2010

MI Biz OpEd: Kalamazoo Offers the Complete Package

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Kalamazoo offers the complete package

John M. Dunn, president
Western Michigan University

Kalamazoo is a city that knows how to use its resources to get things done.

Early this month, I helped kick off the 68th running in Kalamazoo of the U.S. Tennis Association's National Championships for Boys 18 and 16. The extraordinary event brings 20,000 visitors to our community for 10 days of top-notch competition. It is good for our community, good for business and a true celebration of young people and their accomplishments. It happens in Kalamazoo because this is a city small enough to foster strong civic/business/nonprofit partnerships and large enough to bring a wealth of resources to any task.

In 2007, I was a new University president who was just getting to know what seemed like an interesting college community with a charming name--Kalamazoo. Since then, I've moved from interest to advocacy and, now, evangelistic zeal, as I describe this remarkable community to prospective residents and business people on the lookout for a place to grow and prosper. There are few places in the world that can replicate the combination of attributes that make Kalamazoo the perfect place to build a business or raise a family in the 21st century. Those attributes are:

- A long-term commitment to education and young people
- A century-long legacy of community collaboration
- Exceptional quality of life and community engagement in the arts and human services.

Education is in our genetic makeup

The rest of the nation is now paying attention to the tie between education and economic development. In Kalamazoo, that's been the operating principle for more than 150 years. The Kalamazoo Promise is the most recent illustration of commitment. That revolutionary free college program, which produced its first graduates at WMU this year, joins other remarkable educational accomplishments with their roots in Kalamazoo.

- The first taxpayer-supported public high school was established in Kalamazoo in 1858 and served as the legal precedent for secondary schools around the nation.
• In 1986, one of the first dedicated high school math and science centers in the nation was begun in Kalamazoo to develop a high-tech local labor pool.

Earlier this year, Lansing-based political expert Rick Cole correctly opined that, "...the commitment to public education is so deeply embedded in Kalamazoo’s gene pool that it’s just second nature for that community to try to solve problems through education."

Today, Kalamazoo is blessed with a wealth of K-20 educational resources, including 45,000 college students. Our work force is among the most highly educated in the nation, and those well-educated citizens put a unique stamp on the civic life of our community. I've often been regaled with stories about new residents to our area being stunned to learn their mayor is a research scientist and their city commissioners and legislators are M.D.s or Ph.D.s

Collaboration is our community legacy

Collaboration is a way of life in this tight-knit community. It's been a constant as industries thrive and decline and new ones replace them. A decade ago, when the community faced a the loss of part of its major life sciences base, for instance, disparate parts of the community came together to support the establishment of new opportunities.

A life sciences incubator was built, the commitment of venture capital was secured and Kalamazoo not only kept but also has grown its 150-year tradition of leadership in the life sciences that began with the work of entrepreneurs like W.E. Upjohn and Homer Stryker. Nearly three dozen new startup companies have been formed. The life sciences are a relatively new part of Michigan's path to the new economy, but because of collaboration, Kalamazoo and its surrounding environs already constitute one of the world's savviest and most productive spots for life science and pharmaceutical development, testing and commercialization.

Unparalleled quality of life

Educational resources and collaboration bring with them quality of life indicators that can tip the scale whenever someone considers a new community. Kalamazoo has more than an edge in this arena. This is a community that celebrates the arts and culture and reaches out to embrace and support its citizens when they are most vulnerable. Here are just a few examples. Kalamazoo is home to:

• the biennial Gilmore International Keyboard Festival
• its own symphony, outstanding art museum and vibrant civic theatre
• two world-class hospitals
• A United Way organization ranked in the top 5 percent nationally
• professional sports teams and a wealth of recreation facilities.
This is a city ready for anyone looking for a town that offers the complete package.