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Joe Mella

Mella strives to make 'home' a better place

After moving to Wausau 26 years ago, Joe Mella, an attorney with Ruder Ware, quickly realized how unique the Wausau area was and saw the potential in downtown Wausau and along its riverfront.

He soon became involved in some key redevelopment projects including the redevelopment of the river with Wausau's River District. He also became involved with other organizations seeking to improve the area.

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Taking the wheel



Tracy Jonas is in rare company as a woman in charge of a trucking business at JX Truck Center south of Wausau. The Business News photo by Jerry Rhoden

Jonas gets new era rolling for JX Truck Center

By Jerry Rhoden

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If it's lonely at the top of the organizational chart, it can be even lonelier if you're one of a kind. But it's just such a reputation that Tracy Jonas has worked to establish as the Operations Manager for JX Truck Center, 1039 Kronenwetter Drive south of Wausau.

Founded in 1970 in Waukesha as Peterbilt of Wisconsin, the trucking sales-and-service company debuted as a single location with five employees. Known as JX Truck Center since 2017, it now boasts 20 locations across Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, and Indiana. The company has since added finance, leasing, and rental to its service offerings and sees sales of more than \$50 million.

In her top leadership role, Jonas is a rare female presence in what is traditionally the

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Aged to perfection

Mullins Cheese is one of largest producers east of the Mississippi

By Jeffrey Decker

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The largest cheese producer in the dairy state keeps growing with expertise refined over four generations.

Each day, 8.5-million pounds of milk flow through the Mullins Cheese plants in Marshfield and Knowlton, home of the company's original facility. Major expansions more than doubled output in 2016 and further growth is planned.

"Mullins' expansion makes them one of the largest cheese producers east of the Mississippi River and the largest cheese producer in that geography with a two-production-site system,"

said Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association Executive Director John Umhoefer. "Mullins Cheese is one of the Wisconsin dairy industry's great assets. They have that Wisconsin 'X-Factor.' They can innovate into new dairy opportunities because they have generations of in-depth understanding of how to process fresh farm milk into world-class dairy products."

Clusters of silver storage tanks tower over the shores of Lake Dubay in Knowlton, just south of Mosinee. Town of Knowlton Chairperson Brian Feit praises their community leadership.

"They're basically our only industry," he said, "and they're

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Bill Mullin, co-owner of Mullins Cheese, says new technology has helped the company improve selection and efficiency. The Business News photo by Jeff Decker



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Investment company has bought Riiser Energy

Page 21 Area's largest banks



Joe Mella, of Ruder Ware law firm in Wausau, has seen the potential in downtown Wausau and along its riverfront and has worked to help the community reach it. The Business News photo by Jerry Rhoden

Making ‘home’ a better place

Mella has helped downtown Wausau and riverfront realize it’s potential

By Lori Lodes

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By day, Joe Mella, an attorney at Ruder Ware in Wausau, sports suits and ties, but when it comes to his volunteer activities, it’s often a more casual affair as he has stepped into roles as bartender, T-shirt salesperson and even a balloon rustler.

When Mella joined Ruderware as an attorney 26 years ago, he became a transplant to Northcentral Wisconsin. Both the law firm and the area proved to be an excellent fit, offering him the professional fulfillment he sought as well as opportunities to partake in the bicycling, hiking, skiing and snowshoeing that he and his

People who make a difference

► **Joe Mella,**
attorney,
Ruder Ware,
Wausau

wife enjoy. As he became entrenched in the community, he quickly realized how unique the Wausau area is in its offerings because it’s “far enough away from everything else that we have had to do our own things,” he said. “There is an ethic here set by the people who originally came here to invest back into the community with new

business ventures and activities. When it comes to what the community offers for a community its size, Wausau definitely punches above its weight. We have had to be self-reliant and make our own fun, so to speak.”

That’s led Mella to be involved in some key redevelopment opportunities including the redevelopment of the river, with Wausau’s River District, as well as Central Wausau Progress. He first got involved with Central Wausau Progress as a director in 2002 and has served as its president since 2005. While the organization is undergoing a transition, it has played an integral role in several economic-development focused

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Riiser Energy sold to investment group

Riiser Energy, a 73-year-old Wausau company with 34 convenience stores, transportation and fuel operations, has been sold to an investment group specializing in building regional chains of convenience stores.

Dudley Investments LLC, Wildcatters LLC and Kemerling Investments LLC, the former owners of Riiser Energy and the newly formed Riiser Fuels LLC, based in Durham, N.C., closed the acquisition of Riiser Energy on June 15.

Terms of the transaction were not disclosed.

The new owners are hiring the company’s 320 employees, said Jim Kemerling, president and chief executive officer of Riiser Energy.

“The new owners will use their 65 years of combined experience in investing, financing and operating within the c-store and wholesale fuel industry to help Riiser continue to grow into a larger regional operation,” Kemerling said.

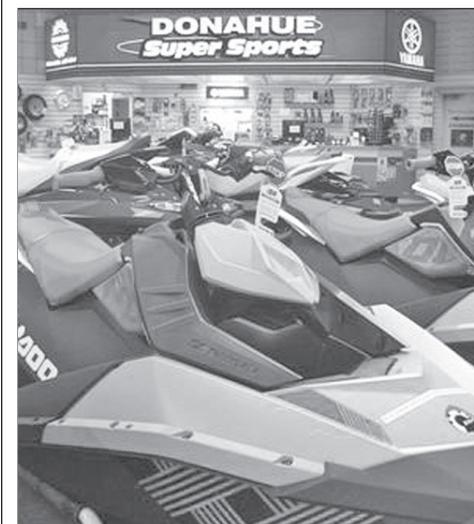
Riiser Fuels was formed by Don Draughon

and J.D. Dykstra, to make investments in the convenience store industry, a market segment that is seeing considerable merger and acquisition activity.

Riiser was started in 1945 by Arthur Riiser. His son, Tom, took over the business in 1958 and operated the company for 40 years.

In 1999, Tom Riiser sold the business to Jim Kemerling, who served as President and CEO of the Company, and Richard (Dick) Dudley, who served as chairman until his death in 2013.

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Family-owned business in Wisconsin Rapids has been helping people have fun since 1966. Story on page 6.

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Page 19 Steel King, with plants in Stevens Point and New London, has benefited from the surge in online sales.

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Mella/He's been involved with Mobile Meals

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initiatives including the redevelopment of downtown Wausau including Wausau Center Mall in the 1980s as well as obtaining the nationally accredited Main Street designation for the downtown River District — a 31-block area. Mella said they're in the throes of the challenges as that mall is definitely transitioning, as well as supporting the River District including facilitating the final leg of fundraising.

"It was around the time of fund-raising for the 400 block that I realized, I've lived in Wausau longer than anyplace else in my life, and it was clear it was home," he said. "It dawned on me that I wanted to leave the place better than I found it, and one of the ways I could do that was to volunteer my time and effort to make Wausau an even better place."

His involvement with Central Wisconsin Progress was intertwined with his involvement with the Wausau River District, on whose board he has served since 2003. And in 2001, he also became a director for Wausau Events Inc., a nonprofit focused on organizing and offering events for the community, building community through events. Mella has worked many events; perhaps the most memorable of which has been serving as a balloon rustler for the Balloon & Rib Fest.

"We're a very active board and all the board

“
When I retire, my hope is that the Wausau area is a better place than when I first came.

— Joe Mella, attorney,
Ruder Ware,
Wausau

”
members volunteer at the events pretty extensively," he said. "I don't think the organization would be as successful as it is without that."

On a more serious note, Mella also has been involved with Wausau Area Mobile Meals Inc. since about 1996, serving in both director and vice president capacities.

This organization's offering is similar in basic premise to Meals on Wheels program, but they don't limit their recipient base by age. It also delivers to people who are recovering from recent hospital stays and meal recipients are charged a nominal fee. Mella is largely involved to provide an attorney perspective to the organization which he says basically operates like a small business.

"We're really a stop gap. A certain portion of our recipients are people who can't cook hot meals for themselves like they used to but want

to maintain their independence as long as they can," he said. "I feel like we're providing a unique service to the community that otherwise wouldn't be filled, and we do it cost-effectively, which is always a fun challenge to figure out how to do."

In his role as chairman of the Wausau Region Chamber of Commerce business advocacy committee, Mella contributes to efforts that vary depending on if it's an election year, focusing on both education and advocacy. In election years, the committee focuses on politics and educating the Chamber's membership on local elections in particular as well as state and federal elections. They also advocate on a state and federal level for legislation or changes to legislation that would benefit the community and/or local business.

Each year, during Small Business Week, the Chamber hosts an opening-day legislators' forum with a panel of elected officials representing the region so members can hear directly from them.

"It's really about providing a forum to talk about issues that are important to our membership," Mella said. "For a community to stay strong and vibrant, we need to continue to have a strong, diverse and growing business community that's 'in the know.'"

Mella said that being an attorney comes in handy in scenarios such as these as he understands the legislative and legal processes. "In the

case of the business advocacy committee, my skill-set adds to the process and mission that committee has," he said.

That also led Mella to the role he says taps the smallest amount of his time, serving as the chairman of the Town of Rib Mountain board of zoning appeals. That usually requires one or two meetings a year, whereas many of his other activities are much more intensive, but he views the investment of time and talent as more than worthwhile, and now that's something he perpetuates in his role mentoring the attorneys his law firm hires.

"One of the roles I play when the firm recruits new lawyers is to oversee their mentoring, assisting them in figuring out what they're interested in doing and matching them up with volunteer activities in the community," he said. "Our founder, George Ruder, strongly believed that you have a duty to give back to the community that supports you, and that's good for the community and good for you, too."

Mella said how involved people are in their community is obviously a personal choice, one that he made a long time ago and is happy he did. "Being actively involved and interacting with the business community, getting to know the business owners and their concerns and goals has been enjoyable and rewarding to me," he said. "When I retire, my hope is that the Wausau area is a better place than when I first came."



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