



OUTDOOR DINING AND AN ICE FESTIVAL: A RECIPE FOR SUCCESS IN MAIN STREET

NILES

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Niles Main Street, Photos by Phil
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Michigan Main Street Story Series

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

Introduction to Niles

I'm Lisa Croteau, and I'm the program manager and director for the Niles Downtown Development Authority DDA Main Street Program. I will have been in this position for 22 years in April.

Niles was one of the earliest settled places in Michigan in the 1700s with Fort St. Joseph. We then, as a city, started developing and have been a city since the early 1800s. By the early 1900s, we were home to five Fortune 500 companies, including Simplicity and Conair Corp.

Niles is a beautiful community in southwest Michigan that is centrally located near everything. We have a lovely river that runs through, we have a delightful walkable downtown, and, from here, you can get anywhere. I believe that's why it was home to those five Fortune 500 companies: we're 90 minutes from Chicago, we're two and a half hours from Lansing, three hours from Indianapolis, four hours from Detroit. We're on an Amtrak rail. We have a small airport. We are less than 15 minutes away from the toll road. So you can get anywhere from here.

Hunter Ice Festival

We celebrated the 18th year of our Hunter Ice Festival in Niles in January. It started when the son of a local business owner, who was an ice carver, decided he wanted to have an ice festival in town. So we went to Andrew Thistlethwaite, the owner of Signature Ice Sculptures, who's now in San Antonio, Texas, and asked, 'How would you throw the perfect ice festival?' We met a couple of weeks before Christmas and had the first festival that January.

More than 10,000 people came to town that weekend. It was the first time in anybody's memory that the streets were packed with people. Through the years, the festival has grown, and we have been blessed to have some of the world's greatest carvers participate.

The caliber of ice you'll see in Niles is second to none, and the festival has turned into a phenomenal economic engine for our businesses. We'll have several hundred thousand dollars spent downtown on Main Street over the festival weekend.



"How would you throw the perfect ice festival?"



Experiences You Can't Get Online

Back in 2017, Main Street America started challenging their communities to have a focused strategy for economic development. They did surveys and research to see what would be possible.

Then they gave us three different strategies the board could pick from—and the one they chose was local foods. In this day and age, when you can get almost anything you want online, food is something people will still travel for.

We had already started a kitchen incubator and were working with local entrepreneurs to start food businesses that ranged anywhere from the production of things like granola to barbecue sauce to catering kitchens and/or commissary kitchens for food truck, so the foundation for food was there.

Through that strategy, we've grown a lot. In 2002, we had five food-based businesses. Now, we have 18, including our first distillery, our first brewery, an Italian bakery, and a lot of other really fun things. People will travel for food, and now Niles has it.

Another thing that draws people to Niles is our antique shops. Like food, antiques is something you want to experience in person. You want to touch and feel and look and find and treasure hunt. So those two things, food and antiques, have been really important to this community.



"People will travel for food, and now Niles has it."

Outdoor Dining Downtown

Just over a year ago, we closed half of one of our side streets to create an outdoor dining area for our restaurants that were shut down. We asked ourselves, 'What can we do to help keep these businesses alive?' So we chose an area that is virtually the center of town, just off Main Street, near parking, near public restrooms, and featuring a fire pit funded by a local foundation.

Now, we're having a lot of community discussion about whether this will continue into the future. Closing a road downtown can be a bit controversial, so we're trying to work through that and help people understand why this space is so important. We want to make a place that encourages people to come downtown.

We're using the same philosophy that we did with the Hunter Ice Festival, which celebrated its 18th year in January. We have an amazing riverfront park where we could



have done our festival, but it would not have had the same economic impact as putting the ice in front of our local businesses. When you're chilly and walking up the street, you pop into somewhere to warm up and you find a shop that you didn't know was here before.

It's going to be interesting to see how the outdoor dining fares after this first year. It was created out of necessity for businesses and then showed us the possibility of what that kind of outdoor space could be to the downtown in the future.

If your community is thinking about placemaking, my advice is just try to do it. We have found it has brought a demographic to downtown that didn't come downtown before. New people have explored the downtown and they have found things they didn't know were here.

Keep in mind, there are going to be growing pains. It's not going to be something everybody loves. Change is hard, and, in small towns, change is really hard. So do your due diligence, do your research, and know what you're doing is right. Michigan Main Street has a phenomenal team that will help you along the way to make these kinds of changes in your community and figure out whether they're the right thing or the wrong thing and morph and change as necessary to make them successful.

I'm probably the biggest advocate for Main Street programs that you're going to find in the Main Street system here in Michigan. We were a downtown development authority that became a Main Street Downtown Development Authority, and we have benefited from the resources, the technical assistance, the network, the training, everything you get by being a part of this phenomenal group of people that all have the same goal: to help make your town the best it can be. It's phenomenal what you can do with ideas and networking, and we're proof of that. We're absolute proof of that

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