

Colby



Colby Magazine

---

Volume 105  
Issue 2 *Winter/Spring 2017*

Article 7

---

April 2017

## Jump Start: Colby-Led Collaboration is Revitalizing Waterville's Main Street and Shaping the City and the College for the Future

Gerry Boyle  
*Colby College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine>

---

### Recommended Citation

Boyle, Gerry (2017) "Jump Start: Colby-Led Collaboration is Revitalizing Waterville's Main Street and Shaping the City and the College for the Future," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 105 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol105/iss2/7>

This Feature is brought to you for free and open access by the Colby College Archives at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Magazine by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

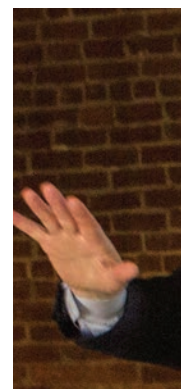
# JUMPSTART

COLBY-LED COLLABORATION IS REVITALIZING WATVERVILLE'S MAIN STREET AND SHAPING THE CITY AND THE COLLEGE FOR THE FUTURE

By Gerry Boyle '78

Photography by Dennis Griggs and courtesy of Waterville Historical Society

Architectural renderings courtesy of Ayers Saint Gross and Beyer Blinder Belle



*From the bustling 1940s (in postcard at left) to an architect's rendering of the mixed-use development complex (opposite page, top), Waterville's Main Street has seen changes that reflect evolving local industry and commerce. The downtown revitalization that is now underway, spearheaded by President David A. Greene (opposite page, bottom), will accentuate the character and architecture of the city, including the historic 173 Main St. building (above and opposite), soon to be the Maine headquarters for CGI, a global technology company. Renderings are conceptual.*



**Businessman Charlie Giguere has always been optimistic about the future of downtown Waterville. So optimistic that he's literally bet on that optimism, purchasing and renovating several Main Street properties, including Silver Street Tavern.**

But bullish on the city as he is, Giguere, a Waterville native whose father ran a downtown supermarket, didn't imagine he'd see the city's historic core infused with as much as \$50 million, as Colby, the Harold Alford Foundation, and other private investors join to lift the downtown from its economic malaise. "I never thought I'd see this in my lifetime," Giguere said. "It's like Waterville won the lottery."

The winning revitalization "ticket" has dramatically changed the prospects for the downtown, the city, and the region. Colby and the Alford Foundation pledged \$10 million each as Colby purchased five downtown properties, announced plans for a Main Street hotel and mixed-use development, including student apartments, and began renovations of a building that will house a regional center for CGI, a tech company planning to provide 200 jobs.

It's a bold plan, spearheaded by President David A. Greene and endorsed by the Board of Trustees. Progress is visible and change is coming, with the CGI building undergoing extensive renovations and expected to be occupied this summer, and the hotel and mixed-use development underway expected to open in 2018.



## A WATERVILLE LANDMARK WILL BE REMEMBERED

When a Colby-owned hotel opens on Main Street next year, it will have big shoes to fill. Four of them, to be exact.

The hotel will be built on the site of the former Levine's department store, a Waterville landmark almost as iconic as its late owners, Colby alumni Lewis "Ludy" Levine (Class of 1921, L.H.D. '95) and Percy "Pacy" Levine (Class of 1927, L.H.D. '95).

Brian Clark, Colby's vice president of planning, said the College and the developers of the hotel, The Olympia Companies of Portland, Maine, are mindful of the legacy of the Levine brothers both at Colby and in Waterville. "That relationship," he said, "will be recognized in the hotel."


It is a storied past.

Levine's was founded in 1891 by William Levine, father of Ludy and Pacy, a Polish immigrant who once sold clothing from a horse-drawn wagon. The store became a Colby annex of sorts as the brothers outfitted countless students on credit, honored the College in a section called Colby Corner, and were fixtures for decades at Colby athletic events. "If you came in and you were from Colby you were golden," said Joyce Joseph, a longtime clerk at the store.

The Levines hired Colby students to work during school breaks and opened charge accounts for students on the honor system ("I don't think they ever got hurt by it," Joseph said.) Colbians were part of a clientele that came from Portland, Bangor, and beyond to shop at the Main Street store.

Former basketball coach Dick "Whit" Whitmore spent hours with the brothers at Colby athletic events. Whitmore recalled them arriving on campus in their customary Cadillac for every football game, taking their seats in the press box. "They'd start there, and by the time the first period ended Pacy would be down on the field," said Whitmore, then also an assistant football coach. "By the time the second period ended, Ludy would be down on the field. ... I had to put one guy in charge of Pacy and Ludy on the sidelines so they wouldn't interrupt the coaching staff. They were terrific."

—Gerry Boyle '78

For a remembrance of Levine's and its proprietors by  
College Historian Emeritus Earl Smith, go to [colby.edu/mag](http://colby.edu/mag) 

"Three years from now I want to feel a very significant change on Main Street," Greene said. "Five years from now I want it to be thriving. Ten years from now I want it to be an economically sustainable street, where the market can take over and support commercial activity.

"I think this has to be the way Colby moves forward in the world," he said. "It's been part of Colby's past, it's not new."

Colby has been involved with the local community since the 19th century, when theological students preached at area churches and Colby-educated teachers staffed one-room schoolhouses. In more recent memory, under President William R. Cotter, the College subsidized The Center, a downtown community retail and nonprofit hub. Under President William D. Adams, Colby was a major supporter of the arts in Waterville, including Railroad Square Cinema and the Maine Film Center. And the College's emphasis on civic engagement saw students spend 43,000 hours engaging with nonprofits, city agencies, and schools last year alone.

Soon that interaction will be ramped up, with the Main Street complex focused on community engagement. "I think it's going to be a tremendous opportunity for the downtown to benefit in a daily way from the presence of students," said Associate Professor of Anthropology Winifred Tate, who serves on the College's civic engagement working group and is a Waterville city councilor, "and for Colby students to really be enmeshed in daily life downtown, to see the tremendous richness that exists" in Waterville.

"There's a lot of buzz" around the downtown projects and the Main Street housing, said Chandler Smith '18, a social justice independent major who serves on the working group now developing a strategic plan for civic engagement at Colby. Ongoing engagement opportunities like Colby Cares About Kids, a thriving mentoring program, will expand—and have a downtown space with which to identify, Smith said.

His only regret, he said, is that he won't be able to live in the downtown residence. "I'll be gone, unfortunately," Smith said. "I'm a little jealous."

This new level of partnership, with civic engagement across the curriculum, is Colby's responsibility, Greene says—to a community that stepped up financially for Colby more than once, to the College itself as it looks to thrive in an increasingly competitive market, and to students who are shaped by their four years at Colby.

"We have to be very tuned into the issues of how we're preparing students for professional success or graduate student success," he said. "But we have to be equally concerned about what kind of students we're sending off into the world. How will they lead? And what values will they carry with them from their experiences at Colby? ... Do we want them living in their own walled-off parts of the world or do we want them to be fully engaged members of society?"

Greene's belief that the College has a responsibility to help produce "an educated citizenry" wasn't the only thing on his mind when he visited downtown Waterville for the first time in 2014. "I was by myself," he said, "and I parked on Main Street, and I looked around and I thought, 'This is a downtown that has great bones.'"

But those bones were masked by decades of neglect as the downtown struggled in recent decades. The city has lost most of what had been its manufacturing base and thousands of jobs. Waterville's population drained at the same time, from more than 18,000 in 1970 to less than 16,000 today. Businesses along Main Street closed, and despite decades-long revitalization efforts, the



“Three years from now I want to feel a very significant change on Main Street. Five years from now I want it to be thriving. Ten years from now I want it to be an economically sustainable street, where the market can take over and support commercial activity.”

—President David A. Greene

prospects for a major turnaround were slim. "We all love Waterville, but loving it isn't quite enough," said Karen Heck '74.

As mayor from 2012 to 2014, Heck—cofounder of Hardy Girls Healthy Women, past president of the Waterville Rotary Club, and a member of the board of the organization Waterville Main Street—oversaw improvements to the city airport and was an enthusiastic supporter of city arts organizations. But her vision for the city was stymied by economic reality. "We had plans, we had ideas," she said. "It always came down to 'Where is the money?'"

Greene, who met with Heck on his first day on the job, agrees. The only thing that would turn the city around, he realized, was "significant economic intervention." That, Greene said, "is when you see transformative change."

It wasn't much of a leap for the new Colby president to picture people working and living in the historic downtown blocks and patronizing shops and cafés—including customers from new downtown Colby student and faculty apartments and a Main Street hotel. Greene had overseen the

revitalization of Chicago's Hyde Park while at the University of Chicago, playing a key role in the resurgence of what had become a depressed part of the city.

That project included constructing an office tower and hotel, renovating an historic movie theater, and opening an innovation center to link entrepreneurs with the ongoing

science and technology research at the university. An area that once couldn't support a supermarket soon had retail anchors like Target and Whole Foods, restaurants, and a vibrant, diverse culture.

The project's scale was many times bigger than Waterville's but "it's incredibly similar to what we're doing here," said Brian Clark, vice president of planning at Colby, who worked with Greene on the Chicago revitalization. Clark saw Waterville as a city with assets completely outsized for its small population, including three colleges, two hospitals, terrific community arts programming, the world-class Colby College Museum of Art, and an active and determined business community—all in a city of 16,000.

In a series of planning sessions, community members, including business and civic leaders, developed a plan to transform the downtown. "That's the goal," Clark said, "not to do it all ourselves, but to create an ecosystem where people want to be involved and engaged and be successful."

That has happened, though some city residents point out that Colby, competing with other elite colleges, has a vested interest in a strong downtown. Others say, so what? "We're very fortunate to have Colby as a partner, whether it's in their best interest or not," said Bill Mitchell, whose century-old insurance business is headquartered on Main Street. "We all win. This is definitely a win-win scenario."

Mitchell, who has business holdings around the state and recently bought and renovated a historic building on Castonguay Square, sees the current downtown investment as having an impact on Waterville for the next 50 to 100 years. It's not surprising that he sees the developments in historical terms. Mitchell's father and business partner, Paul Mitchell, directed federal urban renewal in Waterville in the 1960s,

*An artist's rendering of Castonguay Square (above), the new home of the Waterville Farmers' Market.*

which created the Concourse, a downtown shopping plaza with parking. (A fraction of the 600-space parking lot will be the location of Colby's mixed-use development.)

Waterville has endured economic hard times since urban renewal, but many with deep roots in the community persevered. "Here we are, still here now in this critical time when really good things are going to happen," Mitchell said.

And they are happening, including the announcement that the Montreal-based tech company, CGI, through its acquisition of Collaborative Consulting, planned to fill Colby's soon-to-be-renovated downtown offices with more than 200 good-paying jobs. "I don't think it's completely appreciated just yet," said City Manager Mike Roy '74, "but Colby's role in getting Collaborative Consulting to Waterville is just as big as any of the investments they plan to make."

Former Collaborative Consulting CEO William Robichaud said in 2015 that it was Greene's persuasiveness that led the company to choose Waterville for its expansion in Maine. "The man wouldn't take no for an answer," he said. Colby pledged to assist with the company's start-up costs, but company officials were also convinced by Greene's enthusiastic boosting of Waterville as a place to live and work. "This city has so much to offer," he said.

That's not news to those who live here, including Mirken Director of Academic and Public Programs at the Colby College Museum of Art Lauren Lessing, a recently elected city councilor.

Lessing arrived with her family to find the kind of life she knew growing up in Indiana. "We were free range," she said. "We knew one another, cared for one another."

She and her husband, a Waterville schoolteacher, embraced the lifestyle in Waterville and lauds the plan for Colby apartments on Main Street to allow students to fully experience central Maine. She is also quick to acknowledge the city's need for an economic jumpstart. "We need small businesses and medium businesses," Lessing said. "It's all a matrix and it's all interlinked."

And Lessing, who, while working at the Art Institute of Chicago saw the Hyde Park redo firsthand, thinks Waterville will be another success. "I've seen how it happens, and David Greene coming from [Chicago] and immediately starting to build the same kind of infrastructure here," she said. "I had been saying for years, 'We need some jet fuel.'"

Momentum is building, said Paul Ureneck, who was hired as Colby's first director of commercial real estate, charged with overseeing the downtown projects. Ureneck, a veteran developer in much of the revitalization of Portland, Maine, said that the commercial real estate market is being priced out in Southern Maine and investors are looking for the next opportunity. He points them to Waterville.

"They say, 'You know it's funny you say that because we've been hearing more and more about what's going on up in Waterville,'" Ureneck said. "Word is getting out."

“Colby’s role in getting Collaborative Consulting to Waterville is just as big as any of the investments they plan to make.”

—City Manager Mike Roy '74



Indeed, it is. A Massachusetts businessman bought property on Main Street with plans for a nightclub after reading newspaper reports about Colby's efforts. Justin DePre '06, who lives in Portland, said that in light of Greene's track record in Chicago he began looking at downtown properties. Now he and his family are redeveloping two historic buildings next to the CGI offices. "With everything that Colby and the Alfond's are doing, it made any type of investment in this area attractive," DePre said.

Matt Hancock '90, P'19, another Maine developer, bought property on Temple Street, which he is now renovating. He said he was influenced by the strong reputations of Colby and the Alfond Foundation, but just as much by the attitude of Main Street shop owners,

That excitement will be reflected in new things to do in Waterville. Plans are underway for a downtown Colby College Museum of Art contemporary gallery. The CGI building and the student apartment/mixed-use development



**“With everything that Colby and the Alfond's are doing, it made any type of investment in this area attractive.”**  
 —Investor Justin DePre '06

will have retail space on the ground floor. The hotel on the Levine's site will have a public restaurant and bar. One new restaurant has opened and others are in the works.

Some of the excitement is tempered by caution. A few downtown merchants have voiced concern over reduced parking, concerns that were addressed by a downtown traffic consultant hired to assess the plan. (A study is ongoing.)

Bobby McGee, owner of Selah Tea, said at first glance he was thrilled to learn his café would be located next to the CGI offices and across from the new Colby apartment complex. But will the resurgent downtown lure more competition? How would loss of adjacent parking to the residence hall affect his drop-in customers? "I go from the amazing awesomeness of having so many more people downtown to becoming more of a realist and thinking critically and asking, 'How can we make this work?'" McGee said. "I'm just one little guy on his little corner, excited about the changes—but I want to be able to plan for them at the same time."

Those types of concerns have helped shape the downtown plans, said Mayor Nick Isgro, a Waterville native and local banker who said he feels "an incredible sense of optimism" in the city. "Everywhere you go, I think people really feel for the first time in a long time like we're on the upswing and that our best days are ahead.

"The stars are really aligned around Waterville right now," Isgro said. "Never in my wildest dreams ..." ©

*Above, an architect's rendering of the student apartment/mixed-use development to be constructed on Main Street; left, detail and plans for renovation of 173 Main St., above left, Rep. Chellie Pingree, D-Maine, speaks in Waterville at the announcement of an Alfond Foundation program to reduce or eliminate student loan debt of STEM workers in Maine.*

who have persevered through hard times and now see their big break coming. "It was like, 'We've stuck it out, we're in for this, it's gonna be great,'" Hancock said.

Agreed, said developer Paul Boghossian '76, P'12, whose purchase of the Hathaway shirt factory in 2006 was the first major investment in the downtown in decades. He proved doubters wrong as he converted the riverfront property into a housing and office complex where 550 people now live and work. Boghossian in February completed the sale of the Hathaway to a developer with extensive properties in southern Maine. "Word is starting to get out," he said. "There's definitely an excitement here that wasn't here before."

