

## Semper Youngstown

**Mobbed up, burned down, written off— if Youngstown, Ohio, has a reputation at all, it's as a tragedy of a city. And yet, the place exerts a pull. The people believe.**

**Could Youngstown really be on the verge of reinvention as a 21st-century business center?**

BY BILL DONAHUE PHOTOGRAPHS BY GREG MILLER

There are no hotels in Youngstown, Ohio, population 82,000, and there is no real airport, either. Even before you get there, you have a sense of the place as somehow gutted of commerce. But then you roll into the city, over the highway, and you shudder a bit, for the skyline is sublime. Here is the Central Tower, a graceful 17-story art deco sliver that narrows, à la the Empire State Building, as it reaches its peak. Here, beside it, is the older, more earthbound Huntington Bank building, with its white terra cotta façade.

Both of these structures were built for the ages, before 1930, when Youngstown was among the three largest steel producers in the U.S., with a population of 170,000 and dozens of foundries. Wealthy financiers lived

upwind from the smokestacks then, in Doric-columned manses on Millionaire's Row. The mansions are still there.

You don't really apprehend how desolate Youngstown has become until you pull off the highway and begin navigating the potholes of Southern Boulevard. Here's a concrete-block convenience store with bars on the windows. On some streets nearby, up to 40 percent of the houses are vacant, and down the hill, 200 yards or so from the mayor's office, the brick, hangarlike Wean Steel plant stands vacant amid high, tawny grass. With a 13.7 percent unemployment rate and 3,500 vacant buildings, Youngstown is depressed, failed postindustrial America in distilled form.

Keep driving. Turn left onto the city's main drag, West Federal Street, and then, eventually, you see something weird: a newish green awning, printed with shiny metal lettering, *Youngstown Business Incubator*, it says. Inside is a guy, Jim Cossler, who calls himself the incubator's "chief evangelist." Cossler is a scrappy fellow, 55 years old and sparsely built, balding, with a habit of ducking out onto the street to furtively light cigarettes, his hands fluttering a bit as he cups the match in the wind.

Cossler has a rap about how Youngstown is perfectly suited to become a mecca for producers of business-to-business software. "When you buy software," he says, his voice a bit high and nasal, "do you ever turn over the box and say, 'I wonder

This is the headquarters of Turning Technologies, which last year grossed \$33.5 million making an audience response system used in academic settings and on shows like *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* Turning began in 2002, under Cossler's stewardship, in a small room at the incubator. Today, it has 173 employees, who work amid airy, high-ceilinged rooms with exposed brick walls and aluminum ductwork.

Cossler is especially proud that Turning stayed next door. "In most business incubators," he says, "when companies are successful, you graduate them, and then they move away and work in isolation. That's a horrible idea. We're open-source."

It's Cossler's hope that everyone on the Turning/Business Incubator campus can share ideas by, say, advising one another on how to display wares at a trade show, or participating in what he calls "your baby is ugly" meetings—that is, candid product-review sessions. He wants Turning's triumph to rub off, and he wants to reverse a grim brain drain: For decades now, Youngstown's brightest youths have fled town. He wants to call home what he calls "the Youngstown diaspora," to sprout a cerebral local culture and a computer industry that can support 5,000 jobs on the YBI campus.

Cossler is by no means there yet. The seven companies that sit beside Turning in the incubator collectively boast 62 employees. They are reluctant to share revenue figures, but by Cossler's estimate, they grossed a total of about \$3.5 million

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where this was made?' You don't! Nobody *cares* where software is made. And you can make software in Youngstown, Ohio, inexpensively. You can hire a software programmer in Youngstown for \$50,000, *and that's a good salary.*"

Cossler has been the CEO of the Business Incubator since 1998. The State of Ohio now gives him \$375,000 each year, and he uses the money exclusively to nurture tech-related companies. The YBI houses seven start-ups and gives the newer ones free rent, free utilities, and free Wi-Fi and phone service. It also gives guidance to nine companies that sit off-campus in greater Youngstown as they develop tech products. A framed photo outside Cossler's office, by the elevator, bespeaks the dream. It captures the original Microsoft team in 1978—a baby-faced, beak-nosed Bill Gates flanked by several furry-bearded hippies. At first, it registers as a little absurd.

But attached to the YBI building is a symbol of hope—a brand-new 30,000-square-foot building in chrome and glass.

in 2009. Still, there are intimations of glory. Youngstown's U.S. representative, Tim Ryan, keeps an office inside the incubator. In the past seven years, he has secured more than \$23 million in federal grants for tech projects involving YBI's portfolio companies.

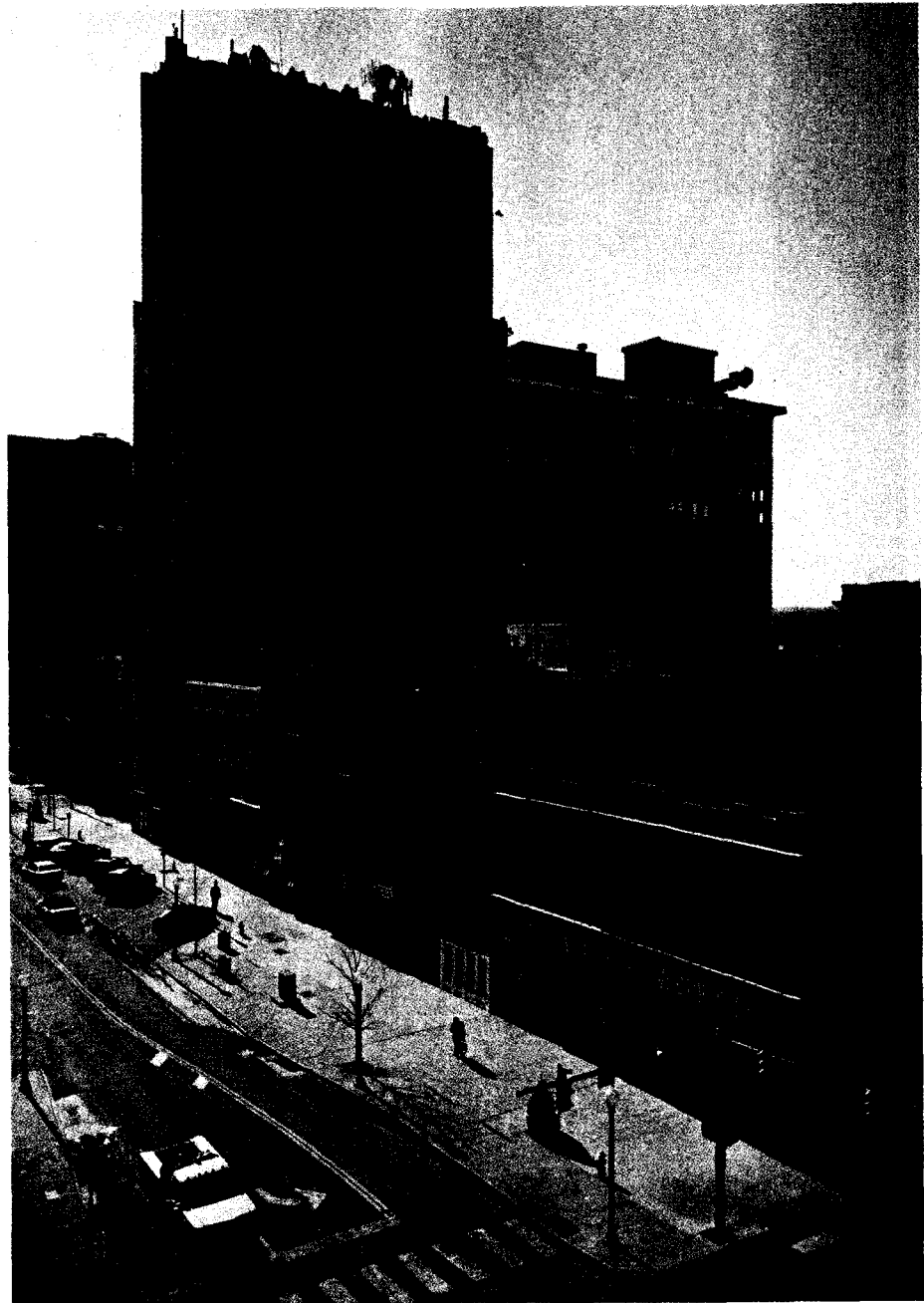
Meanwhile, Cossler is scheming to expand the campus, which includes three buildings and 83,000 square feet. He gave me a tour, pointing first at a weathered brick warehouse—*Furnitureland of Youngstown*, read the fading sign—and then at an open pit alongside West Federal Street. "Here," he said, gazing down, "we're going to build a bocce court, or maybe a barbecue area where everyone on campus can mingle."

We were out on the sidewalk, and it was winter. A scrim of windblown snow skittered about, accentuating the bleakness. But still, there was a new martini bar nearby and a swank Italian restaurant that YBI's workers now frequent at lunchtime. And if

you squinted a bit, you could actually see it happening—the rebirth of Youngstown.

**Youngstown died** on September 19, 1977. That was Black Monday. Forty-one hundred workers at the Campbell plant of Youngstown Sheet and Tube, the city's biggest employer, showed up that morning to learn they had been laid off, permanently. A spirit of fear and anomie had been seeping into Youngstown for years, as the U.S. steel industry withered and the local foundries, once owned by the lions of Millionaire's Row, got sold off to out-of-town conglomerates. Now, despair set in. By the early 1980s, Youngstown had one of the highest arson rates in the country. Sheet and Tube had shuttered another plant. U.S. Steel and Republic Steel left Youngstown, too. All told, greater Youngstown lost about 50,000 jobs in steel and related industries.

It was a story that repeated itself all over the rust belt, but Youngstown was particularly demoralized—and fragmented. In his recent book, *Why the Garden Club Couldn't Save Youngstown*, organizational theorist Sean Safford celebrates how Allentown, Pennsylvania, a similarly ravaged steel town, reinvented itself in the 1980s, as "community-based divisions" melted and city leaders formed a "bridge across ethnic, class, and indeed geographical divisions" to develop a new, diverse economy driven by tech start-ups. Youngstown, Safford writes, was "balkanized." Members of the Garden Club didn't talk to entrepreneurs. A few power brokers (namely, the Garden Club bunch) held the purse strings, marginalizing everyone else. The place was lorded over by the Mafia and often called Murdertown USA. And Jim Cossler felt the sting. In 2002, he told Safford that the city's mayor had never even set foot in YBI's office. "The community isn't behind the incubator," Cossler said, in a rare moment of mop-



### Steel City Remade

Youngstown's strategy for prosperity in the post-steel era includes a controlled shrinkage. But it still has the architecture and public spaces of the vital, much-larger city it used to be. This is West Federal Street, a couple of blocks from the Youngstown Business Incubator.

ing. "We are the ones with the least community support."

Youngstown reserved its support, instead, for a onetime college football star who had apparent ties to the Mob. In 1980, Jim Traficant was elected sheriff of Mahoning County. Audiotapes nabbed him in clandestine chats with a Mafioso, who eventually handed him an envelope containing \$163,000 in cash. Still, when Traficant was indicted in 1982, for accepting a bribe, he defended himself and opened, incredibly, by stating, "I fucked the Mob." His populist gusto sang to bitter, disenfranchised Youngstown,

and after he wriggled free of conviction, he became a beloved U.S. representative, serving from 1985 to 2002, when he finally was caught and sent to federal prison for bribe taking.

In Traficant's heyday, Youngstown's urban core was practically gagged—so moribund that the city's leaders seemed almost determined to suffocate enterprise there. In the '70s, they closed West Federal Street to cars and put in a brick terrace, thereby killing downtown.

Things got so dire that in 2005, the city's voters did a 180. They elected as mayor Jay Williams, a 34-year-old African American banker and political rookie who carried a vision to make Youngstown "healthy and leaner," largely by demolishing vacant houses and revitalizing downtown. Williams, who is still mayor, is now the rock star of the rust belt's burgeoning "shrinking city" movement. He appears frequently on national television and has been invited to the White House. He works in tandem with Tim Ryan, who is just 36.

And there is suddenly a host of young, civic-minded idealists in Youngstown, among them Phil Kidd, a bald and muscled onetime Army lieutenant. Kidd, who is 30, made his first foray into activism in 2005, by standing on a downtown plaza each week with a sign reading *Defend Youngstown*. Today, he works for a new nonprofit, the Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative. He has rallied Youngstowners to shut down a corner

through the streets shirtless, year round, while carrying a 55-pound log. "It's insane," he said. He paused, and then he grew confidential. "I've got my own log," he said, "back home, in my apartment."

**But how do you** build businesses in a city that revels in its dysfunctionality?

When Jim Cossler first came to his job, from Youngstown's chamber of commerce, the Business Incubator hosted just three start-ups—a digital printing company, a manufacturer of wooden rocking horses, and an outfit that wanted to place printers for travelers' use at airport check-in areas. In 2002, the state legislature established funding for the development of technology businesses in Ohio, and Cossler had an insight that would help spawn Turning Technologies: "Software companies are easy to start. Pretty much all you need is a server and some computers. And if we have a bunch of tech companies here, we can build synergy."

That year, Turning began at the incubator. CEO Mike Broderick is still grateful for the jump-start Cossler gave him. "We probably got \$250,000 or \$300,000 worth of help from the incubator," Broderick says. "We didn't have to worry about infrastructure. We could focus on the product—and that accelerated the process. Jim Cossler has a Rolodex of thousands of people, and he

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liquor store where criminals gathered and to help residents of battered neighborhoods get the city to pull down vacant buildings—drug houses, usually, or vandal magnets.

Kidd often works 80 hours a week. He signs his e-mails *Defend, PK*, and he is intense even when he is just hanging out. One evening, he invited me to the Youngstown YMCA, where, he said, the city's young professionals gathered each week to play dodge ball. I expected a convivial gathering with, perhaps, a pitcher of iced tea on the sidelines. But no, the game was ugly. Kidd whaled the ball so hard that he grunted, and one of his targets grew so riled that postgame, he was spoiling for a fight. "Did you call me a faggot, No. 4?" he bellowed to Kidd's teammate.

"I was just sayin'," said No. 4, walking away.

Afterward, over beers, Kidd smirked, recalling the tension. "That's Youngstown!" he revealed. "That's Youngstown! What makes this place is its blue-collar ethic and its dysfunctionality. There are *characters* here." In time, Kidd told me about Paul Dunleavy, the dauntless co-owner of a local gym who runs

made introductions for us. We've been very cognizant of that."

In 2007, when Turning needed to expand, it considered moving its headquarters to the suburbs of Youngstown. The city imposes a 2.75 percent income tax on everyone who works within its boundaries, and parking downtown can be a hassle for Turning's largely suburban work force. "But we took an informal poll, and 95 percent of our workers said they liked working downtown," says Broderick. "There's an energy, a hope."

Now Cossler is trying to create Youngstown's next Turning. In a struggling city, he is a sort of kingmaker. About 20 people approach him every month, trying to secure space in the incubator by pitching ideas for products. Many of the ideas are just plain bad—"they tend to self-select out," as Cossler gently puts it—but still, Cossler always speaks as though he is surrounded by geniuses on the cusp of greatness. He describes Zethus as "a company whose deep and leading-edge knowledge of cloud computing

may just revolutionize how we manage our electronic data." Founded in 2003, Zethus makes a platform called cumulus::DocumentMatrix. One of Zethus's neighbors at YBI, BizVeo, makes an online platform that medical patients can use to download, say, medical-history forms or streaming video of their doctors discussing the nuances of open-heart surgery. The company just made its first sale, to a local hospital.

YBI's off-campus companies, combined, grossed just shy of \$60 million last year, and some have a deep history. Still, it seems that Cossler's main job is cheering up a city with bad-self-esteem issues. In one open letter to the YBI community, he sounds an almost therapeutic ring, calling the incubator "a shining example of how disbelief in ourselves can and must be overcome throughout Northeast Ohio." He wears a short-sleeved YBI polo shirt virtually all the time, even in winter, and in his talks with young inventors, he taps their potential deftly, with the indulgent patience of a good Little League coach.

One afternoon, I sat in as Cossler met with a 28-year-old photographer, Rasul Welch, who wants to fabricate and sell

you did. Say you wanted to create software for DSLR; we'd find you programmers."

As the inventors left, they were envisioning software that could aid video editing. Seven weeks later, they began working in the Inspire Lab.

**Urban theorist and author** Richard Florida has identified what he calls the "three T's" of economic development. Florida argues in his 2002 bestseller *The Rise of the Creative Class* that urban areas need "talent, technology, and tolerance." By *tolerance*, he means venues that embrace "cultural, entrepreneurial, civic, scientific, and artistic creativity." Cool hangouts, in other words: museums, microbreweries, experimental theaters, and research labs.

In those terms, Youngstown could go either way. The ruined steel mills hold a certain rust belt chic, and when I was there, I met artists and writers who had come back to the city, enchanted by the pathos and romance of the place. There is a splendid new café on West Federal Street—the Lemon Grove, where the walls are hung with paintings from local artists and the floors are made of planks salvaged from an old barn.

## There is an old-world charm to Youngstown, a substance and intricacy that you would never find amid the McMansions of Phoenix.

"follow focus" hardware that can facilitate video shooting on DSLR cameras. Welch's business partner was a half-hour late. And as we all waited for him, Welch slumped in his chair. He was impressively schooled on camera technology, but he seemed a little casual for a guy on thin ice. "Charles is a young buck just off the boat from Dubai," he said of his straggling mate. "He went to the University of Cambridge, in England." He admitted he had done only one casual market study for his mount: quizzing five photographer friends about his concept. "Four of them hated it," he said.

Cossler had a flash of doubt. "Just because your mom and your girlfriend like your idea..." he began. Then he changed tack. "I like you guys," he said, after fabricator Charles Beal finally showed. "I like your pedigree. You have nice skill sets." A moment later, he was offering the inventors access to YBI's Inspire Lab, a set of two ground-floor conference rooms shared by about 20 start-ups so germinal that they are just tinkering, nights and weekends. He also offered the gratis aid of a lawyer who could help the inventors incorporate. "We could go to work for you tomorrow," he said.

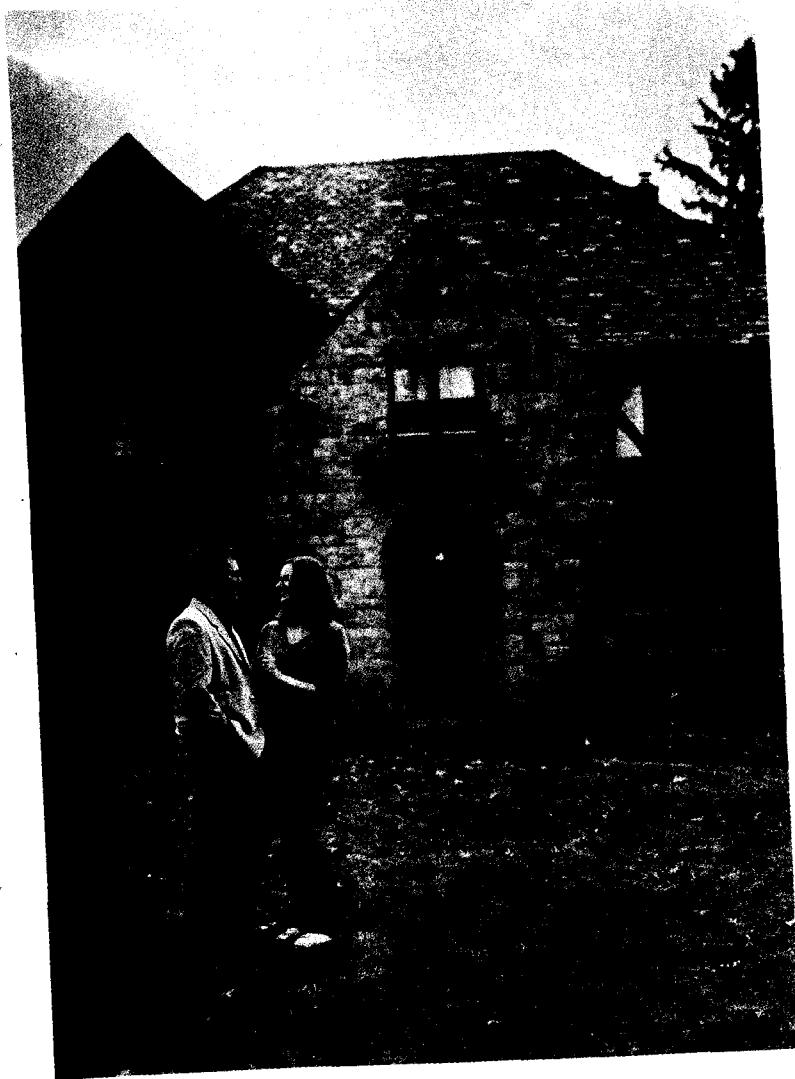
"But," said Beal, "I don't know how we'd create jobs for Youngstown."

"Don't worry," Cossler said. "We'd morph you along so

There is an old-school museum, the Butler Institute of American Art, that boasts Edward Hoppers and Georgia O'Keeffe's in its permanent collection, and there is also a gay advocacy group, Pride Youngstown. Youngstown State University, which sits on a hill above the downtown area, is a big and important presence. But Youngstown is—let's face it—not the sort of place where U2 is going to kick off its next tour. It is a small town, more homey than cosmopolitan, and it is trying to fight its way back from a haunted past.

Skeptics hold that Youngstown could be damned by its history. Heike Mayer, a professor of urban planning at Virginia Tech, notes that Youngstown has no track record with high tech. She adds, "You can't create 5,000 jobs out of nothing. You have to connect to what's already there, historically. Pittsburgh did that. It was a steel town, and it built highly specialized steel-technology firms. But Youngstown, I don't know."

Mayer has studied Oregon's Silicon Forest, south of Portland, where a number of small tech start-ups have emerged in the shadows of the local giants, Tektronix and Intel. "Even there," she says, "the start-ups didn't create 5,000 jobs. Youngstown has Turning, yes, but that won't generate 15 spinoffs. If there's two successful ones, that would be good. Perhaps Youngstown needs to lower its goals and go after



**Their Turn**

Tyler and Jaci Clark are returnees who see the city as a kind of blank canvas. He is a techie and activist who writes a blog called Youngstown Renaissance; she is a photographer. They bought this five-bedroom house, fully renovated, for \$188,000.

low-level tech jobs—the sort of work that often goes to India or China, like customer support.”

But Mayer, who is on leave this year in Switzerland, is far removed from the good news that has of late been sweeping Youngstown. In February, a French pipe manufacturer, Vallourec, announced plans to spend \$650 million building a Youngstown plant that will make small-diameter pipes for natural gas extraction. That project will create 350 blue-collar jobs. Eight days later, General Motors said it would expand operations at its Lordstown plant, just outside Youngstown, by adding a third shift and 1,200 jobs. The factory now employs 4,500 workers. Meanwhile, Ryan's grant money keeps streaming in. Ned Hill, the dean of Cleveland State University's urban affairs program, feels Youngstown has momentum. “There's unprecedented optimism there,” he

told me. “The mayor is walk-on-water amazing, and they know what they're doing at the incubator. They realize that incubation isn't just about giving away free space. And because that area is dominated by community, as opposed to national, banks, the tech companies can get good financing. The bankers there are willing to take a little risk to get Youngstown going again.”

For Hill, the big question is: Will software companies *stay* in Youngstown? Tech startups are often funded by venture capital—and VC firms have no qualms about selling a company as soon as it achieves some success and letting it be swept out of town. “Will that happen in Youngstown, or are YBI companies poised to stay and grow?” Hill asks. “The honest answer is, I just don't know. I am not smarter than the market.”

Along with Hill, Mayor Williams knows that high tech is a gamble—and that it can't single-handedly rescue Youngstown. “We're pursuing software,” he says, “but not with the notion that it will replace steel. Manufacturing will still play a role here, and the service industry, too. We've got a new call center downtown that's employing 650 people.”

Ryan also wants diversity. “We do have a manufacturing base,” he says, “and we need to build on that. But computers—that can change our image. The average salary at the business incubator is \$58,000. That's a force multiplier for us. We want those kinds of jobs here. And so we're designing a city that people would want to live in.”

Soon, Ryan was talking about a Youngstown entrepreneur who had just spruced up three local golf courses, to host LPGA tournaments. “You want world-class golf here?” he says. “We've got it. You like to ski? It's nearby. You like hunting and fishing? It's here. Music? We've got Elton John coming. Right in downtown Youngstown, at the Covelli Centre. Elton John!”

**When I had downtime**, I wandered about town in the snow. The lyrics from a famous Bruce Springsteen dirge, “Youngstown,” wafted about in my head: “Here in Youngstown/ Here in Youngstown/ My sweet Jenny, I'm sinkin' down.” In its direness and gloom, the soundtrack seems to fit, until Youngstown's quiet old splendor sneaks up on you.

Directly across the street from YBI is the Powers Auditorium, built for \$1 million in 1931 by three of Hollywood's Warner brothers, who were Youngstown natives. The wood-

work is wrought of Carpathian elm. The ceiling is coved and gilded, as in a church, and hung with grand chandeliers.

A few miles away is Kravitz Deli, which has been serving corned beef sandwiches since 1939. Founder Rose Kravitz, now 94, still works six days a week, even though she is nearly blind.

Ethnicity still matters in Youngstown, a city that lured legions of immigrants, mostly Italians and Eastern Europeans, in its steel heyday. Myriad Polish, Slovakian, and Ukrainian churches sell pierogis on Fridays, and on Saturdays at one Croatian eatery, the Dubic Palm Cafe, servers carve up whole smoked lambs on a backroom table, in full view of the diners. There is an old-world charm to Youngstown, a

and share everything they learned.”

Until about 2005, Youngstown was a hard sell to young creative types. Now, though, there is a small community of tech people who have come back to their hometown, to embrace the place as though it were the lost Holy Land. The group's guiding spirit is Tyler Clark, a 34-year-old musician and Web-strategy consultant who serves as YBI's "chief imagination officer," helping local businesses spruce up their websites. Clark grew up in Texas and went to Youngstown State University; as an undergrad, he was the musical director at the Youngstown Playhouse. He bounced around after graduation, living in suburban Virginia and

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substance and intricacy that you would never find amid the McMansions of Phoenix. The place can pull on a person, and a few years ago, one Youngstown native, John Slanina, missed Youngstown while living in the Netherlands. Slanina, a policy analyst focused on tech-based development, launched a blog titled *I Will Shout Youngstown*.

The project became a record of one expat's homesickness. Slanina wrote about both ancient Youngstown delights and nouveau tweaks, such as the group Polish Youngstown, which offers Polish-language karaoke at its sprightly ragers. A fondness pervades every word. When Slanina discusses a wedding tradition unique to the rust belt—the cookie table—he lambastes a friend's painfully cookieless wedding. “The initial shock of not having a cookie table is difficult for the soul,” he says, “but it also shows us how there are some traditions out there that are weaved into the core of our beings, which you can't find everywhere throughout the country.”

Cossler is happy to have Slanina in his corner. He dreams of a day when students at Harvard yearn to be sitting on West Federal Street, quaffing Rust Belt beer, which is proudly brewed with Youngstown tap water. But he doesn't want to pinion bright twentysomethings. “We want our best and brightest to leave Youngstown,” he says. “We want them to go to Seattle or New York or wherever, and then come back



### After Hours

Never mind becoming a tech hub—could Youngstown become cool? The Lemon Grove Cafe is where that part of the renaissance is attempting to take hold. Local activists meet there for strategy sessions called Thinkers and Drinkers.

Tucson, but then, in 2006, a good friend in Youngstown fell ill. Clark's wife, Jaci, a photographer who grew up here, came back, and the visit was a revelation. The Clarks bought a meticulously maintained five-bedroom Millionaire's Row manse, once the home of Sharon Steel president Henry Roemer, for \$188,000.

Today, Clark works in a home office replete with a curving black and crimson art deco bar, and he regards Youngstown

as an adventure. “We’re urban pioneers,” he told me. “We’re trying to bring a city back from the dead, and Youngstown needs so much.” Clark writes a blog, *Youngstown Renaissance*, that advocates for a livable Youngstown. (“For God’s sake,” he writes, “no more surface parking lots.”) As a member of the group *Resettle Youngstown*, he takes care of vacant houses, boarding up the windows and doors to keep vandals out, and every so often, at the *Lemon Grove Cafe*, he emcees *Thinkers and Drinkers*, a casual powwow that sees locals sipping pints as they hash over questions like, How can we get Youngstown State students more involved in the community? When I went one night, he began with caution. “Complaining is OK,” he said, “but I don’t want this to turn into a bitch session.”

**The Lemon Grove** is Youngstown’s most progressive and outré venue, and among regulars, there is a feeling that the entrepreneurs at YBI are irrelevant—alien to the Youngstown revolution and ensconced on their own little island of narcissism. At *Thinkers and Drinkers*, I met Howard Markert, 43, a small-scale green developer who had recently arrived, from

and offer passersby free milk shakes,” he said. “Maybe we could open the windows and blast polka music. I’m going to start a Boomerang Initiative. I’m going to get together all the people who moved back here, so we can talk about our hometown—and what we learned while we were away. I’ll ask, Can we combine local trust with global knowledge to do good projects?”

Later, I talked to Tyler Clark, and he insisted that the answer is yes. “Youngstown is a laboratory,” he said. “There’s not a lot of restrictions and bureaucracy. You can make a difference without a lot of effort.”

Clark paused, and then cracked out a screwdriver so that he and I could flagrantly violate the law. We were trespassing our way into an abandoned 10-bedroom Tudor mansion he was trying to keep standing, in hopes someone would buy it. The house had a sheet of plywood over the front door. It looked out onto grassy Wick Park. It was cold and musty inside, and Clark was dressed rather nattily for a burglar, in a long woolen overcoat, black pinstriped slacks, and a necktie. We walked up the stairs. The wallpaper was peeling and gathering into piles on the floor, amid a blizzard

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the Bay Area, to convert apartments into eco-havens replete with nontoxic paint and energy-efficient furnaces. He told me that he felt obliged to be civically engaged: “If you’re not,” he said, “the neighborhoods will fall to pieces around you. Your investment will be worthless.” Markert is active in nine Youngstown nonprofits. I asked him about YBI’s entrepreneurs. “I never see those people,” he said.

It was sad to see how far apart the techies and the activists are in a town that needs its visionaries to band together. At times, it seemed to me as though there were two separate Youngstown renaissances happening on the same street, and not in radio contact. It was as though the Garden Club schism was plaguing Youngstown all over again.

But then, on the day I was to leave town, there came hope for a bridge between the two worlds. John Slanina, the blogger, moved back to Youngstown. Revere Data, a San Francisco company specializing in investing software, was opening a 10-person office in the Youngstown Business Incubator. Slanina had taken a job as a senior analyst with Revere, and he came home brimming with schemes. “Maybe we ought to put a couch on the sidewalk outside the Business Incubator

of old office papers. The bedroom floors were covered with an ugly yellow linoleum. Somehow, though, there was grandeur there under the surface, waiting for a makeover. Over the hearth was a white plaster mantel bursting with carved lions and cherubs.

Clark told me the story of the place. Until 2006, it was a home for the mentally disabled, but then the owner, facing financial trouble, walked away, abruptly, leaving the water service on, so the pipes burst. We strolled into another room, where there was an old piano and also a buckling floor. “A lot of houses in Youngstown should be torn down,” Clark said, “but this one—” He paused. “There’s integrity that’s lost the moment it hits the ground, and there’s a gaping hole beside the park.”

We went back downstairs and screwed the plywood back onto the door, to stave off vandals. Then Clark lingered awhile on the lawn, talking to a neighbor. “It’s a beautiful house,” he said.

“Yeah,” said the neighbor, “it is. It’d be a shame to see it go.”

*Bill Donahue is a writer who lives in Portland, Oregon. His most recent story for Inc., about Dave’s Killer Bread, appeared in the June 2009 issue.*