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# Innovating through storm

NOVEMBER 24, 2021 – BY [LESLEY BAILEY](#) — [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

## 2021 E-Day honorees overcome obstacles by taking chances, staying flexible during uncertain times

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The ability to overcome obstacles always has been a top trait for an entrepreneur, but in today's shifting business climate, the E-Day Class of 2021 has been pushed to another level of fortitude and flexibility.

"We have seen pivots and adjustments from our business owners that would have been unheard of just a few years ago, but are now expected and needed to keep moving forward and remaining open," said Lorri Feldt, regional director of the Northwest Indiana Small Business Development Center. "Our E-Day awards have always been a way to celebrate our entrepreneurs — but today we truly



Dave Lasser, broker and owner  
of Commercial by Choice LLC

treasure them and everything that they do for our communities even more."

The NW-ISBDC Entrepreneurial Excellence Awards recently marked its 30th year of honoring entrepreneurs and advocates who are continuing to make an impact and contribute to our Region.

OT Commercial In-Sites LLC, earned E-Day's 2021 Small Business Person of the Year award. (Photo by Michelle Hamstra)



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While the nine honorees have switched gears in the wake of the pandemic, they also fell back on the lessons they learned from years of experience or their own professional struggles.

## Essential industries pivot

Small Business Person of the Year Dave Lasser employed more techniques that were trending anyway, including online signatures and more videos and photos for his real estate team.

"Real estate fortunately was deemed an essential service, but it did affect a lot of aspects of doing business," he said. "COVID accelerated the use of the electronic signature program."

During the early days of the crisis, personal interaction was almost impossible.

"You can't shake hands and say congrats and thank you ... it's not quite the same," Lasser said. "When you go to look at land, you have a caravan to meet there instead of everyone jumping in the same car."

As broker and owner of Commercial In-Sites LLC, which focuses on the sales and leasing of commercial, industrial and investment real estate, Lasser has more than 35 years of experience in the industry and in business. While he has found some ways of connecting with clients, business development has changed, but some aspects have remained the same.

"Our rule of thumb had always been you network or there's no work as a reminder to get us out there," he said. "Every year, our summer intern would enter business cards, but last summer, there weren't any cards to enter."

Lasser said referrals can come from the least expected places.

"You can be at a function where you think the person you are talking to would never need to buy a factory, but if you talk to them long enough, you might find out their cousin's husband is looking for one," he said. "Developing a business takes time, and you have to be active in the market and build relationships and work at it."

The pandemic also impacted Advanced Engineering Services Inc., the Emerging Business of the Year, as part of the construction industry. The company, led by Akhtar Zaman, president and principal engineer, focuses on a specialized field within civil engineering.

"We provide geotechnical engineering, construction materials testing and inspection services," he said. "It is very important to test and explore the ground to verify that it is suitable to support the intended structures."

Zaman said the pandemic created a cash-flow crunch for AES as well as a need for qualified staff members within the niche field.



Akhtar Zaman

"We were very thankful to have PPP and SBA assistance to continue our operations," he said. "We are now challenged with finding qualified staff to expand our business."

He said the recent growth in new construction has created a high demand for experienced engineering staff in the geotechnical engineering, construction testing and inspection fields.

"We are reaching out to local universities and attending their career fairs to attract talents in the civil engineering and construction majors," Zaman said.

Zaman said, since launching in 2018, he has found that two words are very important: patience and perseverance.

"Starting and running a business requires a lot of hard work, long hours, dedication, focus and good team members," he said. "We all face 'bumps' along the way, but you must not 'give up' and ride the waves with patience and perseverance."

Family-Owned Business of the Year Konrady Plastics was busy in 2020 with the creation of personal protective equipment, including sneeze barriers, like those at gas stations or

grocery stores. The family component of the manufacturer of machined plastic parts includes owner Bernie Konrady as well as son Paul, president and COO, and daughter Leah, CEO.

“While some of the general machine parts business was lighter in 2020, we are seeing a pent-up demand for that this year, and we did a lot of sales for PPE — there was a huge pickup for that kind of work,” Paul said.

“Our challenges are very similar to everybody else’s,” Leah said. “We need a skilled labor force.”

She said finding workers with the proper skill set is more challenging today than before the crisis.

“Referrals from inside have really worked well,” she said. “We try to look for the silver linings in unfortunate circumstances and adapt as quickly as possible and be responsive to the needs around us.”

## **Nonessential industries adjust**

Young Entrepreneur of the Year Brianna Hairlson, of Bri’s Dance Place, was able to offer dance classes virtually to stay connected to her young dancers.

“We have become creative in our offerings, hosting e-learning in our 3,800-square-foot building to bring in additional revenue,” she said. “We’re hopeful that we will continue to grow and dance through the storms.”

Hairlson has been cultivating a strong workforce in-house through her own training program.



Paul, Bernie and Leah Konrady (from left) earned E-Day’s Family-Owned Business of the Year, with Konrady Plastics’ efforts in 2020 creating personal protective equipment. (Photo provided by NW-ISBDC)

"We believed in building the next generation, so we have created an internship program where we train the next generation of dancers to be great teachers," she said. "With this model, we haven't had too many issues finding reliable workers."

Brianna Hairlson, of Bri's Dance Place, offered virtual dance classes during the pandemic. (Photo provided by NW-ISBDC)

Hairlson describes her staff as a solid group of employees, who are more like family.

The sister team behind E&A Jewelers in Valparaiso also turned to online avenues. There they spotlighted their one-of-a-kind gemstone pieces and custom jewelry designs featuring lots of colors. Erin Lively and Amy Perry are the recipients of the Women-Owned Business of the Year honor.

"We are fortunate that we haven't had a lot of changes due to COVID," Perry said. "We have done more online selling, and social media is a great resource for us."

Lively got her start in the industry 20 years ago, and Perry developed her own passion for jewelry while looking for a job in her field out of college.

"The best advice I would give entrepreneurs based on our experience is do not be afraid to take some risks — you are probably underestimating yourself," Perry said. "Be prepared to adapt and change."

She said the original vision someone may have had may not be the path their business follows.

"Above all, keep moving forward," Perry said.

Sisters team Erin Lively and Amy Perry, recipients of the E-Day Women-Owned Business of the Year honor, turned to online sales at E&A Jewelers in Valparaiso. (Photo provided by NW-ISBDC)

## Maintaining momentum

Husband-and-wife team of lawyers Michael and Shelice Tolbert have found solace in their roots as a Christian law firm.

"Because of our beliefs and how we approach life, we feel like when everything has fallen down around us, God has a shield over us to

protect us no matter what," Michael said.

Tolbert & Tolbert LLC, the Minority-Owned Business of the Year, continued to stay busy helping community members with legal issues and serving as a mediator.

"We had a moratorium on jury trials, and we are a trial law firm," Michael said. "We found the opportunity to develop other areas of our business: alternative dispute resolution."

Husband-and-wife  
team of lawyers  
Michael and Shelice  
Tolbert earned the E-  
Day Minority-Owned  
Business of the Year.  
(Photo provided by  
NW-ISBDC)

Michael Tolbert is certified to serve as a neutral party to settle cases.

The duo has seen challenges in hiring as they look to fill a paralegal position.

"We make an effort to try and hire from our community while at the same time filling the need of our open position," Shelice said. "We continue to have remote and virtual work life and make sure our staff is comfortable in their work environment."

Whether it is the pandemic or any other obstacle, Michael said the couple remains focused on fulfilling their mission.

"We have been able to help more people virtually and offer these remote services that are done more effectively and cost efficiently," he said. "We understand that as long as we have

faith, remain positive and keep an open mind, nothing is going to affect our ability to help our clients.”

At the La Porte Economic Advancement Partnership, the team under Executive Director Bert Cook has worked to launch creative ways to help its members and community. LEAP unites the chamber of commerce and economic development sides under one umbrella.

Cook, the Small Business Advocate of the Year, said the virtual events and remote work became the go-to options.

“We worked well remotely, and we will continue some of that as it provides quality-of-life improvements,” Cook said. “We have had to reimagine how we do things: “Why we do events in certain ways?””

Bert Cook

Cook said his group’s biggest takeaway from the pandemic has been to continue to evaluate what you are doing and how you are doing it.

“It is human nature to get comfortable and think, we have always done it that way — that doesn’t work in this world anymore,” he said. “You have to project trends and see what is happening in your community.”

## **Bridging two worlds**

Advocate for Youth Entrepreneurship honoree Chareice White works with current and future entrepreneurs.

As the founder and chair of the board of ECIER Foundation, she is bringing experiences and education to African American students. The foundation — Educate, Create, Innovate, Entrepreneur, Relationships — provides scholarships for high-schoolers, initial bank account funds for younger students, exposure to entrepreneurs and new connections to other youth.

“What we do is empower them and teach them about entrepreneurship,” White said.

Chareice White

As the regional business development officer for the Community Investment Fund of Indiana, she is also helping small business owners affected by the pandemic, connecting them with opportunities to apply for a loan or grant.

"These are businesses that did not receive federal funding," she said. "I get to advocate for the little ones as well as the seasoned ones."

White said connecting students to business owners can really help them learn about being entrepreneurs and innovators.

"What better way to learn than from those who are facing challenges," she said.

As the 2021 Lifetime Achievement honoree, Stewart McMillan has found that starting in one direction doesn't mean that you know your final destination.

McMillan took the helm of Task Force Tips at the age of 28 after the death of his father, Clyde, who had launched the company in 1971.

To McMillan, the innovation and manufacturing of firefighting equipment seemed like the place that he would stay and then pass on to his own son.

"We put our expectations on our children to take over the family business," McMillan said. "When I spoke to my son and he said that this is my book to write, I had the realization that business is a legacy to support our kids doing what they want to do, not what you want to do and that really freed me up."

McMillan said he essentially retired from one business and started a new one.

As the 2021 Lifetime Achievement honoree, Stewart McMillan has found that starting in one direction doesn't mean that you know your final destination. (Photo by Michelle Hamstra)

Today, McMillan holds the title of chairman emeritus of TFT and chief of the MAAC Foundation, named in honor of his father. The Multi Agency Academic Cooperative is a training facility that connects first responders and allows them to work through real-life emergency scenarios.

"It supports the first responders in our community," he said. "First responders have had to continue on despite COVID," he said.

Providing assistance to first responders and helping them understand the value of their contribution has been more significant than he could have ever imagined, McMillan said.



McMillan said being an entrepreneur needs to involve insight and integrity.

"You really have to take the time to look at what is changing and what will affect my business," he said. "You have to adapt in advance and understand that risk is involved in everything."

He said business owners must mitigate that risk, while continuing to live their lives.

"If you drill it down, integrity means the willingness to admit you are wrong," McMillan said. "I have had my direction changed over and over and over by people (who) showed me where I was wrong and how I could take a new path."

[Click here to read more from the December-January 2022 issue of Northwest Indiana Business Magazine.](#)

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### **Lesly Bailey**

Before launching her freelance writing career, Lesly Bailey spent 11 years in the newsroom as a copy editor and page designer. She focused on state, national and world news as well as obituaries during her time at the Seymour Tribune, Columbus (Ind.) Republic and Times of Northwest Indiana. It wasn't until leaving behind the world of hard news that she embarked on her writing career. She has been a correspondent for The Times and its magazines and publications as well as a community coordinator for its Facebook sites. Today, she also serves as a marketing consultant for the Northwest Indiana Small Business Development Center and Porter County Aging and Community Services. She has had the opportunity to share many Region entrepreneurs' stories, and she continues to be inspired by their hard work, dedication and passion.

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