THE DEALS MUST GO ON

Introducing the winners of the top deals and dealmakers over a most atypical year for mergers and acquisitions

T he MiBiz M&A Deals & Dealmakers Awards are back for their 8th installment to highlight best practices and excellence in what can only be described as one of the most atypical deal environments of all time.

As in most other areas of business, the COVID-19 pandemic upended long-standing norms that had driven M&A transactions and dealmakers for decades. All of a sudden, buyers and sellers could no longer meet in person.

Perhaps most notably, the due diligence process — that peek under the hood of a company to ensure that it matches the seller’s description and that it doesn’t pose any undue risk for the buyer — largely went virtual as well, particularly in the case of international deals.

However, the old adage seemingly proved correct: Necessity is the mother of all invention, and dealmakers across West Michigan got creative to keep deals alive and get them across the finish line. Whether some of these new practices stick around for the long term remains to be seen, but these companies’ resourcefulness and entrepreneurial thinking are undeniable.

The panel of judges had their pick of interesting, strategic and challenging deals as a result of the unique situation, but their selections of the deals profiled on the following pages rose to the top as examples of excellence from which other companies can pluck best practices.

Just as in the M&A environment, COVID-19 also upended our plans for these awards, which were originally scheduled for an event in October. While we’re forgetting that in-person celebration this year, we hope you join us in recognizing these companies and individuals as prime examples of the best that West Michigan has to offer.

Joe Boomgaard, Editor

THE SHYFT GROUP COMPLETES 2020 WITH A FLURRY OF M&A ACTIVITY, CORPORATE CHANGES

By JAYSON BUSSA | MiBiz
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The Shyft Group was busy in 2020 — and a couple of major deals were only part of the dizzying year.

In a change in corporate direction, The Shyft Group — formerly known as Spartan Motors — divested from its emergency response vehicle division in a deal that also sent its company name to the buyer. The Shyft Group also acquired aluminum truck body and accessory manufacturer FIMFG Inc.

Meanwhile, the company re-branded under its new name and relocated its corporate headquarters from Charlotte to Novi — all while grappling with the limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pair of company-shaping deals was honored in this year’s MiA Deals & Dealmakers Awards, netting the honor for Deal of the Year in the manufacturing sector.

Daryl Adams, who took over as company CEO in 2015, admitted that he did not have much experience in the emergency response vehicle industry, nor did many members of his team. While analyzing the viability of the segment, the team started to realize the inherent pitfalls that came with the market.

Not only did fire truck sales nosedive by 30 percent during the Great Recession — sales that never recovered — but municipalities now find themselves with more frequent budget constraints.

All factors considered: Emergency response vehicles are a tough market for finding success. Adams said The Shyft Group lost “a lot of money” in 2015 but slowly brought the division to a break-even point and slightly profitable in 2019, when management sat with the board of directors to discuss its fate.

In 2019, the emergency response business delivered $260 million of revenue out of a total of $1 billion for the company.

“We had a target of 10 percent adjusted EBITDA in 2020,” Adams said. “The other divisions are running mid-teens and lower teens. And ER was going to maybe break even and it was taking a lot of management’s time. When we saw it wasn’t going to be the same growth level as the other divisions, it was an easy decision.”

The nature of the deal, which shed 25 percent of the business, was a bit new for The Shyft Group — the first carve out the company had ever embarked on as it sold the division to Wisconsin-based REV Group Inc. for roughly $50 million in cash.

“It was a carve out, so we had to change the campus in Charlotte a little bit and they bought a couple of the buildings in the deal and got the employees so we had to do some separation agreements and things. Maybe they weren’t hurdles, but it was new learning for us,” Adams said.

Investors reinforced the decision by responding favorably. The Shyft Group’s stock ticked up 8 percent for the year.

While The Shyft Group exited emergency response vehicles, it leveraged that money to invest more heavily in its specialty vehicles division, where it purchased California-based Royal Truck Body in September 2019 and then F3 MFG Inc. in October 2020, which included the DuraMag and Magnum brands in its portfolio.

The acquisitions grew the company’s capabilities in steel and aluminum service bodies and provided greater margins.

“Maybe not right now, but in the next few years, we believe there is going to be a significant amount of infrastructure money spent in the U.S. because the roads are crumbling and the bridges are crumbling,” said Adams, whose company manufacturers key components for those and other service vehicles.

“Eventually there is going to be some large infrastructure funding so we wanted to get a jump on that.”
TRIBES LEVERAGE SIMILAR INVESTMENT PHILOSOPHIES IN MCKAY TOWER TRANSACTION

By JOE BOOMGAARD | MiBiz
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The seeds for the joint purchase of the iconic McKay Tower building in downtown Grand Rapids took root years ago when the CEOs at Waséyabek Development Co. LLC and Gun Lake Investments started talking about doing deals together.

Gun Lake Investments CEO Kurtis Trevan and Waséyabek President and CEO Deidra Mitchell both started in their respective non-gaming tribal economic development roles at about the same time, and both also planted their companies’ headquarters in downtown Grand Rapids.

Along with economic development leaders from other American Indian tribes across West Michigan, Trevan and Mitchell began to meet on a quarterly basis to build inter-tribal relationships and share collective experiences. Over time, a common theme emerged.

“We’d talked for years about how tribes should be partnering with each other and how it doesn’t happen as frequently as it should,” said Trevan, a citizen of the Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomi Indians, or Gun Lake Tribe.

Trevan got word through a relationship with a broker that the Borisch family’s Steadfast Property Holdings planned to put McKay Tower on the market, and immediately took an interest in the commercial property. Initially, he planned to pursue the transaction solely for Gun Lake Investments, with the tribal entity taking on “some level of debt” to finance the purchase.

“Before we moved too far with that conversation, we thought, ‘This feels like it could be a really good transaction to partner on with Waséyabek,’” Trevan said, noting his familiarity with the firm’s investment strategy and governance.

His instincts proved correct. “Kurt called and we talked about it, and I said, ‘That’s perfect—that would be a great co-acquisition,’” said Mitchell, whose firm serves as the non-gaming economic development arm of the Nottawaseppi Huron Band of Pottawatomi. “Like any strong relationship, it requires a lot of communication up front about how we’re going to manage the building and what the expectations are for making improvements and returns. It makes it a little more complicated, but that’s true of any partner that you go into business with.”

The two firms worked together on due diligence and ended up closing on the $17.5 million transaction on Jan. 13, 2020. Because of their similar governance structures, they were able to negotiate the transaction at the management team level, which is notable in Indian Country where many economic development firms require tribal governments to sign off on projects.

Gun Lake Investments and Waséyabek split the cost evenly and share 50-50 ownership of the 18-story, 154,000-square-foot building at 146 Monroe Center St. in the heart of the downtown business district.

The joint acquisition was selected as the winner in the real estate category of the 2021 MiBiz Deals of the Year Awards.

To run the building, Trevan suggested a governance structure modeled after best practices from family owned business enterprises by creating a three-person board with a seat for each of the tribally owned firms and an independent third-party member. The partners recruited Scott Spoelhof from Holland-based Bayside Capital Management LLC to fill out the board.

“With large buildings like McKay, there’s maintenance, capex and other improvements that we need to invest in to make sure the building remains in great shape, and those things cost a lot of money,” Trevan said. “You need to balance how does that fit within your strategies—and we have two distinct sets of strategies between GLI and Waséyabek—and ultimately what are your key stakeholders expecting?”

“We needed to have somebody with some independence who’s going to see things with a different perspective and help us elevate out of the weeds a bit. It’s really provided a lot of clarity around how we plan for this in a way that we can all be aligned.”

Similarly, GLI and Waséyabek opted to work with a property management firm that aligned with their values and could deal with the day-to-day operations, ultimately selecting Grand Rapids-based Rockford Construction Co. Inc. for that role.

“Neither Kurt nor I had heavy experience in commercial real estate, so their experience across the industry has been very, very helpful,” Mitchell said.

In particular, Trevan cited Rockford’s assistance as being a “huge asset” after McKay Tower suffered damage during the social unrest last spring.
We’re helping people get better.

Better access to affordable, quality care across Michigan.

Better costs on procedures and prescriptions.

Better ways to stay engaged in their health.

And, as we continue working toward our vision and values, we believe things will only get—you guessed it—better.

Priority Health
CHOICONE'S TWO RECENT ACQUISITIONS PROVIDE LESSONS ON VIRTUAL DEALMAKING

By MARK SANCHEZ | MiBiz msanchez@mibiz.com

The two acquisitions, ChoiceOne Financial Services Inc. closed over a 15-month period tripled the size of the Sparta-based bank holding company.

ChoiceOne first acquired County Bank Corp. in Lapeer, the parent company of Laketown Bank & Trust. Billed as a “merger of equals” because of the banks’ similar size and culture, the $89 million all-stock deal that closed Oct. 1, 2019, doubled ChoiceOne’s assets to $1.3 billion and included 14 offices in parts of Lapeer, Macomb and St. Clair counties. After the deal closed, ChoiceOne moved from the OTC to the Nasdaq exchange, giving its shares greater liquidity and trading under the symbol COPS.

Just three months later, ChoiceOne announced another deal with the acquisition of Community Shores Bank Corp. in Muskegon. The $21.5 million cash-and-stock transaction in Muskegon. The $21.5 million cash-and-stock transaction was announced prior to the pandemic’s breakout and work to close the deal and integrate the bank into ChoiceOne was done virtually.

Going through that process virtually reinforces the best practice that a cultural fit remains the key to a good deal. That fit made both acquisitions go well, Potes said, particularly in the County Bank deal in which ChoiceOne’s senior management team post-transaction was an equal mix of executives on either side of the state.

“When you’re looking at doing a deal, it’s not all about pricing, but also culture. Luckily we were blessed with the fact that we have a good cultural fit with both of these transactions, especially when we did the merger of equals with County Bank Corp. Because the sizes were so similar and you’re bringing together two management groups, you really needed to have a good relationship going into that, and we have,” he said.

Despite the challenges of having to virtually integrate the ChoiceOne and Community Shores systems, “it went very well without a hitch,” Potes said. Knowing the Community Shores leadership well helped to smooth the integration process, as “everybody just rallied together and we made it happen,” he said.

Potes believes the technology platforms used in completing the two deals virtually will prove useful should ChoiceOne pursue future transactions.

“One thing that we learned is that you can do transactions virtually. So, I can see in the future, even when restrictions are lifted on social distancing, that these transactions and these conversions can be done more efficiently and be done virtually,” he said. “There’s always minor glitches here and there, but you’re going to have that whether it’s done virtually or not. We didn’t feel we really lost anything by doing them virtually.”

After closing the two deals so close together, ChoiceOne remains interested in future acquisitions if the right opportunity arises. In the County Bank and Community Shores acquisitions, ChoiceOne staff who had yet to go through an acquisition — and were not with the bank when it merged in 2006 with the former Valley Ridge Bank in Kent City — learned how to manage a transaction.

“It really just enhanced everyone’s skills and got everybody up to speed on doing transactions, and I think that will pay dividends in the future. If we have future transactions that come up, we have a playbook on how to do it.” Potes said. “We have an appetite to grow, but it has to financially make sense and it has to culturally make sense on anything that we would look at. As those opportunities become available, we’ll certainly take a look at them.”

FINANCE

CHOICEONE FINANCIAL SERVICES INC.
Top executive: Kelly Potes, President and CEO
Annual revenue: $15.6 million
West Michigan employees: 232
Company: Full-service bank and financial services company
Advisers on the deal: ProBank Austin (financial) and Warner Norcross + Judd LLP (legal) for the County Bank Corp. acquisition; Donnelly Pinman & Partners Inc. (financial) and Warner Norcross + Judd (legal) for the Community Shores Bank Corp. acquisition.

Broker dealer services offered through M+A Securities Group, Inc. Member FINRA/SIPC, a separate entity from Charter Capital Partners and Charter Private Capital Management.

Congratulations to MiBiz M&A Deals & Dealmaker Awards finalists and winners, including John Kerschen, Charter President and Managing Partner, Dealmaker of the Year/Investor, for his leadership of the Charter Growth Capital Fund.

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Acrisure’s success is no accident.

Acrisure is already the fastest growing broker in industry history, backed by our exceptional Agency Partners.

And in 2020, we acquired the insurance assets of Tulco, a leading provider of Artificial Intelligence.

We’re combining our global distribution power with world-class AI expertise and transforming insurance brokerage and financial services.

For more information, visit acrisure.com
TETRA THERAPEUTICS’ SHIONOGI DEAL BUILDS RESOURCES OF LARGE PHARMACEUTICAL COMPANY

By MARK SANCHEZ | MiBiz msanchez@mibiz.com

After years of raising millions in capital and federal grant funding for Tetra Therapeutics Inc. — which was developing a new drug that could potentially treat Alzheimer’s disease and a form of autism — Mark Gurney in 2020 finally found the big money he needed to get to the end.

The Grand Rapids-based Tetra Therapeutics last spring sold to Japanese pharmaceutical company Shionogi & Co. Ltd. in a deal that could reach $500 million. Under the agreement, Shionogi & Co. acquired Tetra and its portfolio of drug compounds for treating Alzheimer’s disease, Fragile X syndrome and other brain disorders associated with cognitive or memory conditions.

The Shionogi acquisition provided the financial backing that Tetra needed to conduct and complete later-stage clinical trials, secure regulatory approval, and bring the new drugs to market in the years ahead. The company today operates as a Grand Rapids-based wholly owned subsidiary of Shionogi and without the deal would have had to raise millions more in capital to support the upcoming later-stage clinical trials.

“We now have the resources of a large pharmaceutical company … takes a while. People need to evaluate or memory conditions.

Tetra has reported “quite encouraging” results from a mid-stage trial involving 30 patients at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago, where the company has worked with renowned researcher Dr. Elizabeth Berry-Kravis on its compound to treat Fragile X syndrome, an orphan disease that affects about 60,000 people in the U.S. Tetra expects to continue to put further funds out the door.”

The BRCC invested $450,000 in Tetra and received an ROI that was in the “many multiples,” Haakenson said.

Tetra’s deal with Shionogi & Co. won a 2021 MiBiz M&A Deal of the Year Award in the life sciences category.

While specific terms of the deal that closed May 26, 2020, remain undisclosed, the total transaction value may reach up to $500 million if Tetra Therapeutics meets certain regulatory and commercial milestones. The deal followed a prior $35 million strategic investment Shionogi & Co. made in Tetra Therapeutics in late 2018.

Prior to the Shionogi deal, Tetra conducted research and development on its new drug compound, known as BPN14770, at the Southwest Michigan Innovation Center in Kalamazoo with the backing of capital from private investors and $27 million in federal grant funding.

Investors in Tetra included Grand Rapids-based Grand Angels and its Ka-Zoo Angels and Muskegon Angels affiliates, Kalamazoo-based Apjohn Group LLC, Traverse City-based Northern Michigan Angels, Ann Arbor SPARK, the Michigan Economic Development Corp.’s Invest Michigan fund, and the Bioscience Research & Commercialization Center (BRCC) at Western Michigan University, plus a number of local high net worth individuals.

One of the largest exits ever recorded for a Michigan-based life sciences startup, the deal generated a strong return on investment for West Michigan-based investors who backed Tetra Therapeutics early.

Investors in a $7.2 million Series A capital round Tetra raised in 2016 got a return of five times their original investment. Participants in an earlier July 2013 debt offering got an ROI that’s close to 13 times their investment.

“That was one of those exits that an early-stage investment fund counts on — that one out of 10 returns that covers the others. So, it was very successful,” BRCC Executive Director Stephen Haakenson told MiBiz last May. “This allows us to continue to put further funds out the door.”

Tetra Therapeutics Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, MBBJ FILE PHOTO

Tetra Therapeutics Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurney, Chairman and CEO Mark Gurne...
PRIORITY HEALTH

MOVES TO BECOME MORE STATEWIDE HEALTH PLAN AFTER TOTAL HEALTH MERGER

By MARK SANCHEZ | MiBiz msanchez@mibiz.com

Priority Health wanted to build a book of business in Southeast Michigan for its Medicaid HMO.

Total Health Care Inc. wanted to connect with a larger partner to better compete.

Leaders of the two nonprofit health plans who had known each other for years started talking in early 2019 about what they could offer one another and potentially partner on. By August of that year, they worked out a deal to merge Total Health into the Grand Rapids-based Priority Health, Michigan’s second-largest health plan with 1 million members enrolled statewide in group, individual, Medicare and Medicaid policies.

“It was a great combination of two longstanding Michigan-based health plans,” Priority Health Chief Financial Officer and Senior Vice President of Operations Mary Anne Jones said. “It was a great complement and fit for Priority Health and Total Health to come together. We are state-wide and have a very strong focus in Southeast Michigan, but we were not able to serve the Medicaid population there. To be able to bring that into our offerings just made a lot of sense.”

Judges in MiBiz’s 2021 M&A Deals of the Year Awards named Total Health Care’s merger into Priority Health as the winner in the health care category.

One of the oldest health plans in Michigan that was formed in 1973, Total Health Care at the end of 2019 had a combined membership of more than 87,000 members. That included 48,919 members enrolled in its Medicaid HMO, and another 39,412 enrolled in group and individual commercial policies sold through Total Health Care USA.

Should the state re-bid Medicaid HMO contracts in the next few years, the Total Health merger puts Priority Health in a stronger position, Jones said.

“It really has moved us to become a more statewide (health plan) in serving Medicaid, and that’s very important in our mission,” she said.

HEALTH CARE

PRIORITY HEALTH

Top executive: President Praveen Thadani, who succeeded former CEO Joan Budden in January after her retirement
Annual revenue: About $5 billion (2020)
West Michigan employees: About 1,600
Company: Statewide health plan with group, individual, Medicare and Medicaid policies
Advisers on the deal: Did not disclose

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AMID HIGH VOLUME OF DEALS, ACRISURE BREAKS INTO ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

By MARK SANCHEZ | MiBiz msanchez@mibiz.com

Greg Williams was looking for a company that could move global insurance brokerage Acrisure LLC into the world of artificial intelligence.

He found the right one in tech entrepreneur Thomas Tull and his AI company, Pittsburgh-based Tulco LLC.

After a mutual investor in both companies introduced Williams and Tull, the two met in Pittsburgh in early 2019. They quickly found common ground and soon formed a joint venture that ultimately led to Acrisure buying Tulco’s insurance practice. The all-stock transaction, valued at $480 million, closed July 29, 2020, providing the Grand Rapids-based Acrisure the artificial intelligence and machine-learning technology that Williams sought.

“That transaction singularly transforms every facet of our business,” said Williams, Acrisure’s co-founder, president and CEO.

Acrisure’s acquisition of Tulco’s insurance practice was named a winner in the 2021 MiBiz M&A Deals of the Year Awards in the professional services category.

Williams and Tull decided initially to “test the waters” through a joint venture, known as Alway Insurance, that narrowly focused on life insurance and other individual benefits. The joint venture validated the role of AI and a digital platform in the insurance industry, as Alway Insurance generated sales growth of 10 percent or more a week for 24 straight weeks during the COVID-19 pandemic, Williams said.

The joint venture’s success led to last year’s acquisition. Tulco’s insurance practice became Acrisure Technology Group, the Austin, Texas-based AI division led by Tull, who is a significant minority shareholder in Acrisure.

“After almost half a year of 10 percent growth per week, I said to Tom, ‘We’ve kind of proven the case. This was a success we could only dream about. We really need to then take this AI capability and this Altryt and apply it to and deploy it across all Acrisure products,’” Williams said.

The AI and robotic-processing ability that the acquisition gave Acrisure now gets used in back-office administration and sales and marketing functions, he said.

In the back office, robotic processing saves about 1,800 hours of work a week and improves the productivity and efficiency of Acrisure staff, Williams said. The technology has not displaced staff at the fast-growing company, which recorded 2020 revenue of about $2.1 billion, more than three times the $650 million of 2017.

“We’re still going to continue to hire, still going to continue to grow. As we’re bringing more work into the business and into the home office (in Grand Rapids), we’re just doing that with the help of robotic processing,” Williams said.

For clients, Acrisure uses AI in modeling to gain better insights on their risk, “bringing opportunities and identifying opportunities for our sales force they wouldn’t otherwise have, and creating a competitive advantage, he said.

“It gives us that insight to where that risk profile exists to where we know we can help them,” Williams said. “It really is identifying, in some cases, the unmet needs or the unexpressed needs of our clients that we should be talking to them about that we haven’t. The insights gained from this are vast and significant in terms of how we can help clients, while at the same time grow our business.”

One of the world’s largest insurance brokerages, Acrisure has nearly 600 offices worldwide and for years has grown rapidly through an aggressive acquisition strategy. The company last year made 110 acquisitions and another 30 have closed or are under letter of intent in 2021.

Acrisure put together the Tulco deal while maintaining a torrent of acquisitions in 2020. The company for years has by far been the largest acquirer of independent insurance agencies in the U.S., closing on 464 acquisitions from 2016 to 2020, according to Optis Partners LLC, a Chicago-based firm that tracks M&A in the insurance industry.

Key to the Tulco deal, just as with buying an agency, was following long-held best practices.

“Philosophically, we’ve always placed at the top of the list the party that we’re doing a deal with, the integrity of the people, the cultural fit and the things that we emphasize,” Williams said. “All of those things are really relevant to our standard, everyday M&A and that was also relevant here.”
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Hoffman Estates, Ill., in addition to a Jaguar Land

Perrigo Co. plc

M+A DEALS & DEALMAKERS AWARDS

ZIEGLER AUTOMOTIVE GROUP

Top executive: Aaron Zeigler, President and CEO

Annual sales: $1.6 billion

Total West Michigan employees: 750 in West Michigan; 1,800 company wide

Company: A Midwest auto group that features 29 locations throughout Michigan, Indiana and Illinois, featuring a wide variety of brands.

Advisers on the deal: Varnum LLP

RETAIL

ZEIGLER AUTOMOTIVE GROUP

BY ADDING LUXURY BRANDS TO PORTFOLIO

ZEIGLER AUTOMOTIVE KEEPS M&A MOMENTUM

BY ADDING LUXURY BRANDS TO PORTFOLIO

By KATE CARLSON | MiBiz
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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

PERRIGO CO. PLC

Top executive: Murray Klaus, president and CEO

Annual net sales: $5 billion

Total West Michigan employees: 4,000

Company: Generic pharmaceutical, wellness and self care product manufacturer

A Midwest auto group that features 29 locations throughout Michigan, Indiana and Illinois, featuring a wide variety of brands.

Advisers on the deal: Varnum LLP

ZEIGLER AUTOMOTIVE GROUP

Top executive: Aaron Zeigler, President and CEO

Annual sales: $1.6 billion

Total West Michigan employees: 750 in West Michigan; 1,800 company wide

Company: A Midwest auto group that features 29 locations throughout Michigan, Indiana and Illinois, featuring a wide variety of brands.

Advisers on the deal: Varnum LLP

RETAIL

ZEIGLER AUTOMOTIVE GROUP

PERRIGO HEADQUARTERS TO MEDICAL MILE

430 Monroe Ave. NW in what will be a $44.8 mil-

lion project. Perrigo announced plans to relo-
cate its offices to downtown Grand Rapids on Oc-
tober 27, the same day the Michigan Strategic
Fund board approved a $2 million Michigan Busi-
ness Development Program grant, which was based on the anticipated creation of 170 jobs in Michigan.

The deal to bring the Perrigo offices to down-
town Grand Rapids was led by Health Innovation
Partners, a real estate and development joint
venture between Rockford Construction Co.
Inc. and Rockford Development Group, Walsh
Construction Co. Inc. and Walsh Investors,
Murphy Development Group LLC and Michigan
State University.

Facilitating the relocation also involved the
Michigan Economic Development Corp., the
city of Grand Rapids and The Right Place Inc.
Finalizing plans for Perrigo to relocate to Grand
Rapids took about a year and a half, said Birgit
Klohs, the retired president and CEO of The
Right Place who led the economic development or-
ganization for 33 years.

“These projects are complex,” said Klohs, whose retirement was effective at the end of January. “There is a lot of work that goes on under the surface when you pull together the resources, and hiccups that happen that you never see once the deal is done.”

The complex nature of the project earned it recognition as a 2021 MiBiz Deal of the Year Awards winner in the economic development category.

Rockford Construction and Michigan State
University were already a well-established team with a high level of trust before the request for proposals for the space at the innovation park in Grand Rapids was sent out, said Mike Mraz, president of Rockford Construction’s real estate development team.

A key piece of the equation that will help
Perrigo’s employees integrate into the local
community involves the fact that Rockford
Construction serves as the landlord of 700-800

appartments downtown, as well as many restaur-
ants, offices and retail buildings, Mraz said.

“What we really strive to do is connect those
employees and employers with an opportunity
to live nearby and experience what downtown
has to offer,” Mraz said. “That collaboration is
already beginning. Companies are already work-
ting together even though the buildings aren’t
completed yet.”

“We all instantly thought it was a perfect fit for
Perrigo,” Mraz added. “It really took many teams
to bring this to fruition. This is a landmark proj-
ec for us and we’re very proud to be able to be a
part of it.”

Perrigo is domiciled in Dublin, Ireland,
but is run from its existing offices in Allegan,
where the company was founded more than 130 years ago. Despite Perrigo’s local ties to West
Michigan, a company as large as Perrigo had other choices for its North American headquar-
ters, Klohs told MiBiz. The company was also
considering Chicago and Southwest Florida for
its office.

One of the big selling points was Grand
Rapids’ Medical Mile, which company CEO
Murray Kessler previously told MiBiz has the
potential to become the “Silicon Valley of
self-care.”

“The development of Medical Mile and that ecosystem that has developed around
health and life sciences over the last 20 years was one of the key drivers of this project,”
Klohs said.

The project is part of creating an ecosystem that will draw other companies to invest in
downtown Grand Rapids, Klohs said. Helping to secure the Perrigo deal was a capstone project to end her career on at The Right Place, and even more
noteworthy because it was all done virtually dur-
ing the COVID-19 pandemic, Klohs said.

“If you would have told me two years ago that
we could do a deal of this magnitude without ever
meeting with the company in person, I would say,
‘No way,’” Klohs said. “It can be done. Economic
development is a team sport and you never pull
this off without collaboration from others. I’m very proud this all came together.”

By JAYSON BUSSA | MiBiz

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

PERRIGO CO. PLC

Top executive: Murray Kessler, president and CEO

Annual net sales: $5 billion

Total West Michigan employees: 4,000

Company: Generic pharmaceutical, wellness and self care product manufacturer

A rendering of Perrigo’s planned headquar-
ters in downtown Grand Rapids.

HOME PAGE

February 15, 2021 / MiBiz
‘EVERYTHING KIND OF FELL INTO PLACE’ WITH HANNAH LAWRENCE’S FOXBRIGHT ACQUISITION

By JAYSON BOSSA | MiBiz
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H annah Lawrence remembered the car ride home after closing on the acquisition of her first business — a moment of brief panic. “I remember just thinking, ‘What did I just do?’” laughed Lawrence, who purchased Grand Rapids-based Foxbright in January of 2020, becoming the new owner of a company that specializes in website and communication solutions for schools.

“I took on some debt to finance the acquisition,” she added about her apprehension. “You go from not a whole lot of debt in suddenly you’re on the line for a whole lot and you have employees that you need to make sure you pay. There is a lot of responsibility associated with that. But, a few months in, you settle into it and it’s like, OK, things are going fine.”

A little fleeting buyer’s remorse is natural in a deal involving an individual buyer like Lawrence. Her purchase of Foxbright earned the 2021 Deal of the Year status in the technology sector of MiBiz’s M&A Deals and Dealmakers Awards.

Still, business ownership was seemingly always in the cards for Lawrence, who has experience in both finance and the project management side of technology.

She previously served as CFO of Grand Rapids-based property management firm Eenhorn LLC and then went on to work for Northgate Resorts, which is primarily run by her father and brother and manages a portfolio of camps and resorts.

She was bitten by the entrepreneurial bug when she managed marketing, financing and sales operations for a home sales entity called Dolce Vita in Arizona, which was being positioned to sell.

“I had a lot of fun with that small business aspect, having control over sales and marketing — it triggered the desire to really look for something,” Lawrence said.

This is when Foxbright became available after founder Catherine Ettinger planned to exit a business she established in 2002 with Paula Whitman, who remained with the company as an employee.

“I felt comfortable coming in with very little tech experience and being able to focus on areas that they hadn’t historically — the sales, marketing and business side versus the technical side,” Lawrence said. “Everything kind of fell into place, from the size of the company ... as well as the cultural fit. To me, that was huge.”

Lawrence said that the transaction was smooth. However, not long into her tenure Foxbright, the COVID-19 pandemic dominated public life and thrust schools into relative chaos.

“There were some specific sales and marketing agendas I wanted to pursue in the first 13 months — some product changes — but I decided that I’m not going to get too aggressive about this because of the COVID situation,” she said. “I needed to put the brakes on some of it and really focus on relationships with the team and making sure they knew I wasn’t going to come down on them for ridiculous things during this time.”

Clients and potential clients were generally quiet in March amid all the uncertainty. However, business has picked up since.

Lawrence and the team were still productive in COVID-mired 2020, releasing the fifth and latest version of Foxbright’s content management system in October, which created a modern, relevant, user-friendly platform for clients.

Lawrence also grew Foxbright’s client base by 7 percent in 2020.

Some of that growth can be attributed to COVID-prompted interest in addition to the emphasis Lawrence has put on sales and marketing piece, including working with a third party for (pay-per-click) and SEO marketing campaigns.

“It’s been a lot of trial-and-error,” Lawrence said. “My next step is really looking to bring on a sales individual and a marketing individual, and bring that in house and really focus on client growth from a development side. The product we offer is really solid.”

MELTROTTER’S RECENT MERGERS SIGNAL A COMING SHIFT IN PHILANTHROPY

By ANDY BALASKOVITZ | MiBiz
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Mel Trotter Ministries’ acquisitions of two other Grand Rapids nonprofits in 2020 marked the start of a significant, long-term shift for the nonprofit that executives say will fundamentally change the organization.

In early January 2020, Mel Trotter announced a merger with Heartside Ministry, which provides similar services for individuals experiencing homelessness. The primary driver of the deal was to reduce duplicate services, said Mel Trotter President and CEO Dennis Van Kampen.

For about two years, officials with the two organizations had discussed ways to collaborate before the merger was finalized. That collaboration included sharing human resources responsibilities, facilities and maintenance and I.T. support that Heartside would contract through Mel Trotter.

Mel Trotter announced a second merger in July 2020, this time with Grand Rapids-based Next Step of West Michigan, a nonprofit that provides job opportunities and performs construction, property maintenance, assembly and production services.

The pair of deals earned Mel Trotter the Deal of the Year Award in the nonprofit category.

“The Heartside and Foxbright acquisitions were really a business. They employ people to either create a product that goes to the market or to flip foreclosed homes into low-income housing,” Van Kampen said.

The Next Step merger aligned with Mel Trotter’s long-term vision of boosting its revenue through social enterprise businesses. Over the next 10 years, Mel Trotter seeks to derive 70 percent of its revenue through these enterprises, shifting from a mostly donor-based model.

“Our gain was a workforce development program we didn’t have to create,” Van Kampen said. “A social enterprise allows us to fund growth that’s necessary to fulfill our vision, which is ending homelessness. We have a massive housing crisis, which not only contributes to people becoming homeless but also makes it far more difficult for them to get out of homelessness.”

He added: “These mergers allow us to have a greater impact on the housing crisis.”

The wheels are already in motion since the Next Step merger. In December, Next Step acquired a vacant industrial property across the street from its south-side Grand Rapids headquarter.

Van Kampen said preliminary discussions have already started around converting the site to low-income or market-rate housing.

Mel Trotter has also previously purchased two homes from Next Step to help move people out of homelessness. In 2021, Mel Trotter anticipates bringing another four or five houses online that Next Step has purchased and redeveloped.

In the end, the two mergers served separate purposes for Mel Trotter: merging duplicate services in the case of Heartside, and growing its workforce development and housing resources with the addition of Next Step.

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic brought some organizational challenges when merging the organizations, on top of what Van Kampen described as routine cultural changes that come when companies join forces.

The experience also taught company leaders about the value of having sound business decisions driving such a move.

“One thing that’s critical is the business plan — the numbers have to work,” he said. “One thing that frustrates me about nonprofits in general is they tend to not follow good business practices because they’re providing a social service. I’d argue: If you want to have the greatest impact with services you provide, then you have to follow the same principles and practices a business would.”

Van Kampen maintains that the deals position Mel Trotter well in a shifting philanthropic landscape.

“I’m very confident in saying the staff and leadership of all three organizations believe that what we did is the right thing to do,” Van Kampen said. “One way or the other, this is the future of nonprofits. In 10 years, we won’t have as many standalone nonprofits as we have today because the donor support isn’t there. I think we’re going to see many more nonprofits do exactly what we did.”

By ANDY BALASKOVITZ | MiBiz
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Mel Trotter Ministries President and CEO Dennis Van Kampen. COURTESY PHOTO

FOXBRIGHT

Top executive: Hannah Lawrence, president and owner

Annual sales: Around $800,000

Total West Michigan employees: Four (One part-time employee)

Company: Provider of website and communication solutions to the education industry

JEFF LAMBERT OVERSEES STRONG YEAR FOR ACQUISITIONS, STARTUPS

By JAYSON BUSSA | MiBiz
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s the COVID-19 pandemic was just starting to set in last spring, Jeff Lambert jotted down the words “positively legendary” on a sticky note.

For the Lambert & Co. CEO, it was a reminder to make 2020 a memorable one, and by most standards, it was.

Lambert, whose company stands as the largest public relations and investor relations firm in Michigan, said that 2020 was the most active year in company history, complete with three different acquisitions and launching two startups.

“Any one of those would have been a highlight of a year in the past,” said Lambert, who was named winner in the executive category of the 2021 MiBiz M&A Dealmakers of the Year Awards.

Lambert & Co. gobbled up deals in 2020, which kicked off with a December 2019 deal that saw an acqui-hire of Michelle Olson and her Phoenix-based team, who were part of New York-based Fingerpaint Marketing. The move netted Lambert & Co. clients in automotive and mobility and real estate in addition to expanding its national footprint.

Just two months later, Lambert & Co. acquired New York-based Casteel Schoenborn Investor Relations & Corporate Communications, which has a seasoned investor relations practice with a specialty in financial services and the banking sector.

“That was in an area that’s national expertise for us — investor relations,” Lambert said of the CSIR deal. “So, we’re a top five investors relations firm nationally and if there is any IR firm for sale, we’re looking at it nationwide.”

In the spring of 2020, Lambert & Co. made a local acquisition in West Michigan-based Fairly Painless Advertising, a 30-year creative services agency. The deal, which was completed at the height of the pandemic, added copywriters, web developers and graphic designers to Lambert’s strategic communications and capital markets team.

“The Fairly Painless acquisition was really in response to our clients looking for more depth and integrated marketing and advertising so it made sense to add that 30-year track record to Lambert,” he said.

Finally, Lambert & Co. acquired the PR team of Houston-based national advertising and media buying firm 9thWonder, entering into a joint venture with the top-50 agency in which the duo will continue pursuing additional acquisitions.

“The addition of 9thWonder and joint venture was to take the Fairly Painless platform and put it on steroids — to really be able to have a national and global brand strategy firm in our family of companies,” Lambert said.

Deals aside, Lambert & Co. also launched fintech startup TiCKER, which uses incentives to convert retail investors into consumers while also getting investors to invest in the brands that they enjoy and interact with regularly.

Also, Lambert & Co. funded and launched a minority- and woman-owned diversity, equity and inclusion consultancy and diverse board development firm called EQUALSIGN. The firm landed clients spanning higher ed institutions, nonprofits and public companies, and was timely in a year that saw racial tensions boil over.

The breakneck pace is not one that Lambert said his company will slow down any time soon, noting that Lambert & Co. has the goal to complete two acquisitions in 2021 in addition to launching one innovation or startup.

While the COVID-19 pandemic certainly threw its share of hurdles at Lambert throughout the acquisitions process, he did come away learning a few of the benefits that come with this socially distant approach at buying and integration.

“When looking at multi-market acquisitions or certainly non-local acquisitions, the ability to do onboarding, training and even culture build has gone virtual so the speed of integration is actually magnified,” Lambert said. “Honestly, we were concerned about the impact on our M&A relative to COVID. It actually will become part of our playbook — the combination of virtual and in-person.”

JEFF LAMBERT

Company: Lambert & Co.
Annual sales/revenue: $15.5 million
Total West Michigan Employees: 75
Company: Michigan’s largest public relations and investor relations firm. Lambert is also owner of Fairly Painless Advertising, founder of fintech startup TiCKER, and partner in diversity, equity and inclusion consulting firm EQUALSIGN.


Lambert & Co. CEO Jeff Lambert. COURTESY PHOTO

PATIENCE IN A PANDEMIC HELPED GUIDE A BUSY YEAR FOR JEFF OTT

By MARK SANCHEZ | MiBiz
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A s the economy abruptly grinds to a halt last spring under COVID-19 restrictions, Jeff Ott stayed busy. Working from home, he was the main legal counsel for four bank transactions. A couple of the deals closed prior to the pandemic’s onset, while the legal work for others remained in progress and continued virtually amid the state-imposed restrictions.

“It was a very odd year, obviously, and the deal work dropped off. But I was fortunate to have a number of transactions that were in the works essentially right before the pandemic hit, so they played out over the course of the year,” said Ott, an M&A attorney and partner at the Grand Rapids office of Warner Norcross + Judd LLP who specializes in bank mergers.

“As the pandemic kind of came on, it was interesting how people were looking at the transactions and saying, ‘Oh, gee: What do we do here?’” Ott said. “It was just very good monitoring and confidence on the merger partners than getting them through, closed the deals, and that was great.”

Working with partner Charlie Goode, Ott led the legal teams that handled the transactions in the latter half of 2019 and into 2020, including two acquisitions by Sparta-based ChoiceOne Financial Services Inc. His work earned him the 2021 MiBiz/MAA Dealmaker of the Year Award as an adviser.

The deals in which Ott led the legal teams were:

• ChoiceOne's $89 million acquisition of Lapeer-based County Bank Corp., the former parent company of Lakestone Bank & Trust, that was announced May 25, 2019, and closed Oct. 1, 2019. The two banks completed their integration in May 2020.

• ChoiceOne's subsequent $20.8 million acquisition of Community Shores Bank Corp. in Muskegon that was publicly announced Jan. 6, 2020, and closed July 1. The banks completed their integration in mid-October.

• The $42 million acquisition of North Star Financial Holdings Inc., parent company of Main Street Bank in Bingham Farms, by Hancock-based Kresge Financial Corp., the parent company of Superior National Bank and Trust. Announced on Sept. 18, 2019, the deal closed Feb. 20, 2020 with integration in the second half of the year.

• A $15 million debt offering in December 2020 by Sturgis Bancorp Inc., the parent company of Sturgis Bank & Trust, to support further growth across Southwestern Michigan.

Some of the transactions overlapped and — in the ChoiceOne deal with Community Shores — extended into the pandemic that added complexity to the deal, reinforcing the need for patience when putting together a transaction and to work through problems as they arise.

“It was different,” Ott said of 2020 and the pandemic-related challenges with keeping a transaction going through remote meetings and electronic means for exchanging documents.

“What I learned was when you’re dealing with things like the pandemic, you just have to be patient. You have to take each day as it comes and work through the deal with things that come up and move on to the next issue,” he said. “That’s fundamental with any transaction because you’re always going to get thrown a problem that you didn’t expect. … This one just happened to be a monster problem.”

The legal work included negotiating a transaction and preparing merger agreements and supporting documents, preparing securities registration statements and disclosure documents, due diligence and reviewing reports from management, coordinating and preparing regulatory applications, reviewing contracts, and reviewing communications to shareholders and public announcements on the deals.

Ott not only represented banks in the transactions but also public companies that had to pivot and hold their annual shareholders meetings virtually. That meant setting up electronic voting for shareholders to vote on proposals.

When working on a transaction, Ott said the best practice to follow is focusing on fashioning a deal that’s based on what a client needs to accomplish, rather than getting the best of the other side.

“I always approach the transaction not as a game or not trying to win negotiating points. I sit down with the client and figure out what their objectives are. There’s typically a couple of fairly significant business points that are important to your client, and it’s those things that you need to make sure fall on your side or as close to your side as possible,” he said. “At least from my perspective, being reasonable in the documents … creates a better deal atmosphere. It’s easier for the various parties to work together to address the points that need to be addressed for each side of a deal and get to the place where you want to be.”

JEFF OTT, PARTNER

Warner Norcross + Judd LLP

EXECUTIVE

JEFF LAMBERT

Company: Lambert & Co.
Annual sales/revenue: $15.5 million
Total West Michigan employees: 75
Company: Michigan’s largest public relations and investor relations firm. Lambert is also owner of Fairly Painless Advertising, founder of fintech startup TiCKER, and partner in diversity, equity and inclusion consulting firm EQUALSIGN.

Matthew Baas assembles growing number of deals for ‘main street’ companies

By JAYSON BUSSA | MiBiz

as Friar, managing partner at Grand Rapids-based M&A firm Calder Capital LLC, routinely found his company passing on potential clients because of the size of the business.

Wanting to do business with these small, “Main Street” companies, Friar tapped then-intern Matthew Baas to develop a way to harness Calder Capital’s existing infrastructure and resources to provide a helpful, cost-effective service for this brand of businesses.

That’s when the idea for Small Business Deal Advisors LLC was born and Baas, now age 24, found himself leading the venture.

“Matt was instrumental in the founding and the initial running of all SBDA deals,” said Friar. “I would not have done it alone. Presently, Matt is the ‘glue’ — a CEO/COO that makes sure new clients are on-boarded, set up, the prep work is coordinated and clients get out to market (in a timely) way.”

Baas, who also works for Calder Capital, was this year’s Rising Star Award recipient for the 2021 MiBiz M&A Deals and Dealership Awards.

Baas originally came to Calder Capital in 2016 as an intern following his sophomore year of college at Michigan State University. Assuming a role in which Baas said he learned about every phase of the M&A process, conversations soon sparked about ways to effectively serve the many smaller businesses — restaurants, retail shops, franchise re-sales — that submitted inquiries.

These business owners found themselves trapped on an island, generally unable to foot the bill for the fees associated with working with a traditional M&A firm while finding cookie-cutter business brokers to be ineffective.

“That was the biggest thing: You’re going to end up with kind of a crusty old business broker,” Baas said. “A lot of times, they have this Rolodex, and once they get through the Rolodex with calling for a day, they kind of just sit and wait. Typically their contracts are two years exclusive. The seller is stuck. Our goal was to shake that up.”

The model adopted by SBDA featured a month-to-month, non-exclusive contract with the sellers along with 8 percent commission rates. The flexibility and affordability spoke to small business owners.

“The flexibility around the non-exclusivity is a huge selling point,” Baas said. “If they’re able to go and find a buyer on their own without us involved, they don’t owe us anything.”

SBDA officially launched in 2017 and closed its first transaction in October of that year — the sale of Echo Hair Salon in Grand Rapids.

Small Business Deal Advisors has closed 40 transactions since its inception, including 19 deals in 2020. While it relies on Calder Capital for leads and other resources, SBDA is beginning to generate leads of its own.

Baas’ jurisdiction is not confined to SBDA, either. He also leads larger transactions for Calder Capital.

— or a combination of both — in lower middle-market companies in the Great Lakes region that need $1 million to $5 million in capital to grow, recapitalize the business, or make an acquisition. The fund targets profitable companies with annual revenues of $10 million to $50 million.

In addition to the $31 million raised from more than 40 investors, predominantly from Michigan and the Midwest, the fund has secured another $10 million in available debt financing to support deals.

The Charter Growth Capital Fund’s formation earned Kerschen the 2021 MiBiz Dealmaker of the Year Awards as an investor.

Investments through the five deals collectively total about $15.5 million in subordinated debt and minority equity, Kerschen said. Focusing on the lower end of the middle market where there’s demand for capital and less competition for deals has enabled the fund to “pick our spots where it fits our criteria and we connect well with the entrepreneur,” he said.

Kerschen expects the fund to invest in 12 companies by late 2022, and “then we’d have to think about what’s next.”

Four of Charter Growth Capital Fund’s five investments were made in companies based in Michigan. Among them are Keystone Solutions Group in Kalamazoo, which provides product design for the medical device, aerospace and automotive industries, and contract manufacturing for medical devices.

Keystone Solutions President Jim Medsker told MiBiz in October 2019 that the company had grown revenues “in the 40-percent range” and that the next few years “could be similar,” with growth rates of 30 percent to 50 percent.

“We’re growing like crazy,” Medsker said. “This helps us to stay on that path.”

The fund has also backed Ann Arbor-based driving school All Star Driver Education that operates in 16 states; Envirotile LLC in Coldwater that produces specialized foam products; and Traverse City Products, a producer of custom roll formed and stamped products.

The fifth investment, which closed in January, was for die-casting company Premier Engineered Products in Abingdon, Va.

Beyond the financing, the Charter Growth Capital Fund provides portfolio companies advice, guidance and other support. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Charter Capital Partners also worked with portfolio companies on plans for safe operations, developing contingency plans and projections, and helping them secure federal Paycheck Protection Program loans.

“That was a big undertaking in the first year of the fund, getting through a major disruption in the economy and the manner of doing business,” Kerschen said. “We were able to retain their employees and help everybody just get through this challenging time. We had to hunker down in some cases, and in some cases we’re not back all of the way.”

Meanwhile, Keystone Solutions transitioned in the pandemic to packaging and selling swabs, test kits, and various COVID-related products.

Running the Charter Growth Capital Fund through the pandemic reinforced to Kerschen and his partners the need for business owners to guard against overleveraging their companies and “not to push your resources right to the edge.”

“That’s ultimately what got our portfolio companies through the pandemic,” Kerschen said. “They had flexibility on their balance sheets and they had access to cash resources, so when business stopped or got disrupted, we had the flexibility.”

Visit www.mibiz.com
W orking in the wedding industry during the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread restrictions on large gatherings has been stressful for Jennifer Elenbaas.

Elenbaas’ determination in growing her business has earned the Allendale resident the judge’s choice award in the MiBiz M&A Deal of the Year Awards.

“I’ve always definitely been a calculated risk taker with a lot of determination,” Elenbaas said. “Nobody could have predicted what happened to all of the businesses with the shutdowns, but I have big goals for myself, and weddings are going to come back.”

America’s Bride has a staff of seven while Bridal Gallery includes five employees. Elenbaas had to hire people to fill many positions throughout 2020 as employees chose to leave the state or pursue a different career because of COVID-19 and operating restrictions for the business.

“Since the new year, things have definitely started picking back up and I am preparing because gowns take six to eight months to come in on special orders,” Elenbaas said. “We’re preparing to have a big selection to sell off the rack.”

Elenbaas opened the first location of America’s Bride in 2014 at 746 Four Mile Road in Walker, which was recently converted into an outlet store to include wedding dresses ready to purchase. The rack. When Elenbaas learned Bridal Gallery was for sale, she knew she wanted to purchase the store, which has been a staple for West Michigan brides for the past several decades.

Elenbaas first met with the founders of Bridal Gallery at the end of 2019, and worked with the owner couple — Judi and Ralph Tapp — and Small Business Deal Advisors’ Max Friar on the deal, which closed in September 2020. The Tapps first founded Bridal Gallery, located at 749 44th St. SE in Grand Rapids, in 1985.

“Bridal Gallery has been around for so long and they have exclusive rights to sell Allure Bridals gowns, so I was very excited for that,” Elenbaas said. “This has been a dream for me, purchasing Bridal Gallery gives me more options.”

Acquiring Bridal Gallery is not the only growth Elenbaas’ business saw in 2020. After hearing that the Dressbarn at 3165 Alpine Ave. in Walker was closing at the end of 2019, Elenbaas negotiated with the landlord and took over the 8,500-square-foot space to open a luxury flagship store for America’s Bride.

Construction took place throughout 2020 and the store opened in October. White marble floors were installed with runway carpets while Swarovski crystal chandeliers hang from the ceilings.

Elenbaas fell in love with wedding dresses when she was looking for her own in 2000, and ended up pushing back her wedding when she couldn’t find the right dress. This is where her passion comes from to help brides find the right dress for their big day, she said.

“We wanted to create that experience that you dream about from the time you’re a little girl and putting a pillow case on your head and imagining your wedding one day,” Elenbaas said.

M+A DEALS & DEALMAKERS AWARDS

AMERICA’S BRIDE
OWNER REFLECTS ON EXPANDING BUSINESS, ACQUIRING BRIDAL GALLERY

By KATE CARLSON | MiBiz
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JUDGE’S CHOICE

AMERICA’S BRIDE
Top executive: Jennifer Elenbaas
Annual sales pre-COVID: $750,000 at America’s Bride; $500,000 at Bridal Gallery
Total Michigan employees: 12
Company: Bridal gown retailer
Advisors: Small Business Deal Advisors

HONORABLE MENTION

AUXO INVESTMENT PARTNERS MANAGES INTERNATIONAL COMPLEXITIES IN 2020 DEAL

By JAYSON BUSSA | MiBiz
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The team at Grand Rapids-based private equity firm Auxo Investment Partners has a saying that every deal has to die once before it closes.

“That tends to be the way these things work — you often come across things that look like they could be deal killers and you just have to find a way to work through them,” said Jeff Helminski, managing partner of Auxo, which invests in growing founder- and family-owned industrial, manufacturing and business services companies.

Helminski and his team at Auxo encountered plenty of deal instances in its 2020 acquisition of Indianapolis-based Precision Parts Group Inc.

Precision Parts Group operates outside the Midwest region with a joint venture operation in China.

By closing on the deal in September 2020, Auxo was able to establish a platform in the spiral-wound and extruded tubular products, and Euclidal Medical Products, which manufactures single- and multi-dose pharmaceutical packing systems.

Precision Parts Group operates outside the Midwest region with a joint venture operation in China.

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Auxo caught a serendipitous break. One of Auxo’s founding investors is also the founder of a Chicagobased private equity firm, which coincidentally owned PPG previously when Hoeo took over as CEO. This helped to build a bridge between Auxo and PPG.

With these latest experiences under its belt, Auxo Investment Partners continues to seek out deals. Helminski said the firm is eying a European deal as a potential add-on acquisition for one of its existing companies.

“We’re usually looking for good companies that we think we can help make a little better, but mostly grow them over time with our hands on, operationally active engagement with the company,” Helminski said.

Auxo Investment Partners Managing Partner Jeff Helminski. COURTESY PHOTO