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Fellow's investments pay off for Ypsilanti

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Communities are built and thrive from the work of individuals like Peter Rinehart.

The 42-year-old Ypsilanti resident, through his own business and volunteer work, is committed to making the city a better place. The Ann Arbor News is recognizing that work and vision by awarding Rinehart the 2007 Heritage Fellow Award, in conjunction with the annual Heritage Festival running today through Sunday.

The Ypsilanti downtown business district along Michigan Avenue was a sad stretch when Rinehart opened Bombadill's Coffee House there three years ago. Though the area continues to struggle, since then the cafe has become a popular meeting place, bringing together families, workers from local businesses, students and faculty from Eastern Michigan University and anyone who's looking for coffee, pastries, a wireless Internet connection or just good conversation.

But Rinehart hasn't limited his investments to his own business. He's put time and energy into several Ypsilanti organizations, and is chairman of the Downtown Development Authority. His wife, Lesley Chace, is former president of the Friends of the Ypsilanti Freighthouse - a group raising funds to rehab the historic Freighthouse in Depot Town - and is a board member for the organization.

Ypsilanti continues to battle a chronic budget shortfall, the exodus of some of its larger employers, and a harsh economic climate that mirrors the state's fiscal woes. More than ever, the city needs people like Rinehart to make a difference.

Running a coffee house - or any small business, for that matter - can be grueling. Six days each week, Rinehart starts work at 5:30 a.m. He wears many hats, and does it all while contributing to the broader Ypsilanti community through his volunteer work.

"You have to have the passion, the drive and stubbornness to do it," Rinehart told The News.

He does, and the Ypsilanti community is a better place because of it.

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