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Matt Llewellyn at 23rd Street Brewery

Once a Lawrencian, Always a Lawrencian

From Sin City back to Larryville, this local brewery owner worked his way back home, where he always knew he'd end up.

by Bob Luder, photos by Steven Hertzog and contributed by Matt Llewellyn

Spend any time at all with Matt Llewellyn, and it doesn't take long to realize this is a man who loves life, family and the Lawrence community, which formed the man he is today.

Colorful stories of growing up a huge fan of Lawrence High School (LHS) and The University of Kansas (KU) sports flow easily, most filled with laughter and joyful reflection. It becomes abundantly clear that this is a guy who loves a good adventure and sharing that adventure with his closest friends, which with the way he regards his fellow humans, includes just about everyone.

In fact, you don't even have to meet Llewellyn to see where his devotions lie. Just take a step into the 23rd Street Brewery, the establishment he's owned the last 22 years and one of Lawrence's most popular gathering spots, and that love of Lawrence and KU sports fills the walls in the form of memorabilia and tributes to great athletes and athletic accomplishments, both past and present.

Even when work took him halfway across the country, Lawrence was never far from his mind or heart. The pull of home always was there, and he always knew he'd be back.

"Being back in Lawrence, my network of friends just exploded, especially owning a brewery/restaurant where people are always popping in," Llewellyn says. "I love talking to people in here. I really enjoy talking to people who knew my mom.

"That's what you get in Lawrence," he adds.




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Llewellyn's loyalty to his hometown was ingrained practically from birth. His parents moved to Lawrence in 1955 and, at one time, owned a home originally built and lived in by James Naismith, the inventor of basketball and a former KU hoops coach, which sat at 1700 Mississippi, two blocks from Lawrence High School. Two of his four siblings still live here, and the other two visit frequently. All remain loyal to LHS and KU.

Over the years, Llewellyn has carried his civic zeal and dedication beyond his business, serving on the board of directors with the Lawrence chapter of the Boys and Girls Club and The Chamber of Commerce, and volunteering time and resources with Kiwanis Club, his church and, through his business, catering events for KU.

It's been a life full of journeys and adventures for Llewellyn, but throughout his travels—which took him to Nevada and elsewhere—he says he always knew where he'd end up. "Once a Lawrencian, always a Lawrencian" could, and probably should be, this man's creed.

A Life of Sports

Llewellyn's love of Lawrence took root early in his childhood, and that love manifested itself through local sports—be it youth athletic events at Centennial Elementary School, Central Junior High, Lawrence High or KU. Llewellyn was enamored with it all.

"Starting from Centennial grade school, I always wanted to be good at all sports, even though I wasn't very good at any of them," Llewellyn says.

He laughingly remembers Nanny Duver, a local icon and favorite junior high gym teacher and coach, who, while being one of Llewellyn's greatest role models as an adolescent, also happened to be a lead character in one of his more embarrassing moments.

"I always wanted to impress him," Llewellyn says of Duver. "I always ran full steam in practice, because I wanted to make sure he saw my effort.

"Well, one day I was running full blast and ran full blast right into him," he continues. "I went Charlie Brown, bouncing off him and full on the ground. I remember, (Duver) looked at me and said, 'I didn't hurt you, did I, Mary?'"

At Lawrence High, Llewellyn continued his support for the Lions' athletic teams by serving as team mascot. If there was a sporting event taking place at the school over those four years, chances are Llewellyn was there cheering on his teams.

Later in his life, he worked in the broadcast booth for LHS games with local broadcasting legend Hank Booth.

After graduating from Lawrence High in 1984, Llewellyn enrolled at KU and continued his pursuit of sports by joining the university's rugby club. But after one school year—much of it spent with his rugby teammates at the original Johnny's Tavern—"they asked me to leave," he says.

Little did Llewellyn know then that the rejection would lead to a great adventure that eventually would circle him back to where he is today.



Top to bottom:
Matt Llewellyn and his stepson Micah after a big LHS win over rival FreeState
Brian Hanni, Heather and Matt Llewellyn on KU baseball trip, celebrating at Festavile in Fort Worth Texas
Matt with Kim Murphree announcing at the Lawrence Old Fashioned Christmas Parade

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Matt Llewellyn on the air at KLWN

Working His Way Back Home

Llewellyn had built a strong reputation in Las Vegas as an ambitious go-getter who could get things done. As that reputation grew, job offers poured in. He says it wasn't a difficult decision to take one that got him closer to home. He accepted a job working for The Old Spaghetti Factory restaurant franchise, first locating in Denver then Kansas City. That and two other restaurant companies led to a management position with the Old Chicago pizza chain, where he worked for the next 10 years in Wichita and Kansas City.

It was during his stint in Wichita that Llewellyn experienced one of his most "infamous" moments. He was chosen as the ceremonial "baby" of a local festival, a duty that included his dressing "down" in a diaper and pacifier, and posing for a portrait that ran on the front page of the Wichita Eagle newspaper.

"It sounded like fun at the time," he says. "So I just went with it."

Though he enjoyed Wichita and his time at Old Chicago, Llewellyn says he could sense the lure of returning home intensifying. That opportunity presented itself in a golden way in 2003, when he received an opportunity to partner with KC Hopps and take over a struggling 75th Street Brewery, in West Lawrence, at the corner of Clinton Parkway and Kasold Drive.

"After 10 years with Old Chicago, a sale to a larger corporation and stock option maturation, that gave me some money to partner with KC Hopps to run 75th Street Brewery," he says. "After six months, KC Hopps wanted to sell to me. So I rounded up some local investors and took on some debt, and was able to buy the restaurant and change the name to something that made more sense—23rd Street Brewery."

As managing partner of the brewery, Llewellyn knew the importance of being involved and connected to the community.

"I had heard Hank Booth all my life on KLWN 1320, and I loved this fledgling sports radio show called 'Rock Chalk Sports Talk,' with Brian Hanni," he says. "I knew I needed to get involved with these guys, so I advertised with the station, put Hank Booth on the menu and gave food to the sport talk guys."

Llewellyn also met Sue and Al Hack, who became mentors and two of his closest friends.

"Sue and Al know everyone," he says. "Al's a lifelong Lawrencean with involvement in the business community. Sue is a former teacher, mayor and head of Leadership Lawrence, and helped me tremendously."

That relationship eventually led to Llewellyn spending Friday nights broadcasting Chesty Lions football games, along with a weekly spot on KLWN Thursday mornings talking about local issues. His relationship with Hanni also led to various trips to out-of-town Jayhawks games with local basketball stars like Scot Pollard and Bud Stallworth. To this day, Llewellyn and Hanni take at least two sports or guys trips every year.

"Those relationships made me realize that maybe it wasn't the best idea to be on the front page of the paper with just a diaper on," Llewellyn says.

He commuted for more than a decade while raising his family in Olathe before finally moving home to Lawrence for good in 2017.

Runnin' With the Rebs

Following his departure from KU, Llewellyn was working as a pizza delivery guy when a friend mentioned he was getting ready to go work at a casino in Lake Tahoe, Nevada, and could probably hook him up with a summer job. He jumped at the opportunity, and it wasn't long before he was made a supervisor despite only being 20 at the time.

Even though he enjoyed almost immediate success at Harrah's and was loving life at one of America's premier resorts, Llewellyn knew that to advance further, he would need to go back to school. An easy choice at the time was the William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration, at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). This was the late 1980s, approaching 1990, which was an exciting time to be a student at UNLV because the Runnin' Rebels men's basketball team, led by legendary coach Jerry Tarkanian, was one of the hottest sports tickets in the entire country.

Things got even more exciting when Llewellyn was appointed social director for the school's hotel association.

"We had front-row seats to every UNLV home game the year we won the championship in 1990," Llewellyn explains. "I was put in charge of student tickets for the 1990-91 season. We gave away a couple thousand tickets per game."

All student organizations had to go through Llewellyn to get tickets, and he and his buddies were constantly surrounded by celebrities such as MC Hammer, Wayne Newton and tennis great Andre Agassi.

"It was an incredible experience," he says. "However, those games were nothing like being in Allen Fieldhouse."

The young, happy-go-lucky entrepreneur was riding high in Sin City. At the same time, however, he was always cognizant that such a lifestyle couldn't last forever.

At some point, he'd have to grow up.

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Matt Llewellyn - first job after leaving Lawrence (age 20) Harrah's in Lake Tahoe



Matt preparing himself for TRANSFORMATIONS



Matt was the Chilenium Baby for the Wichita Chamber

Home Sweet Home

Over the last 22 years, 23rd Street Brewery has grown into one of Lawrence's top gathering spots to enjoy time with friends, watch a ballgame and eat a top-notch meal. At the center of it all has been Llewellyn, who not only captained that ship but is one of Lawrence's greatest and most effective civic cheerleaders and public servants.

He also can't think of anyplace he'd rather play his most important role, as husband to wife of six years, Heather, and dad to a blended family of five children ranging in age from 17 to 30.

"This is just a great place," he says. "It's like a small town. Everyone knows each other. This town just has some things you don't get anywhere else. There's no place I'd rather be." ▲

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