

| CASE STUDY |

# INDIVIDUALITY MATTERS

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**Varied experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives are catalysts for creativity and innovation in downtown areas.**

**When people from different walks of life come together, they bring with them a wide range of skills, knowledge, and ideas. This melting pot of diverse perspectives leads to unique and out-of-the-box solutions for the challenges faced by small towns. And when these individuals collaborate and exchange ideas, it sparks a fire that fuels vibrancy, energy, and growth.**

**The downtown area is often a community's beating heart in small towns across the country. With a mix of businesses that offer everything from daily needs to one-of-a-kind mom-and-pop shops, these areas are what make small towns so charming.**

When it comes to business and growth, though, economic or otherwise, small towns are very often used to doing things "the way it has always been done." They tend to wait for so-called "progress" to come or work to generate ideas within an old-guard leadership group rather than proactively including new people and the ideas they bring to the table in the process.

**“The energy, spirit, and ultimate success of a downtown area, though, directly reflect how many new, unique ideas have been brought into form within it.”**

Change and progress, it seems, aren't always easy.

The energy, spirit, and ultimate success of a downtown area, though, directly reflect how many new, unique ideas have been brought into form within it. And where do new ideas come from? New people. People from backgrounds with new experiences. People of different genders, races, and religions with different offerings and services. People who bring new views on what a community can be.

Our unique differences, it turns out, are the key.

## Ideas: The seeds of growth.

Embracing new, diverse ideas and people in downtown areas is not just a moral imperative; it's a strategic one. A broad spectrum of ideas, inspirations, and backgrounds can fuel innovation, breathe life into local culture, and contribute to sustainable economic growth.

Almost any issue a small town faces, including a declining downtown area, can be overcome with fresh ideas and innovative solutions. Varied experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives are catalysts for creativity and innovation.

For instance, a multicultural community might bring unique traditions and customs to the fore, influencing local arts and festivals. These cultural influences can inspire new attractions or events that make the town a more vibrant and interesting place to live and visit.

People with different backgrounds may also see unique business opportunities or identify gaps in the market that others might overlook. For example, someone born in another country might see the potential for a restaurant serving their native cuisine, or a young, creative entrepreneur might recognize the need for a co-working

space in a town with a growing number of remote workers. Bellefontaine has successful stories in both cases.

This kind of idea exchange can also lead to better decision-making and problem-solving. When a wide range of perspectives are considered when addressing local issues or planning community initiatives, more inclusive and effective strategies result, taking the needs of all residents into consideration. For instance, urban planning might be influenced by the input of both older citizens who have lived in the town for decades and newcomers who bring fresh eyes to its opportunities and challenges. This combination of long-term experience and new perspective can lead to innovative solutions that cater to everyone and improve the overall quality of life in the town.

## Creative solutions

A diverse populace often becomes a bedrock of creativity, particularly in small towns. The convergence of different cultures, experiences, and viewpoints often leads to a vibrant tapestry of novel ideas and innovative solutions.

Diversity drives creativity by stimulating intellectual friction, pushing boundaries, and challenging the status quo. In small towns, this can manifest in the form of unique and creative business models, initiatives, events, and partnerships that are designed to fuel growth, revitalization, and resilience.

Small Nation Founder Jason Duff is a prime example. When considering how Bellefontaine's once crumbling downtown might be revitalized, Jason brought ideas into fruition that were largely fueled by his unique background. Jason's education combined business and the arts. A creative soul at heart, Jason's love of music and performance helps him see possibilities through a unique lens.

Downtown Bellefontaine's redevelopment has been strategically composed since 2013. A new energy flows in the streets of Bellefontaine now, and it's not just because of the beautifully designed buildings. Yes, many historic buildings downtown have been renovated, but the spirit that is now rising downtown is due to the many layers of people, ideas, and experiences that have been woven together to create a unique blend of success. There are the businesses that anchor the area. They are the bass in the musical composition that is our downtown. The boutiques and retail shops are the harmony, and the restaurants and night spots add a crescendo of excitement.



Jason Duff, Small Nation

As a gay man in a small town, Jason deeply understands the importance of diversity in creating a welcoming and inclusive community. It's not only about acceptance or tolerance. It's about giving people the room, the freedom, and sometimes the resources to bring their uniqueness and ideas to life. In Downtown Bellefontaine, the result of these ideas often manifests in the form of new and exciting businesses. Jason has prioritized identifying people's unique gifts and talents as a key part of Bellefontaine's revitalization

efforts. Because every authentic, successful person within their downtown micro-culture gives back to the whole in a fundamental way.

## A cultural case in point:

One of the brightest new success stories in Downtown Bellefontaine is The Flying Pepper Cantina (137 W Columbus Ave.). Humberto Nieto grew up cooking in a small town in Michoacán, Mexico, with a dream to someday open his own restaurant in the United States. He started serving authentic Mexican recipes from his past from a food truck using fresh, local ingredients. When Jason tasted Humberto's food, he immediately

| SMALL TOWN. BIG IMPACT. |

One of the biggest factors in the success of Downtown Bellefontaine's revitalization was how the unique backgrounds of the business owners

fueled ideas we may have never thought of ourselves. Our individuality truly is what really matters. Learn more at [downtownbellefontaine.com](http://downtownbellefontaine.com).



became a fan. So much so that when a building became available downtown, he actively recruited Humberto to open a restaurant in the space.

Humberto and his wife Laura Haverkos opened the Flying Pepper in 2020 and have been gracing Bellefontaine with their amazing food ever since. The Flying Pepper has become extremely popular, with its fresh, authentically-prepared meals drawing visitors from around the region from as far away as Columbus.

When asked about how bringing his unique background and culture to Bellefontaine through his restaurant had an impact on the community, there was one important concept that Humberto wanted to emphasize: we are all human beings. And he means it — he doesn't see himself or anyone else from a different place or background as a minority. To him, it's all about celebrating our shared humanity.

Humberto's perspective holds a lot of power. It challenges the common narrative of small towns being homogenous or narrowly focused. It means that we all have something unique to contribute, whether it's our culture, our beliefs, or our talents. Celebrating our uniqueness is what makes us different - because, ultimately, it's what makes us all human.

**“An impressive 75 percent of the business owners downtown are women, painting a picture of entrepreneurial gender parity uncommon in many other small towns.”**

Adding to Humberto's message, Laura said, "The Flying Pepper has been able to 100% stick to our guns in terms of authenticity, and operating with our staff and with our customers in a way that truly is known as a place that accepts and respects everyone. Humberto has a really strong sense of identity, and that identity isn't wrapped up in what most people would say falls under the label of diversity. That's not what his identity is tied to.

It's really interesting that in feeling those beliefs and living those beliefs, we typically end up with a staff that reflects that, a staff that looks diverse, and openness to religion and gender and things that may not necessarily plug in really nicely and neatly into an article, but it's our reality. So living it authentically makes a very big difference. And somebody used to use a quote all the time, and I can't attribute it to the proper person, but they always said, 'to see what's important to you. Look at what *you* do. Look at what you support, and look at what you do.' And I feel like we're always completely in line with that. We feel good about who we are and how we treat people."

### The real impact of women

In Bellefontaine, the way we embrace varied perspectives and ideas is reflected in our gender dynamics as well. An impressive 75 percent of the business owners downtown are women, painting a picture of entrepreneurial gender parity uncommon in many other small towns. Women-owned businesses in various sectors—including retail, professional, hospitality, and more—significantly contribute to the town's diverse economic fabric. Their presence fosters an environment that encourages female entrepreneurship and drives innovation.

Brandi Madison is a great example of Bellefontaine's growth-minded female entrepreneurs. In 2020, she transitioned from employee to salon owner when she opened Undertone Beauty Bar. She expanded it to a full suite of beauty services and a second downtown location within two years.

When asked about the impact female business owners have on a downtown area, Brandi said, "I think women bring a different type of drive to downtown areas. We tend to be go-getters, and we see other businesses in our downtown as a huge benefit rather than as competition.

For example, I am a small business owner. I own a beauty salon downtown where there are also four other salons, but we don't

see them as competition because there is just so much business out there for everyone. We consistently refer clients to every other salon on our block — because each person contributes something just a little bit different."

Brandi feels that while she is a female business owner, she doesn't focus on the fact. She thinks more men and women alike should want to open small businesses in downtown areas. Because so much of the large-merchant retail industry has shifted toward online retailers, there is significant whitespace opening up in the shopping experience, and small downtown areas are the solution. People still want a place to go where they can touch and try the merchandise, and have one-on-one communication with a real person. She feels rents and overall affordability is better in downtown areas as well.

Brandi says, "Some people think a downtown area is fierce competition, but the truth is, the more businesses we have downtown, the more we all contribute to one another. Because there are so many different types of



Outdoor patio at The Flying Pepper Cantina



Humberto Nieto and Laura Haverkos, owners, The Flying Pepper Cantina



The bar at The Flying Pepper Cantina



Undertone Beauty Bar



Owner Brandi Madison and team, Undertone Beauty Bar

businesses, the business you bring in contributes to everyone else's success as well. It's built-in marketing. Downtown merchants should be focusing on what they can bring to the table that is different rather than at their [perceived] competition."

### Bringing the world downtown

Coming to Bellefontaine from Kingston, Jamaica and New York City, Julie "Julz" Green and her husband Norm own and operate The Flats at Rainbow Row, a series of seven Airbnb short-term rental properties in Downtown Bellefontaine. Julz leads operations at G.E.LLC Homes, which also offers short term rentals in Ohio and Jamaica.

The Flats at Rainbow Row in Downtown Bellefontaine are truly one-of-a-kind. Designed to feature seven continental regions, these short-term rental apartments offer a truly unique experience for a small town. Even though they are in Ohio, visitors can be transported to different parts of the world through The Flats' interior decor which features Asian, South American, African, European, Australian, and American influences.

Not only do these apartments provide a comfortable and stylish space to stay, but they also offer a glimpse into different cultures and ways of life for those in the area who may not travel internationally. Each region is thoughtfully represented through the design choices, creating an immersive and enriching experience. And with the convenient location right in the heart of downtown Bellefontaine, they'll have easy access to all that our charming town has to offer.

As a female business leader operating downtown, we asked Julz how she felt about the impact female-owned businesses have in small towns. She responded, "At Rainbow Row alone, four of the six businesses are led by women: Candy Craze, Eden Haus, the Salty Swan Tattoo parlor, and The Flats are female-owned. I believe female owners tend to establish relationships with their neighboring businesses and their customers in a way that male business owners do not. At Rainbow Row and in Bellefontaine, we watch out for each other. We text each other if we hear or see something that might be off. We protect each other, you know? We're a family here.

I think how female business owners interact with people is different. Being part of a network is important to us, and a female presence within the business tends to open people up differently."

At The Flats, Julz and Norm made it a point to purchase furniture, decor, artifacts, and even antiques from local Bellefontaine stores in addition to the authentic hand-made pieces they brought by hand from Jamaica. Providing support to their business neighbors was important to them.

Julz said, "We came to this small town from a New York City borough and Jamaica, and let me tell you... we have been wholly embraced. We have both been pleasantly surprised at the friendliness and genuineness in this town. When someone asks you to go to lunch, they actually mean it! And I love that. We have no plans to ever leave."

The impact of these women-owned businesses on Bellefontaine's revitalization cannot be understated. Each business brings a unique perspective and approach, further enriching the town's vibrant downtown area. These women entrepreneurs' success stories inspire other women, creating a virtuous cycle of empowerment and economic growth. As they continue to flourish, they serve as a beacon for other small towns to emulate.

### When life experiences give back

2G's Barbecue, owned by George and Vanessa Hunter, is a true gem in Bellefontaine. This family-owned and operated establishment reflects the passion and heritage of its owners, bringing a touch of "slow and low" smokehouse BBQ culture to the heart of Bellefontaine. Vanessa and George see 2Gs as their ministry and mission, serving their customers amazing food with God at the center

of their purpose.

2Gs stands for God and George, in that order. George came to Ohio from California with the goal of overcoming a rough past. He met his wife Vanessa, who, in his words, "helped him become a man of God."

When George was young, he had a pull on his heart to open a restaurant. "I had a gift as a child that I had spoken long, long ago: I wanted to open up my restaurant and always have a way of touching people in the things that I went through in my life. And I wanted to open it up with a way of just home-cooked food, nothing out of a can... but just the soulful taste."

After an accident and going through brain surgery, George knew it was time. "That's what kind of opened the door, which is how God works in our lives, that he does certain things to us to make us aware of our gift. And that gift was my cooking. I had a vision of what Bellefontaine



Ribs & Gigantic Shrimp Dinner, 2Gs BBQ



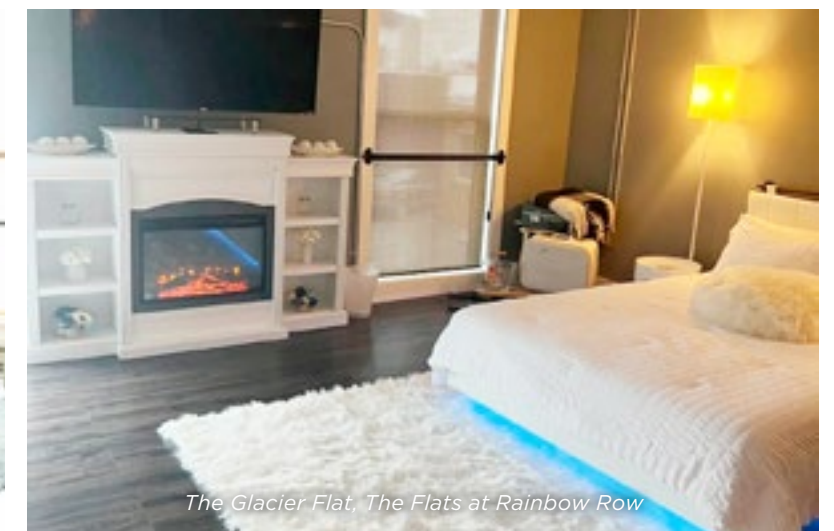
The East Flat, The Flats at Rainbow Row



Julz and Dr. Norman Greene, owners, The Flats at Rainbow Row



The Caliente Flat, The Flats at Rainbow Row



The Glacier Flat, The Flats at Rainbow Row



needed in this town, and they didn't have it. And so I had that gift."

Around this time, Vanessa's employer shut down, leaving them both out of work, so she took a sabbatical to Virginia to reconnect with God and listen for guidance. Through multiple seemingly serendipitous connections and situations, they were gifted equipment, a loan for startup capital, and willing hands to make the interior just right, all of which the Hunters believe was divinely led by God's grace.

2Gs opened their doors on Main Street in Bellefontaine, serving George's amazing barbeque, as well as fried catfish, shrimp, and, of course, greens, mac and cheese, and cornbread. Their staff is comprised mostly of people who have been through hardships in their lives and teenagers who would benefit from guidance.

Vanessa told us, "People show up at our back door; they'll come in the front door saying 'I can't feed my family. Can you help us?' We don't ask any questions. Maybe they really need help. George will go over and beyond that call and stack them up with whatever we can, to feed children, to feed whoever. And he's always been like that. And his testimony is on the menu for a reason, because those are the type of people we hire."

The Hunters see their restaurant as their vehicle for helping and mentoring others. Their mission is to provide delicious food and a safe, welcoming space for the community while also giving back and supporting those in need.

As George puts it, "I understand where I came from, and I understand what I've been through. And those who don't give out the opportunity to help somebody with what you went through, what are you in this world for? It ain't about money; it's about giving back."

George and Vanessa's backgrounds and life experiences have become manifest in the way they run their business and the way they serve the community as a whole. Openness and acceptance infuse their culture and attitude, and their customers feel it.

Their passion and dedication to helping others shine through in every aspect of 2G's BBQ, making it truly unique and special to Downtown Bellefontaine. They are a testament to how individuals can make a positive impact, and their story serves as an inspiration for others to do the same. As it states clearly on their website, "Vanessa and I desire that through our testimony and the 2G's experience, all who enter our door feel the love of Jesus, that they are encouraged, knowing that no matter what they've been through, or what they are going through, with God, nothing is impossible."

The popularity and success of 2G's Barbecue demonstrates how unique small businesses who are clear about their mission can contribute to the revitalization of a downtown area, attracting both locals and visitors while adding a distinctive personality to the town's identity and perception.

### **It's about how people drive progress**

These successful businesses in Downtown Bellefontaine illustrate how people from different places with unique visions, ideas, and backgrounds can be a key driver in a small town's success. From promoting economic growth to adding layers to local culture, proactively encouraging people to share the viewpoints and talents that only they can bring to the table adds a multitude of benefits to downtown areas. The result is a vibrant, idea-rich community that offers something for everyone and enhances the quality of life for residents and visitors alike.

SMALL NATION develops places, spaces, and dreams for small towns and small town entrepreneurs across the country.

**SMALL  
NATION**

We're here to show the world that small town and small business success is not only possible, but profitable. For everyone.