

Enter the entrepreneurs – Bigheart Times 4-22-14



The Pawhuska Business Development Center, aka the incubator, had a slow start but as of Thursday has its offices fully occupied – by an interesting array of businesses, including three architects, a pipeline consulting firm and the latest tenant: An Osage interior designer who is designing textiles with a tribal twist that eventually are to be made into pillows and other accessories.

The board approved the application Thursday for designer Chad Renfro, a fellow who grew up in Pawhuska, the nephew of renowned Osage artisan Maudie Cheshewalla who moved on to be a well-known interior designer based in Palm Beach, Fla.

“I left Pawhuska at 18 and I came back at 44,” Renfro said. “Some people would call it my midlife crisis but it doesn’t feel like a crisis. It feels like coming home.”

With his designs, he said his “goal is to familiarize the rest of the world with Osage patterns. It’s about finding alternate uses for our arts and crafts, taking our traditional clothing and putting them into other formats.”

Renfro already has some fabric designs plotted out that are based on Osage ribbonwork and finger-weaving that have found an enthusiastic reception by top wholesalers and editors of design magazines.

“They’re all excited about it,” he said. “One of the things that they’re interested in is the stories behind the designs.”

Renfro is starting out with an office in the incubator but plans to also rent one of the available industrial bays for a sewing operation to make pillows for the wholesale market. That will create new jobs in Pawhuska in a rare sector for the city:

Manufacturing. He has located a company in Bartlesville that makes the pillow inserts. Renfro is also working closely with Blue Star Studio, an architectural firm whose principals are Jon Red Corn and Scott Moore y Medina, who recently lured a third architect, Ace Elsea, from Washington, D.C., to, yes, Pawhuska.

Red Corn moved a year ago from Kansas City, where he had worked for Black & Veatch on government projects and Moore, also from Kansas, has long worked in sustainable development projects for Indian tribes, rural and disadvantaged communities.

Blue Star is currently working on a large project on the Rosebud reservation in North Dakota: A master plan for a 600-acre green city, essentially, including housing, businesses, a language school, greenhouses and community gardens. It is part of the Clinton Global Initiative’s Commitments to Action and will be included in an upcoming book on public interest design.

“We want it culturally relevant, respectful of people and place and economically feasible,” Moore said.

That project, called the Keya Wakpala Green Development, started with a few thousand dollars but Blue Star helped the Lakota Nation find grants and other funding, so it is now funded to the tune of \$300,000.

Moore said performing that kind of support is one of the services Blue Star aims for in its focus on indigenous, rural and disadvantaged communities. “A lot of our clients say, ‘I have a dream, but I don’t know how to get there.’” Moore is good at getting there, but he is also choosy: Clients have to be willing to pitch in and work with the architects.

“We don’t work with anybody,” he said. “If you want to go to the Olympics, you’re going to have to work out and run wind sprints.”

“This is about collaboration and partnership.”

Blue Star is also working on a stormwater plan for a pueblo in New Mexico, where modern life has taken its toll on the 500-year-old village. In days of yore, when a roof leaked, it would be patched with adobe, but with people working, repairs have turned to metal roofing and other modern techniques, which have caused erosion, including the streets and flooding in the ancient cemetery.

Locally, Blue Star is hoping to design new homes for the Osage tribal housing authority in Skiatook. And that is where Renfro comes in: He wants to have a lottery of sorts for one of the homes, for which he will do all of the interior design.

For Blue Star and Renfro, the incubator represented more than sizable tax advantages granted to its tenants (they are exempt from state – but not federal – income taxes for up to five years).

“We chose to come back because that’s where we come from,” said Moore, who grew up in rural Kansas in the Flint Hills but spent much of his childhood walking between the cultures of his white father and Hispanic mother from Las Vegas, N.M.

“This has always been home for me,” said Red Corn, who grew up mostly in Lenexa, Kan., but spent summers with his grandparents, Raymond and Waltena Red Corn, in Pawhuska’s Indian Village.

Both Moore and Red Corn studied architecture at the University of Kansas, but they met in a more unlikely fashion, through Red Corn’s brother Ryan, a member of the Native American comedy group called the 1491s. The 1491s were at the Pine Ridge reservation when Moore was working there and, as part of a project, he interviewed them on a tribal radio program. He and Ryan hit it off, and finally Ryan turned to him and said, “You need to save my brother,” explaining that Jon would love working with indigenous people, green architecture and getting away from the dog-eat-dog world of Black and Veatch.

Moore took it with a grain of salt and didn’t call, but “Ryan started harassing me,” he said. He made the call, met Jon and the pair hit it off but Red Corn balked at cutting the cord with the corporate giant who employed him.

“It sounded like a pipe dream,” Red Corn said.

Frustrated, Moore gave Red Corn an ultimatum one day, telling him to jump in Moore’s car and go with him to Pine Ridge to deal with government officials on a straw-bale housing project. Three days later, after riding horses, learning some new Indian beading techniques, and more, Red Corn was back in a cubicle at Black and Veatch.

“He sent me a text,” Moore said. “I can’t work here anymore. I’m sitting in my cubicle. I can’t do it any more, you’ve ruined me.”

Four months later, Blue Star was born.

“I told him: ‘If you tell the universe what you want, you’ll end up getting it. But if you don’t, you’ll end up being frustrated and you’ll never get what you want.’”

The incubator’s other clients include Lou Ann Smith of Barnsdall, who moved a pipeline consulting company called Arrowhead from her home to Pawhuska, and Rick Luttrell, whose Muzzie productions makes casino training films and intends to branch out to government films. Both businesses were already local but are growing in the incubator.

By [Louise Red Corn](#)