

Dad and son have big plans for historic depot

By Sarah Kingsbury
The News Examiner

John and Shawn Genung have their hands in so many entrepreneurial projects, it's difficult to keep them straight.

The father-and-son team are managing partners of an engineering and consulting firm, and that firm is housed in Gallatin's Depot Square building, which they own. But the building also houses several other businesses, including two the Genungs helped start and one they purchased and sold to a larger company, although it still operates out of the depot.

The business ventures that pay the bills and the 78,000-square-foot historic structure they are trying to restore are hard to separate these days.

"It's a love-hate relationship," John Genung said. "We have to focus on the building or we won't have the companies; without the companies we wouldn't have the buildings. They're intricately intertwined."

The former TVA nuclear plant designer grew up around Sumner County and has been trying to restore or replace rundown structures in Gallatin since he moved here in 1990.

John retired from his job as a military engineer for the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers in 2003 and started working with his son to develop their consulting



Shawn Genung, left, has been involved in starting five businesses, while his father, John Genung, right, has started 11. The father-and-son team are currently managing partners of an engineering and consulting company and owners of the Depot Square building in Gallatin, which houses other firms that work together on various contracts. SARAH KINGSBURY / THE NEWS EXAMINER

business, which is called Project Development Strategy and Validation.

As the company grew, the Genungs used their contacts and experience to develop relationships with other startups. They worked together with those companies on government and private contracts alike.

Between them, the two men have been prodigious entrepreneurs. Shawn Genung has started five companies, two that are still operating, one that he sold, and two that have since dissolved. John estimated he has been involved throughout his lifetime in the startup of 11 businesses — four that are still functional, five that he's sold to larger companies and two that didn't make it.

When the opportunity arose to purchase the depot, the father

and son pair saw it as an irresistible opportunity to bring their own company and other subsets of companies they commonly work with under one roof. The nine businesses operating out of the building also save money by sharing services and appliances, such as Internet, phone service and copiers.

"The original plan was to take this building and do the small business incubator concept," Shawn Genung said.

While that concept has mostly stuck, about half of the businesses in the Depot Square community are local offices of regional or national companies that wanted to be part of the abundance of consulting, planning and professional resources available under one roof.

Depot plans include entertainment center

Along with running their company, the Genungs have invested a significant amount of time and money in the depot building. Their shared hope is one day fully restoring it as a professional center for workers like architects, attorneys and engineers.

One of the companies operating in the building is Depot Square Entertainment, which is set up to handle the many events the Genungs hope to start booking when the structure is ready. An 8,500-square-foot event room has already been host to a handful of weddings and private birthday parties, while a secondary 15,000-square-foot room with a full stage is in the works.

Severe flooding damage from heavy rains in May were a recent setback, but John Genung said that by mid-August he plans to start weekend concerts that will attract Nashville-based entertainment. The center would be family-friendly, alcohol-free

and would feature performers of old-time country, classical bluegrass and contemporary gospel music.

To help achieve that dream, the Genungs didn't take salaries from their consulting firm last year. Instead, they put all of the money back into restoring the depot, which has already needed a new roof, air conditioning units and an updated sprinkler system.

"Before we could even move into it, we put almost as much money as we paid for the building back into the building," John Genung said. "This was a building that was falling down. It was dilapidated."

JUST THE FACTS

Name: Project Development Strategy and Validation

Location: 254 W. Eastland Ave., Gallatin

Contact: 230-1000

How long in business: Three years

Concept: Project development and small business incubation

Business type: Engineering design and business consulting

Startup capital: \$1.5 million

2009 gross income: \$800,000

2009 net income: \$0

Inspiration: John: "I'm doing what I always wanted to do, have a chance to help people, improve the area where I'm living and be amongst friends. I can't think of a better way to spend my time."

Shawn: "I can't think of a more relaxing and entertaining place to work."

Role model: Nelson Genung, John's father, and his older brother, Richard Genung

Best lesson learned: Shawn: "Don't be afraid to fail. Don't be too quick to fold up shop. Don't trust the economy."

John: "In the entrepreneurial world, a loser is just a winner that has not met his potential."

Rookie advice: John: "Seek advice, regardless of how smart you think you are."

Shawn: "Spend the extra time to do it right from the beginning."

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