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Winter 2024

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**BEST OF ERIE**  
10 YEAR WINNER  
2014-2023  
**RIE READER**



**Best of Erie: 10 Years of Winners**  
Decade of repeat winners shows staying power

**Lessons from West Philadelphia**  
The Leader of The Enterprise Center, Della Clark



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# Best of Erie 2023: 10 Years of Winners

A decade of repeat winners demonstrates true staying power

By: Erin Phillips

This year's publication of the 2023 Best of Erie Awards marks the 10th anniversary of these crowdsourced honors. Once again, the people of the Erie region have assumed the annual duty of nominating and voting for the best people, places, and things in Erie — and each year the cream rises to the top. That's the case for the following businesses and nonprofits which have won their respective categories for 10 years running. That kind of customer loyalty reflects consistency of service and means that these establishments are truly the best that Erie has to offer. It is our pleasure to show them a little extra love for all of the love they have shown to our region throughout the decade. (Listed alphabetically by category)

**Best Athletic Competition: Barber Beast on the Bay**

Erieites love showing up for a good cause, and this annual "American Gladiator" style athletic competition is one that so many people support that it has been voted Best Athletic Competition for 10 years running. Organized every year to benefit Erie's Barber National Institute, the group's mission is to "provide children and adults with autism, intellectual disabilities, and behavioral health challenges and their families the education, support, and resources needed to be self-reliant, independent, and valued members of their community."

This competition is not for

JESSICA HUNTER/CONTRIBUTED



Among those businesses and organizations who won their categories in the Best of Erie Awards for 10 years running are (Clockwise from top left): Greengarden Lanes for Best Bowling Alley, Erie Federal Credit Union for Best Bank, Barber Beast on the Bay for Best Athletic Competition, Bianchi Honda for Best Car Dealership, and Art's Bakery for Best Bakery.

the faint of heart: it is a physical gauntlet of challenges stretching over 10 miles of Presque Isle State Park featuring more than 30 obstacles. The competition also features a one-mile adapted course at nearby Waldameer Park, so those with physical or intellectual disabilities can also join the challenge. Maybe this is

the year you'll feel inspired to tackle the Beast, all for a great community cause.

**Best Bakery: Art's Bakery**

A mainstay on West Ridge Road, Art's Bakery built its business and reputation on the legacy of Art Evans, who founded the bakery in 1950. With delectable treats like

specialty cookies, breads, and pies, the familiarity and quality of the baked goods at Art's have stayed consistent through a recent change in ownership. And that consistency has resulted in Art's continuing to win the hearts (and taste buds) of local Best of Erie voters, as it has swept the category for 10 years running.

## FEATURE

JESSICA HUNTER/CONTRIBUTED



Winners of their Best of Erie categories since the inception of the awards in 2014 include (Clockwise from top left): The Erie Otters for Best Team to Root For, Coventina Day Spa for Best Spa, Epic Web Studios for Best Web Developer, Penn State Behrend for Best College or University, and YogaErie for Best Yoga Studio.

### Best Bank: Erie Federal Credit Union

It's clear to Best of Erie voters that when it comes to choosing their favorite bank, they'd rather not choose a bank at all. Erie Federal Credit Union (EFCU) reminds us, "When you join Erie Federal Credit Union, you become a member, not a customer. As a member-owner, the focus is on serving you and your financial needs. Unlike banks, credit union profits are returned to you through better rates and lower fees. EFCU was formed to serve our members, not to earn profits for shareholders."

It's this commitment to service – putting their members first and keeping money within the local community – that has inspired Best of Erie voters to cast their ballot for EFCU for the past 10 years. Local business owner Missy

Monacella relates in a testimonial about EFCU, "I am impressed with their staff and even more impressed that they remembered my name the next time I visited. That never happened at [my previous] bank. EFCU has friendly and efficient professionals. They helped me get my business banking on track and made our new home-buying process as simple as possible. I highly recommend EFCU!"

### Best Bowling Alley: Greengarden Lanes

Originally established in 1957, Greengarden Lanes offers more than just some bowling lanes on which to practice your roll – it offers, according to their website, "a full-blown bowling experience." For a business to consistently succeed over 65 years (including winning Best Bowling Alley



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for the past 10), it has to grow, adapt, and stay relevant while still holding on to the foundations of its success. Not always an easy task, but Greengarden Lanes has achieved that by offering bowling lessons, top-rated equipment for sale, organized bowling leagues for all age groups and skill levels, birthday bowling parties for adults and children alike, and "Rock and Bowl" events, all in a family-friendly facility with well-maintained lanes and technology.

**Best Car Dealership:  
Bianchi Honda**

It's not just the voters for Best of Erie who think Bianchi Honda (located at 8430 Peach St.) is the Best Car Dealership in Erie since the inception of the awards in 2014 – Bianchi was named the number one Honda dealer in Pennsylvania in 2022 and is a 24-time winner of the Honda President's award, 2022's DealerRater Consumer Satisfaction Award Winner, and a BBB Torch Award winner for Marketplace Ethics. But it's not just awards and accolades that make Bianchi Honda outstanding in their field, it is their dedication to maintaining a "no-pressure, family-owned dealership that puts the customer first."

If you're looking for a reliable, high-quality new or used vehicle, or need to utilize the service department for whatever reason, Bianchi Honda is dedicated to creating a good customer experience. Customers consistently report on their positive interactions at Bianchi, stating "I felt like I was their only customer of the day;" "They were very attentive to my needs, not pushy, and worked well trying to get us the best

deal;" and "the customer is always treated with respect and dignity."

**Best Chocolates or Candy:  
Romolo Chocolates**

The people of Erie clearly have great taste, as they've consistently voted Romolo Chocolates to the number one spot in the Best Chocolates or Candy category for 10 years in a row. In their expansive facility producing the freshest chocolates and confections, the brain behind the candies, Master Confectioner Tony Stefanelli, has been "making and seeking knowledge about candy for more than 48 years, apprenticing under his grandfather Romolo Stefanelli at the start of his career." It was through longstanding family tradition that the Erie phenomenon of sponge candy came to be as ubiquitous in our region as it is.

Within their footprint on West Eighth Street, Romolo's has succeeded in producing high-quality chocolates and candies, while also providing a gathering place in their Cocoa Cafe which offers authentic Italian coffee drinks, homemade ice creams, and desserts alongside a retail store with gifts, art, and Erie-centric souvenirs. A visit to Romolo Chocolates is a feast for the senses and all of Erie agrees – it's unbeatable.

**Best Consignment Shop:  
The Sassy Peacock**

Only accepting the best is what has helped make The Sassy Peacock Erie's favorite Consignment Shop for an entire decade. Celebrating 18 years in the consignment business, the Sassy Peacock on Pittsburgh Avenue has made a



10 time winners of Best of Erie awards in their respective categories, the Erie Reader congratulates (Clockwise from top left) The ANNA Shelter in Best Place to Adopt a Pet, The Sassy Peacock in Best Consignment Store, The Erie Food Co-op in Best Health Food Store, Panache in Best Salon, and Romolo Chocolates in Best Chocolate.

success out of resale. According to their website, "Shopping can be a form of therapy: resale therapy to be exact! You will certainly find many designer labels to choose from at The Sassy Peacock to update your closet, but regardless of our supply of designer names, we are rather picky and only accept and select items that still have lots of life in them and are in style; that is the Sassy difference!"

Whether you're looking for hard-to-find, unique clothing items, a good bargain on a name-brand piece of apparel, or quality, helpful service from their hardworking team, Erie agrees: you can't go wrong by checking out what's in stock at the Sassy Peacock.

**Best Health Food Store:  
Erie Food Co-op**

A cooperative in the truest

sense, the Erie Food Co-op is owned by the community and, unlike most other grocery stores or retail establishments, they have a mission: "to serve our community as the foremost provider of foods and products that enrich health and well-being, while cultivating a spirit of community through excellent service and education." And that mission is the backbone of bringing healthy, as-local-as-possible food to the members of the co-op (as well as the community at large – you don't have to be a member to shop the co-op)!

The Erie Food Co-op also features one of the only and, most certainly, the largest bulk departments in Erie, allowing customers to get bulk grains, coffee, dried fruits, nuts, herbs, spices, soap, honey, flour, nut butters, cereals, and more, all without additional packaging

## FEATURE

– contributing to the health of our planet as well as the health of their customers.

Whether you shop the Co-op for health foods, local or organic produce, bulk foods, natural household or health and beauty products, thoughtfully prepared deli foods, local dairy and eggs, wholesome supplements, or any of the other products available, Erie agrees, the Erie Food Co-op is the best health food store around and has been for at least the past 10 years (although they've been serving the Erie community since 1981).

### **Best Place to Adopt a Pet: The ANNA Shelter**

While all of the animal shelters and rescue organizations in Erie do an incredible job at housing, rehabilitating, caring for, and adopting out the homeless pets in our region, the ANNA Shelter (which stands for the Association for Needy and Neglected Animals) has stood out above the others as Erie's clear go-to when it's time to bring home a new pet.

The organization's mission is "to provide unwanted, stray, abused, or neglected animals with a safe, nurturing, loving environment where they can be either reunited with their owners or placed into new, lifelong, loving homes." They care for stray pets, operate an animal cruelty investigation department, and accept owner surrenders of unwanted animals. They have multiple pet wellness centers that provide routine health checks, vaccines, spay/neuter surgeries, and dental care at a discounted price. They have programs established in which adoptable animals visit senior centers, a program connecting veterans

with companion animals, and educational outreach through school visits and pet CPR classes. Their place within the community is necessary and priceless, and the people of Erie appreciate their service.

### **Best Salon: Panache**

When you look your best, you feel your best. And the people of Erie agree: the place that will have you looking and feeling your best is Panache. For the past 10 years, Panache has swept the "Best Salon" category in our Best of Erie contest for its commitment to customer satisfaction, quality service, and providing a professional atmosphere. All of the stylists employed by Panache are certified in advanced hairstyling and hair design artistry.

In addition to top-notch hair styling services, Panache is also a full-service day spa, offering a multitude of options including manicures, pedicures, facials, body wraps, waxing, lash, brow, and makeup services, aromatherapy, massage, cupping, as well as wedding hair and makeup preparations. The folks at Panache are also expanding their local beauty reach with the opening of nearby Simply Coco in the West Erie Plaza, offering a variety of skin care and med-spa services. Give yourself the gift of self-care and a fresh new look, and see what the people of Erie are so excited about at Panache.

### **Best Spa: Coventina Day Spa**

Coventina Day Spa has been a part of the Erie community for decades and has recently come under new ownership, which has included an expansion into the med spa realm. The new owners, Drs. Chris and Dawn

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The views, prominent downtown location, and entrepreneurial spirit in the building make Palace Business Centres the best real estate in Erie!

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Karns, have built upon the established stalwart reputation for quality service and have grown the successful legacy of Coventina.

While still offering traditional day spa services like facials, massages, manicures, pedicures, and hair styling, they also offer a full line of med-spa treatments like laser hair reduction, injectables and fillers, hair restoration, hyperhidrosis, incontinence and vaginal rejuvenation, anti-aging and color correction, and acne and scarring treatments. The people of Erie know their go-to when it comes to rest, relaxation, and rejuvenation, and that's been Coventina for the past 10 years.

### **Best Team to Root For: Erie Otters**

There's certainly a lot to love about Erie, but the long winters full of gray days and freezing temperatures are enough to deflate even Erie's biggest fans. Enter the Erie Otters giving us all a reason to get out, get excited, and cheer on our local team throughout the winter season. And Otters fans feel passionate about their team, voting the lo-

cal hockey outfit as their favorite team to root for for 10 years running!

Whether it's the thrill of the game, the atmosphere of the Erie Insurance Arena, the enthusiastic mascot OTTO, the poutine, or the Zamboni that gets you going, one thing's for sure: the Erie Otters make for an exciting winter night out with family and friends.

### **Best University: Penn State Behrend**

The Erie region is fortunate to have several local colleges and universities to bolster our local economy, but one university stands out above the rest – Penn State Behrend has won the category of Best University each year for a decade.

With the resources and affordability of the large state university system of Penn State, Behrend offers area students the opportunities of a bigger school while maintaining the familiarity and intimate feel of a smaller, local option. Behrend's outreach in the community is also part of the reason for their continued success in the Best of Erie contest: offering youth

outreach, summer camps, and cultural and science-related fairs open and free to the public. WE ARE Penn State Behrend!

### **Best Web Developer: Epic Web Studios**

Epic Web Studios are home-grown web-design heroes, starting very small and very local and quickly expanding to become "a full-service digital marketing firm that envisions, builds, and manages web-based solutions for organizations throughout North America."

Their talented local staff specializes in paid and organic search engine optimization (SEO), content strategy and development, and website design, development, and maintenance.

With hundreds of satisfied clients, Epic Web Studios is fully equipped to bring their customers the best possible experience in building the website they envision for their business or nonprofit.

If you need a well-designed, bug-free, smoothly-running website (such as [eriereader.com](http://eriereader.com)) with prompt, reliable service and a knowledgeable, up-to-date crew backing everything up, Epic Web Studios is Erie's clear choice and has been for the past 10 years.

com) with prompt, reliable service and a knowledgeable, up-to-date crew backing everything up, Epic Web Studios is Erie's clear choice and has been for the past 10 years.

### **Best Yoga Studio: YogaErie**

When Erie yogis want to hit the mat, they have a preferred studio in YogaErie, which has won the Best Yoga Studio category for 10 years in a row. Conveniently located in the Shops at the Colony, YogaErie has a class for every ability and need. Individual or group classes are available in all levels and types including basic beginner, power yoga, yin yoga, prenatal and postpartum yoga, as well as kids classes.

The studio was born in 2009, out of owner Jill Crawford Murphey's struggle to find hot yoga classes locally. Since then, her practice has grown to include 15 teachers with over 25 classes available including special events, workshops, and retreats. Whether you're just starting or are already a seasoned yogi, YogaErie has an offering for you. Namaste.

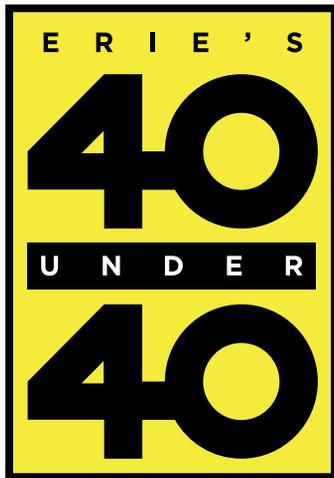
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To nominate, fill out the form at [www.eriereader.com/40under40nomination](http://www.eriereader.com/40under40nomination)



## UPMC Hamot Holds Community Close to Heart

Innovations in robotic heart surgery improve overall health of Erie

**T**o have truly transformative care, UPMC Hamot is changing the traditional definition of health care. So, it's no surprise that UPMC is a trailblazer in matters of the heart.

This year, Dr. Stephen Waterford, who specializes in cardiothoracic and cardiac surgery at UPMC Hamot, is expanding health care horizons to include robotics in heart surgery. By using a robot, heart surgeries can be minimally invasive and reduce recovery time, blood loss, and possible complications.

Robotics first landed on the radar of medical professionals in the late 1990s, marking the beginning of America's first significant embrace of robotic technology in medicine. It was then that Dr. Johannes Bonatti became one of the first surgeons to perform coronary bypass surgery using robotics. "We already have a true robotic pioneer in the [UPMC] system, which is Dr. Bonatti," Waterford said.

Waterford worked alongside Bonatti throughout the past year, learning to operate via robotics on patients, especially those with atrial fibrillation (AFib) and mitral valve issues. In the time since the '90s, the interest in robotics died down, but UPMC kept its nose to the grindstone and continued its research. Now, a resurgence of interest in robotics is taking hold of the medical field nationwide, and UPMC is at the forefront.

Waterford himself has plenty of credentials. The surgeon grew up in New York City before attending Yale University for his bachelor's and master's degrees in biophysics and biochemistry. He then attended medical school at Harvard and trained at hospitals in San Francisco, Boston, and St. Louis. Before coming to UPMC Hamot in 2022, he did two extra years of training for mitral valve reconstruction at Mount Sinai Hospital under Dr. David Adams, a recognized leader in the field.

Minimally invasive heart surgery is

CONTRIBUTED



The UPMC Hamot Heart Institute is uniquely able to provide modern robotic heart surgery for those in need of minimally invasive mitral valve repair or AFib treatment with two world-class heart surgeons on staff using the latest and best surgical technology.

not a new concept. It enables heart surgeons to operate with precision and not divide the breastbone like the traditional method. "The robot adds a much-improved ability to see or visualize what you're doing, and that's a big benefit when you're doing something as de-

in the hospital for recovery, whereas the minimally invasive operation using robotics allows patients to leave the hospital in as little as two to three days.

Mitral valve disease is not common, but it is a difficult burden for those who experience it. The mitral valve is made

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**"The robot adds a much-improved ability to see or visualize what you're doing, and that's a big benefit when you're doing something as detailed as a mitral valve repair where it's a couple of millimeters that you need to fix."**  
**– Dr. Stephen Waterford, UPMC**

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tailed as a mitral valve repair where it's a couple of millimeters that you need to fix," Waterford explained.

The robot is another tool in Waterford's belt, as its four arms and camera allow him to view a 3D image of the heart while operating. Traditional heart surgery requires a five to seven-day stay

of two leaflets around 1 to 2 inches and has strings like a parachute that connect it to the heart's infrastructure. If there is a small break or leak — even 1 millimeter — it can cause heart problems. Instead of cutting the valve out and replacing it with a synthetic valve or a bioprosthetic valve that comes from an animal, re-

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**Dr. Stephen Waterford, a specialist in cardiothoracic and cardiac surgery at UPMC Hamot, is introducing robotics into Erie-area cardiac care, which will greatly improve outcomes for certain heart surgeries – making them minimally invasive, reducing recovery time, and minimizing blood loss and complications.**

pairing the valve increases the chance of survival and can grant its patients a longer life. Waterford explained that he employs a plastic surgery technique to rearrange the valve’s pre-existing tissue to stop the leak.

UPMC is already unique in its ability to perform coronary bypass surgery thanks to Bonatti, but now, those in need of minimally invasive mitral valve repair or AFib treatment will be able to get that care at UPMC Hamot, too.

Waterford said that value resonates with him the most – UPMC’s commitment to treat patients without sending them to a different hospital outside the region. “[At Hamot] they can stay where they’re from and where their families can see them,” Waterford said.

Using robotics will improve the accuracy of those operations, too, while increasing the volume of surgeries that

Waterford and Bonatti can perform. This year, they are on track to complete 100 to 150 minimally invasive heart surgeries. Waterford works closely with UPMC Hamot’s team of cardiologists and says the robust relationship benefits patients literally putting their lives in the hands of medical professionals.

In addition, Waterford said Northwest Pennsylvania is a region where the number of people with heart conditions is rapidly increasing. Fortunately, the robotic procedure remains accessible to those who prove to be viable candidates as insurance covers the cost the same as it would using traditional techniques since the robot is just another tool in the operating room.

It is through innovations like robotics training, top-of-the-line surgeons, and community initiatives that UPMC Hamot is set apart – it truly has the health of its patients at its heart.

## Palace Business Centres: A Shared Office Space

An affordable, convenient office solution in the heart of Erie

The following Q&A is with Barbara Pete, manager for the Palace Business Centres located at 1001 State St., Suite 1400.

JESSICA HUNTER



**Barbara Pete, manager of Palace Business Centres located on the 14th floor of the Renaissance Centre in the heart of Erie, offers office space and services to their clients, while boasting an unbeatable view of the City of Erie, the lake, and Presque Isle.**

### What is Palace Business Centres (PBC)?

Palace Business Centres is a shared office space facility which is fully equipped, staffed, and furnished and is in the Renaissance Centre in Downtown Erie. It is a physical workspace where professionals can go on with their working day and find all those extra services and the necessary support they need for their daily routine.

### What is the difference between PBC and a traditional office?

PBC is an office space where businesses can enjoy flexible, affordable, and comfortable spaces for their business. Furniture is included so there are no move-in or move-out hassles. High-speed internet, a technology work center, a staffed

reception desk, a fully furnished secure office, a phone answering service, and an impressive lobby all work to create a professional environment that enhances your credibility and image without the organizational hassles of having to manage all of those services.

### Is PBC affordable?

Yes. There is a combination of interior and exterior offices in various sizes and prices, beginning as low as \$595 per month. We offer suites with a vast city view as well as a view of Lake Erie. There is a café with complimentary



JESSICA HUNTER

**The historic Renaissance Centre at 1001 State St. offers a convenient, downtown location for those utilizing the office space available at Palace Business Centres. The attached parking garage eliminates the need to find parking on city streets.**

refreshments and snacks available. Cleaning and janitorial services are included in your rent. We offer short-term flexible leases that can accommodate everyone's budget. The advantage of a business center is that your suite rent is a fixed amount and you only pay for additional services when you use them. It's like time-sharing the administrative staff and common areas, with no long-term commitment or hassles.

#### **What services are available?**

We offer notary services, court filing, mail handling, phone answering customized to your business, secure shredding, printing/scanning/copying/faxing, high-speed internet, and an AV

Hub. We also offer day offices, meeting rooms, and boardrooms along with beverage service or catering as required. Additionally, we have on-site attached parking which limits weather exposure during the winter and having to circle the block looking for a parking space.

#### **Can you compare PBC vs. working from home?**

PBC provides a professional image as well as social interaction that just cannot be achieved working from home. From the moment someone steps off the elevator and is greeted by the receptionist, they are surrounded by a professional atmosphere. There are none

of the interruptions that, inadvertently, happen at home. In addition to the atmosphere, you have the opportunity to interact with other business entrepreneurs. Whether it is a sharing of ideas or gaining insight and knowledge, this is an excellent way of networking.

#### **Who works at PBC?**

Currently, PBC's clients include lawyers, accountants, investment advisors, global logistics suppliers, and others who all want to ensure the safety of their data and computer systems, prefer to have a private space to meet

---

**"The advantage of a business center is that your suite rent is a fixed amount and you only pay for additional services when you use them. It's like time-sharing the administrative staff and common areas, with no long-term commitment or hassles."**  
**–Barbara Pete, Manager, PBC**

---

with clients, or to have a zoom call where others cannot hear the conversation. We also have out-of-town customers who utilize the various conference and meeting rooms for depositions, conferences, training, and client meetings.

PBC is, unfortunately, a well-kept secret in the Erie area. Previously, I had been in the business industry for over 35 years and had never heard of PBC prior to my job interview. I was completely amazed and impressed by the entire concept. I thought back to all the times when I would have had an opportunity to utilize this facility if I had only known it was here. In August of 2023, I had the chance to become the general manager at PBC and I jumped at the opportunity. This is such a great concept and the clients and facility are amazing. I look forward to the opportunity to expand this business and help serve Erie's business community.

*To learn more about Palace Business Centres visit [palacebusinesscentres.com](http://palacebusinesscentres.com)*

## RAD Solar Is Spearheading Erie's Solar Revolution

Green technology meets infrastructure to bolster Erie's economic growth

**W**hen solar power is mentioned, big, clunky, ugly solar panels typically come to mind. From panels mounted on roofs to arrays sprawling across fields, solar has earned a reputation for making houses stick out like sore thumbs and changing the character and landscape of rural communities. But RAD Solar is here to change that tired old image of solar energy into something fresh and innovative, using a new approach and new thinking to bring solar to the Erie area and beyond.

When Colin Russ moved to Erie in 2018, he wasn't particularly tied to the area: "I was traveling four or five days a week for work and came back on the weekends to spend time with my daughters, so I hadn't made any real effort to join the Erie community," he said. "It was just the place where I dropped my bags and did laundry."

But when the pandemic hit in 2020, he found himself grounded in Erie, working remotely instead of traveling, which gave him the opportunity to fall in love with the city. "I had more time to learn about the community I moved to,



**What sets RAD Solar apart from other solar companies is their innovative approach to solar design. Rather than take up farmland space in rural areas, RAD's creative solution works solar panels into pre-existing urban structures like parking garages and storage facilities.**

and I started meeting people who were engaged in the efforts to move the community forward," Colin stated. Much of his knowledge about the area came through reading and research, where he found that a city with so much room for opportunity was being excluded from important conversations.

"I discovered that Erie being left out

of big, ambitious conversations wasn't the exception, but the rule," Colin stated, citing multiple factory deals where Erie wasn't considered that would have brought thousands of jobs to the area. "In the last two years, hundreds of companies have announced investments around the country totaling more than \$600 billion to expand American manufacturing capabilities and increase domestic energy independence, but less than 0.5 percent of that is planned for Pennsylvania, with none of it in Erie."

Instead of despairing over this lack of opportunity and industry in Erie, Colin decided to fill one of the biggest needs he observed in the area through his creation of RAD Solar. After two years of part-time and weekend work dedicated to the company, they officially launched in 2023 as Erie Development and re-branded as RAD Solar in 2024 to better reflect their mission to the area.

Not all solar companies are created equal – Colin is looking to revolutionize the way we approach solar energy and take advantage of underutilized spaces: "The way solar developers approach it is all wrong – we shouldn't have to ruin farmland for energy production when



**Electric vehicles make up approximately 10 percent of new cars purchased and a lack of charging infrastructure can leave Erie behind when tourists with EVs look for accommodating places to travel. RAD Solar proposes installing EV charging stations in places where people live, work, and play for ultimate convenience.**

we already have plenty of space.” By using spaces already in existence – such as parking lots, building rooftops, and storage facilities – other, more rural areas can be left for agricultural and other natural developments.

“Our approach is different because we think about solar power differently,” Colin said. “We don’t see solar as a stand-alone solution; you have to consider the bigger picture. For us, this means using solar to improve customer experiences with amenities like covered parking and electric vehicle charging stations. It means offering companies reliable onsite power, and owners a way to generate income from underutilized spaces. But most importantly, it means ensuring our projects fit within the community instead of appearing to be a disruptive afterthought.”

Colin also plans to keep production as local as possible: “We are committed to an ‘Erie first’ sourcing strategy, meaning we will exhaust all local opportunities for parts, materials, and labor before looking outside of the area,” Colin stated. “Erie has the skills to build almost everything we need, while also being cost-competitive. We hope that the demand RAD Solar creates with area suppliers will help Erie develop a new local industry and establish a footprint in a field that is experiencing massive growth elsewhere.”

When talking about electricity, electric vehicles (EVs) cannot be left out of the conversation. “With more than 3.6 million EVs on the road today and with EVs making up more than 10 percent of new car purchases, industries and businesses need to be able to accommodate these owners,” said Colin. “As a community that relies heavily on tourism, this is especially important for Erie – with more than 11 million visitors each year to the Lake Erie region, most of whom arrive here by car – we risk undermining an important industry that employs thousands of people if we don’t take steps to accommodate this change.”

Another EV-related issue RAD Solar is trying to combat is “range anxiety,” a term used for the concern people have

regarding the lack of available charging stations. “Since chargers are not as prevalent as gas stations, some people have concerns about making it to a particular destination, which can deter them from going to certain places or prevent them from getting an EV in the first place,” Colin said. “Our goal is to install chargers where people are already spending time, so places like shopping centers, grocery stores, movie theaters, hardware stores – you name it, we want to be there.”

Colin continues, “Like solar, we need to rethink ‘filling up’ because what works for gas-powered vehicles doesn’t

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**“As a community that relies heavily on tourism, (accommodating electric vehicles) is especially important for Erie – with more than 11 million visitors each year to the Lake Erie region, most of whom arrive here by car – we risk undermining an important industry that employs thousands of people if we don’t take steps to accommodate this change.” –Colin Russ, Founder & CEO, RAD Solar**

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make sense for EVs. Even with fast-chargers, it can still take 15 to 20 minutes to charge, and most people don’t want to sit around waiting. That’s why we are bringing chargers to the places where people live, work, and play. A routine trip to the grocery store transforms; it’s no longer just a 30-minute errand but an opportunity to return to a fully charged vehicle. We think that if we can make charging easy and accessible it can help to minimize range anxiety.”

Colin also believes that solar energy can have a major impact on Erie’s local economy. “We don’t generate any electricity in Erie, and that translates into \$350M to \$400M leaving the community every year,” stressed Colin. “That’s

not money Penelec is making, that’s just what we pay the companies supplying the electricity.”

Generating electricity locally with solar would mean more local dollars staying local, which has a multiplying effect in the area: “When consumers support local businesses (non-chain/online business), every dollar spent is recirculated between two to four times and has a multiplier effect. By relying on companies outside of Erie to supply our electricity, we are losing out on hundreds of millions of dollars of economic activity in Erie every year,” Colin stated. “That’s equal to between 5 and 12 percent of our local economic output each year. If we can keep that money working in the local economy, imagine what that could do for Erie; it’s exciting.”

Colin knows that there are plenty of skeptics when it comes to solar energy, “Twenty years ago, a lot of the concerns were valid, but in just the last few years, the technology has made major strides, not just in terms of improved reliability and performance, but the pricing has improved as well. Today, solar panels don’t need direct sunlight to generate electricity.” Colin concedes, “It’s true that panels are not as efficient on cloudy days, but advancements in technology mean that there’s still a steady energy output, even under overcast skies. As for cold weather, solar panels operate more efficiently in cooler temperatures, as it increases conductivity and allows the panels to produce electricity more efficiently than in hotter climates.”

With so much happening in the Erie area for revitalization and growth, it only makes sense for us to move forward in all aspects. For Colin Russ, the mission to get Erie involved in the energy transition was simple but also personal: “I’ve moved more than two dozen times in my life, and Erie feels like home,” he confessed. “You can’t find a city as affordable as Erie with all the amenities, entertainment, and resources – Erie is a hidden gem, and I love that it has so much to offer.”

*To learn more about RAD Solar, visit their website at [rad.solar](http://rad.solar)*

## Breathwork Classes at the Victoria Inn Bed & Breakfast

Create more space for joy with elemental rhythm

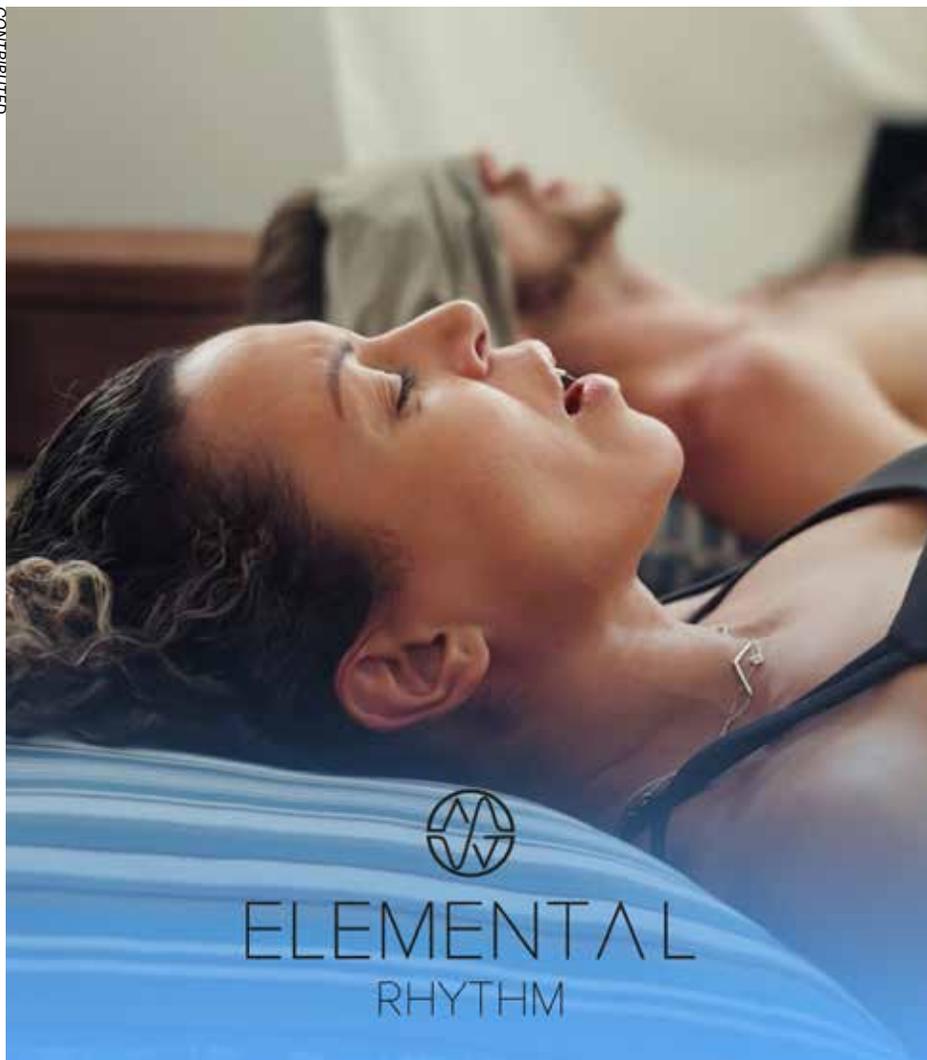
“**T**he true magic of breathwork can’t be put into words – it’s an experience of the power that’s already within you. Feeling this power will change how you think, act, and feel; it will change what you believe to be possible,” said Vicke Marz, owner of the historic Victoria Inn at 401 Peach St. Marz is one of a handful of Certified Elemental Breathwork facilitators in the Erie area. “This modality is truly a game-changer as we navigate this thing called life.”

Elemental Rhythm is a culmination of years of studying various breathwork practices from different modalities and teachers, presented in a modern way that is fun, easy to understand, and highly effective. It started as a self-exploratory practice as Elemental Rhythm’s Founder, Gio Bartolomeo looked for a way to get answers and feel better daily. To his delight, he discovered a sequence that seemed to work on repeat.

Bartolomeo is an entrepreneur and adventurer with a passion for teaching, learning, and creating connections with others. He is the Founder of Elemental Wellness Studio in Toronto and Co-Founder of the Personal Development School among many other ventures. Bartolomeo started to share his method to help others experience the benefits of breathwork – first with family and friends, then on a larger scale. He refined the practice by taking the things he loved the most and adding music, rhythm, and movement to create exciting and impactful experiences. These methods evolved into what Elemental Rhythm is today: a combination of different types of elemental breaths set to a relaxing cadence of music to take the participant on a journey.

At the Victoria Inn Bed & Breakfast, Marz facilitates the Elemental Rhythm Breakthrough Experience (ERBE). ERBE is a deep breathing journey, taking the

CONTRIBUTED



**The Elemental Rhythm Breakthrough Experience is offered locally at the Victoria Inn Bed and Breakfast at 401 Peach St., facilitated by owner Vicke Marz. A guided journey, the exercise combines breathwork, movement, and meditation.**

participant through an impactful experience. An ERBE combines movement, guided meditation, and special breathing techniques connected to the four classical elements (earth, water, air, and fire) for an unforgettable experience.

“It is somewhat comparable to other popular breathing techniques like holotropic breathwork, transformational breathing, or even the Wim Hof method – but with its own unique style and flavor. Could it be the right modality for

you? The only way to know is to come to a class,” said Marz.

*ERBE Classes are held on Sundays, 4 to 6 p.m. at Victoria Inn Bed & Breakfast, 401 Peach St.*

*Classes are limited in size and fill up quickly. Classes are \$35 each. You can reserve your spot via Venmo @vicke-marz or contact her at elementalbreathislife@gmail.com. You can find more information on Instagram @vicke-marz or elementalarhythm.com.*

## Lessons from West Philadelphia: The Leader of The Enterprise Center, Della Clark

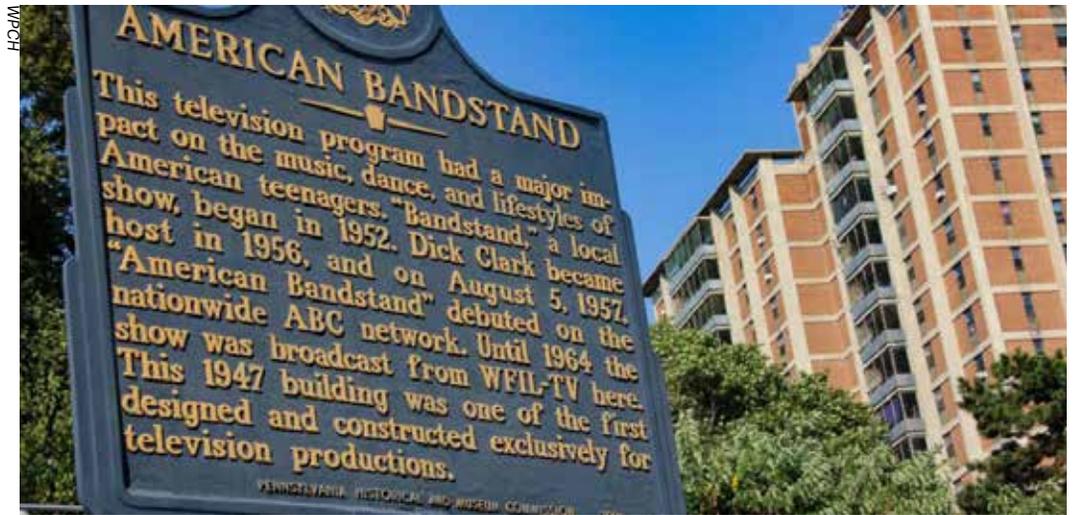
A connector, bridge builder, and leader of a capital revolution

By: Ben Speggen

Between 45th and 46th streets in West Philadelphia, a Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC) marker stands on Market Street. The fifth of five sentences informs passersby that the Nationally Registered Historic building erected there in 1947 was “one of the first designed and constructed exclusively for television productions.” Noteworthy for its potential, sure, but the first four sentences explain how and why the building gained national notoriety: It was the birthplace of *American Bandstand*.

Live from Studio B in WFIL – which advertised itself as WFIL-adelphia – *Bandstand*, as it was first known, hit airwaves in 1952. Broadcasting the pulse of music, culture, dance, fashion, and more, it captured the American teenage zeitgeist as youth gathered to gyrate to the soundtracks of the times – an experience initially delivered to some six million households throughout the region.

Four years later, a then-young, up-and-coming DJ by the name of Dick Clark took over at the helm, and “American” was added in front of “Bandstand.” The popularity and reach of the show grew to an estimated 20 million viewers, as it hit national airwaves on Aug. 5, 1957. The building would remain the home of *American Bandstand* until 1964, when the show packed



**This PHMC marker sits outside of a building that once housed WFIL studios, which originally produced *American Bandstand*. Many years later, Della Clark has made this historic building the base of operations for The Enterprise Center, whose mission is “to cultivate and invest in minority entrepreneurs to inspire working together for economic growth in communities.”**

up and moved across the country to Los Angeles, where it continued its run until 1989.

Twenty-eight years after *American Bandstand* headed west, another Clark – Della Clark – would happen upon that block and see that historic building. There, she would find trash-strewn streets and graffiti brought on by years of abandonment. “Is this my journey?” the Texas native who’d married a Philadelphian and had relocated to the city of Brotherly Love asked herself. “Is this what I’m supposed to do?” the entrepreneur who’d run a water-bottling company, wondered.

Della Clark, who self-identified then in 1992 as a for-profit woman, not a nonprofit leader, found herself pondering those

questions because she’d received a call telling her she was chosen to run the future of The Enterprise Center, a then-18-month-old community development nonprofit.

“Is everything that I learned in life preparing me for this role?” Clark rhetorically asked me on a Zoom call in early February, answering, without hesitation, “I can honestly say it was – and that is why I’ve stayed 32 years, because this is my journey.”

That journey – the story of Della Clark, and the evolution of The Enterprise Center into the full-throttled economic and community development engine it has become – was on display in Erie, when Clark presented “Promoting Racial and Economic Equity: Ways to Lead Community Revitalization” on

the campus of Gannon University as part of the Jefferson Educational Society’s (JES) Global Summit.

By title, Della Clark is the president and chief executive officer of The Enterprise Center, a nonprofit whose mission is to cultivate and invest in minority entrepreneurs. But to know Clark by her title alone would be akin to knowing a Swiss-Army knife only as a knife because it happens to have a blade.

On stage, throughout the course of the 90-minute event, she told some 300-plus attendees she views herself as a capital revolutionary, a disruptor, a connector, an intermediary, and bridge builder. In flashes of wit sparking from a steady current of humor that matches

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**Della Clark, president of the Enterprise Center, focuses her work on achieving and distributing capital to minority owned businesses in the Mid-Atlantic region. She recently spoke at the Jefferson Educational Society's Global Summit in Erie on "Promoting Racial and Economic Equity: Ways to Lead Community Relations."**

her intelligence, and acumen that comprise an ever-present moxie, she added that she also considers herself to be a professional beggar and a pick-pocket. She might even pick someone's pocket that night, she half-joked.

At the core of that sense of identity is a commandment of Clark's: "Capital flows where it knows," which she told the Erie audience, highlighting why it is important to introduce investment capital to audiences that aren't traditionally at the tables, or even know how to get a seat there. Her mission: open doors, make introductions, channel capital in new directions. She is someone who's reached the control room, understands the panel, and has a hand on the levers.

That has meant turning what was, in 1992, a one-and-a-half-year-old nonprofit housed at the University of Pennsylvania with \$2,000 in the bank and a \$31,000 grant on the way

into an independent, multi-pronged approach to promoting racial and economic equity by supporting and investing in diverse small businesses while partnering with West Philadelphia communities on revitalization strategies with an operating budget today of \$12.8 million and a team of 45 full-time employees and a wider network of experts and coaches ready to help throughout the Mid-Atlantic region.

It means long days – heading to work in the dark, and returning home in the dark – and persistence – the stick-to-itiveness to turn "nos" and "maybes" into "yesses." And in Clark's case, it also means sometimes saying "no" to opportunities that don't look or feel right – like eschewing programming dollars to instead channel her energy in pursuit of investment capital.

Clark's rebuke of programing-based initiatives is in the spirit of a phrase she repeats often: "Low-wealth communities get program dollars while prosperous communities get investment capital."

She and her team are working to change that.

To her, the Enterprise Center is not a "social service organization; we are a wealth creation organization. I've created millionaires; I've created multi-millionaires," she'd told the Erie audience in November. "I haven't created a billionaire yet – but that's the goal."

Overviewing in broad strokes, that approach has resulted in three nonprofit entities – the Enterprise Center (TEC), TEC's Community Development Corporation, and TEC's Capital Corporation, and two for-profits – The Enterprise Center Construction, LLC (more on

vendors \* food trucks \* art \* more

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that in a minute) and the Innovate Capital Growth Fund.

Between 2016 and 2020, the Enterprise Center served nearly 8,000 clients, procured over \$460 million of contracts and over \$95 million in capital, and created nearly 2,000 jobs. A goal in the coming years: grow to a \$25 million organization that consistently connects minority entrepreneurs with over \$100 million in contracts annually.

"Why is capital so critical?" she asked the audience, answering, that for entrepreneurs and businesses, "it is the number-one disruptor. There are 18 pain points associated with the lack of capital – you make bad decisions because you can't hire people, you can't build the infrastructure you need to be successful."

Clark continued, explaining she heard too often that businesses didn't have the capacity to take on larger contracts and scale. "That is when I decided I needed to become a capital revolutionary. I'm focused on bridging the capital gap."

That means saying no – like to more programs – and focusing on getting investment capital. It also means launching a construction company, which Clark and the Enterprise Center have done. Why? In Philadelphia, "construction is the number-one industry cluster for minorities," Clark told me. TEC Construction supports 100 percent minority contractors to empower them to build a track record. And rather than looking at an education component as, say, "technical assistance" or "training," Clark sees it as "expertise and management coaching and consulting," pairing those who want to learn and do with

those who know how and have done – just as how she's done in the number-two industry cluster for minorities in Philadelphia: food.

The Enterprise Center launched the Center for Culinary Enterprises that provides area residents in food deserts with access to farm-fresh and high-quality food while connecting Black and brown food entrepreneurs with retail and contract opportunities.

But what if entrepreneurs can't get to the Enterprise Center? Take the resources to them.

Clark told the Erie audience she likes to vacation on the weekends. But she does it online. Opening a browser, she heads anywhere in the world to see what is working elsewhere that could be modeled and scaled. One weekend, a virtual trip took her to India, where she saw an organization that used a van to meet entrepreneurs where they are. So, from India she headed to North Carolina and found a used van. She also found an area company that could customize it. Thus, Biz on Wheels was born – curbside business services to bring business loan and support services to the doorsteps of small businesses in commercial corridors and in residential neighborhoods.

One of the Enterprise Center's latest ventures, which Clark told the Erie audience about in November as her presentation drew to a close, is "Cocktails and Economics – Developing an Eye for the Economy." A 22-city tour, the concept is to kindle an interest in key economic indicators in minority CEOs to fuel informed decision-making by connecting them with economists and

experts.

That's the "economics" part. To make it more approachable and lower the barrier of entry: feature cocktails – or beer, wine, and spirits. In keeping with the spirit of the series, ensure they're produced by minority business owners.

In November, there were 21 cities. Now, it's 22.

Of the cities, Erie is now right there alongside Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, St. Louis, Memphis, Charlotte, Miami, Orlando, Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, Detroit, Chicago, Minneapolis, Phoenix, Denver, Oakland, Los Angeles, Boston, and New York City. The series will also help Clark and The Enterprise Center take a pulse on the interests, needs, challenges, and successes of minority business owners throughout the country. This will help further inform the work Clark and the Enterprise Center do, not just in West Philadelphia, but beyond.

This latest initiative, like the host of others, to Clark, "is not about the Enterprise Center, or West Philadelphia – this is about America."

"We have to identify ambitious people who want to hit it big," Clark told me. "And we need to rally resources and subject matter experts to help them. They will help save the economy, save our communities, and save our country."

The original office space for The Enterprise Center wasn't in that building that sits on Market Street in West Philadelphia between 45th and 46th streets. They were across the street. That historic relic had been boarded up – its glory days, presumably, left to the annals of by-gone times.

On her second day on the job, Clark bet on the historic building – that its brighter days lie not in the past, but the future. On day three, she started negotiations. Eighteen months later, the *American Bandstand* building was theirs.

Over three decades, transformational change has been seen in the West Philadelphia neighborhood. It's not just because Della Clark had a vision. It's because she knows change requires more than hopes and dreams; it requires dollars and cents, and she's the woman on a mission, called to her assignment, to be the bridge builder, the capital revolutionary that connects those with dreams and visions to the resources needed to turn ideas into reality.

*To learn more about The Enterprise Center, including the work along the 52nd Street corridor being informed and guided by an economic playbook drafted by Bruce Katz, the co-founder and inaugural director of the Nowak Metro Finance Lab at Drexel University and director of The New Localism Advisors, visit [TheEnterpriseCenter.com](http://TheEnterpriseCenter.com).*

*To watch Della Clark's presentation, "Promoting Racial and Economic Equity: Ways to Lead Community Revitalization," visit the JES's YouTube channel, and its website, [JESerie.org](http://JESerie.org).*

*Look forward to more information coming soon about The Enterprise Center's visit to Erie which will include private informational events for minority CEOs and entrepreneurs.*

*You can follow Ben Speggen, vice president of the JES, and a contributing editor at the Erie Reader, on Threads and Twitter/X @BenSpeggen, and connect with him on LinkedIn.*

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### Fri 3/08

#### Featured

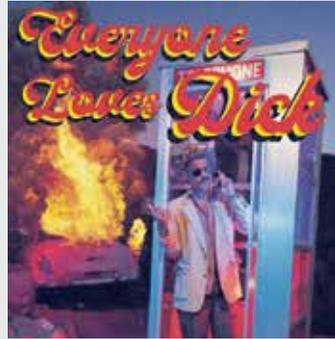


**Long Day's Journey Into Night**  
@ 7:30pm / \$20  
PACA, 1505 State Street



### Wed 3/13

#### Featured



**Everyone Loves Dick**  
@ 7:30pm / \$20  
PACA, 1505 State Street



### Featured

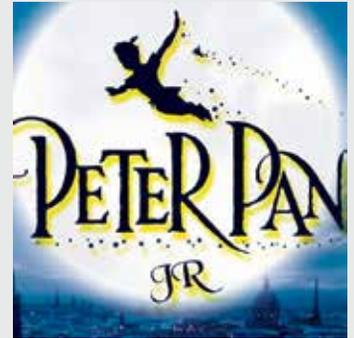


**John Mellencamp**  
@ 8pm  
Warner Theatre  
- PA, 811 State St.



### Fri 3/22

#### Featured



**Peter Pan Jr.**  
@ 6:30pm / \$22  
Cathedral Preparatory Auditorium, 250 West 10th Street



### Sat 3/09

**Erie Anime-Fest**  
@ 10am / \$20

Erie Anime-Fest is an anime convention located in the beautiful City of Erie, Pennsylvania. Striving to be Pennsylvania's best and truest anime convention featuring fandoms of multiple genres. Quality Inn & Suites Conference Center Across from Casino, 8040-A Perry Highway. info@louisvillecon.com, 416-907-8410

**Long Day's Journey Into Night**  
@ 7:30pm / \$20  
PACA, 1505 State Street

### Sun 3/10

**1st Annual iRock Fitness "Enduro"**  
@ 8am / \$40  
2312 W 15th Street, iRock Fitness

### Fri 3/15

**Long Day's Journey Into Night**  
@ 7:30pm / \$20  
PACA, 1505 State Street

### Sat 3/16

**ERC St. Patrick's Day Distance Festival**  
@ 9am / \$16-\$18  
1 Peninsula Dr

**Experience Curling!**  
@ 5pm / \$30  
LECOM Sports Park, 8159 Oliver Road

**Make-A-Wish Cash Bingo**  
@ 5pm  
East Erie Moose Club, 6060 iroquois Ave, Harborcreek

**Long Day's Journey Into Night**  
@ 7:30pm / \$20  
PACA, 1505 State Street

### Thu 3/21

#### Featured



**Dark Matter**  
@ 7:30pm / \$20  
PACA, 1505 State Street



**Comedy Night at the Bunker : Simon Fraser**  
@ 7pm / \$20  
The Bunker at Lavery Brewing Company, 128 West 12th Street

### Sat 3/23

**Long Day's Journey Into Night**  
@ 7:30pm / \$20  
PACA, 1505 State Street

### Wed 3/27

**Brit Floyd**  
@ 8pm  
Warner Theatre - PA, 811 State St.

Calendar information is provided by event organizers. All events are subject to change or cancellation. This publication is not responsible for the accuracy of the information contained in this calendar.

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