

Conestoga man turns rundown buildings into hub for faith-based small businesses



By TIM MEKEEL | Business Reporter | Posted: Friday, July 3, 2015 6:00 am

Two springs ago, Joe Sharp wasn't in the market for commercial real estate.

He wasn't looking for rundown old buildings to convert into a hub for nonprofits, ministries and faith-based small businesses, including his own.

Funny how things work out sometimes.

Sharp had a perfectly suitable location for his Internet marketing firm, Sharp Innovations, in the former Slaymaker Lock building on South West End Avenue in Lancaster city.

Yet there he was, driving with his wife Jen from their Conestoga home to the airport for a Hawaiian vacation, when a "for lease or for sale" sign on a rundown building only a few minutes from their house caught his eye.

They pulled over on Main Street in Conestoga. Sharp hopped out and looked in the window.

He said aloud, "God, why am I here?" An answer popped into his head. He remembered 14 years earlier, during a snowstorm, when he was there to buy office furniture for the launch of Sharp Innovations.

But this time, as Sharp looked inside, he felt called to buy the property, not just some of the contents.

He phoned his Realtor. The property already was under agreement, but soon that other suitor's deal lapsed.

"Everything that would have been an obstacle (was resolved). It's kind of crazy. I felt distinctly like God was saying he was going to give me this place," said Sharp.

Sharp bought the property, which includes a second building of similar size, for \$309,000 in July 2014. He relocated his business there in January and named the property Kingdom Crossroads.



Kingdom Crossroads

Joe Sharp (left) and his wife Jennifer, who is holding their son Joshua, stand with Bob McMullen along Main Street in Conestoga in front of Kingdom Crossroads.

"I had a real nice studio office in the city. I had no reason to leave..." said Sharp. "I would say obedience to the vision God gave me is why I moved."

Sharp has spent another \$300,000 to partially renovate the two buildings, each about 5,000 square feet. Sharp is the majority owner of the property, with Sharp Innovations partner Bob McMullen of Quarryville joining him as a partner in the real estate venture.

"These buildings used to be the beauty of the town. Then things changed. ... We're 40 to 50 percent there. It will take us years to get the whole thing done," he said.

Sharp said he's "turning it into something of excellence. We're keeping the old bones so you can still see what it was 150 years ago, but we're putting a lot of cosmetic and structural improvements into it."

Future plans include constructing a bridge to connect the two buildings and perhaps adding a third building.

Sharp, 37, is a Montgomery County native who has lived in Lancaster County for 19 years, since enrolling at Millersville University.

His effort to transform the Conestoga Township site, near the Conestoga Wagon Restaurant, has been noticed.

The two buildings at the 3113 Main St. property "were beat up and not being put to good use," said Craig Eshleman, chairman of the township supervisors.

Sharp has "cleaned up the property. It looks a lot better. This is a welcome addition to the town. The property is being put to good use now," said Eshleman.

They've been divided into five spaces for offices and five apartments. (An 11th space is an unfinished basement that has a laundry for the apartment residents.) All 10 spaces are occupied.

Not bad, considering that when Sharp bought the property, one building was two-thirds vacant and the other building had one vacancy.

Long-time apartment tenant Tony Encarnacion said Sharp's arrival has been "a blessing."

Encarnacion said Sharp has addressed big issues such as repaving the parking lot, fixing the HVAC system and painting the buildings.

He's also tackled small ones, such as replacing a mail box that had a hole in the top and moving it to the same side of Main Street as his buildings.

"I've got no complaints whatsoever," said Encarnacion, a R.R. Donnelley material handler who's been a tenant since 2011.

But Sharp still sees room for improvement, especially on the commercial side.

"The buildings are fully occupied but under utilized," he said. "There's a lot of expansion space for groups that are interested in joining us."

Sharp described the commercial space layout as "an open work environment. Companies could work share in a co-habitated scenario. It's like a Christ-centered Candy Factory in the country."

(The Candy Factory is a professional co-working space in downtown Lancaster.)

"We're reusing the space in a new way. We're creating synergy. We're trying to get like-minded businesses and organizations to join us," he said.

Sharp sees one building on the property, dubbed Building A, as being home to faith-centered consulting, coaching, advisory firms, nonprofits and ministries. Built in 1892, it's been used as a general store and for casket manufacturing, tobacco stripping and a balloon business.

Among Building A's current occupants is Sharp's other business, Live with Purpose Coaching, which provides business and life coaching and career counseling to business owners, teams of employees and individuals. Its roster consists of seven coaches and three support staff.

Also in Building A are House of Style Hair Salon and Bare Wealth Advisors.

Sharp envisions Building B as being home to creative, marketing and technology businesses. Constructed in the 1860s, it has been home to a dance hall, tobacco business, machine shop, hotel, fire engine equipment manufacturer and apartments.

Current occupants include Sharp Innovations, a full-service Internet marketing firm that "helps small business solve creative, marketing and technology problems," said Sharp. Its 11 employees manage more than 400 websites.

Joining Sharp Innovations in Building B is Digital Bridge Computer Services.