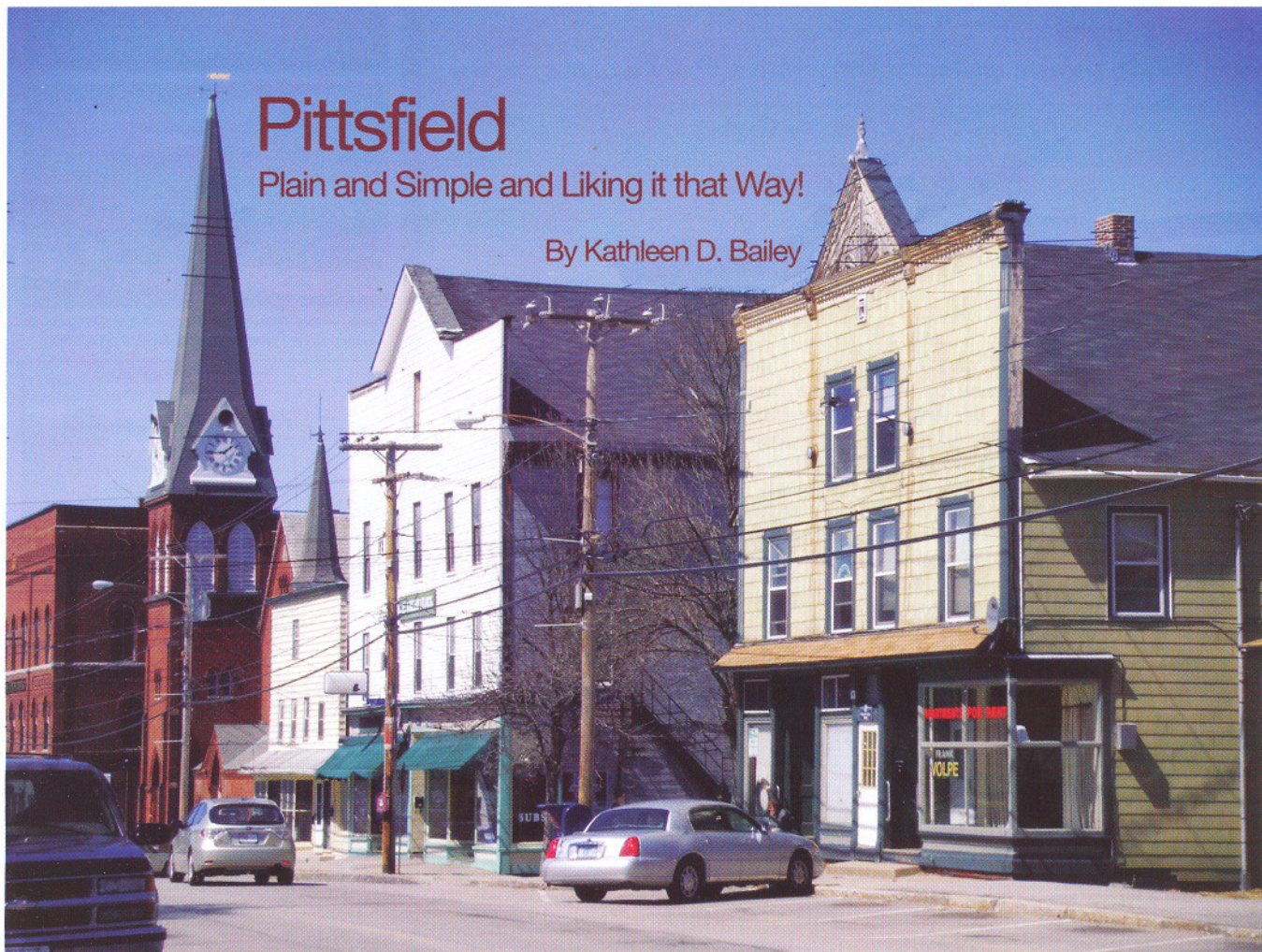


# Pittsfield

Plain and Simple and Liking it that Way!

By Kathleen D. Bailey



On a spring weekday morning, Main Street in Pittsfield looks like other towns do on a Sunday afternoon. A few retired people slowly stroll the sidewalks, trolling for that morning cup of coffee. A woman drops an armful of books in the book drop at the shuttered Carpenter Memorial Library, then peels off with a screech of tires. The wide main street is deserted, and a pedestrian (me) can cross anywhere without looking for a crosswalk. The only businesses open are a couple of generic banks, a convenience store, a DVD rental/hair salon, and the Chinese restaurant, which has just turned on the neon soup bowl logo in one of its windows. In the other window of the storefront, two tiny Asian girls, brought to work by a parent, blow soap bubbles and giggle when they break against the glass.

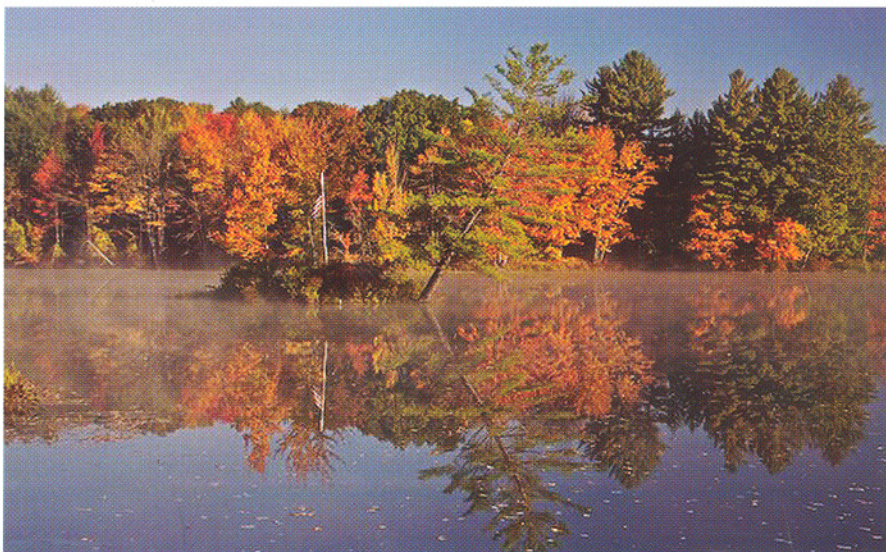
Pittsfield is full of surprises.

The town, once a mecca for factories and other industry, began to decline when a major state highway was rerouted. A tannery and several other major employers eventually left town, while smaller businesses decided it wasn't worth the effort. But Pittsfield is fighting back. While local groups such as the Chamber of Commerce and the Economic

Development Committee are working to build up the business community, craftsmen and entrepreneurs, on back roads and in basements, are coming up with products that would make their Yankee forbears almost smile. A core group of residents is committed to making the town shine again, for themselves and other people, and they have one message: "Don't count us out."

## Natural Features

Main Street looks much as it did in the 50s and 60s, except for the empty storefronts. A red-brick Congregational Church's spires soar, while the tiny Carpenter Library is a masterpiece of stonework. Elegant Victorian homes, some restored, some not, line the street. Down at the curve of Water Street, the Suncook River tumbles over the Factory Street Dam,



Courtesy of [pittsfield-nh.com](http://pittsfield-nh.com)/BobLegg Photo



sparkling in the sunlight, with old homes and a Catholic church spire in the background. The scene is postcard-worthy. The "bones" are there: with a little elbow grease and a lot of new small businesses, Pittsfield could be another Exeter or Goffstown.

Like New Hampshire, Pittsfield has a little bit of everything. It's located on the side of Catmount Mountain, offering spectacular views on a simple drive to Northwood. Part of the town borders on Jenness Pond, a three-season vacation area. Stone walls from early settlers line the back roads. The town has several small parks and one big one, Drake Field, for sport and recreation.

It's easy for me to see the potential, even on a one-day visit, and even easier for those who live and work here.

### Child's Play

Michelle Trovato straightens a greeting card on the rack in the rear of her store, The Toy Box, on Depot Street in Pittsfield. It's a weekday afternoon, and she's expecting visitors—the Pittsfield school children who routinely stop by on the way home from school.

It's a habit she hopes to encourage, in these children and possibly their children. Michelle opened the shop in September 2008, after 25 years in the child care field. She wanted to do something different, she says, and she and her husband already owned the building. She knew exactly what she didn't want—a chain store or franchise. They tossed ideas around, asking each other, "What can we do that will not only help us, but help the community?"

Michelle briefly considered a candy store, but decided, "Not with everyone on diets." She decided on a toy shop featuring items not seen in the big box stores—Ravensburger puzzles, science kits, traditional board games in keepsake packaging. There are wooden dollhouses, princess crowns, hula hoops. Finger



Michelle Trovato of The Toy Box shows off a wooden dollhouse, and its inhabitant.

puppets represent characters from classic fairy tales, and a Ring Toss game is in retro 1950s packaging. While she has a few baby dolls and fairy tale figures, there's nary a Barbie in sight. "I try," she says, "to have the vendors you don't see everywhere."

She also offers party balloons and the greeting cards. While her shop brings to mind other independent toyshops such as Whirlygigs in Exeter and Treehouse Toys and G. Willikers! in Portsmouth, Michelle is mindful of her community's profile, and

sells most of her toys for \$25 or under. She's also put in a wall of inexpensive items, " ... so kids can spend their allowances here."

Michelle is a full community partner, lending the shop to the Pittsfield Players for a refreshment space whenever the group does a show in its theater two doors down. She and her husband do the concession, splitting the proceeds between the Players and the Pittsfield Youth Workshop.

### Play in Pittsfield

Carpenter Memorial Library, (603) 234-9788, for up-to-the-minute reading material in a brick gem from the last century.

Downtown's Drake Field offers a basketball court, baseball diamond, soccer field, tennis court, picnic tables, swings, slides, and sunshine!

Pittsfield Historical Society is open Tuesday mornings or by appointment. Call Larry Bergson at (603) 435-8004.

The Pittsfield Youth Workshop, housed in an early red brick high school, offers homework help and activities for the town's

future citizens, open to grades 6 through 12. Call Zach Powers at (603) 425-8272. Other activities for youths and children include Drake Field summer program, Louise Sawyer, (603) 435-6701, extension 110; 4-H, Corinne Miller, (603) 435-8497, Pauline Wheeler, (603) 435-8752; Fire Explorers, Jim Girard, (603) 435-6807; and Girl, Cub, and Boy Scouts.

The Pittsfield Players: Though the Scenic Theater no longer shows Hollywood's best on the big screen, the Players have taken over the historic venue and present several shows a year. Visit [www.pittsfieldplayers.com](http://www.pittsfieldplayers.com) or call (603) 435-8852.

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## New Hampshire ToDo

The shop is a bright spot in the downtown area, and Michelle is hoping others will follow suit. She has hope for Pittsfield, saying, "If we can do it, I know others can." She lauds the Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Committee for their efforts to revitalize the town. "With a little bit of effort, this town CAN come back," Michelle says.

Joe Danis knows where it's been. His family has owned Danis Supermarket on Water Street since 1903. The store, one of two supermarkets in Pittsfield, has a little bit of everything. The "store brand" for canned goods is Shurfine, one seldom seen in larger stores, and the store brand name for the hard goods is Western Family. Though the store hasn't changed much physically since the 1950s, the freezer case now carries Chinese and Mexican items. But the candy by the register includes Charleston Chews and Atomic Fireballs, and the community still posts its notices on the glass front window.

Joe watches it all from his office on a raised platform near the checkout, as he's watched the town for most of his life. Though he now lives in Loudon, he was "born and brought up here," and remembers a very different Pittsfield.



Joe Danis, owner of Danis Supermarket, has seen generations come through his store.

It was a thriving town in the 40s and 50s, with a tannery, two shoe factories, men's and women's clothing stores, and its own movie theater, Joe remembers. But over the years big box stores came in to nearby Concord, and more people went out of town.

Joe has learned to diversify. "We go with what the customer demands," he says. In Pittsfield that's beer and wine, groceries and meat. While Pittsfield is no longer a

"destination" town, residents of surrounding towns still come to Danis's for meat. The meat counter stretches the length of the store and serves customers from six local communities, Joe says.

Joe stops to wave to a person in the checkout line. People who bought candy as children, or came in with their parents, are now in their 40s and 50s, and he knows them all by name. He stays involved in the community, supporting local fundraisers. His sister, who owns the laundromat in the same complex, lets emergency personnel use it as a base during disasters, he says.

Joe would like to see Pittsfield revived, to see more industry come in. "I'm not looking for competition—I've got enough of that as it is—but it would be nice to add to the tax base," he says.

He isn't sure the store will continue after him, at least not with the name "Danis." His two children are involved in other pursuits, he said, adding, "It's a hard business and long hours."

"But we're still here," Joe says, adding, "It's a tough row to hoe." But he'll stay as long as he can for this generation, the next one, and the people who have nowhere else to go.



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## Pittsfield Heats Up in the Summer

While the town is quiet over the snowy months, it comes to life in spring and blooms in July and August, with civic-minded individuals intent on showcasing the charms and capabilities of their town. In addition to the Balloon Fest, there are a couple of events we'd like to let you know about.

Andi said this year's theme was chosen because it's one people can get behind easily, with things they have at home.

The event begins the night before, Friday, when the Pittsfield Players' "Encore" group presents a special musical program at the Scenic Theater.



Courtesy of pittsfield-nh.com/BobLegg Photo

The 12th annual Town Wide Yard Sale will be held June 6 from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. The event, pulling in businesses, organizations, and families, is sponsored by the Greater Pittsfield Chamber of Commerce. A large advertising campaign is focused on "getting people into Pittsfield for the day," according to organizer Andi Riel. Proceeds from registration, map sales, and advertising on the map will be poured back into Pittsfield for college scholarships, the town Christmas Tree Lighting, and other civic events. For more information, visit [www.pittsfieldchamber.org](http://www.pittsfieldchamber.org) or call Andi Riel at (603) 435-6346.

Andi is also one of the point people for Old Home Day, planned this year for July 18. This year's theme, according to Andi, is "Down On the Farm, Off To the County Fair." She and Louie Houle co-chair the event.

A "really good" parade follows at 1 p.m. There are four or five bands, at least 10 floats, and sometimes horses, antique cars, or both. After the parade there's usually a community dinner of some sort. This year's will take place in the community clubhouse on Dowboro Road in South Pittsfield, and will be a ham and bean supper followed by old-time fiddling and a Historical Society walking tour of the area.

Though the Old Home Day is a lot of work, it's a good day for Andi, who said, "I'm a nostalgia kind of person. I grew up in town, and this is a day when the community can come together. This is my way of giving back, of making sure it continues."

### Multitasking

In this small town on the side of a mountain, people have learned to make do and to do more than one thing.

Paul Rogers and his partner David Stout run a variety of businesses out of two adjacent storefronts on Main Street. Rogers has owned Moo-Veez Galore, a video store, and Paul's Unisex Hair Salon for 13 years. They added a tanning bed and a gift basket/balloon piece and recently threw lottery tickets into the mix. You can rent a flick, get a trim, start a tan, pick out a present, and scratch a ticket all under one roof.

"We do 90 percent of the gift baskets for Christmas and Valentine's Day and 10 percent for Mother's Day and Easter,"

David says. And while video stores are going out in many towns, Moo-Veez is holding its own, David says, because many of their customers aren't interested in participating in rental programs like Netflix.

While David is relatively new to Pittsfield, Paul grew up in town and has had some of the same customers at his salon for 13 years. "It's a small town, everyone knows each other," David says. "Paul goes to a wake about once a week."

Creativity and business savvy flourish in Pittsfield as it did with the early Yankees. Sharon Blais parlayed her daughters' 4-H project into a personal-care product line, at her Happy Critters Farm. "My older daughter started showing them when she was 8," she says. "Two years into the

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## New Hampshire ToDo

project, we had to breed the goats, and we had to milk them." With seven goats a milking, she ended up with five gallons a day, more than she could use even with two growing girls. "I couldn't justify the waste," Sharon says in Yankee fashion. She tried making cheese, but found it was "too much work."

She found her answer in personal care products. She experimented with soaps and lotions for years before "I got brave enough to try and sell them." Now she does soaps, lotions, natural insect repellent and other items.

"There was a lot of trial and error; a lot of chemistry," Sharon says.

She markets her work online, at the Bedford and Amherst Farmers Markets, at fairs and festivals, and at the Lupine Festival in Sugar Hill. "We make thousands of bars a year," she says. Her older girl, now in college, still works in the business, she says.

Why is goat's milk good for you? "The milk of goats is close to the natural Ph of skin," Sharon says. "It's a very good conditioner for the skin. It has lipids for dry skin, which a lot of dermatologists recommend." A soap containing emu oil is good for psoriasis and eczema, she says.

Her "insect guard" contains lemon eucalyptus oil, said to be as effective as DEET on the Centers for Disease Control website, she points out.

Courtesy of Happy Critters Farm



Ally and one of her babies at the Happy Critters Farm where you can buy real goats milk soaps and lotions: [www.happycrittersfarm.com](http://www.happycrittersfarm.com).

Sharon has lived in Pittsfield since 1992, and says she loves the "willingness and tolerance" of her neighbors. "If my goats get loose, they'll put them in the barn for me," she adds.

#### Timber!

Dan Schroth has also branched out, literally. The stonemason's property on Tilton Hill Road was devastated in the July 2008 tornado. When he came home after the storm, he says, "We could only get as far as the bottom of the hill. My wife Nancy was freaking because our horses were out.

We had to walk along the stream and come in behind the barn."

"We hit it hard," Dan recalls. With Yankee ingenuity, he put out a sign, "Cold beer for work." People "came from all over," he says, and the yard was 80 percent cleaned up in eight days.

But Dan wanted more than just his yard back. He began to think about what to do with the fallen hardwoods. One day, while riding the backhoe, he had an epiphany and TornadoWood, his second business, was born.

Dan hadn't done woodworking since eighth grade shop class. But he went to work and soon crafted designs for rough-hewn chairs and benches. He experimented, kept his first two pieces, and began to sell the rest. He is now on his 80th piece, he says. Nancy, skeptical at first, became a cheerleader for him and even suggested a table design. Dan's yard still has fallen trees, but now they're the material of his dreams. He has a canopy set up so he can work on rainy days, and the yard is filled with finished products and works-in-progress.

While the furniture is funky and functional, Dan took it a step further. "In the hurricane of 1938, they made furniture and none of it was marked," he said. He wanted his pieces to commemorate July 2008, and designed a "brand." Each piece is branded with the iron brand

### Be at the Balloon Fest!

The 28th annual Pittsfield Balloon Festival, held on July 31 and August 1 and 2, will once again be sponsored by the Pittsfield Rotary Club. Like the brilliant balloons it features, the festival has taken off, bringing Pittsfield together and out-of-towners into the community.

According to Steve Catalano, this year's chairman, the festival brings up to 20 hot air balloons to downtown Pittsfield. "This year, the Energizer Bunny will be here—it's the biggest one we've ever had," he said.

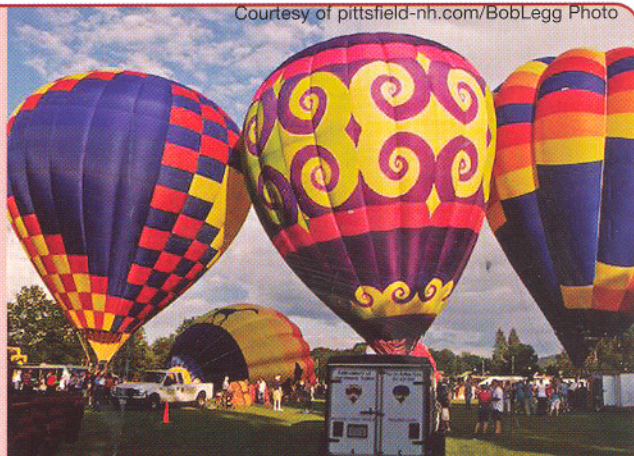
The festival is unique in that the Rotary doesn't "sell" rides, Rotarian Art Morse said. All balloons are sponsored by businesses or individuals, and those people get to ride. But anyone can view, and the town is thronged with people who just come for a glimpse of the colorful craft.

Balloons bracket the day, going up at 5:30 or 6 a.m. and again at 5:30 or 6 p.m. Between balloon launches there's a full carnival going on. There will be 30 to 40 vendors and concessions, mini-train rides, and music. Commercial vendors and crafters will mingle with town organizations, for whom, Steve said, "It's the biggest fund-raiser of the year." The Rotary has dibs on the hamburger and hot dog trade, but other groups are free to sell any other kind of food.

Saturday night is the big one, with 8,000 to 10,000 people converging on Pittsfield. After the evening balloon launch, several of the owners do what is called a "night glow." They light the balloons from the inside and leave them on the field for what Steve said is an "absolutely gorgeous" spectacle. But there's more: a fireworks display and entertainment until 11 p.m.

But for Art, the biggest thrill isn't the pyrotechnic display, which he called "the biggest fireworks show in the state," or even the balloons. "It sounds silly," he said, "but the thing I get the most out of is working our food tent. You see people you haven't seen all year, and it puts a 'face' on the Rotarians."

The rally is the longest-running balloon rally in New Hampshire, Art and Steve agreed. Admission is free, and everything's free except for parking and whatever people eat. "You can't find anything like it for the price," Steve said proudly.



Courtesy of [pittsfield-nh.com](http://pittsfield-nh.com)/BobLegg Photo

Do people actually get up at 5:30 to watch a balloon go up? "Absolutely," Steve affirmed. "People get down to the field before 5:30, so they can watch the balloon owners setting up. The owners will say, 'Give us a hand?' and all of a sudden, you're helping a balloon go up."

"It's SO cool," Steve said, adding, "After 20 years, I never get tired of it."

For information on the festival, call Steve at (603) 435-6332 or Art at (603) 435-6917.



heated in a woodstove. "A lot of people," he says, "want a souvenir of the tornado."

He's poised to sell them one. Tom Hitchcock of Concord handles Dan's marketing. Currently the pieces can be found at Interior Additions, South Main Street, Concord; Stone Falls Nursery in Henniker; Northwood Country Market, Route 4; and at Charlie Watson's farm on Catamount Road, Pittsfield. Prices range from \$50 for a "kiddie seat" to \$300 for a bench.

And Dan credits Pittsfield for his inventiveness: "Pittsfield," he says, "is the home of the free and the land of opportunity."

#### Keys to survival

Louie Houle III, president of the Pittsfield Chamber of Commerce, says, "I can't say I've lived here all my life—it's not over yet." But for his 55 years he's lived in town, seen the changes, and hasn't given up on it.

Like Joe Danis, Louie remembers the bustling village center of the 50s and 60s. The biggest factor for the change, he says, was the rerouting of Route 28, which goes from Epsom to Alton and the Lakes Region. The road used to go right through town, Louie says, and that brought visitors



Dan Schroth, a stonemason by trade, shows off one of the Tornado Benches he began making after a July 2008 tornado devastated his yard in Pittsfield.

and shoppers. Improved roads also make it easier to get to Concord—in 15 minutes—Louie says. "When I was a kid it was a 45-minute trip." People from Epsom, Chichester and Loudon used to go to Pittsfield on Friday night for shopping, Louie recalls. "But now it's easier to go to Concord, or the Seacoast. People just 'fly through' Pittsfield."

But the chamber is doing its part to make Pittsfield a destination again, Louie adds. The chamber "fell into disarray" for several years, going from 75 members down to 20. It was recently revived and has about 65 members, he says. Networking is one key to survival, and the revived chamber has revived the Business After Hours tradition. They draw 30 to 40 people, Louie says. A recent After Hours took place at the White Buffalo in Barnstead, which is a combination country store, restaurant—and gun shop, according to Louie.

Diversity is the other key to survival, Louie notes. He was a banker for several years and now works for his wife, a CPA, who runs her business out of their home. "I work for her most of the year," Louie says. And when it's not tax season, he adds, "I work in an apple orchard."

It's an unusual but welcome change for a former banker, and worth it for Louie to stay in Pittsfield. "The house I'm in, my kids are the fifth generation to be here," he says. "I love this town. There are a lot of good people, a lot of good things. 'I'm in 12 different community organizations,'" Louie adds.

And with luck and work, those organizations will make Pittsfield shine again!

**To Do**

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