

THE STORY OF ONE CITY'S REMARKABLE RENAISSANCE: *From a Person Who Was There from the Start*

Q/A with Linda John, Executive Director of Visit Eau Claire

Linda has lived and worked in Eau Claire for 25 years and counting. It's where she has raised two children, run three half-marathons and countless 5Ks and joined the local Clear Water Kiwanis and Women's Giving Circle, both of which raise money for projects to improve the lives of women and children in the area.

Here are Linda's thoughts on the city's remarkable renaissance that has catapulted this town to a national darling of independent spirit, arts and culture, and natural beauty, and the destination marketing organization's role in taking the community vision from dream to reality.

Q. A city doesn't reinvent itself overnight. How did it happen for Eau Claire?

The desire to reinvent ourselves was there, but we struggled for years to get momentum and sustain it. It was a classic case of starts and stops. That all changed in 2007 when we began a community-wide process called "Clear Vision" led by the city and facilitated by the National Civic League. A group of several hundred of us came together once a month for a full year to tackle everything from quality of life to transportation. Those meetings were not easy, and there were often conflicting opinions.

We eventually identified gaps in community facilities, prioritizing the need for an arts center first, then an events center, and lastly a convention center. The Pablo Center at the Confluence opened in fall 2018, we'll be breaking ground on an events center before too long, and a convention center is cued up after that. As part of the process, several of us were trained in civic problem-solving, and I still use those skills today.

The success of "Clear Vision" really came down to three things: One, we shared from the beginning. Two, we put power in the hands of the people to change things rather than waiting for the city to take the initiative to solve problems. And three, we committed to a collaborative spirit, relationship-building if you will. That third one took a lot of effort, lots of one-on-one meetings over coffee. We put in the hard work and I'm happy to say those of us involved in the process now consider ourselves friends as well as colleagues. We definitely have fun but, when it comes down to it, we roll up our sleeves and solve problems together.

Q. What's the vibe of the city today?

Collaborative, entrepreneurial, independent, creative. We also place a high premium on quality. No one wants to do things half-baked. It needs to be work worthy of acclaim. Still, there's a humility to what we've accomplished through hard work.

Q. How much of what visitors see now is organic and homegrown?

The central business district is about 80% homegrown, a remarkable percentage really. That district is a great reflection of the Eau Claire spirit. And this homegrown phenomenon is expanding to every corner of the city limits.

Q. What was the most outrageous idea that actually became reality?

I have to go with The Lismore Hotel in downtown Eau Claire. Our city lost its place in convention rotations because our downtown hotel fell into awful disrepair. A 30-something Eau Claire native, Zach Halmstad, founder of JAMF Software, wanted a place for his clients and vendors who were coming in from around world to stay when visiting the corporate headquarters in Eau Claire. Now \$24 million later, convention and meeting planners are eager to host their events at The Lismore. Coming in a photo-finish second is The Oxbow Hotel, formerly a seedy hotel many thought would be torn down. We couldn't have imagined that property would be revitalized the way it has been and, in a way, that is so reflective of Eau Claire's culture.

Q. Who are some of the locals who jumped at the chance to fast track this renaissance with you?

Zach Halmstad is one. Julia Johnson, project specialist who works with Zach, exhibits a quiet style with a keen eye for how to produce big results. Chancellor Jim Schmidt of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire brought an attitude of community partnership and a collaborative approach to problem-solving. The same could be said for assistant chancellor Mike Rindo. Kerri Kincaid, former city council president, stuck her neck out to shepherd changes. Catherine Emmanuelle, city council representative, has a can-do attitude and creative spirit. There's also Vicki Hoehn, vice president of community engagement at Royal Credit Union and current board chair for Pablo Center at the Confluence, a real facilitator with a clear vision and an uncanny ability to keep calm and talk others down too, allowing us to stay focused on the bigger picture. Kim Way, the rainmaker if you will, is president of the UW-Eau Claire Foundation, and she's creative in a strategic way. Stuart Schaefer and Dan Clumpner of Commonweal Development were willing to take a financial risk on the Haymarket Landing downtown student housing portion of the Confluence Arts Center project very early on. The team at Volume One, a local magazine and event production company led by Nick Meyer, saw the potential for our city to be a major arts and music destination and turned that potential into reality which, in turn, helped to revive the city's collective self-esteem.

You have the young and the seasoned standing together. This is a list that goes on and on, with Eau Claire's success stemming directly from unfaltering collaboration.

Q. How did you make sure momentum didn't come to a screeching halt?

We kept going back to our key principles of problem-solving. It was also really important to celebrate the wins. I've lost count of the number of grand openings and ribbon cuttings we've held. We even celebrate milestones along the way. Seems any excuse for a celebration!

Q. Was there a turning point when you thought, wow, this is going to work?

It was at the exact moment when the referendum for the Confluence Arts Center passed. We didn't have to rest in the shadows of the reluctant any longer. It was a mandate from the community to move forward. There was a huge celebration that night. It was a magical moment in Eau Claire.

Q. What is Visit Eau Claire's relationship with the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire?

We have an incredible relationship on so many different levels, but one that really stands out is our university facility agreement, with UW-Eau Claire allowing us to book sporting events and conventions and committing to honoring those bookings. This arrangement was one of the first of its kind in the country. In fact, the University is at the community development table, wanting to partner with tourism to bring in events. They see the bigger picture and understand the benefits this arrangement brings in the way of recruiting students and creating quality of place.

Q. How is diversity championed here?

Look no farther than the diverse population on campus to understand what we champion for all of Eau Claire. We invite people to live here and create here and to feel great support from the community. The tourism industry champions diversity with an invitation to experience all those iconic Eau Claire moments that define the destination.

Q. Eau Claire has been called a “mini Portland” and “young Austin.” Are you happy with those comparisons?

Yes, I like those! Those comparisons paint the right picture of imagination, independent spirit, music, and art, and that’s spot on. Yet we also hold on to quintessential Wisconsin traditions, we’re protective of our untouched natural resources, and, of course, we also throw in a little flavor of winter.

Q. Have you been able to keep a playful mindset through this major morphing of the city?

Absolutely. Our penchant for celebrating successes at the drop of a hat helps! It’s also cool to see city leaders as super fans of community events, attending music festivals, for example, with their families and friends.

Q. Why do you think independent spirits feel so at home in Eau Claire?

Here’s a little-known fact: Eau Claire was once a national test market for new products, everything from music festivals to potato chips, dating back to the 1990s. This was part of the Shoppers’ Hotline initiative, a consumer research and market testing program. So that gives you a clue as to our mentality to try new things. Another interesting tidbit: UW-Eau Claire has an Entrepreneurial Training Program, and the students in that program are winning local economic development competitions and some are even starting businesses here. We nurture creativity and support individuals who are putting their talents and energy towards realizing sustainable businesses.

Q. What lessons has Visit Eau Claire learned about the importance of imagination and originality?

Imagination and originality are not just fluff terms, they’re important business strategies that lead to economic development. We don’t shut down creative thinking. We find ways to support new and sometimes out-there ideas. We cheer each other on, and that gives people confidence to pursue their dreams and continue on their chosen paths. We refuse to take “no” for an answer, and we know the importance of never stopping. It’s really about perseverance.

Q. What would you say to someone who hasn’t visited recently?

We’re inviting alumni to come back and reconnect, telling them “if you’ve not been here in five years, you don’t know Eau Claire.” There are new festivals, new facilities, updated trails, new art installations, a sculpture tour, parks, not to mention a new focus on locally sourced foods, a growing list of sports events, and a commitment to philanthropic causes.

Q. What’s next on your wish list for the visitor experience?

We want to literally light up the features of and events in our city that are the real standouts. Come to think of it, that could be the ultimate metaphor for the way people in Eau Claire champion bright ideas. We’re looking for ways to genuinely embrace winter and invite visitors to do the same. We’re always working toward creating experiences that are delivered with superior consistency, whether it’s dining or technology. We need a convention center that will hold more than 500 people and I’m determined to make it a reality. We’re closer now than we’ve ever been thanks to that spirit of collaboration that’s been established. I’m not letting go until that last item is done!