



Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau
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Welcome to the latest issue of
ROI

Sharing the story of revitalization



John Groh, RACVB president/CEO visits "Big" John Howell show.

As downtown Rockford, and the community as a whole, continues to revitalize and reshape itself, sharing the story becomes just as vital as creating the story. During November and December, RACVB worked to tell these stories in the Chicagoland market by reaching out to regional media outlets with the good news of Rockford's comeback.

The results included two interviews on WLS-AM 890 the week of Thanksgiving, including a fantastic morning drive-time live interview on the popular "Big" John Howell show, where John Groh, RACVB's president/CEO, spoke about the great small businesses that are giving a unique flavor to the Rockford area, along with **discussing the economic impact of an event like Stroll on State**.

In addition to the exposure on WLS, RACVB was able to secure feature placements on the Chicago Board Options Exchange "Business First" video newscast and WYCC PBS Chicago's segment, "In the Loop". The PBS piece, titled "The Rebirth of Rockford," focused on a local family that recently re-established itself after hard times, along with several shop owners who have helped to put downtown Rockford on the upswing.

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Real, Original **ROI**

How tourism is benefitting our regional economy now

Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau



Rockford's River Lights

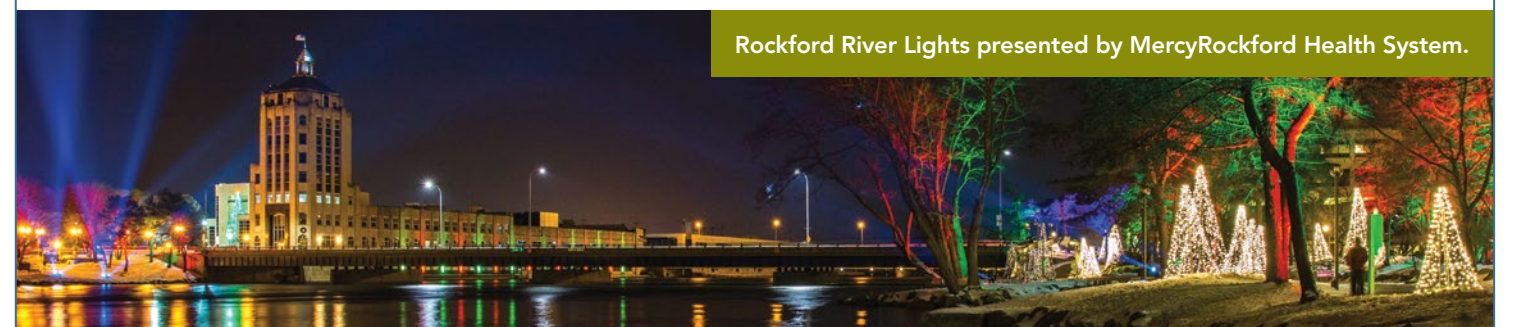
The Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau introduced the newest attraction in downtown Rockford this past holiday season. **Rockford River Lights presented by MercyRockford Health System** debuted at Stroll on State presented by Illinois Bank & Trust. After the opening performance at SOS, River Lights continued throughout December culminating the first weekend in January. Special performances were showcased on New Year's Eve, and spectators filled the riverbanks throughout the holidays to watch the great light displays.

Set along the east and west banks of the Rock River between the State and Jefferson Street bridges, River Lights is a synchronized light show that lasts 8-15 minutes per show. The River Lights shows are choreographed and designed by Luxe Productions of Rockford.

The River Lights experience is designed to be viewed both from afar and up close. Residents and visitors will be invited to walk along the Esplanade on the west bank of the river and the Millennium Fountain path on the east side, between the State and Jefferson Street bridges. River Lights will stay up and on year-round. They will be programmed to change colors with the seasons and for special events and holidays. It will be possible to offer light shows for special events/occasions and holidays. Interested parties would work with RACVB to make this happen.

River Lights is **funded through donations by local businesses, organizations and individuals**. Learn more about our donors and how to donate at rockfordriverlights.com

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Rockford River Lights presented by MercyRockford Health System.



UW Health Sports Factory progress

Despite the cold winter weather, activity at the UW Health Sports Factory heated up over the past few months. Crews remain on target for a June opening of the facility. The high-end hardwood flooring installation, one of the most time-intensive aspects of the construction, began in early January.

Community members have had the opportunity to get up close and personal to the construction process thanks to several group tours coordinated by the RACVB, Park District and City of Rockford. Citizens, potential clients and tourism partners were invited to see the progress and then encouraged to pass along their observations and enthusiasm to others.

The first tournament to hit the courts at the UW Health Sports Factory will be a Rockford Hoops tournament on June 4–5. This will be the first of 21 basketball tournaments conducted by Rockford Hoops in the Factory's first year of operation.

Sports Complexes Named

Sportscore Downtown received its official name, UW Health Sports Factory, thanks to a naming rights partnership agreement between the Rockford Park District and SwedishAmerican, a division of UW Health. The announcement was made on Nov. 12, 2015, by the Park District, Winnebago County Regional Tourism Facility Board (WCRTFB) and City of Rockford. The 10-year agreement will total \$1,938,24 with the Rockford Park District receiving an annual fee beginning at \$175,000.

In addition to the Sports Factory announcement, the Rockford Park District and WCRTFB announced that both Sportscore Complexes have been renamed, thanks to a new naming rights partner. The complexes will now be called MercyRockfordSportscore 1 and MercyRockford Sportscore 2. The 10-year agreement with MercyRockford Health System will total \$2 million, with an annual contribution of approximately \$200,000.

FUN FACT: If all of the hardwood pieces for the UW Sports Factory floor was laid end to end, it would stretch 106 miles.

RACVB Annual Luncheon will spread the love

RACVB's Annual Luncheon will take place on Wednesday, June 1 at the new UW Health Sports Factory. The luncheon will be the first event to take place at the Factory. Just a few short years ago, in 2013, RACVB hosted its annual luncheon in the same space, when it was still an unused and underdeveloped space with the dream of being transformed into a world-class sports facility just beginning to take root in the community.

"We are excited to host the first event in the new UW Health Sports Factory," said John Groh, RACVB president/CEO. "We look forward to welcoming visitors from around the world to the facility, but first want to

welcome our many partners and stakeholders who have cheered on the development of this new facility."

In addition to showcasing the newly opened facility, the annual luncheon will feature **guest speaker Peter Kageyama, author of "For the Love of Cities."** He will explore what makes cities lovable, **what motivates ordinary citizens to do extraordinary things** for their cities, and how people who are truly in love with their cities are key to the future development of communities, including the Rockford region.

Tickets are available at gorockford.com/lunch



UW Health Sports Factory tour, October 2015.

Local entrepreneurs help to define a destination



Winnebago Buy Local works from the inside out to draw people to the region for unique retail and dining experiences.

The organization, founded in 2011, is a coalition of locally owned businesses where collaboration is key. Lauren Davis is the group’s president, and she co-owns the funky Rockford gift and vinyl record shop Culture Shock (2239 Charles St., Rockford) with her husband, Skyler.

“If we can make this a good place for businesses, other businesses will want to come here, and tourists will look at the Rockford region as a destination,” Davis said. “We want business owners to like being here because the community, cities and county support them, and they feel welcome here.

“Your businesses that are already here are your best form of advertising.”

Winnebago Buy Local boasts more than 200 members, and visitors can search a

handy online directory for a local business that fits their needs, be that a restaurant for a night out or a boutique to find a new outfit.

The group’s collaborative focus has helped build up its popular annual events: a kickoff that just happened in February, A Totally Local Ice Cream Social in July and A Local Holiday Market in December. Winnebago Buy

Local also offers educational and networking events free of charge for local businesses every other month. And each August, the group receives proclamations from municipalities throughout the county declaring it Winnebago Buy Local Month County-Wide.

New on the calendar this year is a social media conference scheduled for May 23

at Midway Village Museum featuring keynote speaker Larry Williams, a popular TEDx presenter from Reno, Nevada. The day-long event will include several speakers, and the cost will cover a museum tour and lunch.

Winnebago Buy Local is active on the Web, with featured member blog posts and engaging posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (hashtag #buyWBL or #ShopSmallWBL). **The group encourages visitors to tag locations and share photos during Eat Local Saturday** – the first Saturday of each month – when they choose local restaurants, grocers, delis, coffee shops, etc. for eats and treats.

Kim Knutson, owner of Lallygag Boutique (4616 E. State St., Rockford) said everything Winnebago Buy Local does is relevant to small business owners, from the collaborative public events to sessions about customer service, branding and store layouts. Lallygag is located in the same building as fellow retailers For the Love of Chic and Petals & Pickin’s, and Knutson said they work together to create a warm, inviting atmosphere and a

unique destination shopping experience for visitors.

“Lauren and Skyler and the whole team of Winnebago Buy Local volunteers – they live that notion of be the change you want to see in the world, and I love being a part of that,” Knutson said.

Letica Wiley and Lorraine Weathers just opened their new resale clothing and gift shop The Jean Studio Boutique (3929 Broadway, Rockford) on Jan. 30, but they joined Winnebago Buy Local right away to collaborate with other regional business owners.

“We want Rockford to know who we are, and Winnebago Buy Local is a good place to start,” Wiley said.

Where to find Winnebago Buy Local

Website: winnebagobuylocal.com

Facebook: facebook.com/winnebagobuylocal

Twitter: twitter.com/BuyWBL or @BuyWBL

Instagram: instagram.com/buywbl



Bath & Body Fusion



A local holiday market – A Winnebago Buy Local Event



Toad Hall Books and Records



Minglewood



All of the Lights.
Continued from cover.

All Aglow exhibit at
Nicholas Conservatory
& Gardens.

The twinkle and shine of holiday lights can instantly put people in the mood for the Christmas season. And that’s exactly what two of the region’s largest light displays did just a few short months ago.

Festival of Lights celebrated its 27th year in 2015. More than 17,000 vehicles drove through Sinnissippi Park touring 56 lighted displays during the event’s 14-day run, according to longtime organizer and “Mr. Fourth of July” Joe Marino.

Lights displays help draw visitors to the region.

Across the street, Nicholas Conservatory & Gardens saw a 20 percent increase in visitors over 2014 thanks to the All Aglow exhibit. All Aglow featured 137,244 colorful LED lights that illuminated the conservatory and surrounding gardens; 55 planted trees and bushes; and 39 fresh-cut trees. A new lantern and laser light system inside the conservatory displayed changing colors synced with music.

Kelly Moore, the conservatory’s facility manager, said many people toured All Aglow and Festival of Lights all in one visit. The displays drew people driving along Illinois 251, as they were surrounded on both sides of the road by lights. Moore received emails and calls from people sharing their appreciation for

All Aglow and saying they’d be sad to see the lights turned off in January.

“People feel good when they see the lights – they’re dramatic and bright and colorful,” Moore noted.

Moore said Rockford Park District officials were pleased with All Aglow’s reach, and the plan is to make the event bigger and better this year.

Marino said Festival of Lights **volunteers see vehicle license plates from Indiana, Wisconsin, Ohio and Iowa, which means the event draws out-of-town visitors** – likely people in town visiting family for the holidays.

“Just like we do for the Fourth of July, we get thousands of people from out of town because we show them what they like to see for the holidays,” Marino explained. “The idea was to make North Second Street by the park and the conservatory a showplace.”

Additional activities paired with the light displays also helped draw visitors. The All Aglow Express ran 17 trolley rides with a total of 766 participants for the 2015 season. Santa Claus helped welcome families at Festival of Lights.



Rockford River Lights debuted at Stroll on State 2015.



The Olympic Tavern
“Now we’re a destination for the entire region.”

Visitors Mean Jobs...My Job!

Name:
Zak Rotello

Job:
Beer director at **The Olympic Tavern**,
2327 N. Main St., Rockford

Question: How did The Olympic get started?

Answer: My grandfather, Anthony Rotello, founded The Olympic Tavern in 1945. Previously, it was a corner store/tavern called Mutimer’s. My father, Thomas Rotello, also grew up in the business and has grown it from a 30-seat neighborhood pub to a full-service restaurant with great outdoor dining and a newly refurbished bar. I came on board full time around 2003 when I returned from college, discovered my passion for great beer and really started building up our draught beer program. Now we’re a destination for the entire region.

Q: Have you seen business increase, or has business changed in any way since you did the big renovations at Olympic?

A: Business has definitely increased – we have more room now! The remodel definitely allowed us to have more usable space in our bar room and probably has brought in new people that had never been in the restaurant before. People always love the high ceilings, the big round tables in the dining room, sitting by the fireplace in the winter and of course, the deck and outdoor bar in the warmer months.

Q: Why do you think Olympic remains a popular, local establishment where people like to bring visitors and out-of-town guests?

A: We’re Rockford’s home away from home. We aim to curate a cozy, comfortable atmosphere with friendly, knowledgeable servers while delivering our guests great food and the best beer, wine, whiskey and cocktails around. Some of our regular customers live down the block, and some live on the other side of Cherry Valley. I think it’s important to remember that we are a destination, and we have to make it worth people’s drive (or walk, or bike ride) to get here, so we always have to be improving food, service, drinks – everything has to always be improving. I can’t sit still anyways. I get bored.

Q: What’s Tour de North End all about?

A: I lived in Portland, Oregon, for about two years and somehow managed to never ride a bicycle while I was there, even though it’s one of the most bike-friendly cities in America. So when I came back to Rockford, I moved into a house in the neighborhood and started biking every day to work. Since Rockford really doesn’t have the best infrastructure for cyclists, I started the TDNE as a way to reach out to bikers and make sure they followed the rules of the road but also as a message to motorists that they need. We have been overwhelmed with the community support and goodwill that the event creates. This will be our sixth year of TDNE, and I expect well over 1,000 cyclists to hit the road with us on July 30, 2016.

Q: Why do you enjoy your job/work?

A: I grew up behind the bar and in my parents’ kitchen. I’m a foodie, a beer geek and a restaurant industry lifer. My homework nowadays is to eat and drink great food, wine and beer so I can share the best recipes, brews and cocktails with our guests and staff the next morning. What else could possibly be better than that?