

FOCUS ON THE REVITALIZATION OF POTTSTOWN

Pottstown's Mosaic Community Land Trust Revitalizing Pottstown from the Ground Up



DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

By Barry Cassidy

Where you live becomes a part of who you are. In most cases, goods and services provided locally are your window on the consumer world. The location of goods and services is only part of the story associated with the quality of life of a place. The entire living experience relates to the quality of life you enjoy in your localities. In many cases the older neighborhoods, since the 1960s, have experienced disinvestment, outward migration and job loss. What was once the hub of pre-World War II society had lost its sense of place, as the "old" moved out and there was no "new" ready to move in to many of the buildings and spaces.

People in these communities have responded to the challenges to work to bring about change for the better in the communities. Through grass roots leadership, the seeds of renewal have spread to many communities. In Pottstown, the Mosaic Community Land Trust has been seeding renewal in the borough for about

nine years. They have a mission to improve the quality of life in Pottstown, with a wide array of responsibilities including Housing, Community Gardens as well as Community Arts.

A Community Land Trust is a little different than other non-profits in as much as it seeks to be a land owner. To date, there

are 255 Community Land Trusts across the nation, and there is a National Community Land Trust Network. The mission is much the same as a community development corporation, as it is a sustainable model for community involvement and partnerships, increased homeownership, neighborhood stabilization, arts & culture, greening/ community gardens.

Mosaic's community garden manager is Daniel Price. A lifelong resident of the Pottstown area, Dan knows the area well. Dan has brought a wealth of knowledge on not just Pottstown, but the trends in revitalization of older Pennsylvania communities. He assisted in the revitalization of West Chester Business Improvement District. I personally view this as his "return to nature" period of his life.

There are currently five community garden sites located in Pottstown — two on Chestnut Street, one on Walnut Street, and the others on the grounds of Rupert and Barth Elementary Schools. At three of the garden locations, residents are able to rent

garden plots to grow their own healthy and organic produce. Volunteers and Mosaic staff, as well as community members, are often educated through workshops and hands-on assistance offered at the garden locations.

The overall mission of Mosaic is the improvement of Pottstown. Mosaic recently purchased its first home at 417 Chestnut, located right next to one of its gardens. In coming months, they will be partnering with Habitat for Humanity to demolish the building and rebuild. It will be the first house in the borough sold under the Land Trust model. Mosaic's Community Arts wing also assists in community-wide art endeavors that include murals, children friendly events and a variety of community outreach efforts, including the founding of the Youth Orchestra of Pottstown last summer.

The entire effort is used to build the community and create a sense of place for both residents and visitors alike.

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A Community Garden is more than a garden where members of the community gather together to grow fresh produce. It becomes a way to interact with your neighbors, even if they live further away from you within the community.

Community Gardens are not that easy to set up, but they are harder to make go away as they become a focal point of the community. I remember having a significant community garden on South Street in Philadelphia. I also remember that a developer wanted to use the space, and there was significant community pushback concerning the conversion. I also remember the same thing happened in Phoenixville when the housing authority wanted to get rid of the community garden and the sacred Labyrinth. That also was not pretty.

Dan has done a good job keeping up the momentum on the gardens, as the idea has caught fire in Pottstown. During the summer months, Mosaic's Kids' Club is a weekly educational program that inspires kids to be engaged in the community and to be environmentally conscious. He has also initiated workshops that are held in the gardens,

at the Mosaic offices, and in locations hosted by many of our community partners, including the Pottstown Regional Library, the YWCA and YMCA, Olivet Boys and Girls Club and Art Fusion.

Dan has developed and instituted rules that people must abide by in order to be a member of the garden. They have to agree to abide by the garden rules for MOSAIC Community Gardens.

If a potential member is a beginning gardener, they will be required to attend at least one orientation session for new gardeners. He requires members to attend at least three (3) of the monthly "Garden Party Work Days" to maintain common areas, borders and paths, and to get to know other gardeners and foster a sense of community. He insures safety by requiring that members not give out the Garden lock combination to anyone.

These are simple rules that lay out the responsibilities for the participants, and fosters a sense of community interaction which is the essence of community quality of life.

Barry Cassidy is a freelance grant and economic development consultant. He can be reached at barrycassidy@comcast.net.



The popular trolley tour of investment opportunities will return this year to the Pottstown Investors Conference.

Third Annual Pottstown Investors Conference to Advance Local Economic Development

The Third Annual Pottstown Investors Conference will be held Friday, April 12 from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. in The Hill School's Center For The Arts, 760 Beech St., Pottstown, Pa. This conference is geared toward real estate investors, developers, business owners, entrepreneurs, state and federal officials, and Pottstown community leaders.

There is no charge to attend, although participants are asked to pre-register with Stephanie Trauner, administrative manager for Hobart's Run, at strauner@thehill.org or by calling 610.705.1018. The program will inform individuals who may be interested in opening a restaurant or entertainment venue, retail shop, or other business, or moving to Pottstown and buying, restoring, marketing, and/or residing in real estate featuring the Borough's architecturally diverse housing stock.

Building off the previous two well-attended events and participant feedback, conference planners from Hobart's Run are varying this year's format so there will be fewer "speeches," more conversational story-telling by Pottstown stakeholders and entrepreneurs, and further showcasing of intriguing real estate opportunities here in our hometown during a session dedicated to this requested topic. Participants also will be treated to a guided trolley tour (also a popular feature of the initial conference). Details are being finalized for a keynote speaker.

The event will again offer a "Taste of Pottstown" lunch featuring fare from local restaurants – and, this year, the delicious food samplings will be paired with a "gallery walk" displaying information and literature about nonprofits and other organizations that



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The Pottstown Investors Conference (left) will again feature "A Taste of Pottstown" networking lunch featuring local vendors' fare.

Panel discussions (below) planned as part of the Pottstown Investors Conference will allow participants to "go deep" into timely topics.



support and serve Pottstown in partnership with our business community.

The program will include a panel highlighting women-owned or operated businesses in the Borough, among other stimulating, timely discussions — including a chance to engage in "Q & A" with elected officials who interact with Pottstown investors. The day will end with a networking happy hour.

The event is hosted as a partnership of the Hobart's Run neighborhood revitalization initiative and The Hill School.

A 501(c)(3), Hobart's Run works with residents and property owners to revitalize the neighborhood through projects that create a clean, safe, and inclusive community; provide incentives for home

ownership and home improvements; and generate positive, sustainable commercial and retail development. While initially addressing an area of approximately 600 parcels in Pottstown (Queen Street in the south, North Adams on the west, Beech, Grant, and Jackson on the north, and Keim Street on the east), Hobart's Run strives to use successes in this focus area to spark and support revitalization throughout the Borough.

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Wave of New Investment Accelerates Pottstown's Revitalization Process

When the Third Annual Pottstown Investors Conference gets underway at The Hill School on April 12th, presenters and attendees will no doubt be encouraged by the veritable tsunami of recent investment along East High Street in the heart of the downtown, as evidenced by the sale of several dozen properties over the past few years, including seven transactions in the last seven months. And the good news is that multiple investors and investor groups are acquiring these properties for reasons that will ultimately bring enormous benefit to the borough and the downtown. This collective group of motivated, committed, well-capitalized visionary investors offers an enormous opportunity to bring the string of long vacant and underutilized buildings lining the first three blocks of East High Street in the heart of the downtown back to life.

"I have a real good sense of who's buying and who's selling," said Brian Kelly, Broker/Owner of Brian Kelly Real Estate. Kelly has sold 20-some commercial properties in the first three blocks of East High Street. "I've been selling downtown for 20 years, and what I've noticed is a big shift in the motivation of the buyers coming in," he explains. "It used to be you would buy in Pottstown because of affordability. You couldn't afford to buy anywhere else. Today buyers are seeing opportunity, and they are choosing to come to Pottstown looking to the future, as opposed to just getting in because it is affordable. That's a really nice change, because it is bringing in people who have much greater resources and a willingness to invest significant amounts of money in their buildings, either for their own operations, or to get them ready for a tenant. That wasn't the case with the investor pool that was here 15-20 years ago," he said.

Kelly is also optimistic because these new investors — some partnerships, some

individuals, and some family partnerships — for the most part, communicate and coordinate with each other and share a collective sense of vision and optimism for Pottstown's revitalization based on the success of other post-industrial towns in the region.

"I still hear the Phoenixville reference from buyers who say, 'We missed out on Phoenixville. We're trying to get in Pottstown,'" Kelly said. "That mindset is still out there. This buyer pool includes a handful of investors who own multiple (two-to-six) properties downtown. So, these are people who really recognize opportunities today. There are also local people buying just one property or two properties. I'd say it's a 50/50 local investors and people from outside coming in," he said, adding, "Commercial renovation is certainly a process. You have to be fearless and investors bring a fearless attitude toward projects and find reasons to say 'yes' instead of reasons to say 'no' to things. You have to have ambition and courage. Some of these properties need a lot of work. They are not turnkey cash machines. You almost have to be a contractor or hire a contractor to make the building into something that can be profitable. I think the people buying now are people who are serious about it and are doing the work."



Brian Kelly

Scott Bentley, president/owner of VideoRay LLC, a manufacturer of small underwater video equipment, was one of those fearless early participants in the current wave of investment. Bentley purchased the property at 212 East High Street, renovated the building, and moved his 35 employees working in management, corporate administration, marketing, engineering assembly and repair functions into the downtown. Bentley cited Pottstown's growing arts and culture community as one of the reasons he chose Pottstown to relocate his company.

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Bentley's "put feet on the street" approach has been emulated by others, including April Barkasi's Cedarville Engineering Group, which undertook the expense of asbestos abatement to renovate and relocate their headquarters to the long-vacant upper floors of the BB&T building at 159 East High Street.

Another of those early investors was Sailaja Adlura and her husband, who own six properties in the borough and have invested more than \$1 million in downtown real estate and improvements. Their properties are currently 95 percent occupied, with only the property at 133 E. High Street still undergoing renovations.

Sailaja acknowledges that she was initially pessimistic about Pottstown, with concerns about safety issues. She credits then PAID Director Steve Bamford, real estate agent Brian Kelly, and then-Borough Manager Mark Flanders for alleviating her early concerns and facilitating her efforts. While her initial pessimism about Pottstown has turned to optimism, Sailaja notes there are still issues to be addressed, and she is working in concert with other investors in the borough to address those issues with the appropriate entities in order to create an even better environment in which to promote revitalization in the downtown.

Yet another family investment group, Win and Sutida Somboonsong, may perhaps represent the "canary in a coal mine" in reverse for Pottstown revitalization. The Somboonsongs have purchased a number of properties downtown including 152 East High Street, site of the former Brickhouse restaurant. The Somboonsongs operate several popular Asian fusion restaurants on the Main Line. One of those restaurants is cited as having contributed to the revitalization of Media, PA, and many are expecting the new restaurant they will open in Pottstown at the former Brickhouse location in August to have a similar impact in Pottstown.

"I met (Win and Sutida) on East High Street and I could tell they were the real thing," Brian Kelly said. "They were serious. They talked about their other restaurants. When they bought their first property (in Pottstown) they said it reminded them of Media where they went in and opened something and it was very much like this," Brian Kelly said. "The town has grown with them. They are a real class act. They have great restaurants on the Main Line. The eateries coming to Pottstown are what is exciting to most people more than anything," he explains. "The new restaurants and brew pubs opening are the talk of the town."

(Continued on page 16)

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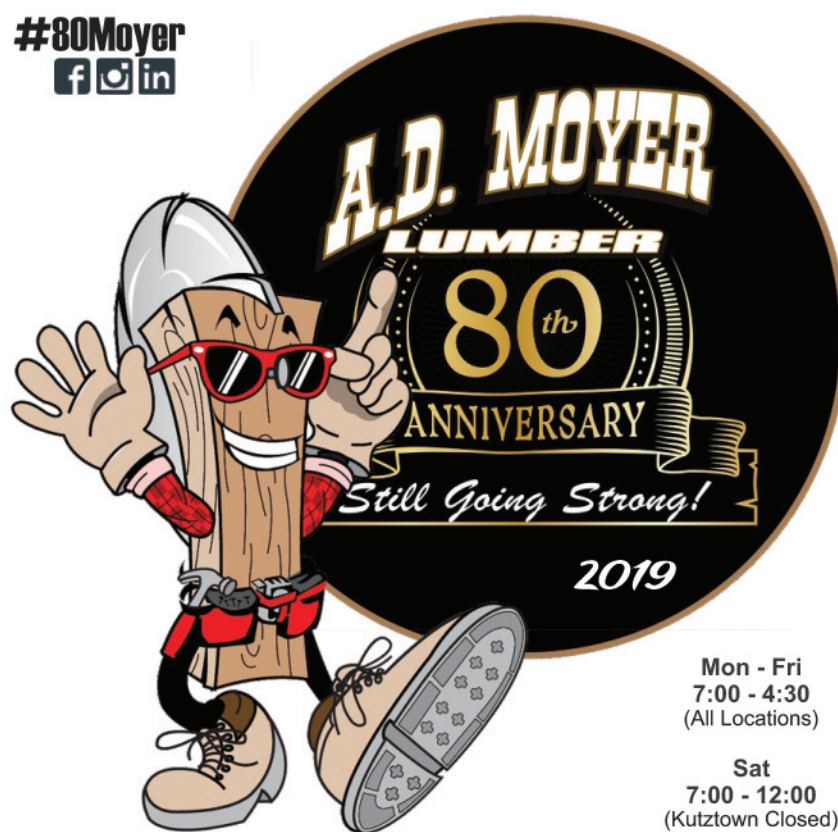
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Entrepreneur Adam Burke, owner of Lily's Grill, at 115 East High Street, recently partnered in a second eatery, Pottstown United Brew Pub, located at 251 East High Street. "Adam Burke gets a lot of support from people who want to see his businesses succeed downtown," Kelly said. "And a place like Sly Fox Brewery (at Circle of Progress), which draws huge crowds, shows people are willing to support interesting businesses and eateries and I think that is encouraging other investors, because they see there is a clientele base."

That is certainly the case with yet another investment group which recently acquired several properties in the downtown, including the former Ellis Mills Department Store building at 225 East High Street, where they opened Splitting Edge Axe Throwing in February, and they are planning to open a brew pub / restaurant at that location later this year. Steve Everett, a developer who also works as a realtor for Berkshire Hathaway in Devon, is one of the investment group's partners. Everett attributes the Somboonsong's investments in Pottstown and their planned restaurant

at 152 East High Street as a contributing factor in his decision to invest in the borough. "When we saw (Win and Sutida) come in, we said, well they started in Media and the Main Line and they do a hell of a good job. They last. They put a lot of money in their properties," he said.

Asked why else they decided to invest, Everett said, "Why not?" citing the borough's abundant assets. "Look at the architecture, the roads (easy access to Routes 422 and 100). Look at what you've got around you," he said, referring to The Hill School, the West Campus of MCCC, the Steel River Playhouse, the Schuylkill River Trail, the Pottstown Carousel, a downtown Farmer's Market, a new Colebrookdale Railroad station, parks and many other unique assets that, when looked at collectively, add up to opportunity.

"We (initially) came (to Pottstown) because of (the availability of) Prince's Bakery," Everett said. "Architecture is something we both like, and we both said this could be a speakeasy. We bought it and we are in the process of building that out."

Everett and his partner also purchased the old Ludwick Motors building on North Hanover Street and have converted that property into the popular Red



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Horse Motoring Club, managed by CEO Chuck Holder. The partners currently employ 14 people in several of their enterprises, and they are in the process of renovating and acquiring tenants for a handful of additional properties along East High Street. "If you can't put someone in there, put yourself in there," Everett said.

"We're taking on a lot more risk by doing our own things, trying to focus on urban lifestyles and what's working in other small towns and adding to it," Everett continued. "Luckily, our timing is right because there are other investors doing the same thing. They have a stake and are making efforts and it's a collaboration of efforts," he said, adding, "There are a lot of similarities to what happened in Phoenixville, but I think Pottstown will do it faster. Breweries attract like minded people. People don't want to leave the house anymore, but when they do, they want a fun experience."

Brian Kelly looks at the current group of investors in Pottstown and sees them collectively as the final piece to the puzzle for revitalization of the downtown. "I think it comes down to individual investors," he said. "The community can hopefully create an environment ripe for revitalization, and the borough has created

a stronger, more user-friendly stance to businesses and investors which is good, but it still comes down to the individual investor, building by building, doing the hard work. It's not easy, but it's the individual investor who does it. It's their money. They are putting their neck out there to make these projects work. They deserve the credit," he said, adding, "I do think we are getting close to a tipping point, and with a few more establishments opening, it will just snowball from there. That's what I'm hoping," he said, adding, "It's an exciting time for the borough."

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Steve Ladner Photography

My journey as a photographer began in the early 1970s, right out of college. Sometimes you just hit it, and fortuitously for me, I did. Though I wasn't formally trained in photography, photography had been my passion starting with photographing my friends in college, the streets of New York City, and the cultural events of the time.

An art director friend suggested that I look at some fashion magazines to see how those images were shot, and Inspired by what I saw, I knew that if I studied those images, I could replicate them in my own style. I borrowed some clothing from young designers and boutiques and went out into the country side with a group of friends to take pictures. That became my training, as I quickly learned what worked and what didn't. Model agencies liked my work and sent me models, and I was off and running.

Within months I had a portfolio and after showing my photos to some fashion editors in New York City, I got my first professional job shooting for *GQ Magazine*. Over the next year, I continued to evolve and to



develop my style. After a few more fashion magazines saw my work and hired me, I "caught on" and a 20-plus year career as a fashion photographer was launched.

While living in New York, I shot for magazines like *GQ*, *Harpers Bazaar*, *Seventeen Magazine*, *French Vogue*, *Town & Country*, *Modern Brides*, *The New York Times Magazine* and advertising campaigns for beauty clients such as Revlon, Almay, Estee Lauder, and Chanel. For the sake of adventure and to broaden my experience,



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I moved to Paris, France and spent seven years shooting for *French Vogue* and other publications there.

Three years ago I moved to a home near Saint Peters Village, just outside of Pottstown. I now shoot for a variety of local clients, as well as regular clients in NYC, CT and Philadelphia and in many different styles based on what is needed: company headshots, company events, individual and family portraits, parties, interiors and exteriors, and artist/modeling portfolios.

I'm available from Philadelphia to Allentown and beyond. When we work together, you will experience being in a relaxed and fun atmosphere and you will receive artistic and creative images that best capture and match the style of your event or the needs of your business.

Feel free to visit my website: www.steveladner.com to see the galleries of my work.

STEVE LADNER PHOTOGRAPHY



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O'Donnell, Weiss & Mattei, P.C.

The attorneys at O'Donnell, Weiss & Mattei, P.C. (OWM Law) have been serving clients in Pottstown and Phoenixville, and throughout Montgomery, Chester, and Berks Counties, for over 60 years! In addition, OWM Law has been a member of the Chamber for over 35 years. OWM Law attorneys serve as Solicitors to both the TriCounty Area Chamber of Commerce and Pottstown Area Industrial Development, Inc., and we are pleased help advance their vision of growth and revitalization for Pottstown. In fact, it is not unusual to find the lawyers from OWM involved, both on the front lines and behind the scenes, in much of what is happening in both Pottstown and Phoenixville, as OWM attorneys are good citizens and proud volunteers, strongly committed to supporting the communities in which they do busi-

ness. The fingerprints of OWM Law attorneys are all over the revitalization of Pottstown and Phoenixville, including various and assorted business and real estate projects (i.e. motels, retail establishments, redevelopment of formerly abandoned industrial sites, restaurants, etc.).

The attorneys at OWM Law represent businesses, municipalities, banks, individuals, families, and charitable organizations. Each lawyer practices in specific areas of the law, and to better serve clients we also frequently utilize client service teams consisting of multiple attorneys and paralegals. Through the development of these teams, we are able to handle complex transactions and provide the guidance and solutions our clients need.

(Continued on page 20)

The WordTech Group

Don't
use the
J&@K
word!

A sly grin spreads across the face of the man operating the shiny new UV based variable data imaging machine. "Four letter word, ends in K... but starts with a J. Yeah, we don't say that word around here," says Donovan Price, who has been with The WordTech Group since 1992. When summer rolls around, Price will be celebrating his 27th year with the Pottstown-based, family-owned business. While that counts as serious longevity, you may be surprised to know that he isn't the longest tenured employee at WordTech. In fact, of the 17 full time staff employed at the company, they count nearly half with over a decade of service.

"That's the kind of loyalty you can't buy... and it's why our customers stay with us year after year," says Greg Ohanesian who, along with his brother Ben, own the company.

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Greg Ohanesian (left) and Ben Ohanesian

For the team at WordTech, they try not to call it "Junk" mail and instead encourage "direct mail" or "marketing mail" both internally and with their customers. "Direct Mail drives traffic and increases revenue. It's that simple. If "junk" gets more people to know who I am, and to do more business with my company, then sign me up for more "junk," Greg said.

Nearly 40 years after their parents founded the business, the Ohanesian brothers are moving WordTech into previously uncharted territory. "It used to be that one million pieces of mail processed in a month was an incredible feat for us... now it's just called a bad month," says Ben Ohanesian. Gaining a reputation as the direct mail industry's version of the Property Brothers, Ben and Greg Ohanesian are looking at 2019 as a breakthrough year for WordTech.

"We really focused on customer success and making sure what we were sending out in the mail was effective. Anyone can send out mailings, but we work individually with our customers to understand their end goal, and how they will measure success. Every company is different, and every mailing needs to reflect that," says Ben Ohanesian.

It's no secret that direct mail marketing is still going strong in 2019. Once thought to be a relic of the past, as the 21st century ushered in new mediums in digital advertising, email marketing chief among them — marketing and advertising direct mail still boasts an average response rate that is several times higher than most digital forms of advertising.



Ben Ohanesian (left) and Greg Ohanesian

All of these points highlight why Ben Ohanesian, and the team at WordTech, prefer not to use the "J" word. "Marketers are smart people — they understand that consumers are going to sort through their mail every day, and while sorting what they want versus what they trash or recycle, they are looking at your message. How many hundreds of emails never even reach your normal inbox because they are caught in a junk or spam filter?" Ben asks.

For additional information about the range of services offered by The WordTech Group, please call: 610.326.7200 and visit www.wordtechinc.com.

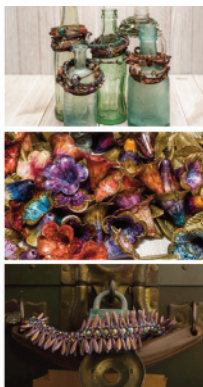
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(Continued from page 18)

In addition, several OWM Law attorneys are licensed title agents, and OWM Law routinely conducts residential and commercial real estate settlements in both of our office locations.

OWM Law has fully-staffed offices in Pottstown at 41 E. High Street, and in Phoenixville at 347 Bridge Street, Suite 200. Supporting the 13 lawyers is a dedicated staff of paralegals, legal assistants and other staff members who, along with the attorneys, are committed to providing top quality service and legal representation to clients in a professional, pleasant and cost-effective manner. We constantly strive to stay up-to-date with the latest available technology, while endeavoring to develop and maintain personal relationships with our clients and provide individualized service.

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