

# The Strength of KC's Spirit

These 10 organizations have flourished with their own brands of success to rise above the rest

STORY BY BRIAN D. SPANO | PHOTOS BY GARY ROHMAN

*There is a Norman Rockwell painting titled, "The Spirit of Kansas City." Commissioned in the early 1950s by Hallmark founder Joyce Hall after a devastating flood hit the city, it shows a man, larger than life, holding some blueprints while rolling up his sleeves as he looks off into the distance.*

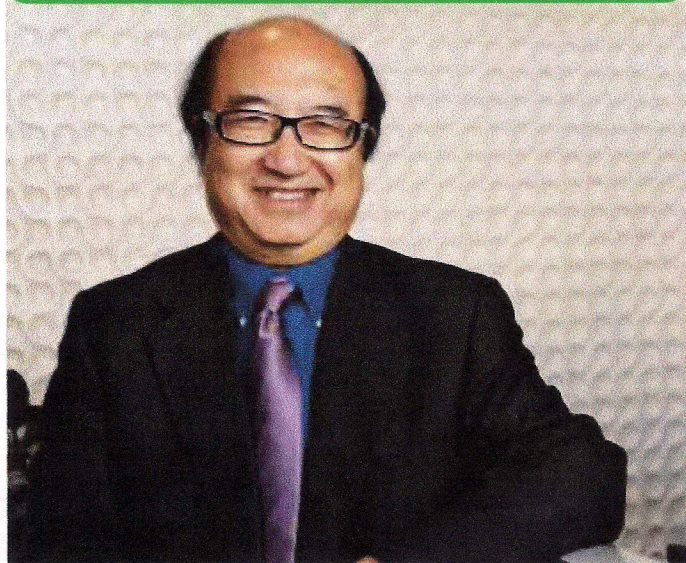
*Over the decades, it still has come to embody the strength, tenacity and entrepreneurial spirit evident in each of the 10 finalists profiled below for this year's Top Companies, along with their respective awards.*

*People are still the driving force that can inspire a business. Relationships are what make it flourish. And quality, from its product or service to its work environment to its staff, makes it succeed.*

## 2012 TOP COMPANIES NOMINEES

- |                            |                        |                          |
|----------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| ADAMS GABBERT              | FSC INC.               | MIRROR LIGHTING          |
| ALLURE LUXURY HOMES        | GAILS HARLEY DAVIDSON  | MWVA                     |
| ARSALON TECHNOLOGIES       | H2B ARCHITECTS         | NETSTANDARD              |
| AVILA UNIVERSITY           | HATHMORE TECHNOLOGIES  | PERCEPTIVE SOFTWARE      |
| BLOCK REAL ESTATE SERVICES | HIGH PERFORMANCE HOMES | PORTFOLIO KITCHEN & HOME |
| BURLAP                     | HOEFER WYSOCKI         | PWC                      |
| CAPITOL FEDERAL            | HOME RENTAL SERVICES   | REACTOR DESIGN           |
| CRB                        | IDD IN STORE DESIGN    | ROUND TABLE HOSPITALITY  |
| DAVISON ARCHITECTURE       | INTOUCH SOLUTIONS      | SANDLER TRAINING         |
| DURACOMM CORPORATION       | J-TEK                  | SEARCY FINANCIAL         |
| EA BRIDE                   | K-STATE OLATHE         | THE STILETTO GYM         |
| EVANS MEDIA GROUP          | LEVEL FIVE SOLUTIONS   | THINK CONTRACTING        |
| EXHALE TO EXCEL JEWELRY    | LMG CONSTRUCTION       | TRUMAN MEDICAL CENTER    |
| FIT MOM KANSAS CITY        | MEERS ADVERTISING      |                          |

### DIVERSITY DURACOMM CORPORATION



When Benny Lee assumed the leadership role of DuraComm Corporation at the start of 2011, the Taiwan native immediately began changing the culture of the company to better reflect his business values and beliefs. At first blush, outsiders may have seen this as a brash, arrogant move on his part, but Lee saw this as an opportunity to connect with his diverse group of employees.

"Our company is an international company," Lee says. "We have employees from China, Mexico, America, all over the world. It's a very interesting mix."

It is these different cultures that has made DuraComm, a source for AC-to-DC switch mode power supplies, power converters, battery management and charging systems, power distribution and wind power generators, a successful Kansas City business.

"I want to salute Kansas City," Lee says of the community. "The people have always welcomed the different cultures. People of different races bring a different culture to our company. For instance, we work hard, but sometimes, we need to learn the

tradition of the American spirit, which is also good for business, very straightforward, efficient and focused. I value the people and respect the people.”

Lee has created a culture at DuraComm over the past year and a half to the point that the employees feel it’s their own company. They care about their jobs and the growth of the business.

“I value the contributions that all of my team members bring to DuraComm,” Lee adds. “I credit much of the success we continue to have to their expertise, attention to detail and customer service abilities.”

## PHOENIX BLOCK REAL ESTATE SERVICES



Anyone who has tried to buy or sell a home, property or any type of real estate over the last several years has felt the effects of a tough economy. Block Real Estate Services was one company able to navigate those stormy seas and sail through to calmer waters, thanks in part to the foresight of several business decisions.

“I think a lot of people don’t understand when they operate a business, you either represent someone or something, but you have to be able to control your destiny in order to make sure your business doesn’t go out the window,” says Kenneth Block, managing principal for the firm. “What we’ve tried to do is become a vertically integrated company.”

What the leadership at BRES did was expand into another market: St. Louis. By doing so, the company was diversified beyond Kansas City, where it had a base of management and leasing activity. They created opportunities that included Block Maintenance Solutions, professionally trained personnel to serve the needs of buildings

and tenants; Strategic Advisory Services, assisting banks, lenders and owners of distressed properties; Block Healthcare Services, underwriting acquisitions, securing the industry’s lowest lending rates, while bringing strong financial offerings to clients; and Block Technology Solutions, providing consultation, planning and installation for voice, data and security systems.

Another service that recently began for the company because of the structural change of how people look at the housing industry is Block Multifamily Group. It provides full-service multifamily management in a wide range of geographic areas to a wide range of assets.

“If we’re successful and someone is acknowledging our success, it’s because we’ve done something good for the people we work for,” Block says. “Every success we have is based upon the fact that we are trying to give our clients, tenants, prospects and customers the very best care.”

## ORIGINALITY HOME RENTAL SERVICES



If a family must relocate to Kansas City because of a job and needs to find a home to rent comparable to the one they are already living in, a quick search online might lead them to Kandy Meehan and her business, Home Rental Services.

Meehan helps take the stress out of having to transfer to another city by finding a home that makes the family feel comfortable.

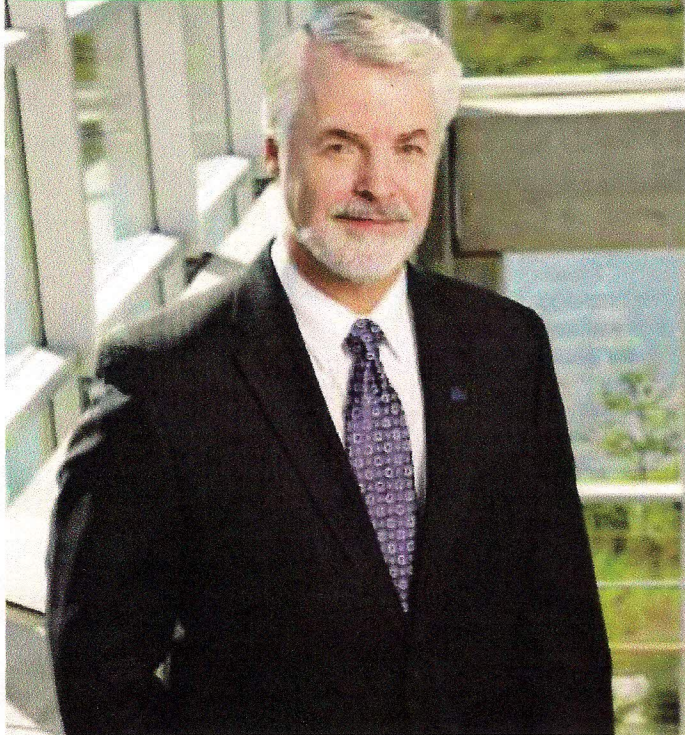
“It used to be the husband would get transferred, he would start work, the wife would start packing boxes, put the house up for sale, the house would sell, the wife and kids would come, and they

would buy a new house in a new city,” Meehan says. “That doesn’t happen anymore. Everybody comes because they can’t get their house sold where they’re coming from, or they could sell it, but they don’t have enough equity to buy another house, or they don’t have confidence in the market that if something were to go wrong with their position here, they want to be able to go back.”

What makes Home Rental Services unique is that the homes Meehan rents are toward the higher end of the market. The houses aren’t furnished, and her typical client is a husband, wife, two or three kids with a pet moving from really anywhere in the world. She says she has many doctors as clients.

As the economy has faltered over the past several years, business has been booming for Meehan. The company has doubled in size in the past two years because, she says, she has seen a change in mindset from her clients as more and more are renting rather than buying houses.

### INNOVATOR KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY-OLATHE



Kansas State University–Olathe has branded itself as the Innovation Campus. Its origin was innovative itself.

First, it was a land grant from the city of Olathe, and second, it was a 1/8-cent sales tax passed by Johnson County taxpayers was the first sales tax passed in the country to fund a higher education initiative.

“We couldn’t have built this campus without that innovative approach to funding through the Johnson County Education Research Triangle Initiative,” says CEO Dan Richardson. “That was the first

step, or we wouldn’t be talking about the rest. The land grant is unique in that we are a land grant university and we were able to obtain a second one from the city of Olathe. It’s not quite as big as the initial land grant for K-State University Manhattan, but it was for an extension of the campus.”

K-State has chosen to focus its core strengths on animal health and food safety and food production, as well as other aspects of agriculture and engineering.

“We are now in the heart of the animal health corridor, which strengthens the corridor and gets more accessibility to K-State’s resources,” Richardson says.

In addition to the animal health and food safety research, there also is the Urban Water Institute, which will research and improve the quality of the area’s greatest natural resource.

All the work they are doing on campus is interdisciplinary. It’s not viewed as a college or even departmental, which allows them to get all the right people in the room who need to be there, not just someone specialized in one area.

### REINVENTION MEERS ADVERTISING



In 2008, Sam Meers took a step back and looked at his company. The decision whether to sell, close or reinvent stared him directly in the eye.

“We hit a tipping point where we had a client owe us almost \$200,000,” says Meers of that career-changing moment. “We were maxed out on our line of credit, and we had two bad months in a row. So, we made the decision to reinvent. It wasn’t

like a bolt of lightning hit. It was several things that conspired to help us realize we could reinvent.”

Meers and his staff developed a mobile program for Blue Cross Blue Shield of Kansas City that allowed people to get instant health insurance quotes on their mobile devices.

That sparked a recurring revenue stream and gave them the capability to start hiring more senior people as well as go after bigger clients.

“It really helped us go from a traditional brand agency to a digital marketing and advertising agency,” Meers says. “That’s really how we did it.”

Because Meers took a chance to completely revamp the way he does business, he offers this bit of advice to clients and potential clients: “I think they should not be afraid to make a hard right turn. They get so stuck in what they’ve always done or in copying or echoing what their competitors have done that they don’t take the time to ask a different question, and that’s what we help them do. A great question beats a great answer, and we’re going to help them ask a different question.”

### EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT TRUMAN MEDICAL CENTERS



Over the past several years, Truman Medical Centers has been setting the standard in the metro and beyond for providing an innovative and creative environment for its employees.

By doing so, TMC has seen employees become happier at their jobs, which in turn ensures patients receive better care. Take, for instance, that only nonsmokers are hired to work at Truman

Medical Centers. That policy has led the organization to set an example by its employees for a healthy living lifestyle.

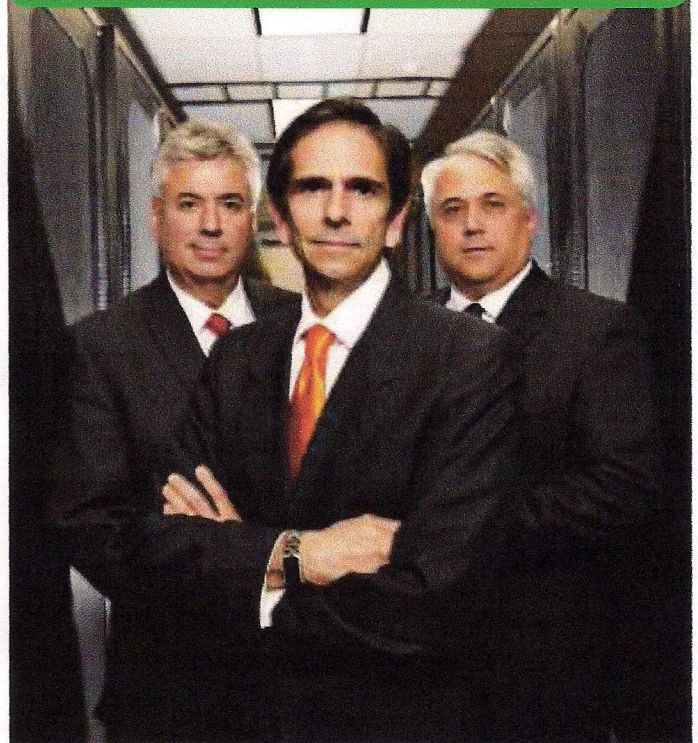
“That’s what our whole wellness program is about,” says Truman Medical Centers CEO John Bluford. “We want to lead the community to a healthy state, and the best way to do that is to start with our own employees.”

There are two popular programs employees have found beneficial. The first is paid time off for fitness that allows for the conversion of up to \$2,400 annually for those with excess vacation time who want to cash that in for fitness-related activity. The second is the farmers market on campus every Wednesday. Some 500-plus customers purchase anywhere from 3,000 to 4,000 pounds of fruits and vegetables each week.

“Our intent here is to address every detail that is consistent with the positive brand we are trying to create that will help foster better clerical outcomes and better customer satisfaction,” Bluford says.

The measurement of success is not necessarily in the positive or negative feedback Bluford and his staff receives but through the clinical outcomes and the retention rate of employees. And though Bluford says there is always room for improvement, by those objective measures, Truman Medical Centers has been doing quite well.

### COMMUNITY STEWARD NETSTANDARD



There is an abundance of information technology jobs available in the Kansas City area, but unfortunately, there isn’t enough talent to fill those positions. NetStandard CEO Jeff Melcher is on a mission to solve that problem with FiberKC, a community

initiative focused on cultivating Kansas City's workforce talent through education.

"There are more than 8,000 open IT positions in the metro," Melcher says. "That's a real issue. If we can't find talent, that becomes a limiting factor to growth. We thought, 'Let's refocus our efforts around workforce development and education.' If we are able to have an impact around that, that's going to be the biggest and most substantial thing we could do to expand this economy here."

NetStandard provides businesses with strategic information technology solutions; however, if it weren't for Melcher's FiberKC initiative, companies like NetStandard wouldn't be able to provide these services.

At a recent event that consisted of educators from school districts K-12, higher education tech schools, major universities, employers, students and parents, the discussion centered on exploring the gap between technology careers and educational output.

"We want to grow our businesses and be prosperous, and this is just one thing that if we succeed, it will be good for us as an industry and for the community as a whole," Melcher says.

Melcher wants FiberKC to make an impact without having to rely on government grants or other funding sources, especially taxpayer money. Melcher makes sure FiberKC is business-driven to work effectively.

Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!" The unmistakable Gail Worth of Gail's Harley Davidson has made her mark creating a fun, almost party-like atmosphere at her dealership at the intersection of Highways 71 and 150 in Grandview. And she would have it no other way.

"I want it to be fun when you walk through our doors, but I also like to give back to charity, and I do so much through charity work," Worth says. "I want to give back to the city because I wouldn't be here without the city and without the help of everyone else. That's why I do so much charity work. We are a Disneyland for motorcyclists, so we want to make it fun and interesting."

Everything from the "Feel the Power Happy Hour" every Wednesday to the Wayside Waifs Putt for Mutts benefit ride to the 9-11 Tribute Ride and Rally, there is an event or ride nearly every week at Gail's. She and her staff make sure motorcycle enthusiasts have a place to go for fun or simply to hang out.

What makes the atmosphere even more inviting is that you don't have to ride a Harley to participate in any of these events. In fact, you don't even have to ride a bike.

"I'm doing my thing and touching people," Worth says. "I try to meet every person who buys a motorcycle. It's amazing how many people when they are getting ready to leave will say this was the coolest experience they've ever had. It's so neat to hear that."

#### CORPORATE COOL GAIL'S HARLEY DAVIDSON



Most people have heard the radio spots with the tagline and that infectious laugh, "Where every day is an excuse to have fun.

#### GROWTH PERCEPTIVE SOFTWARE



Even in a down economy, Perceptive Software continues to chug along. There was the 2010 acquisition by Lexmark International with the stated objective of helping the company grow on a global

scale. Then, last year, through acquisition, Perceptive Software added four companies and nearly doubled its human capital, adding more than 100 positions locally and reaching nearly 1,200 employees worldwide. It also has expanded its product offerings into new markets.

The company's revenue was up 40 percent year over year in the first quarter of 2012 and continues to outpace the industry. The success can be attributed to Perceptive Software's heavily continued investment in R&D and research opportunities for growth.

Within the past year, Perceptive Software expanded its offering to encompass business process management software and solutions that help streamline business operations in a variety of industries. The software and solutions have been integrated with more than 500 business applications.

According to the company, employees have always been Perceptive Software's intellectual capital and among its most important assets. The company has grown so quickly that finding the best people to help continue that growth has been an ongoing challenge, but its unique company culture has helped them overcome that obstacle, evidenced by its high employee retention rate.

With its introduction to new avenues for growth, Perceptive Software now serves as a stand-alone software company within Lexmark International.

Headquartered in Shawnee, the company has offices in the UK, France, Spain, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Australia, Brazil, Singapore and other countries.

There was a reason Geri Higgins, a Northeast transplant, wanted Portfolio Kitchen & Home located in the Pershing Building across from the iconic Union Station. It was a commitment to celebrate and repurpose the historic Pershing Building and be an active part in the synergy of Kansas City's vibrant design district and revitalized urban core.

"All of us at Portfolio are inspired on a daily basis with the fantastic panoramic view of Kansas City's beautiful skyline that we enjoy from the front windows of our Flagship Store," Higgins says.

The uniqueness of the business is its versatility to mesh any of its design work with any neighborhood in the city. Clients can range from the young family updating its Brookside bungalow to the suburban homeowner getting a dream kitchen to the executive power couple remodeling their luxury Plaza condo.

"It's an adventure we take together to ultimately create an expression of their personal aesthetic and lifestyle," says Higgins.

The goal for the business was to create an elevated and sophisticated environment and client experience not previously found outside of New York, Chicago or Los Angeles, while still capturing the heart, soul and essence of Kansas City.

Portfolio Kitchen & Home is striving to build its reputation as a leader in design and lifestyle by consistently communicating, embracing and elevating the Midwest lifestyle.

"We are very proud to translate our clients' life expression of both Portfolio and the community that has embraced and supported it," Higgins says. **KCB**

## LIFESTYLE PORTFOLIO KITCHEN & HOME



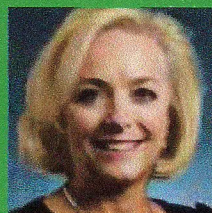
## MEET OUR JUDGES



ADAM BROWN  
OWNER  
VOSS VISUALS



BARBARA MILLARD  
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR  
JCCC



MICHELE MARKEY  
VICE PRESIDENT  
KAUFFMAN FASTTRAC



ERIC MORGENSTERN  
PRESIDENT AND CEO  
MORNINGSTAR COMMUNICATIONS