

PERSONS TO WATCH IN 2009

They might be considered fascinating people, or up-and-comers, or spirited personalities. But most of all, they're simply interesting individuals making a mark in the Wausau area. The array includes:

- A young architect who co-founded an organic grocery store that some are amazed is still afloat after two years in this market.
- A 20-something woman who fearlessly took on the organization of a "VIP Prom" that got its start using the mailing list from Special Olympics.
- A man who jokes that he gets paid for talking about sex much of the day – the director of a group of eight family planning clinics.
- A public health advocate who got our attention when she confessed to wanting to throttle a local doctor who pronounced that it's the duty of medical professionals to report all illegal aliens.
- And a woman who has formed an arts and education haven on the southeast side

Kevin Korpela

and his foodie community dream

You have to give a second look when you encounter a man who designs buildings for a living and, in his spare time, chases down purse-snatchers and created an organic and local farmer grocery store with its own kitchen and deli. Actually, he chased down just one purse-snatcher, but it still provided an exciting few moments downtown in August 2007 and other potential petty criminals now know there's a long-strided fellow in the neighborhood who can run faster than they can.

Now 41, Korpela grew up in Wausau and headed off to attend UW-Milwaukee for architectural studies before wending his way back to his hometown. He received a master's degree in architecture from University of Utah in Salt Lake City and is nearly finished with a second master's degree, this time in studio art to help him with the quick drawings clients like to see before they commit to full-blown architectural renderings.

He had worked in St. Louis, Utah, Madison and Superior before learning Stone House Builders, an earlier employer, wanted an on-site architect in 2004 to do all the months of detailed work involved with converting the old Wausau East High School into apartments. The loop back home took him 19 years, and he brought back a vision that changed a significant corner of Wausau.

There's not much call right now for an architect, so he's using his temporary lay-off time to work with business partner and organic farmer Blaine Tornow to build up their business, Downtown Grocery.com, in the 600 block of Third Street. Not many businesses can lay claim to truly improving or impacting the lives of their customers, but Korpela can. He likes the idea that, because there is a healthy food store within walking distance for people in the downtown area, he can be a part of what he calls "a large life leap." Without the store, it would be much harder for a couple to choose a simpler existence, perhaps living downtown and cutting down to a single car. Fewer cars and fewer commuting miles would make the world a better place and he'd have a piece of it.



Korpela is beyond a dreamer. When he has a dream and likes it, he gives it a name and puts it to the test of writing out a plan of how it might be achieved. Some of those proposals are akin to business plans, so he's not keen to talk about them, but he will talk about "pockets for people" and "bubblegum billboards." The pockets idea is the sort of thing one might hear from Alderman Jim Rosenberg, a wish that there might be spots other than the city square where small groups of people can congregate in the central part of the city. Korpela calls them "urban interventions" — breaks in the cityscape, mini-parks almost, that can be as small as an outdoor chess table with a small canopy. They would be landmarks that would have people saying, "Meet you at the chess table." Bubblegum billboards would involve students, art and building exteriors. In the past, the sides of barns doubled as large surfaces for art and advertising. Done thoughtfully, a modern-day version of that could blossom around the community. Students would develop teamwork and professional skills in creating a dozen or so places with art that could be "connected" with an internet site showing each location.

If all that sounds dreamy and nebulous, consider that it's exactly the way his vision for Downtown Grocery began — talking not so much about the nitty gritty of, say, acquiring local produce and making delicious vegetarian dishes, but about the community it could engender. Now it's a place that its avid patrons can't do without.

Right now, his focus is getting the 2-year-old Downtown Grocery to the point where he can call it a success and expand in little ways. When he looked into offering shopping totes for sale that were made in the United States, they found none, so they're making them out of material from the now-closed Marathon Rubber plant. In the kitchen, Korpela recently introduced dried apples and chips made from sweet potatoes, parsnips and sun chokes, a little-known tuber native to North America. More of Korpela's thoughts are at his web site, DowntownGrocery.com.

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