

OCTOBER'S BUSINESS OF THE MONTH!



The Savanna Chamber of Commerce is pleased to announce Havencrest Castle as October's Business of the Month!!

What made you choose this type of business? When my late wife, Adrienne, passed in 2006, Havencrest Castle became dark and quiet. She had always given wonderful events for our anniversaries, birthdays, and Christmas. I don't have her talent for such things, but when friends encouraged me to open my home to the public, I thought it was a way to honor Adrienne. We got the lights and music on again, and people were soon smiling, laughing, and enjoying all that we created just like in times past!

How long have you been in business? We first opened Havencrest Castle Tours to the public in July 2013 on a very limited, appointment-only basis. The tours were conducted by an actor/singer, Michael Dunavant. People seemed to enjoy them, but it was a terrible business plan, and the tour guide was, unfortunately, unreliable. In the end, we were hurt by some bad reviews on Yelp at the finish of Mr. Dunavant's tenure. He had completely dropped the ball on some bus tours from the QCA. Not good! I turned my attention to my other businesses, and did nothing with the tours for 3 years. In the summer of 2018, while picking up supplies at Savanna's former TrueValue an employee there, Brandon Holmbo, and I started talking about repairs needed at the castle. Soon we got his cousin, Ryan, involved too, and set about that summer getting the house ready for viewing. In October 2018, we decided to try something different. Open tours only on the weekends of October and May, concentrating our patrons to those 16 days a year. Instead of hiring a docent to guide them, we made the tours self-guided with signage, and our own audio app to describe each room. This was enormously successful. We had nearly 3,000 people taking the self-guided tours in those 8 days of October 2018. Since then, we've been fortunate to get publicity out to metro areas via coverage on QCA media like Paula Sands Live, Local 4 News, WQAD, and Rockford's WIFR, and rural magazines like Agri News and Big River brought us many new visitors from both big towns and tiny ones. One couple from Indiana drove 6 hours to Savanna because of an article in Agri News. Now the entire Holmbo family

constitutes most of the "Castle Crew." If they ever decide to go on strike, I'm in big trouble! The funny thing is, I discovered that they are actually the 3rd generation of the family to work for the St. Georges and Facemakers!

What is your favorite part of your business? Without a doubt it's the people! The ones that work here at the Castle, and the many visitors who come in smiling and leave with bigger smiles. Some have come back 5 times, visiting us in spring and again the next fall. So many of them tell us they can "feel the love the moment they walked in the door." That always makes everyone's day, and especially mine. Some ladies came on Adrienne's birthday, September 9, our opening day this year, with birthday gifts for her. I put them in the Ivory Tower where her crematory urn is. Those beautiful and kind gestures, and interacting with the visitors are what I love about the tours. And having the lights and music on again to make Adrienne's spirit happy! This brings to mind a favorite quote: "To live in hearts we leave is not to die."

What is unique about your business? Havencrest Castle Tours are as unique as the house itself. We get visitors who say they will probably never fly to Europe, but now they don't have to! Others, tell us they have visited European castles and palaces, or US houses like Biltmore, Hearst Castle, or even House on the Rock, but they enjoy coming here because it is not just beautiful and interesting, but built on a love story. I think that's what keeps repeat visitors coming back, and brings us new guests.

What is your background? Education, Work Experience I started by studying with an Italian portrait-painter during my elementary school years and learned the classical method of European-style oil painting. Then continued with art classes through all of high school. After graduation, I attended the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts for more classical art education and art history. I left school early to begin my main business, Facemakers, Inc., which is what made the renovations and expansions of Havencrest Castle possible over the 44 years that I have lived here.

How did you get started in this business? Adrienne and I never intended to open the house to tours. What she had her heart and mind set on was giving weddings, anniversaries, and other special events. She thought when the ballroom was finished her dreams could come true because she loved entertaining on a large scale. In fact, at the time of her death, she had already collected hundreds of beautiful crystal sets, silver, and Haviland Limoges china sets for this purpose. Unfortunately, when she passed in 2006, the ballroom was barely even begun as it still had bare stud walls, and an unfinished ceiling. It was friends, especially Jean Ferris, that encouraged me to open the house to the public for tours, so Jean gets the credit or the blame for it! She even wrote that first article for the STJ in 2013 that launched the "public life" of my home.

How did you get the background and skills necessary to run this type of business? Adrienne taught me everything I know about how to put a successful room together, how to treat people politely, and how to have faith when the chips are down. The rest is "learn-as-you-go," but knowing my way around Photoshop, InDesign, and drawing on a Wacom Tablet has certainly helped with promoting the tours on traditional and social media, as well as designing products for the gift shop. They don't say "exit through the gift shop" for nothing. It is a very important part of any venue's bottom line. I would say as important as popcorn is to a movie theatre's bottom line. I was able to create our line of Havencrest Publishing books in Adobe InDesign, and provide them to the printers, print-ready. Books are by far our best-selling items.

Where do you see your business in the next year? In the next five years? The next ten years? I believe we have just begun to become known since people are still referring to Havencrest as a "best-kept-secret," and even visitors from Savanna are saying: "I never knew this place was here!" In the next five years we hope to finish opening the remaining public rooms. We currently show 26 of the most spectacular rooms, but there will probably be 35 in all when we are finished. In addition, we plan to continue promotions to put Havencrest on the map. There is a PBS documentary in the making, and a Canadian one too, and both look promising. Those are the kinds of things that will bring people to Savanna that might not ever have come. However, we are learning that our "audience" isn't just those looking for high culture, but just about anyone that enjoys beauty, romance, and fun.

If you had one piece of advice to someone just starting out, what would it be? world, and do it with all of your heart. Even if your intention is not to make a your own light. 2) Don't be afraid to pray for divine guidance when castle business, and a biker bar can't co-exist in the same little town,



One piece of advice is too little. These three: 1) Find the thing that is your gift to the business out of it. You will brighten your world with all looks bleak. "Invisible hands" will help you. 3) Never give up. If someone tells you a just smile and say: "God is fond of wondrous variety!"