

White Birch creative with real estate during pandemic; open house for new space coming

By Shawn F. Linenberger
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White Birch Properties, Realty Executives of KC might have been in flux during much of the pandemic with regards to a physical office, but it's been business as usual — and then some — for Realtors Joanna Eibes, Amanda Beach-Starcher and Breanna Holthaus in recent months.

The agency left its roughly 900-square-foot space in the 400 block of Fourth Street in late March. But plans to move to a new location stalled as the COVID-19 pandemic intensified.

The group adapted, though, offering virtual home tours on the White Birch Properties Facebook page, as well as virtual listing appointments and buyer consultations. They've taken additional pandemic precautions, such as limiting who can attend showings to people on the title. They also offer the option for electronic signatures as another way to limit in-person contact.

"We could sell you a property without you leaving the house," Holthaus said, as Starcher attested to doing for one of their clients during the pandemic.

Eibes said the group hasn't experienced a decrease in real estate activity during the pandemic. "We were actually super busy," she said. "We thought it would be slow and it was super busy."

The Realtors at White Birch Properties said the added virtual features



Shawn F. Linenberger/Staff

WHITE BIRCH PROPERTIES, REALTY EXECUTIVES OF KC is at 1203 E. U.S. Highway 24-40.

were a big part of that. "Oh, 100%," Starcher said.

Starcher, Eibes and Holthaus continue to settle into their new 1,600 square-foot space at 1203 E. U.S. Highway 24-40 where they're planning for a September open house. Some might know the locale best as the former Vet Vax and then the Country Store.

They also have plans in the works to add a lender and a title company at White Birch Properties' new home.

Eibes said it is a "one-stop shop" for folks looking to buy a home.

"We can take you from the beginning to the end of the real estate purchase," Holthaus said.

Starcher and her colleagues agreed they missed having an office in the downtown district, but were excited for new opportunities at the new highway space. They also will be getting a start in property management with two additional rental spaces at the property.

White Birch Properties, Realty Executives of KC also continues to be active in the Tonganoxie community and surrounding areas.

Eibes serves as secretary for the Tonganoxie Business Association, while Starcher serves a fellow board member.

White Birch Properties organized the St. Patrick's Parade before the pandemic threw a wrench in those mid-March plans.

They're also members of the Kansas City Regional Association of Realtors Community Outreach Group and traditionally have participated in Habitat for Humanity's Rock the Block. They also plan to participate in a fundraiser through the Martin City ReStore, an organization that partners with Habitat for Humanity to provide used appliances, fixtures and other home furnishings. White Birch agents also said they're always ready to collaborate with businesses for other community activities.

Sunday, they participated in the The Flower Bar's Flowers and Friends event at the Gideon Event Space in Basehor.

White Birch can be found on Facebook and Instagram. The agency is open on weekdays with a flex schedule, so meetings by appointment are best. Contact info: 913-417-1007; whitebirchkc@gmail.com.

Himpel Lumber successful fixture in downtown business district

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What started out as a light-hearted conversation nearly 40 years ago has turned into an expanded and prominent anchor in the downtown Tonganoxie business district.

Bo and Ona Himpel owned Himpel Lumber when Charlie Ussery, working for Bendix in Kansas City, Mo., at the time, would always chat up Bo as a frequent customer of the Tonganoxie store. Charlie said he would kid Bo about buying the business from him sometime.

"I didn't think too much about it," Charlie recalled. "I was just kidding him."

And then came a call from Charlie's father-in-law, a local banker. He relayed to Charlie that Bo, who opened the store in 1974, also asked him whether Charlie had any interest.

Bo chatted some more with his wife, Ona, and after three months of chats between Charlie and Bo, they struck a deal. On Jan. 1, 1983, Charlie and Sheri took over ownership and have been operating the lumber yard at 415 Pleasant St. ever since.

Bo, who died in 2012, was a beloved longtime Tonganoxie fixture who continued to work at the store into his early 90s.

The retail space when Ussery started was about 2,500 feet, or the main area one sees when they walk into the store. It now covers 6,000 feet of retail space. The store-

front and warehouse covered a combined 5,000 square feet back in the early 1980s. The total area of the store, warehouse and yard now covers 17,000 square feet.

Charlie attributed the longevity and success to customer service.

"Honestly, I think it's our commitment to taking care of our customers, it really is," Charlie said. "You can buy a 2x4, you can buy a faucet, you can buy a drill, you can buy all of these things anywhere," he explained. "But taking care of customers is the key."

"You have hurdles, of course, but we try to take care of those."

The pandemic and stay-at-home order translated to an increase in people working on home improvement projects and more. Charlie said there was a 90-day window when customer count was up "way beyond what it normally is."

"It actually did help our business," Charlie said. "It's unfortunate that we're having to go through this, but we're appreciative of the business."

He noted that the pandemic has brought people out to assist others. His family has donated to other businesses who might be negatively affected by the pandemic. He also talked about a tradition of socially distant backyard family gatherings on weekends. They rotate takeout orders among Tonganoxie restaurants those weekends.

"If we all just work together, we'll get through this," he said. "We just

have to help where we can. I think it's brought people together a little bit."

Himpel Lumber has experienced big sales in two distinct areas as of late.

"Lawn and garden is just nuts," Charlie quipped. "We had to reorder twice a week to keep the shelves up."

He said paint and paint sundries also were flying off shelves.

Sheri's brother, Rodney Stephenson, retired earlier this year from the store, so there's now a staff of six.

Charlie said the younger help — employees working during high school and some into college — have been a big benefit to the lumber company as well.

He said there have been youths who worked at the store who "have become doctors and U.S. Marshals. You name it, they've done it all."

"There have been a lot of years and a lot of younger people coming through here," Charlie added. "We've been fortunate for that."

Charlie thought that pride in shopping local keeps folks coming back again and again.

"If this place closed up tomorrow, our real value is the number of people we know in this community," he said. "We would have hundreds if not thousands of people we wouldn't have met."

Himpel Lumber is open 7 a.m.-6 p.m. weekdays, 7 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturdays and 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Sundays except Thanksgiving and Christmas. Its phone number is 913-845-2680.

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