

By John Groh

The Faces of Tourism

Hospitality industry in Winnebago County makes up 2,800 jobs

The power of tourism is prevalent every day in the Rockford region. Whether it is large-scale sports tournaments at Mercyhealth Sportscore Two, or families visiting the Riverfront Museum Park and enjoying the great offerings at the Discovery Center Museum and Rockford Art Museum, tourism is always in motion in Rockford.

One of the best benefits of tourism is that it is a job creator and sustainer. Last year, the Illinois Office of Tourism released statistics showing that in Winnebago County, more than 2,800 jobs were directly produced by the tourism/hospitality industry. That is amazing! Those are jobs that if not for tourism wouldn't exist. Those are jobs that help bring stability to our local economy and help to enhance the quality of life of families in our region.

During National Travel & Tourism week in May, the theme presented by the U.S. Travel Association was "The Faces of Travel." Designed to shed light on the great people that make the industry so remarkable and powerful, the theme underscores the value of entrepreneurs, service workers, chefs, customer service managers, hotel line staff and so many others who contribute to our travel industry.

These people work extremely hard behind the scenes and roll out the red carpet to our residents and visitors. It takes a strong unified community to make a big impact and each of these individuals continue to do their part to offer an above and beyond experience for people to enjoy each day.

To celebrate and highlight a few of these individuals, RACVB's marketing manager, Andrea Mandala, interviewed three people who help make the tourism industry hum in Rockford.

Josh Binning, owner of [Lucha Cantina](#)

What is your favorite part about owning a restaurant in the Rockford region? "My favorite part of the job is my team. I love working with the staff and seeing what I can do to help them take great care of our guests."

Are there any new events that you'll be involved with or new offerings to the community? "We just came off of our most successful Cinco de Mayo ever. It was crazy. As usual we are excited to be a part of many community events and we are excited to be a food vendor at [Urban Farmgirl's Main Street Market](#) at Midway Village Museum next weekend! We have also started doing monthly features on our menu and that has been very well received by our guests."

Lauren Davis, owner of [Culture Shock](#) and Lauren Davis Creative

Why you love what you do each and every day? “With Culture Shock, what gives me the most joy is getting to meet new people every day. Some people have the illusion that they might not "get" our store, but when they take the chance to stop in and find all of our unique, eclectic, and story/music-driven products, they find out that there is truly something for everyone in here. I also love seeing their eyes light up when we tell them that MOST gifts in our store are under \$25 with some exceptions.”

From a Millennial's perspective what are some of your favorite things about the Rockford region? “I love the art and music scene that has formed out of the desperation of lack there-of. There is never a night I have nothing to do. I like to open my mind to all different types of the "arts" and take it all in; Rockford is so vibrant. We try to celebrate this by hosting live music in our shop, selling local and regional music, and attending as many art and music events as we can, and I always end up at Social or Octane at the end of the night. I would also say that I love how the local businesses really stick together in Rockford to help each other through organizations like Winnebago Buy Local. I have an 11 year old business and I am a Millennial. That's not something that everyone has, and it's due to the supportive nature of the businesses around us who let us know that we are never alone and we are all standing together.”

Lonna Converso, Director of Marketing and Social Media at [Midway Village Museum](#)

Why do you love what you do each and every day? “Each day is interesting at the museum never is there a same day twice. We see many school groups on weekdays coming on tours, while the weekends are about private rentals such as weddings, bridal showers or other family gatherings. Weekends also mean greeting and engaging visitors in the larger special we produce to educate the public about history.”

Are there any new events or achievements the Museum has seen over the last year? “This year, the museum's The Great War: World War I at Midway Village increased in attendance by 82 percent! This was reflective in the team approach at the museum. The event grew in scope with new features for the public to engage and learn about, while the re-enactors popular with this event also grew. We saw the most re-enactors come out to portray both civilians and soldiers. All these factors, plus the marketing made for the success of the event. The public came out in record numbers. I enjoy working at the museum not only because of the history I learn and engage with on a daily basis, but also the hundreds of volunteers I meet who assist in making sure Midway Village Museum is able to deliver its mission of history preservation and education.”