



Defining the ‘Spirit of Toledo’

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As a young boy, I always enjoyed spending time at my grandparents’ house. Their small home in Springfield was filled with interesting objects and a few antiques. One of my favorites was a small bronze bust of Charles Lindberg that was used as a doorstop. I really liked it for what it was, but I came to admire the Lindberg bust even more when I learned the story about his famed flight to Paris in a small plane he called the “Spirit of St. Louis.”

I’ve often thought about the vision, courage, confidence and tenacity demonstrated by Lindberg and his team that led to his historic, transatlantic flight. Interestingly, many of these same qualities and others came to be associated with the city of St. Louis because of the name of this small plane. True, the flight itself was historic: the plane, its engine and the technology became objects of great curiosity and interest. I think, however, we continue to be fascinated by this event, not so much because of the equipment or the fact that Lindberg crossed the Atlantic — thousands of people now do it everyday — but because of the qualities of vision, courage, confidence and tenacity that powered this inspiring event. Indeed, it was the “spirit” behind this adventurous feat that captured the imagination of the nation and the world.

For nearly a decade, I’ve followed the work and publications of Richard Florida and have learned from his insights into economic development and the growth dynamics of cities. Remember when Florida came to Toledo to talk about the research findings captured in his book, “The Rise of the Creative Class?” Florida’s latest book, “Who’s Your City?” makes the argument that cities and regions have “personalities,” or what we might also call qualities of “spirit.” His description of cities and regions-based on exhaustive research-reveals these qualities or personalities and how they differ from city to city and region to region all across the nation. He argues rather forcefully that “personality plays a significant role in understanding cities, regions ... and economic growth.”

Cities are, in many ways, like people. They have these personalities and qualities of spirit that, like people, can be attractive, positive, nurturing and forgiving. We are drawn to them and want to be around them because of these qualities. There are other cities and regions — again, like some people we know — that are unattractive, negative, overly critical and unforgiving. Some even seem to take satisfaction by attacking those individuals who want to try something new or different or simply want to break out of the mold created by the personality and culture of the city or region. These negative qualities often drive more people away than the positive qualities can attract.

All this begs the question that Florida asks, “Who’s your city?” What is the “personality” of our city? Or, what is the “Spirit” of Toledo?

I love the UT billboards scattered around the city that read, “CREATE YOUR FUTURE!” As a city and region, we, too, can create our future. Our city can have the type of personality that would be attractive to potential newcomers and those companies that want to be in a positive, progressive region. As we enter the mayoral campaign season and look to the future, perhaps this would be a good time for us to evaluate our city’s personality or the qualities of spirit that characterize our community and region. Are we, as a city and region, who we want to be?

In an earlier Toledo Free Press column, I asked the question, “Are we [Toledo] selling what the world is buying?” This is the fundamental question undergirding economic development. In addition to the products and services that must find their way to the marketplace, the world is looking for those qualities that create the environment within which these products and services are provided. These qualities of “spirit” include, among others, vision, creativity, talent, courage, willingness to take risks, opportunity and leadership.

Cities and regions that are recognized for these positive qualities of spirit are the ones most attractive to business, entrepreneurs and venture capitalists. They are also the cities and regions most attractive to creative people. Like the UT billboard, Toledo can “create its future.”

What does this really mean in practical terms? Florida puts it this way:

“For cities and regions, it means that their leadership — political, business, and otherwise — must be aware of the powerful role played by psychology. Places really do have different personalities. Those personalities stem from their economic structure and inform and constrain their futures.

It is a lot easier to go out and attract a new company or even build a new stadium, than it is to alter the psychological makeup of a region. Regional leaders must become more aware of how their region’s collective personality shapes the kinds of economic activities that it can do and the kinds of people it can attract, satisfy and retain.”

The destiny of any community, region and state is in the hands of its citizens and leaders. Research, experience and common sense reinforce this proposition.

We can “create our own futures” if we truly decide to do so and are willing to make the kinds of changes that will make our community and region more attractive.

Do we as a community and region have the kind of personality that is attractive to talented, creative, innovative people and companies? Do we as a city have the qualities of spirit that will enable us to create a dynamic, engaged, economically successful future for ourselves, our children and our grandchildren?

This is the perfect time to create the “Spirit of Toledo” that we want and believe we should have.

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