



## *Michigan Premier Events*

ASHLEY WILLIS IS INTENT ON BRINGING LANSING BACK ONE EVENT AT A TIME WHILE SERVING HER COMMUNITY WITH PURPOSE

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Photos and Story by Phil Eich, Storyville Social, as part of the Michigan Main Street Story Series

"I own a business here in Downtown - Michigan Premier Events. Our company loves to create programs and events that bring people together, create awareness about what's going on downtown, and showcase the diversity we have.

I'm also a board member for Downtown Lansing, whose mission is all about the vibrancy of downtown Lansing and helping to create the strategic planning for leadership. Downtowns are the heart and the heartbeat of the community, no matter where you're at, so for me and my company, it's important to be a part of that. The board is fantastic and I'm honored to be president.

They have so much knowledge, and you would think by how involved they are that the committee is a 9-to-5 job for them. It's great to have that kind of support at the board level and they're a key part in the momentum of what's happening here in Downtown Lansing.

Prior to the pandemic, we created a business ambassador program where we gave leaders and other folks from the community gift cards they could use at businesses in Downtown Lansing. Those gift cards allowed them to interact with and directly support businesses here.

We also asked them to use their social media platforms and help promote those places by taking a picture of themselves there with their ambassador T-shirts to show that they're a part of the program. We created the hashtags #SupportLansing, #GrubLansing, and #LoveLansing for the program and asked the ambassadors to use them in their posts as a way of showing additional support to a lot of these local business owners.

When the pandemic started, a lot of the business owners went through a tough time. There was an economic crisis and the local business owners, our mom and pop shops, the fuel of the economy, were in trouble.

The Lift Up Local campaign is about lifting up the local scenery, the business owners, and the community in general. I presented the idea for the campaign to Cathleen Edgerly, our Main Street director, when the pandemic started and right away, she said, 'Let's do this.' From the time we launched, the community has really supported it. There was a need for something inspiring and that was it.

For community events and campaigns, it's important that there is a return on investment, not just in financial support, but also in terms of creating experiences people are always going to remember. Lift Up Local was that and it still is.

Another example is an event we run called Winterfest. Wintertime is typically a time where people can't really get together as much, and that was especially true during COVID.

I remember sitting in a Main Street Events Committee meeting and asked, 'Why don't we do something outside and activate a space where the community can come out safely? A place with good ventilation, food and other vendors, and installations of art pieces?'

We activated the Rotary Park area with ice sculptures, vendors, and activities for families and kids. It was held on a Saturday because there are less people working. We've also stretched it from Old Town as a way to collaborate with that district: they had their Chocolate Walk the same day. A lot of people were able to use the River Trail, so they were able to walk to Old Town, see a lot of spaces being activated, then go right into Rotary Park, which is the main focus of Winterfest. They could come to downtown Lansing to support the businesses and go to Impression 5 to enjoy all the activities they were hosting as well.

We hosted the first Winterfest in 2020 and had probably 3,000 people come out.

Downtown Lansing also partners up with Lansing 5:01 for BLOCK:AID, which is another really great event. The middle of the street right in Downtown Lansing shuts down to cars to make room for vendors, live music, entertainment, activities for kids to enjoy, and things like that. The businesses are open and people can go get their food, sit and walk around out on the street because it's closed, and enjoy the atmosphere, the vibrancy and the collaboration between everyone.

Downtown Lansing, Inc. does a really great job showing how it takes collaboration to make a downtown community thrive. We're all a family here in Downtown Lansing. Old Town and REO Town are right next to us and they're part of our family, too.

Looking ahead, I feel like what we're doing now is a catalyst for a vibrant future. The collaboration, strategic planning, working with stakeholders and community leaders—all of that is going to be a catalyst for creating the vibrant future of downtown."

- Ashlee R. Willis, Founder and CEO of Michigan Premier Events and President of Downtown Lansing, Inc. Board

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# Michigan Main Street Story Series



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