

Gibbons brings local influence to national restaurant group

The president of Mainstreet Ventures Inc. in Ann Arbor is gaining influence in national restaurant industry leadership.

Mike Gibbons took over as treasurer of the National Restaurant Association's Board of Directors on May 20. The NRA represents more than 380,000 member establishments, according to its Website. The industry comprises about 935,000 foodservice outlets employing 12.8 million.

Mainstreet Ventures owns and operates 15 restaurants, including Real Seafood, Palio, The Chop House, Gratz and Carson's American Bistro in Ann Arbor. It also operates in Ohio, West Virginia and Florida, giving Gibbons a taste of trends in other regions.



GIBBONS

Gibbons spoke recently with Paula Gardner of *Ann Arbor Business Review*.

How did you build a national profile in the restaurant industry?

I got involved, kind of reluctantly because it was such a big time commitment, when the executive director of the Michigan Restaurant Association approached me. I turned him down for about six months, but he said I was the right person from the state of Michigan to (join the Board of Directors). That was back in 2000.

How meaningful is it for Michigan now that you're an office in the NRA?

Every quarter, I go to the (Michigan Restaurant Association) and give a report on what's happening on the national level ... to keep people involved. We have a tremendous turnout for our political affairs conference in September. Per capita, we probably have the biggest delegation there, and we're bringing our state's issues.

What are those issues?

Immigration reform is a huge issue for us right now. It's huge in probably every state.

Health care is still a big issue. Minimum

► **GIBBONS**, page 21

Product diversifying works for Chelsea duo

BY JANET MILLER
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Bill and Marsi Darwin have merged an unlikely combination of products and interests into a single business endeavor based in a pole barn northwest of Chelsea.

Darwin's Stained Glass Studio and Antique Slot Machines sells custom-made stained glass, and repairs and sells antique slot machines.

Soon, the Darwins also could be hosting sanctioned tournaments for the Waterloo Croquet Club.

While the mix may not seem to fit together, the combination gives the couple enough diversification to weather economic changes, they said.

Bill Darwin has been making heirloom stained glass windows, doors, panels and lamps for homes, business, churches and other public spaces for three decades.

But it was 12 years ago – when he was looking for a hobby to give him a break from his 18-hour days at his stained glass work bench – that he began collecting antique slot machines. The hobby quickly turned into a business and today, the slot machines account for half Darwin's revenue.

Inside the pole barn Darwin's father built to house a wind generation business in the 1970s, stained glass doors and



Bill and Marsi Darwin of Darwin's Stained Glass Studio & Antique Slot Machines. | RAMEY

lamps along with slot machines fill the space, making it feel more like a museum more than a work shop.

Most of Darwin's stained glass work is custom, from a recent commission from the Salvation Army headquarters in De-

troit for a five-foot-by-six-foot panel that hangs 26 feet in the air inside the chapel, to a 13-foot skylight with 64 panels for a private home in Ann Arbor. Much of

► **GLASS**, page 21

Transplant teams make willing sacrifices



HEALTH WATCH
Deb Merion

The University of Michigan Transplant Center – including 15 surgeons in all – performs over 400 transplants every year, and over 100 of them require a flight to and from the donor hospital.

My husband, Dr. Bob Merion, is one of the U-M transplant surgeons. Over his 25-year career, he has flown to procure organs hundreds of times, always as part of a team including surgeons, technicians and pilots.

When the U-M transplant team's plane crashed on Monday June 4, 2007 on its way back from Milwaukee, Bob was in Switzerland at a transplant meeting. He heard the sad news from me by phone in the middle of the night.

People have been asking me if Bob's colleagues were involved in the crash, and I was always grateful for their caring concerns. Yes, he knew them all. "How's he doing?" friends have asked.

"It's hard, but he's doing OK," I respond. "We both are."

But really, what does "OK" mean in a situation like this?

The days since the crash have not been easy on us, and I cannot even imagine the confusion and pain of the families of the six men who perished.

I'm angry and befuddled when good people die. Befuddled also about how other individuals and communities make it through huge tragedies, whether it's in New Orleans, Romania, Sudan or New York City.

For me the experience of loss isn't rational. I can't dial a desirable intensity of feelings to occur at a convenient time like choosing a temperature on a thermostat. Sometimes I simply need to sit and let my tears flow.

I didn't know all the men personally though I wish I had.

My deepest loss was Richard Chenault II. He was a family friend for over 15 years, a man who delighted me whenever I saw him, whether at a black-tie transplant fund-raising event or near the doughnuts in Busch's grocery store.

I met him after Bob hired him at U-M as a lab tech. Then, Richard became a trans-

► **HEALTH WATCH**, page 21

► GIBBONS

Continued from page 3

wage has always been a big issue.

What do you see immigration-wise in Ann Arbor's restaurant industry?

I couldn't even guess percentage wise ... but I know there's a good number of Mexican immigrants that work in the restaurants. That brings a lot of challenges with it. ...

There are a lot of sides to the story.

What are you doing at the board level on that issue?

We are very much in favor of the (Kennedy/McCain bill). For my business, I don't think it will change anything. But I do think it will give immigrants a clear path to citizenship.

And health care?

That is a tough issue. We are really involved with NRA with association health plans. We're working on developing plans for our industry like health savings accounts.

Some analysts look at job creation and dismiss those in your industry as "just service jobs." What's your response?

I like to say from the dishroom to the boardroom. I didn't plan on being in this industry. I can give you the work history of anyone in management with me – they all started somewhere as an hourly employee. I can't think of an industry that provides more opportunities for growth than the res-

taurant industry.

What specific challenges are you seeing here?

The economy. Disposable incomes are affected when people are worrying about their jobs. I hear Ann Arbor is insulated, but it's not insulated from everything. We feel it when things are rough. It's not the worst pocket of the state. We also have restaurants in Toledo, and their economy has been hard-hit.

How are you changing things in response?

We have to be nimble. We're constantly tweaking our menus, trying to attract more guests or get greater portions of the numbers of people going out to eat.

Has the economy forced any chances to your capital improvement plans?

Our plans call for remodels every five to six years. We did Real Seafood three years ago.

We are constantly tweaking; we've got plans for a remodel for Palio that we'll do in January.

What about new restaurants?

We've got two openings in Annapolis, Maryland: Real Seafood and The Chop House in a lifestyle center, Annapolis Towne Centre.

Websites say that center will have over 600,000 square feet of retail space along with 900 residences,

diversification, he would not be making stained glass today.

It started as a hobby – he bought one and then another, repairing and restoring them. With the help of the Internet, he's bought and sold hundreds of slot machines throughout the country. He owns 60, which range in price from \$900 to \$6,000.

Bill's next project is to register his croquet courts with the United States Croquet Association, which will allow him to host sanctioned tournaments.

The private, 16-member Waterloo Croquet Club was founded in 1994 and the 14,000-square-foot lighted courts were built four years ago.

There's only one other sanctioned croquet court in the state, Darwin said.

Meanwhile, Marsi is a former librarian who creates smaller decorative items from glass such as coasters and ornaments. She founded the Chelsea artist cooperative, the West of the Moon Gallery.

Each of the endeavors helps the other, Bill said.

"They all feed off each other," he said. A customer may come to his studio for a stained glass door for their recreation or game room and see the slot machines. Or they may come to play croquet and discover the stained glass.

"Diversification is the key," Marsi Darwin said.

■ Janet Miller is a freelance writer.

offices and a hotel. How did you find that location?

It's a \$400 million development. A developer is one of my brothers, who has been after me for years to do something in one of his projects. It fits what we do. We think it's a phenomenal location.

What other out-of-state locations attract you?

We've spent some time in Washington, D.C. We're based in the central Midwest through (Naples and Fort Myers.) Florida, but I've been looking for other opportunities in Florida. I thought we had a deal in Sarasota, but it came apart.

How intense is your search?

Growth isn't our engine. It's not what drives us. We look for opportunities when we've got the human capital ... We don't have to grow. But I've got some great people coming along and they want great opportunities, and if you don't grow, sometimes you lose your best people.

How do you describe today's restaurant scene in downtown Ann Arbor?

I can't address the whole scene, I can only talk about what we're doing. We're still have success with multiple concepts ... and we know a lot of people drive a long ways (to come to them). We're happy with what's going on there.

What do you think it will look like a year from now?

I think there's going to be a little fallout (from the economy) but not different from other times. Ann Arbor has a very sophisticated dining clientele, and if they get something that's good, they flock to it. If it's not good, they won't stay in business.

How do you describe today's restaurant industry?

It's a battle. I think that's true of any industry. ... Every state has its own issues. Florida has a minimum wage law with wage increases tied to the consumer price index. That makes me wonder what people will be willing to pay to go out to eat. ... because when the employees get raises, menu prices go up.

What will we see from menu prices in Michigan's price-sensitive economy?

There won't be a softening. Beef prices have gone through the ceiling because of corn prices. If corn price go up, so do chicken, beef... The cost of food is going up, minimum wage is increasing, so is fuel... It has to be passed on somehow.

How do you keep your competitive edge?

Make sure we're doing everything right and as well as we can to make unique, new dining experiences. I can't worry about what competitors are doing. I'd rather have them worry about what I'm doing.

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► GLASS

Continued from page 3

his work is residential, including an Ann Arbor woman who wanted her three dead cats memorialized in stained glass. Prices range from \$200 for a small panel to tens of thousands of dollars.

Darwin also has commercial customers, such as the Common Grill in Chelsea and the Jackson Brewing Company.

Still, the soft Michigan economy has taken its toll, and Darwin is looking beyond his historic geographic reach. What used to be a six-month waiting list has disappeared.

"There is no waiting list anymore," Marsi Darwin said. "We've never had to have an advertising budget before."

Bill said he now delivers a job in four to six weeks. The couple is looking to market in the Detroit area and toward the west side of the state.

Globalization has also hurt sales, Bill said. Much cheaper stained glass imports from China began to flood the market in the late 1980s, hurting sales of Darwin's hand-crafted, museum-quality lamps that could cost thousands of dollars.

"People would see stained glass at K-mart for \$229.99 and then see our product and would be surprised by our price," he said.

Diversifying into slot machines not only allowed Bill to follow a dream, it saved his business, Bill said. Without the

► HEALTH WATCH

Continued from page 3

plant donations specialist and an ardent proponent of organ donation. That is what he was doing when he died.

Richard was a guy I liked and admired. His beaming smile under his mustache was like opening the fridge at night in an August heat wave-refreshing, bright, soothing, welcoming, and nurturing.

As a donation specialist, Richard's job was to assist in the surgical removal of the organs from the donor and to process and monitor them until the transplant took place. It was a job he loved. He helped hundreds over the years by bringing back hearts, lungs, kidneys, pancreases and livers.

Many people have asked why the transplant team needs to travel to the donor hospital to procure the organs. There are two main reasons. First, very few donor hospitals have a transplant team capable of taking out the organs, because less than 5 percent of the hospitals in the U.S. perform transplants. Second, surgeons need to see the organs to make sure they're suitable for each particular recipient.

Despite the tragedy, Bob is looking forward to going out on his next transplant flight. He says it will help him cope with his loss. He loves the flying part of his job so much that he became a private pilot a few years ago. Now he flies for fun on

his days off.

Transplanters are a strong, flexible and resilient breed. They pick challenging hobbies like flying planes and challenging second jobs like being a track coach, as Richard did so superlatively as the girl's track team coach of Gabriel Richard High School.

Transplanters are awakened in the middle of the night and leave warm beds willingly to get into cold helicopters and planes in the winter to bring back organs for people in desperate need.

Transplant spouses also need to be strong, flexible and resilient. Even a "normal" on-call schedule can disrupt family life because when the call comes in, the transplant needs to leave as soon as possible.

Six brave and dedicated men died trying to save another's life. Now, six families are left behind trying to find the strength to be brave themselves. My heart goes out to them.

The tragic situation doesn't make sense except for one thing:

David Ashburn, Richard Chenault II, Dennis Hoyes, Richard Lapensee, Bill Serra and Martin Spoor were doing what they loved.

They will be deeply missed.

■ Deb Merion is a freelance writer and writing coach who writes a monthly column on health care. She can be reached at DEMerion@aol.com. For more information about the U-M transplant plane crash, visit http://www.med.umich.edu/survival_flight/update/