

The reinvention of Beloit

Hendricks companies lead change in the city

by [Alysha Schertz](#) | May 01, 2018, 4:25 PM

The year is 1885; four former employees of Beloit-based Merrill & Houston Iron Works have just purchased the company's assets and renamed the company.

Beloit Iron Works has 10 employees. In four years, the company will grow to 100 employees, and in 10 years, it will reinvent the industry and ship its first paper machines to Japan and China.



Beloit ironworker, 1952

For the next 115 years, Beloit Iron Works, later Beloit Corp., would be an integral part of the lifeblood of the city—the hero and innovator of the community.

At its peak, the company employed more than 7,000 people.

Beloit’s identity was made on the backs of the hard-working iron workers, and later papermakers, who called the city home.

Yet Beloit Corp. could not be sustained.

In 1999, the company would shut its doors, filing for bankruptcy and dealing a significant blow to the community’s iron and manufacturing heritage.

The city’s next hero would come in the form of Diane Hendricks and her late husband, Ken. Together, and with help from others in the community, they would begin to reinvent what it means to be Beloit.

Its new identity would not be iron, but tech.

Innovation would still thrive, but it would come in the form of computer technology, innovative startups and a different breed of entrepreneur.

Diane Hendricks founded what would become Beloit-based Hendricks Commercial Properties in 1974. She married Ken in 1975, and together they founded more than 40 companies, including Beloit-based ABC Supply, one of the community’s largest employers and the largest roofing and vinyl siding wholesale distributor in the United States.

Diane and Ken purchased the 30-acre industrial campus formerly occupied by Beloit Corp., in 2001. From the beginning, they saw potential to give new life to the property.

Tragically, in 2007, Ken passed away after falling on the job.

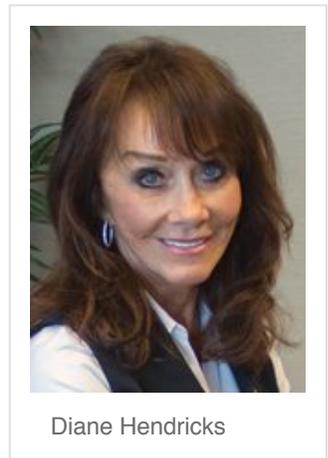
Diane would press on and continue to fulfill the vision the two had for not just the property, but also Beloit.

Today, the former Beloit Corp. campus, now known as the Ironworks, has been completely redeveloped as a multi-tenant space.

“We changed the direction of this building in its entirety,” said Rob Gerbitz, president and chief executive officer of Hendricks Commercial Properties. “We knew if we didn’t think differently, this property would never reach its potential as the epicenter of business in downtown Beloit.”

Most of the building was manufacturing space, complete with 50-foot ceilings, Gerbitz said.

Instead of demolishing the building, Hendricks decided to leave the structure and redesign the property to add roads, more access doors and additional parking. They named it Ironworks.



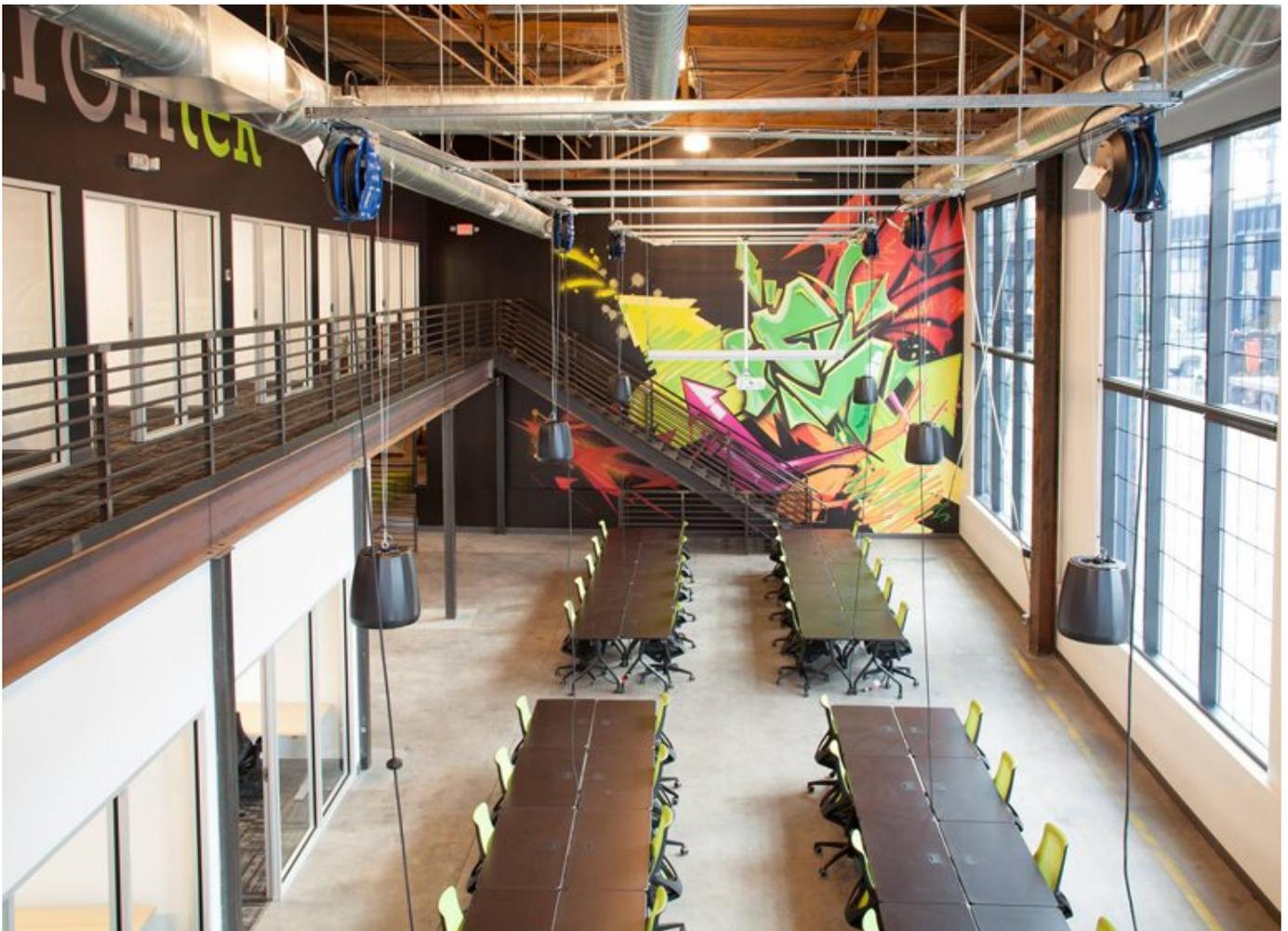
Diane Hendricks

The company used the high ceilings to create more floors, loft spaces, and even a large slide for one of the companies located in the building.

It is the headquarters for Hendricks Commercial Properties, but also innovative tech companies Ebates, Comply365, Ironworks Golf Lab, and most recently, Acculynx.

Nearly 50 companies currently occupy or plan to occupy space in the building, along with organizations including the Greater Beloit Chamber of Commerce, Hendricks CareerTek and IronTek co-working.

Hendricks also donated an 80,000-square-foot building worth approximately \$4 million at the south end of the complex to the Stateline Family YMCA, which renovated the space and relocated in 2017.



The IronTek co-working space.
Credit: Hendricks Commercial Properties

While the space hasn't quite neared the number of employees its former occupant reached; Ironworks currently has approximately 1,500 people employed in the space, and plans for continued growth, Gerbitz said.

"It's fun to think about what we can do with the space we have available," Gerbitz said. "We're not trying to do the same types of projects over and over again; we like to ask our tenants what they need and then deliver. We have to be creative."

Building Beloit

Gerbitz joined Hendricks Commercial Properties in 2008. According to him, he was tasked by Diane Hendricks to “build Beloit.”

The Iron Works property, situated on the banks of the Rock River in the heart of downtown, would be just one of several flagship projects of Beloit’s revitalization, Gerbitz said.

The Eclipse Center is located on the former property of the Beloit Mall. Hendricks Commercial Properties has rebranded the building as a mixed-use development with retail and office space, and a 50,000-square-foot event center.

Just across the Rock River from the Iron Works Campus is a new Ironworks Hotel, a luxury boutique hotel that calls attention to the city’s heritage, as well. Several other projects, including a historic building located at 419 Pleasant St. that was redeveloped into office space and the Phoenix Building apartments, were also completed downtown a few years ago.

According to Gerbitz, the company will also open Hotel Goodwin at 500 Public Ave. in downtown Beloit this summer. The 34-guest room hotel is named after the 19th century Goodwin House that once served downtown Beloit, he said.

Around the corner are the Merrill & Houston’s Steak Joint and Lucy’s #7 Burger Bar, also developed and managed by Hendricks subsidiary Geronimo Hospitality Group. The company will add Velvet Buffalo Cafe to its restaurant lineup this summer, as well.

“Business in the community has been absolutely spectacular,” Gerbitz said. “We continue to see demand for economic development.”

According to Gerbitz, the company is also working on the conversion of the former Kerry Ingredients building at 200 W. Grand Ave, into a 70-unit apartment building, and a pedestrian bridge across the Rock River.

“Beloit’s transformation has been nothing short of amazing,” Gerbitz said. “The community as a whole has really been a partner for Diane, and for Ken, in the growth of their businesses. Through good times and bad, people in this community have worked together to constantly help it grow.”

When Beloit Corp. went out of business and Fairbanks Morse, a diesel engine manufacturer, scaled back its operations, the community really suffered, Gerbitz said.



Gerbitz



Just across the Rock River from the Ironworks campus is the new Ironworks Hotel.

Credit: Hendricks Commercial Properties

“The jobs left, the ancillary businesses who served those manufacturers left; it’s a devastating process to go through. What’s so impressive though is that this community gathered, realized they were headed in a not-so-great direction, and set the course to do something about it.”

Back in 1987, a group of civic and business leaders formed an organization known today as Beloit 2020.

Both Gerbitz and Hendricks sit on the board of the organization, which has been instrumental in the revitalization efforts of the community, Gerbitz said.

“The conversations were happening long before I came to Beloit,” he said. “It hasn’t been easy and it didn’t happen overnight, but that’s where it had to start.”

The reinvention of Beloit has worked, primarily because stakeholders in the community are committed to talking and working hard, and are passionate about bettering the community, Gerbitz said.



Hendricks recently completed the redevelopment of the Phoenix Building apartments in downtown Beloit.
Credit: Hendricks Commercial Properties

Does a community need a Diane Hendricks?

“It certainly doesn’t hurt, but it’s not just because of her money,” Gerbitz said. “Her money pales in comparison to her passion. Her passion for her community and (her passion) to get things done is paramount. If she didn’t have the passion, her money wouldn’t matter.”

It’s definitely a collaborative effort, he said.

“A strategy was put in place and then executed,” Gerbitz said. “It’s about making this community better, and how we get to where we, as a community, want to be. There’s so much potential in this community. We haven’t even begun to scratch the surface.” ∞