Growing Their Businesses in the Town Where They Grew Up

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Hunter Seyfarth (left) and Ken Campbell grew up in East Lansing and are now downtown business neighbors on Grand River Avenue.

Small business owners Hunter Seyfarth and Ken Campbell didn’t know each other when they attended East Lansing Public Schools. Seyfarth was four years older than Campbell – an eternity for a student. The two also lived in different neighborhoods, making the chance of an occasional encounter even more remote.

But now as adults, the two ‘townies’ find themselves in daily contact, fewer than 20 feet apart on East Lansing’s main drag. Seyfarth owns Evergreen Cycle and Repairs, a veteran retail mainstay on the city’s cycling scene. Campbell, on the other hand, is a newcomer, having recently opened Campbell’s Market Basket to answer the long-time need for a neighborhood grocer.

For some, the small footprint stores owned by locals harkens back to long-ago when big name retailers or chains didn’t populate mid-sized cities. Others see the shops as representative of millenipreneurs – a generation of business owners ages 35 and younger. Whatever the
movement, some residents can?t help but note the coincidence of two high school alumni running shops side-by-side on Grand River Avenue.

Retired Marble Elementary School social worker Libby Kennan is one of them.

Keenan picked up right away on the Trojan vibe when she cycled downtown on one of her daily bike trips. Venturing in to the newly opened market, she recognized Campbell as a former student from Marble. She immediately made the connection with Seyfarth ? another Marble alumnus who had grown up a few houses from hers in the Glencairn neighborhood.

?I was thrilled when I saw Ken?s new market right next store to Hunter?s bike shop,? Keenan said. ?I always do a double take when these people I knew as kids do things that are so adult. We have kids who are doing all sorts of things that are just amazing. Ken and Hunter are right up there.? 

On the road to find out

Seyfarth didn?t necessarily set out to open a bike shop, or even to stay in town. But his passions pervaded. And so did his connection to friends and family.

The 2002 graduate of East Lansing High School attended Lansing Community for a couple years with his eye on earning a bachelor?s degree from Michigan State University. After securing enough transferrable credits, he decided instead to take a year off and start Evergreen Cycle and Repairs ? a 500-square-foot, street-level bike shop in a building behind the Peoples Church.

Seyfarth never went back to the classroom. A bike enthusiast and former employee of several local bike stores, Seyfarth was compelled to fill the niche for a bike retailer and repair shop in the downtown district. Within a few years, he outgrew the space and moved in 2011 to the now 1,500-square-foot shop at 545 E. Grand River Ave.

?When I started the shop in 2006, it was the only one close by,? he said. ?I built up a brand and didn?t see a real need to go elsewhere. I like it here. I?m from here. It seems like a good place to be.? 

Campbell shares a similar point of view.

After graduating from ELHS in 2006, Campbell made his way 50 miles south to Albion College. He earned a degree in business and economics, explored coursework in agriculture and sustainability at MSU, and ran a farm near Harbor Springs through an internship program. Developing a passion for the local food movement, he moved back downstate and opened a farmer?s market near Grand Ledge. After seven years, he decided it was time to come back to East Lansing to be closer to his siblings, parents and grandparents.

?It was always my goal to set up shop in my hometown,? he said. ?I noticed a gap in the downtown area as far as access to fresh and seasonal food. I saw it as a chance to do something I?m passionate about, and couldn?t say no.? 

In March, Campbell opened the doors on a 2,000-square foot market at 547 E. Grand River Ave. with his business partner Perry Kaguni?also a graduate of ELHS. The upscale urban grocery
created 10 jobs and stocks fruits and vegetables, herbs, eggs, meats and other locally sourced foods. Customers will find staples and dry goods, hot and cold beverages, loads of snacks, and fresh-baked or prepared options for a small meal.

Campbell remarked it?s an advantage to be an East Lansing native as far as sensing the likes, wants and needs of the area. He enjoys reconnecting with friends and neighbors from his childhood and teen years, and likes chatting with customers who live, work and play in town.

?I?m getting to know the other local business owners here, too,? said Campbell. ?And I?m able to share similar ideas and values in a way I?ve never been able to before. It?s exciting to brainstorm and work toward common goals.? 

Campbell believes he was in the right place at the right time and in the right spot in his life to make the move. And like Seyfarth, he believes he?s on the brink of a new wave of business as the city undergoes some of its biggest changes and developments.

?I was happy to hear Ken was going in next door,? said Seyfarth. ?East Lansing breeds good people. Having neighbors who care about the community and do well brings more people to the area. It?s good for everyone.? 

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