waller's work in his year and a half at the Downtown Chamber gave Chittenden a base of about 100 members to work with when she joined the organization in 2011. At that point, the transition from the Partnership to the Downtown Chamber was complete. There was a foundation, but Chittenden was striving for more growth.

To increase membership, Chittenden and the leadership needed to identify some key values and differentiators for the Downtown Chamber. The organization was still trying to separate itself from the Partnership in many aspects.

“Being a relatively new chamber, it's like a startup company,” Chittenden said. “We were still trying to figure out who our clients were and why they should join us.”

Since having those discussions, the Downtown Chamber has tried to serve its unique audience. The organization's programs run the gamut, targeting specific niches in the community as well as the broader audience.

“I think the chamber has found its own success and path that makes sense for their audience,” said Tiffany Tauscheck, one of the original members of the Downtown Chamber.

The wide variety of members has also caused some tricky situations for the Downtown Chamber in the past.

When the downtown Hy-Vee building was in its planning stages in 2015,

businesses and leaders in the community were thrown into controversy. There were disagreements about whether the Hy-Vee location would be a benefit for the community. Nearby businesses worried that the new store would hamper customer traffic. The new development would also take away public parking spots, leaving some to fret about increased congestion downtown.

Because the Downtown Chamber represents all of the downtown businesses, the organization had internal conversations about how to handle the controversy.

“That was a very difficult conversation for us to have,” said Joe Benesh, a past president of the Downtown Chamber. “We, on one hand, are all for economic development, and on the other hand, we have a group of folks who were chamber members who had an opposing viewpoint.”

That year, the Downtown Development Insights Group (Downtown DIG) program, which provides developers and the community with an open forum to discuss new construction projects, was in its first year. On June 30, 2015, the Downtown Chamber hosted Hy-Vee for one of its Downtown DIG events. Hy-Vee representatives laid out its plans and walked attendees through the development and what the store would become when it opened.

“We did everything we could to make sure this information was available,” Benesh said.

While it didn’t ease everyone’s concerns, the program did provide a platform for both sides to discuss. About



two years later, the Hy-Vee construction was complete. The Downtown Chamber didn’t take an official stance on the development, but rather used the opportunity to facilitate a civil discussion — an important benefit for all of the organization’s members.

“In a lot of ways, it’s the chamber’s job to make sure we have open doors for any kind of business that could benefit from our services,” Benesh said. “We are invested in setting our members up to be successful, no matter how they feel about a situation.” ■

“That was a very difficult conversation for us to have. We, on one hand, are all for economic development, and on the other hand, we have a group of folks who were chamber members who had an opposing viewpoint.”

Joe Benesh, a past president of the Downtown Chamber

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Highlights: From new idea to national award-winning organization

The first chamber is developed in Des Moines, the Commercial Exchange, which eventually becomes the Greater Des Moines Partnership.

The Downtown Partnership changes its name to Downtown Community Alliance, becoming an events organization for downtown Des Moines.

The Greater Des Moines Partnership develops new Affiliate Chamber/Regional Member model, creating two additional chambers of commerce: the Des Moines Downtown Chamber and the Des Moines West Side Chamber.

The Des Moines Downtown Chamber hosts its inaugural event, an informational meeting at the Cub Club at Principal Park, in front of about 100 attendees and media members. Anne Moeller of Bankers Trust is named the first president of the board of directors.

1888

1999

2000

2003

2008

July 2008

Sept. 2008

The Des Moines Development Corp., Choose Des Moines Communities and the Chamber Federation merge to form the Greater Des Moines Partnership.

The Downtown Community Alliance — not affiliated with the Des Moines Downtown Chamber but a close partner — is brought into the Greater Des Moines Partnership fold.

The Des Moines Downtown Chamber officially starts.



Brian Waller, now the president of the Technology Association of Iowa, hired as the first executive director.

The Downtown DIG and Leadership Education and Advancement Pipeline (LEAP)[®] programs begin. The two programs have helped bring nationwide recognition.

Tabbed as the Chamber of the Year by the ACCE during the organization's annual convention, which was held in Des Moines.

2009

2010

2011

2015

2017

2018

2019

Full-scale operations begin.

Jennifer Chittenden hired as the second executive director, a position she still holds.

Named the runner-up Chamber of the Year by the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives.

Moves into its first solo office space in Gravitare.

**“They aren’t
afraid of
taking risks
and hitting
home runs
with them.”**

Christina Moffatt, a past president of the
Downtown Chamber



A connected community: Innovative chamber programming brings businesses together

Earning a glowing reputation locally and nationally has been years in the making for the Des Moines Downtown Chamber. But what has earned the most respect and recognition is its unique and innovative approach to programming.

A quick look at the Downtown Chamber's list of 17 current programs shows that many of them are different from what chambers around the nation are offering. While the main purpose for these programs has been to connect businesses and the larger community, they have spun into many different industries and niches. Over the past few years, adding quality programs was a major goal for the Downtown Chamber, and it's clear that work has paid dividends.

"I've just been so impressed with the events they hold," said Christina Moffatt, a past president of the Downtown Chamber who was integral in hiring the current executive director, Jennifer Chittenden. "They do think outside of the box. They are all amazing events and they just continue to grow, and that just shows what tremendous leadership the Downtown Chamber has. They aren't afraid of taking risks and hitting home runs with them."

The Downtown Chamber holds popular events like the Economic Bike Tour, where attendees gather, bike through downtown Des Moines and visit a variety of businesses and buildings. Another popular event is the Journey, which gives CEOs the opportunity to tell their stories and advice in a question-and-answer forum. And there

are many more events that have gained notice around the city.

"One of the comments we hear from members is they want to go to every event, but they can't," Chittenden said. "We feel our programs offer something unique that you really can't get anywhere else. It helps that we're in a setting where we have the opportunity to start and hold these programs."

Two of the most recognizable Downtown Chamber events are the Downtown Development Insights Group (Downtown DIG) and the Leadership, Education and Advancement Pipeline (LEAP)®. It was these two programs that the Downtown Chamber touted during the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE) Chamber of the Year process — the chamber eventually won the award in 2018.

They have truly become defining pillars for the chamber.

A GROWING NEED

The idea behind the beginning of the Downtown DIG program came via feedback. In 2014, Des Moines saw growth on almost every street corner. Construction crews, cranes and equipment dotted the city.

That same year, the Downtown Chamber circulated through the city, asking members what their needs, wants and questions were. Leadership noticed a common question in return: What's with all of this development? Members, especially small businesses and residents, knew Des Moines was growing, but they had questions for developers and didn't

have a platform or avenue to discuss their concerns.

“Downtown DIG was our response to something that was percolating as Des Moines was growing,” Chittenden said. “There was, and still is, so much going on downtown, and we wanted to make sure our members were informed and that they could connect with these projects.”

The first testing ground for the Downtown DIG program was a new art incubator project with the goal of giving local artists a place to work and share their work. Local business leader Justin Mandelbaum was the brains behind the project, and in January 2015 he was invited to speak in front an audience of Downtown Chamber members and the general public. Mandelbaum explained what his project meant and how development would look. He also took questions from those in attendance.

The event was a success. And the art incubator discussed that day eventually became Mainframe Studios, which is located on Keosauqua Way.

The next event would be an even bigger test for the Downtown DIG program: the new Krause Gateway Center, which was slated to be built across the street from the John and Marry Pappajohn Sculpture Park. Before Kum & Go broke ground, the Downtown Chamber arranged a meeting between the community and the company’s leadership.

There were some concerns about the planned construction, especially for those in the historic Sherman Hill neighborhood, where residents would have a clear view of the building’s backside. On Feb. 19, 2015, Kum and Go’s Senior Vice President of Store Development Nikki DePhillips spoke in front of a packed house at the Hyatt Place Downtown.

It was another resounding success for the program and the Downtown Chamber.

“I knew there were some concerns from the Sherman Hills neighborhood, but Nikki was able to put their concerns at ease,” Chittenden said. “But knowing they had an access point helped, and we were able to generate some buy-in from the community.”

The Downtown DIG program continued to gain momentum as it tackled other key developmental projects in downtown Des Moines: the downtown Hy-Vee, Cityville on 9th, the Des Moines Public Library and more. More recently, the program has helped facilitate conversations about the new skate park near the Des Moines Riverwalk, the Confluence Apartments and other major developments.

In 2018, success was realized — officially, anyway — when Downtown DIG was named the Event of the Year by the Mid-America Chamber Executives.

“It just invites a different group of people to come and experience what we’ve developed,” said Rick Tollakson, CEO of Hubbell Realty Co., which is one the biggest developers in Central Iowa. “We take advantage of it as well. And it’s not just Hubbell, there’s a lot of different

types of developers that take advantage of these programs as well. It introduces the entire business community into what we’re doing.”

CATCHING UP

It wasn’t a secret that Iowa struggles when it comes to women-owned businesses. In 2012, the State of Women-Owned Business Report cited Iowa as the worst of the 50 states in regard to growth of women-owned businesses since 1997. Iowa saw growth of 20.6 percent, compared with a national growth rate of more than 50 percent.

By 2014, there were positive indications the state was moving in the right direction, but discussions continued about how to foster a better culture for female business leaders. At about that time, the Downtown Chamber was re-evaluating its revenue streams and looking for places to grow, particularly in programming.

“We kept hearing people talk about how Iowa was pretty far behind in having women-owned businesses,” said Lorin Ditzler, current president of the Downtown Chamber board of directors. At the time, Ditzler was on the outreach committee tasked with reaching out to members to understand their needs.

“We felt we needed to do something about that issue. We discussed starting a program related to women-owned businesses and taking the next step in their careers. It was trying to address the day-to-day realities of people’s work and tech them skills to help them in the long run.”

The plans were put in motion to start a program geared toward teaching women hard and soft business skills, with the idea to connect female business leaders with resources and opportunities. After a year of speakers from different industries, the Downtown Chamber received feedback and suggested alterations to the program. A common complaint was the lack of professional skill development. So in 2016, the Downtown Chamber developed an updated LEAP series, which was more in line with what the program has become today.

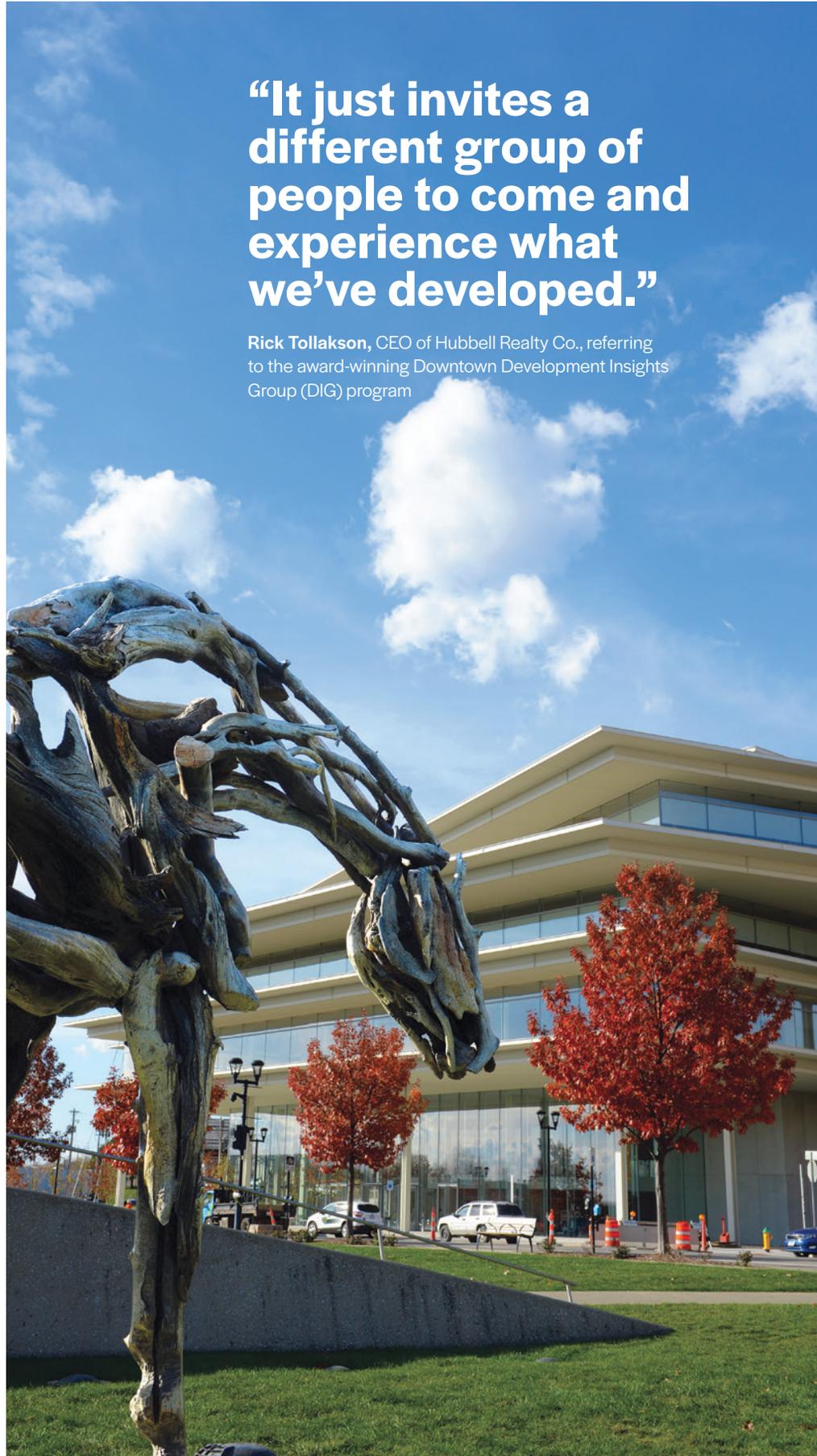
“We try to be flexible when members are asking for something different,” Chittenden said. “Was this something we could implement? We changed it and the program took off by leaps and bounds.”

Later in 2016, LEAP won the Mid-America Chamber Executives Event of the Year award. The program was also integral in the Downtown Chamber’s bids for ACCE’s Chamber of the Year award in 2017 and 2018.

“I think the LEAP series is really cutting-edge,” said Jay Byers, CEO at the Greater Des Moines Partnership. “It has done a great job of promoting women in our downtown community, and that’s great. It really speaks to just how hard the volunteers and the staff work at the Downtown Chamber to really make it special.” ■

“It just invites a different group of people to come and experience what we’ve developed.”

Rick Tollakson, CEO of Hubbell Realty Co., referring to the award-winning Downtown Development Insights Group (DIG) program



Second chances: You can't keep a good chamber down — especially twice

In July 2017, Jennifer Chittenden left Nashville, Tennessee, defeated.

At the end of the 2017 Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE) annual convention, the leader of the Des Moines Downtown Chamber of Commerce knew just how close she was to winning the ACCE's Chamber of the Year award. All of the progress the Downtown Chamber made in the previous few years left the organization with a still-impressive second place finish but without a trophy to take home.

The monthslong process to apply and prepare for the awards process was exhaustive. The Downtown Chamber leadership put hours of work into the application during a three-month stretch. For Chittenden, the executive director of the Downtown Chamber, the idea of going through that process again just a year later was hard to comprehend.

"I was hesitant to do it again at first," Chittenden said. "It was just so intense. I wanted to wait a year, make something fantastic and win in 2019."

Jay Byers, CEO at the Greater Des Moines Partnership, had other plans in mind.

The 2018 ACCE conference was coming to Des Moines, a wonderful undertaking for the Partnership and the community. Byers wanted Chittenden and her team to try again. To win on their home turf would make it extra special, he said.

"I think they were pretty disappointed they didn't win," Byers said. "But I told them, 'How amazing would it be if you were selected in downtown Des Moines — your

hometown?' It was a great opportunity for them to evaluate their application and make another run.

"That's exactly what they did."

A GOAL WORTH WORKING TOWARD

The idea first came to Chittenden when she attended the Institute for Organization Management, essentially a chamber college hosted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. In 2015, Chittenden sat in one of her lessons and listened to the day's speaker, who touted his organization's Chamber of the Year award.

A light flashed in her head.

"I was sitting there thinking, 'There's a Chamber of the Year award? How cool is that?'" Chittenden said. "I knew we were doing something different and we had to apply for this award."

But when she researched the application, it was extremely comprehensive. The criteria had minimums regarding membership base, funding and more that the Downtown Chamber hadn't reached yet. The Downtown Chamber wasn't ready to apply in 2015, but with the influx of programs — particularly the Downtown Development Insights Group (Downtown DIG) and the Leadership, Education and Advancement Pipeline (LEAP)[®] — and a larger budget, the award was certainly possible down the road.

Just a couple of years later in 2017, the Downtown Chamber, which had seen a sharp increase in membership, budgeting



and programming, felt ready to apply. The leadership worked intensely to create the perfect application. The marketing committee boasted copywriters and designers to beautify the piece. Three months after beginning the creation process, the application was finished, complete with videos, testimonials and all of the proper numbers and measures.

Chittenden had a planned vacation, so she sent the package a week early and waited. A few weeks later, the Downtown Chamber was announced as one of three finalists. The next step was attending the ACCE annual conference in July 2017 and undergoing an intensive interview.

"It was a great application, but I think sending it a week early gave us a bit of a boost," Chittenden said with a smile.

The Downtown Chamber knew it had

a wonderful story to tell at the conference. Chittenden brought Cheryl Tuttle, who had a firm grasp on the organization's numbers and metrics as the treasurer, with her to assist.

The night before the interview, Chittenden and Tuttle sat in the hotel and studied. They were the last of the three finalists to be interviewed in one-hour segments. The judges, consisting of former Chamber of the Year winners, were going to be tired, hungry and maybe a little on edge from monotonous talking points.

Chittenden and Tuttle wanted to give them something to remember, something unique.

They traveled to the conference with temporary Downtown Chamber logo tattoos. They hatched a plan to stick the tattoos on their shoulders, wear tank tops and cover the ploy with jackets. Then, when the time was right, Chittenden and Tuttle would take the

jackets off and show the judges their logos.

"My thought was if we can get them laughing or crying during our interview, they will never forget us," Chittenden said.

About midway through the interview the next day, Chittenden and Tuttle looked at each other, made a whimsical comment about the warmth in the room, and removed their jackets. They flashed their tattoos loud and proud.

"They about died," Chittenden said with a laugh. "They had tears rolling down their cheeks. It was a good interview, but I guess we weren't ready yet."

The Downtown Chamber lost the Chamber of the Year Award to the O'Fallon Chamber of Commerce and Industries out of O'Fallon, Missouri.

But after Byers' pep talk, they were ready to come back and win in 2018.



Unique locations and programming give the urban chamber its edge. Clockwise from left: a volunteer-staffed booth at the annual Des Moines Arts Festival, longtime Downtown Council emcee Jen Morrow, Leadership Education Advancement and Pipeline (LEAP) attendees Jasmin Higgins and Whitney Warne.

TRY AND TRY AGAIN

The Partnership put together an application and became one of two finalists to host the ACCE annual convention. Instead of applying the traditional way, the Partnership put together a video showcasing the unique and fun qualities of Des Moines. It featured Gov. Kim Reynolds, various Des Moines CEOs and Partnership staff members.

"It must've have worked because we were ultimately selected," Byers said. "I don't know if the video did it for us or not, but it did show how much we wanted it."

That was the stage Chittenden and the Downtown Chamber were walking onto during the conference in July 2018. They had an opportunity to win the Chamber of the Year award in front of their friends, peers and city.

Having gone through the process before, the Downtown Chamber refined its processes and improved in some of the finer details of the application process.

"We worked on this application and made it the best we possibility could," Chittenden said. "We had a great story to tell because all of those programs we touted in 2017 had grown in massive ways in just one year. We weren't resting on our laurels by any means."

Lorin Ditzler, the current president of the Downtown Chamber board, was a part of the committee in charge of planning and drafting the right message to send to the judges.

"The core message was that the most important thing a chamber can do is watch and listen," Ditzler said. "We always ask our members, 'What keeps you up at night?' We tried to get that across: that we are always doing our best to listen closely to what our members are telling us."

On the first day of the three-day event, July 18, the ACCE held its annual award ceremony at the Iowa Events Center. The Downtown Chamber leadership sat among the crowd, waiting in anticipation. When the Downtown Chamber was announced as the Category 1 winner, the home crowd erupted in cheers.

Chittenden led her fellow leaders and board members up to the stage. Her voice wavering with excitement, she commended the fellow award finalists. She thanked the Downtown Chamber's board members and everyone who helped move the organization in the right direction during the previous 10 years.

"It was the perfect trifecta," Chittenden said while looking back at the celebration. "It was the month of our anniversary, in our hometown and at the Iowa Events Center, a member of our chamber. It's the kind of the thing you see in movies. I still can't believe it."

In the days and months following the victory, the Downtown Chamber circulated the trophy throughout its members' locations. The member organizations displayed the award in their offices as a point of extreme pride.

"I just had so much joy in watching them and how they were really owning this award," Chittenden said. "It wasn't something that was staff-driven or staff-won. This chamber as a whole really won it and they owned it. It was incredible."

With a lofty goal completed, Chittenden said it's time to move on to the next chapter of the Downtown Chamber. With new plans in store, the Downtown Chamber now has a national reputation to uphold with whatever comes next.

"Now everyone is making sure we continue the good work," Ditzler said. "We want to continue living up to that title and that award." ■

Congratulations Downtown Des Moines Chamber of Commerce

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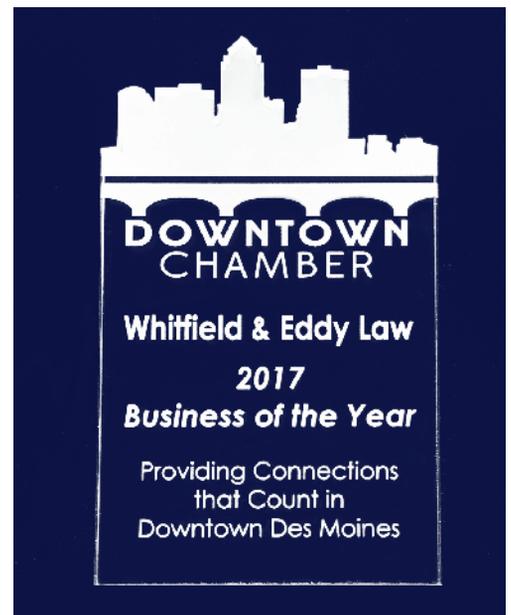
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Congratulations and thank you to the Downtown Chamber

Since inception, the Des Moines Downtown Chamber of Commerce has demonstrated it is not a traditional Chamber of Commerce, but one unique to our community. By creating and growing ground-breaking events including the Development Insights Group (DIG) and Leadership Education and Advancement Pipeline (LEAP), the Chamber truly created connections that count.

Your recognition and awards from the Mid-America Chamber Executives (MACE) and the Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE) by being named Chamber of the Year Runner-Up in 2017 and Chamber of the Year in 2018 only prove that you are something truly special.



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On to the next chapter: Downtown Chamber still growing after national honors

Throughout the 10-year history of the Downtown Chamber, it has gone through two monumental moments. The first was the beginning of the chamber, as it attempted to find its footing and role in the Des Moines community. The second was a two-year stretch in 2014 and 2015, when the organization significantly increased its budget and implemented new signature programs, like the Leadership Education and Advancement Pipeline (LEAP)[®] and Downtown Development Insights Group (Downtown DIG) series.

But as Executive Director Jennifer Chittenden puts it, the Downtown Chamber is in for yet another big transition in the upcoming year. After winning the

Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives (ACCE) Chamber of the Year award in 2018, the organization is ready to take further steps, the biggest being a new location in January of 2019.

The Downtown Chamber has been housed in the RDG Planning and Design building since 2010. Past president Christina Moffatt, who used to work for RDG, helped create a connection between the two organizations. RDG actually rents out office space for a variety of small nonprofits and companies.

The new home was just announced: Gravitare Downtown on 6th Avenue. Chittenden says it will give the chamber a new legitimacy.

“It will be our first official paid space,” Chittenden said. “A place of our own for the first time. That’s an important step in our growth.”





Eight of the 10 past presidents pose during a 10th Anniversary celebration held December 4. Front row: Tiffany Tauscheck (2010), Lorin Ditzler (2018), JR Textor (2017), Christina Moffatt (2011), Kris Maggard (2015), Keshia Meissner (2016). Back row: Tony Timm (2012), Joe Benesh (2014), Scott Seeliger (2019). Not pictured: Anne Moeller (2008-2009) and Kevin Tiernan (2013)

Beyond the new physical space, there are other plans in the works for the upcoming year, particularly in service areas. The Downtown Chamber has already implemented the Student-to-Employer (s2e) program, which started in June 2018. The program connects the Downtown Chamber’s members, many of whom are employers, with area students. These students will have the opportunity to job shadow, intern or participate in other professional development opportunities with a member businesses.

“That’s one service for our employers, but we’re also looking at other programs that will help professionals grow,” Chittenden said.

The Downtown Chamber isn’t resting by any means after its national honor over

the summer. There is growth and continued innovation in the plans for the future, but that mindset isn’t anything new.

“The Downtown Chamber doesn’t do what everybody else does, and it continues to be like that,” said Moffatt, who now works for the Greater Des Moines Partnership. “Jennifer [Chittenden] doesn’t want to be like everybody else, and that is what has helped set the Downtown Chamber apart.” ■

DES MOINES DOWNTOWN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE DIRECTORY

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