



Joni Harman stands in front of the newly renovated Old Town Works on Minnesota Avenue. She and her husband, Steve, spent nine months renovating the building after purchasing it at auction.

PHOTOS BY JAMES WOODCOCK

# OLD TOWN WORKS

*JONI AND STEVE HARMAN'S LOVE OF HISTORY AND COMMITMENT TO CONSERVATION MELD BEAUTIFULLY IN THE NEWLY RENOVATED OLD TOWN WORKS*

BY ALLYN HULTENG

**JONI HARMAN KNOWS ONE THING FOR SURE: RENOVATING AN HISTORIC PROPERTY IS NO COOKIE-CUTTER OPERATION.**

**HARMAN, ALONG WITH HER HUSBAND, STEVE, LEARNED THIS TRUISM WHEN THE COUPLE PURCHASED AND RENOVATED THEIR FIRST DOWNTOWN PROJECT, KNOWN AS THE SWIFT BUILDING.**

Top: The inside of the building was gutted to reveal the original brick and beams. A new skylight allows natural light to flood the interior.  
Bottom: Attorney Russ Plath leased the suite on the west side of the building.



“Our youngest had just graduated from high school, and we decided to sell our big home on the West End, move downtown and minimize,” said Harman.

The couple, who share a passion for conservation issues, rented a loft apartment while looking for just the right living arrangements. Months of fruitless searching ended when friend and architect Randy Hafer encouraged them to purchase the Swift Building.

“We were naïve in terms of what we were getting into,” Harman said.

Nevertheless, the Harmans moved forward with the purchase and began renovating in 2008.

“We knew we wanted it to be as green as possible and retain as many of the historic features as possible,” Harman said. The two goals, she noted, fought each other.

“It was a learning process.”

When the project was finally completed, the renovated Swift Building received Platinum LEED certification and was also listed on the historic register. For Harman, it was “mission accomplished.” Or so she thought.

#### THE NEXT CHAPTER

Shortly after Joni and Steve completed their first renovation project, the couple was approached to purchase the Old Town Works

property, located just east of the Swift Building.

“Initially we said ‘no,’ we just weren’t ready,” Harman said.

Ultimately, the property went up for auction and on the day of the auction, Harman’s dad, Gene Espeland, suggested that Joni go and bid. Joni and Steve ended up buying the property, thinking they would lease it until they were ready to undertake another renovation.

*“As we worked on the renovation, the biggest challenges were also the greatest opportunities, and those opportunities became the uniqueness of the building.”*

#### - Joni Harman, owner, Old Town Works

The space, which had most recently been used as an appliance show room, was chopped up into small, scattered display areas throughout the main area with an old garage on the far east portion.

“We got a call from our friend, Russ Plath, who wanted to move his law practice into the west side of the space,” Harman said.

Plath, who frequently represents injured and disabled people, knew the Old Town Works building would provide easy access

and convenient parking for his clients.

“My lease was up, and I felt this was a good location for my clients plus I could support ongoing renovations taking place in the neighborhood,” Plath said.

Jay Marschall, who owns Gym Jay, also had been looking for a downtown space for his new fitness center and contacted the Harmans about leasing the east end.

With Plath slated to move into the west side, and Marschall taking the east, the center of the building seemed ripe for a coffee shop-type business.

“Our son, Ben, who had been living in California attending culinary school came home, saw the space and said, ‘mom – that’s what I’ve always envisioned. It’s perfect for a restaurant.’”

Joni and Steve agreed, and changed the plans to include constructing The Fieldhouse Café in the center space, which Ben would own and manage.

With two tenants and the restaurant on deck, building renovation number two went into full swing.

#### A VISION REVEALED

Built around 1918, the Old Town Works building originally housed a hardware warehouse in the west half and an automotive garage and repair shop in the east

half. Over time, the building underwent multiple incarnations. By the time the Harmans purchased the building, the original brick was long covered up, the ceiling had been lowered and space usability was restricted by multiple interior walls and coverings.

Harman, who wanted to take back as much of the original character as possible, turned to Don Olsen with O2 Architects to lead the design efforts.

"The vision Don brought to this project was incredible," said Harman. "Don walked in and envisioned the view of the building from where he stood in the front all the way to the back. Once we opened up that space, we could see the historic character of the building start to emerge."

Harman's design team included Jeremiah Young with Kibler & Kirch and Susie Hoffmann with Envi

Design. She also hired Eric Hulteng with Hulteng, Inc. as the general contractor.

"Joni's insight and previous renovation experience played a key role in transforming the building into a downtown gem," Hulteng said.

The renovation, which began in May of 2011, took nine months and "a few detours" on the road to completion.

"Sometimes the design and construction needed to change mid-stream," Harman said. "As we worked on the renovation, the biggest challenges were also the greatest opportunities, and those opportunities became the uniqueness of the building."

One example of a mid-stream change was the addition of an angled, glass garage door installed on the east side of the restaurant.

"Don came up with the idea of installing a garage door at an angle, which freed up space to create a separate entry to Gym Jay's fitness center." The garage door was just one of many creative solutions.

#### DOWNTOWN CHARMER

Now fully renovated, Old Town Works has become a jewel in the city's Southside. Anchored by Plath's law firm on the west and Gym Jay to the east, The Fieldhouse Café, a certified green restaurant with a focus on local and organic food, is quickly gaining a following of fans.

For anyone dreaming of undertaking an historic renovation project, Harman has this advice. "Plan as thoroughly as you can, but be open to the possibilities and be willing to make changes along the way. It's all part of the fun."



The Fieldhouse Café occupies the center of the Old Town Works building.

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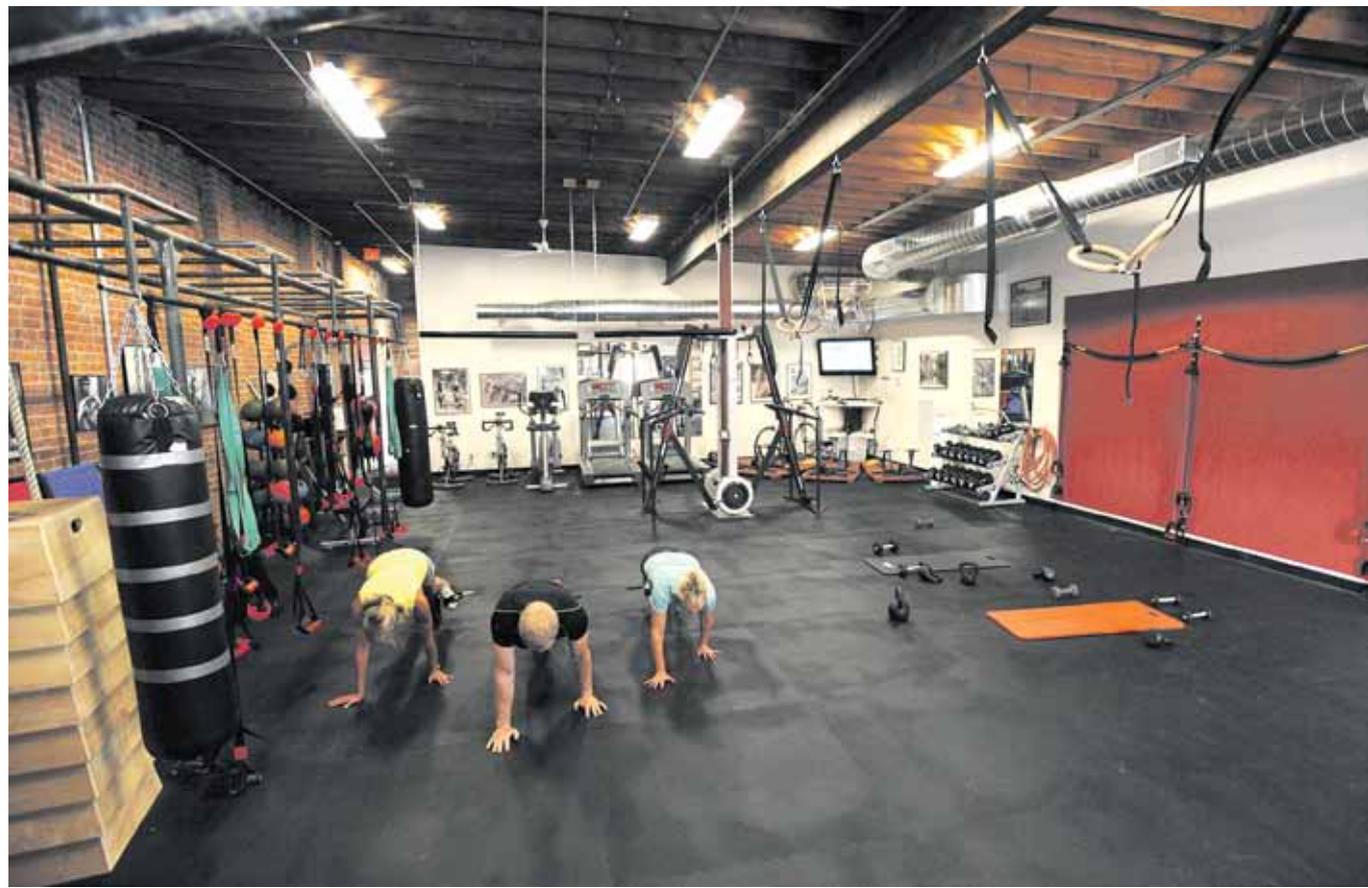


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Jay Marschall opened Gym Jay fitness center on the east end of the building.



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