

April/May 2013

MCKINNEY

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Historic Downtown McKinney

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By Rick Atkinson



DOWNTOWN THE PLACE TO BE

*Historic Downtown McKinney
continues to show the way*



There's not much doubt about it now. For unique shopping, dining and entertainment in this neck of Texas, Historic Downtown McKinney is the place to go. Years in the making, and with thanks to many, the current rendering of the convergence of Louisiana, Virginia, Tennessee and Kentucky streets on McKinney's east side is, by any measure, a solid success.

The Square, as it's known to many, now hosts an estimated 1.5 million visitors each year, according to McKinney Main Street data. McKinney Main Street is the City's 13-member board tasked with improving and maintaining every aspect of downtown. With roots

recharge," she says, "I'll go just sit on one of the park benches — just to see the life and the vibrancy. It's incredible."

Lake's prior experience includes 13 years in national retail sales and marketing. She and her husband Brad have lived in McKinney since they were married in 1996. They have a son, Parker, age 7.

She and Brad shopped and dined downtown from their earliest days in McKinney. "It was just a handful of restaurants [then]," Lake says. "But the shopping and the people — downtown has always been so service-oriented — it just drew us back, time and time again."

Downtown McKinney really kicked into high gear in 2008, Lake says, when the City spent over \$2 million on infra-

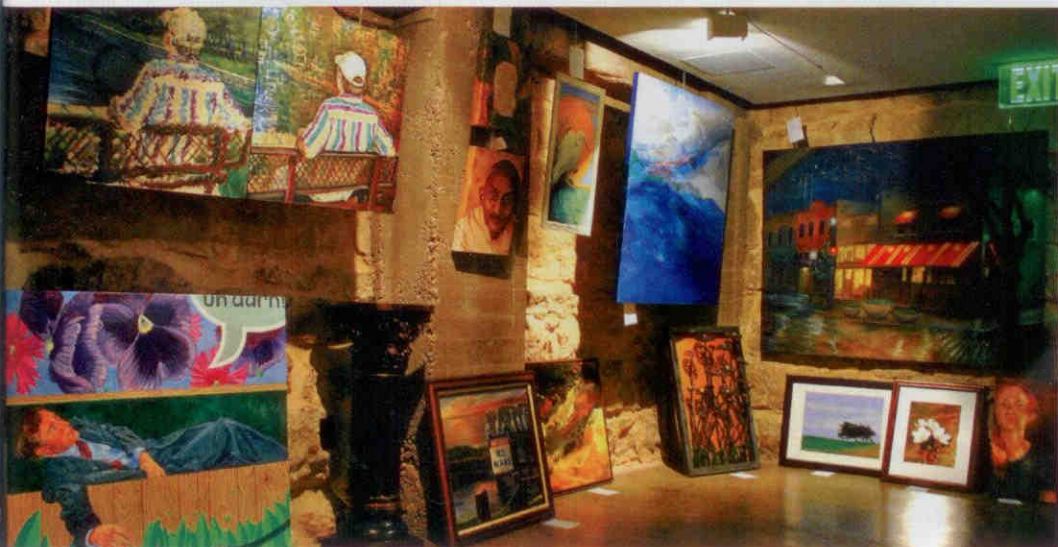
So why has this all turned out so very well?

"I think it's the passion that's put forth," Lake says, "not only by the community, but by the City leaders and our stakeholders. McKinney has always been known for preserving our past, and that's a priority to everybody. It's not just one person."

Lake says downtown's transformation was not patterned after any other town square. "It was who we are, through and through." She attributes much of the success to property owners who have "a keen eye to bring in what works for McKinney."

Representatives of towns across Texas have called Lake to inquire about McKinney's success.

"One of my most exciting phone calls



going back to a 1980s national effort to preserve historic commercial architecture, Main Street programs have evolved to emphasize economic development, marketing and design.

McKinney exemplifies how it is all supposed to work and finding a better example would be hard.

Ty Lake has been Director of McKinney Main Street since 2005, and she took on the added duties of director of downtown's McKinney Performing Arts Center 18 months ago. She says she has "that perfect job."

From her office, appropriately ensconced in the eye of downtown's surge — in the MPAC, the former Collin County Courthouse — Lake sees and feels it all. "Sometimes, when I need to

Festivals, live music, a thriving art scene, shopping & dining keep people coming downtown throughout the year

structure, including new water lines and expanded-width sidewalks and patios. "Downtown was already doing wonderfully," she says, "but that was the tipping point for when it just really started to boom."

"To put it in perspective," Lake says, "when I started in 2005, there was really, I would say, a nine-block area that we would focus on, with businesses. Now, we've got 17 blocks that we focus on and 138 businesses."

this past year was from Georgetown," she says. "They've got such a great downtown and every time I go there it's, 'Oh, I wish we could do X, Y and Z.' So when you get someone like that who comes to us, it's just that inspiring feeling that says, 'Hey, we're doing something right.'"

No fewer than eight annual festivals keep the downtown juices flowing year-round. The events are produced either by McKinney Main Street or in partnership with other groups. Bike the Bricks,



*Expanded width sidewalks and patios make
make dining “out” a reality and the Krewe
of Barkus Mardis Gras Dog Parade is a crowd-pleaser.*

now in its third year, is a closed-circuit bike rally held each May. Other popular events include Oktoberfest, Halloween’s Scare on the Square, Dickens of a Christmas, the Krewe of Barkus Mardi Gras Dog Festival and Parade, Morning Maniacs Classic Cars and Arts in Bloom.

The Wish 100 fundraiser, another bike rally, covers 100-kilometers through Collin County, with its start and finish in downtown McKinney. Last year, the event raised \$60,000 for Make-A-Wish Foundation® of North Texas.

Lake says these recurring events embody a sense of community for residents. “There may be 10 to 20 of us working on an event, but when you pull in 100 volunteers from the community, they own it.”

Live entertainment is also available most any night somewhere on the square. And on the second Saturday of each month many shops and restaurants stay open for extended hours.

“At the end of the day,” Lake says, “it all goes back to that small-town feeling and our unique charm, not only where adults can have fun, but all our events are so family-friendly, that it’s just a gathering place. We’ve got a great formula now.”

Hamilton Doak, owner of Orisons Art and Framing at 110 E. Louisiana, calls downtown McKinney “a breath of

fresh air.” “The Second Saturdays,” he says, “have really turned into a signature monthly event for our downtown area. The restaurants, the boutiques, the art galleries are definitely enjoying the increase in foot-traffic. And people are buying.”

Deb Olthouse and her husband Ken have owned The Little Red Hen, a men’s and women’s apparel and gift shop at 105 E. Virginia, for eight years. The shop has been a fixture on the square for about 35 years.

“It started out, of course, as our retail business,” Deb says, “but it has become more like a family in here... [customers] come in from Dallas, they come in from Oklahoma. They come in, and they get one-on-one service. They don’t find that in other places. It’s been an incredible experience, and it’s been exciting to watch the square grow.”

Lake says the MPAC is now more incorporated into the downtown’s overall scene. “We did partnerships and things like that [before], but it’s almost like a true marriage now. Everything is just consistent, and there’s such congruency, from a standpoint of, if we do Arts in Bloom we’re going to do an event inside MPAC [too].”

Last May, the MPAC hosted its first annual Juried Art Show. The event drew

100 entries from 70 artists and featured cash awards.

Lake says her experience with Main Street prior to taking on the MPAC benefited her greatly.

“By working with the merchants for so many years, city leaders, and just the community overall, there was more of a support system.” Plus, she says, “The [MPAC] staff here was already fantastic, doing what they needed to do.”

The MPAC’s 427-seat performance venue provides an intimate environment for musical concerts, theatrical presentations and stand-up comedy. Community business partners like Torchmark and Raytheon to name a few have also rented the space for conferences. Instructor led classes for arts and professional development are offered, as well, with rental costs based on enrollment.

With downtown’s occupancy rate at approximately 98 percent, getting in on the action can be difficult for interested merchants, though four new restaurants are slated to open in spring/summer 2013 just east of the square.

A handful of residents currently live in lofts above the square and new apartments have sprung up on South Kentucky. Says Lake, “One thing that our community can expect to see in the future is more — more continued growth, more entertainment and activity and more memories to be made, which is what history and preserving who we are is all about.”

If what’s coming is as well-planned and executed as the present, bring it on!