

THE POWER IS IN THEIR HANDS



And they wield it in a variety of ways: The public hospital administrator and the hotel captain. The anti-gang activist and the renewable energy guru. The unlikely theater guy and the United Way CEO. The real estate wizard and even the caterer to the power players.

Some are metro-area natives. Many are transplants. Larimer Square owner Jeff Hermanson came from California for the skiing while Wisconsin native and Renewable Choice Energy CEO Quayle Hodek was into snowboarding. Denver Health CEO Dr. Patricia Gabow was on vacation when she landed on her future husband after diving into an Aspen pool. The Colorado lifestyle, and opportunity, kept them here.

They're all at the top of their field. They want to make a difference. And despite their differences, they sometimes speak the same admirable language. "You talk about the environment all the time, but what are the actual things you can do to have an impact?" says Hodek, who sells wind energy. "This is one of them."

Rev. Leon Kelly came to see the tears he witnessed at funerals as a sign of regret and resolved to help children before their lives were cut short. "When [people] had the opportunity to say, they didn't say. When they had the chance to do, they didn't do."



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JEFF HERMANSON
CEO OF LARIMER ASSOCIATES

No Rubber Tomahawks

JEFF HERMANSON CREATED TODAY'S LARIMER SQUARE, HELPING PUT DENVER ON THE WORLD MAP.

In the 19th century, Larimer Square staked its claim as the center of Denver with dry goods stores, the city's first post office, and a notorious saloon famous for its back room poker games. Today, the meticulously preserved facades of those buildings house the center of Denver's cultural renaissance. Restaurants along Larimer Street between 14th and 15th — Rioja, TAG, and Tamayo — are press darlings and a mecca for foodies worldwide. Elegant and fiercely independent retail shops, such as Cry Baby Ranch and Violet, and high-end nightclubs and bars — Corridor 44, Suite Two Hundred, Wicked Garden — have drawn acclaim from visitors and locals alike.

The man behind the success of today's Larimer Square is Jeff Hermanson, CEO of Larimer Associates. Hermanson, whose modest, second floor office in a Victorian building overlooks the square, is quick to deflect credit for ending the tired old meme of Denver-as-cowtown. He points to his partners along with the chefs and shop owners who populate Larimer. But as the head of one of Denver's most highly regarded real estate investment and management companies, he is squarely the man behind this block — some of the city's most valuable real estate.

With his tall, athletic appearance, Hermanson reminds one of a cowboy who has

been to finishing school instead of a Trump-type reality-TV real estate mogul dripping with boiler room machismo and flaunting a power tie. The 60-year-old Hermanson has a contemplative demeanor and the laid-back Colorado entrepreneur's uniform of slacks, dress shirt, and fleece vest — as if, at any moment, he might decide to skip out on that afternoon's meetings and head for Crested Butte, which isn't all that unlikely, considering that's where he got his start and where he still prefers to spend his free time.

A California native who attended graduate school in San Francisco for international relations, his backstory is that of most Denver transplants. Boy moves to mountains to spend a year skiing and finding himself. Boy falls in love with said mountains and decides to stick around. Next thing you know, boy is wearing a fleece vest and calling Colorado home.

Hermanson spotted opportunity in the form of Slogar, the fine-dining restaurant he opened in Crested Butte in 1976. Within a few years, he had opened others in the tiny ski town, including Soupon Bistro and Artichoke. The success of these restaurants coincided with the success of Crested Butte, and Hermanson took full advantage, diversifying his holdings into real estate and even a utilities construction business. Soon, he expanded to Denver, purchasing a Larimer Square icon, famed Italian restaurant Josephina's, in 1987.

By 1993, Hermanson was the owner of four restaurants in the square and the historic block's largest tenant. When the whole of Larimer Square was put up for sale, Hermanson seemed the logical buyer. However, with the opening of the Cherry Creek Shopping Center in 1990 and the proliferation of other restaurants throughout downtown, Larimer Square's future was far from certain. "If we had done nothing," Hermanson says, "Larimer

Square could be full of shops selling T-shirts and rubber tomahawks."

To avoid that fate, Hermanson and his new partner, commercial real estate expert Joe Vostrejs, turned to Texas-based retail consultant David Levine. "[David's] first recommendation was that I close all the restaurants," Hermanson says. "I pointed out that those were all my restaurants. David told me if you want to save the property, you've got to get rid of them."

And so Hermanson did. "Whereas my restaurants had been very corporate, driven from the top down in a sort of Soviet model, David had the vision of chef-driven." This decision to follow the advice of Vostrejs and Levine would inform how Hermanson operated Larimer Square from then on. "I realized that I didn't need to make every decision, that I wasn't the only generator of good ideas."

Today, Larimer Square tenants thrive because they're operated by chefs and owners with visions of their own. The result is not corporate homogeneity, but an enclave of individuality, the sum of which is greater than its parts.

Just as many real estate developers are pulling back, Hermanson is extending his game, venturing out of Larimer Square and into Denver's diverse neighborhoods. He is buying local bars, shops, and eateries, and turning them into gems, "places where local residents can come two, three times a week." He's not out to replace the neighborhood burger-and-beer joint with haute cuisine and \$20 cocktails. But he is out to reinvent them by teaming up with aspiring restaurateurs at places such as Billy's Inn, LoHi SteakBar, and Ernie's Bar & Pizza — all Highland staples.

Chances are, Hermanson will soon be bringing a bit of Larimer Square to a neighborhood near you.

BY SCOTT BERGSTROM