

by Peggy Capper



PHOTO BY MICHAEL BARTON, INDIGO PHOTOGRAPHIC


Austin Dempsey never thought of himself as a champion of the arts. However, through his hard work and cooperation with other artists, he helped facilitate the creation of Batavia's own Water Street Studios. It all began a few years ago when one of the buildings that Austin manages through Batavia Enterprises was in dire need of painting. "I thought it would be a unique idea to put something interesting on the outside of the building. I came up with the concept of having an artist do a painting on the exterior." Local artist Joe Gagnepain was chosen to complete the work, and in the process he and Austin became friends. One night, while dining at Austin's favorite Batavia restaurant, Daddio's Diner, Joe shared his dream with Austin about having an art center in Batavia. "He had a vision about a place where people could come to learn art and where artists could work together to synergize," says Austin. Although Joe was passionate about the idea, he lacked the business experience to execute his vision.

However, Joe's enthusiasm resonated with Austin, who happened to have the skills needed. "I have business experience. So, the next week I sat down and wrote up business plans for an art center," says Austin. He was able to bounce his ideas off of many people in the community including groups of artists, the property owners, city officials, and community members. "I gave the plan to a number of people in the community whose opinion I respect and I had them refine it. Then I sat down with Joe and rolled through the concept and he fell in love with it. Joe was able to find interested artists, and I had a space that worked. Two years later, with hard work, Water Street Studios opened."

Water Street Studios was designed to be a self-sustaining, not-for-profit

organization devoted to expanding art in Batavia and the surrounding communities. The 16,000 sq. ft. arts center is located in an historic limestone building and features twenty eight artist's studios, three classrooms, and two premier galleries for showcasing fine art. The vision of the art studio is to have central location for artists to rent affordable space and develop their craft, all while having a network of support and inspiration from their neighboring artists. In addition, the studio hosts art shows, classes, workshops, projects and events for experienced and budding artists alike. Even Austin has taken advantage of this unique studio. "Four years ago when I started this project, I would have never considered myself an artist. But today, I dabble as an artist. I'm developing a whole different side of my brain because of Water Street Studios. It really is a testament to what Water Street Studios is supposed to be for the community and it's working for me!"

Austin is passionate about the business community in Batavia and the Fox Valley as well. He recently teamed with Waubensee Community College and other business leaders in the area to start the Fox Valley Entrepreneurial Center (FVEC). The purpose of the FVEC is to create a fertile ground in the Fox Valley area for entrepreneurs to grow thriving companies that add value back to the community. "There are so many business owners who don't have time to seek the help they need to really take it to the next level." Austin and the other volunteers at FVEC are dedicating their time to help local businesses grow to their fullest potential. "I have a passion for this. I believe America is the greatest country on earth. If you have a dream and a passion, with hard work and a little bit of luck you can really make a go of it. That is an amazing and special thing." Interested entrepreneurs can




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In addition to his other community involvement, Austin was also instrumental in helping to preserve a special tradition in Batavia. When there was talk of moving the Batavia Fireworks to another location, Austin joined the committee to help preserve this Batavia institution. "My parents used to bring me to the show when I was young. I didn't grow up in Batavia, but Batavia was the place to be on the 4th of July for fireworks." He is so enthusiastic about the Batavia Fireworks that one of the selling points when he purchased his home was the promise of viewing the fireworks from his back yard. Austin and a group of concerned citizens worked with the city to keep the fireworks in its current downtown location. Austin hopes that one day his young son will appreciate this longstanding Batavia tradition. "All those years I was coming as a kid, I appreciated

watching the fireworks. I feel a great sense of pride that there are kids coming to the show experiencing the same thing I got to experience when I was little. That rich Batavia tradition is going to carry on and I just do my small piece to help out."

Austin and his wife Melissa have lived in Batavia for the past four years and recently welcomed their new son, Colton. He is very happy to be living in this wonderful town. "There are so many things I like about Batavia. It really has an amazing sense of community. The people are so warm and friendly." Austin is confident that Batavia is just on the cusp of realizing its full potential. "Batavia is in the process of reinventing itself and its identity, which is exciting. It has always been a community rich in history, but we have a very healthy and vibrant downtown that is reemerging and the arts are growing dramatically. We've got great park districts, great schools, and a great library and really I feel lucky to live here." ●