

# Building a business from the inside

Dani Michels finds success in a man's world

## Dani Michels

Founder, owner and president of **Commercial Interior Contractors**.

Age: 41

Hometown: Madison

**Family:** Married with a 5-year-old son and three stepsons ages 7, 14 and 15.

**Education:** Received a BA in journalism from UW-Madison in 1989, and got her MBA in business from the **University of Chicago** in 2001.

**Experience:** More than 15 years of experience overseeing the design and construction of commercial spaces, most recently as a senior project manager at Madison-based **Carlson Co.**, where she worked for three years before starting CIC. Before then she was an account executive at Chicago-based **Ready Fixtures**.

## Commercial Interior Contractors

CIC is a design/build construction company based in Middleton which specializes in interior construction projects including build-outs, redesigns and tenant improvement projects.

**Address:** 2564 Branch St., Suite B12, Middleton.

**Founded:** June 2005

**Employees:** 4

**Web site:** [www.cicbuildsout.com](http://www.cicbuildsout.com)

**2007 sales:** \$2 million



Dani Michels, 41, founded Middleton-based construction company Commercial Interior Contractors three years ago as a single parent with a two year-old son, working out of her condo until the business began to take off.

CRAIG SCHREINER

Interviewed by Nick Heynen

**Q: What attracted you to the construction industry given your educational background was originally in journalism?**

**A:** I kind of backed into it a little bit by accident. After I graduated from **UW-Madison** I wound up working for this company **Ready Fixtures** in Chicago. We designed and manufactured interior packages for large retailers like **Sears, Circuit City, Barnes and Noble** and **Starbucks**. There was a strong construction component to that, and so part of my job was to interface with these people, troubleshoot any problems they were having, visit the sites, make sure that these things were being installed properly.

That's kind of where it started. I started to develop more of an interest in the construction side of things and less in the manufacturing side. I was interested in work-

ing in more of a hands-on way with one-of-a-kind local commercial environments instead of these huge retailers that are all the same and all over the place. I liked the idea of working with a person who is opening a store or a restaurant, as opposed to an executive from **Sears** or someplace like that.

About five or six years ago I came back to Wisconsin after living in other places for many years. I was a single mother by this time so I came back because Madison is home to me more so than any place in the world, and I wanted to be near my family while I raised my child.

I wound up getting connected through networking to a gentleman named **Chris Carlson** (owner of Madison-based construction company **Carlson Co.**), and that meeting wound up working very well for both of us. I had a lot of experience working with retailers and retail interiors which is

an area his company also worked in, and his company happened to have its own day-care center. And he also was doing interiors for a lot of one-of-a-kind offices and stores and things on a more local basis.

I worked there as a senior project manager, and over the years **Chris** became a mentor for me. I had finished my MBA not long before this and had a pretty strong desire to start my own business. He knew that and he appreciated it from an entrepreneurial standpoint. It was always a question of what, when and how, not if I would do it, because I didn't want to just start any company. I wanted it to be something special and something I could be passionate about.

I had gradually begun to be more interested in the construction side of the commercial spaces, the nuts and bolts: the HVAC, the electrical, the plumbing, the concrete and the framing of walls, those sorts of things. So though a series of con-

versations with **Chris** and a lot of support that's how my business model evolved. He helped make the transition from working for someone else to working for myself much smoother than it would have been otherwise.

So once I had the business plan, I started the company out of the living room of my East Side condo. It was me, a laptop computer, a cell phone and a car. That's how I got started.

Fortunately I knew a number of people in the business community and the real estate world and some architects and so on. I started networking around, got some projects, executed them well and the next thing I knew I was getting pretty busy and started hiring staff. Everything kind of fell into place. Now there's four of us and we're looking for number five currently.

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## Thefts from companies results in three arrests

Madison police say their burglary task force has broken a ring that took nearly \$115,000 in equipment and supplies from construction sites and construction companies from late May to early June.

Madison Police Lt. Mark Brown said the ringleader of the operation is believed to be Jeremy P. Hyatt, 25.

Also arrested in separate incidents were Lonny L. Linberg, 44, Madison, an associate of Hyatt's, and Darrell W. Sunderlage Jr., 49, Brooklyn.

Police set up surveillance on an East Side motel on the evening of June 13 after a truck con-

nected to the crime spree was found parked in its lot, police said.

Hyatt was arrested after he and Linberg later drove from the motel. Stolen tools and a crack pipe were recovered from the truck, police said.

On June 19, detectives searched a self-storage locker rented by Hyatt, said Madison police spokesman Joel De Spain.

They found more than 150 stolen items, including tools belonging to local construction companies and other contractors, and recovered more than 30 empty spools, which investigators believe had held thousands of dollars worth of stolen copper.

Hyatt is also accused of steal-

ing a dump truck, which was used to transport some of the items stolen from at least a dozen local companies.

In a separate case, police arrested Sunderlage on June 23 for theft and motor vehicle offenses after he was spotted allegedly stealing items from a construction site in the 2700 block of LaFollette Avenue, police said.

## TrafficCast expands link with Yahoo

**TrafficCast International** of Madison is expanding its partnership with **Yahoo** to provide real-time road speed information for the Internet search engine's mapping products.

The Madison's company's

Dynaflow technology will allow Yahoo Map users in the nation's top 100 markets to calculate travel times and receive incident reports.

Through partnerships with other providers such as cellular phone companies, **TrafficCast** is able to analyze factors impeding traffic flow and provide data to Yahoo Map users. This information previously was available only by monitoring road sensors.

The Yahoo traffic Web site is [maps.yahoo.com/traffic](http://maps.yahoo.com/traffic).

**TrafficCast's** Web site is [www.trafficcast.com](http://www.trafficcast.com).

## Madison ranks 61st in airfares among top 200

The **Dane County Regional**

**Airport** ranks 61st nationally for the highest fares during the first quarter of 2008 among the nation's top 200 airports, according to an analysis by **Ron McNeill**, an industry analyst and consultant with **Mead & Hunt** of Madison. **McNeill** works with the airport. Excluding free tickets such as those given to frequent fliers, the Madison airport ranked 57th for highest fares.

An analysis by the federal **Transportation Department's** Bureau of Transportation Statistics, found that the Madison airport had the nation's third-highest average daily fare during the first quarter among the largest 100 airports based on the number of available seats. ■

## Michels

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**Q: Many small startup companies fail within their first year or so. How did you get through those first couple years and what's it been like competing with the bigger players in the Madison-area construction industry?**

**A:** I would say mainly hard work, long hours, late nights. There were many days where I'd pick my son up from day care, spend a few hours with him, then after he went to bed I'd get back to work until 11 o'clock or midnight.

Another huge part of it was having **Chris Carlson** as a mentor, and I made a point of having some other mentors too. Because of them, I had good advice. There are a number of things that come up when you're starting a business. You come to a fork in the road and you're not really sure which direction to go. So it was really helpful to have the perspective of people who have been there.

The third part has been having a really good staff. I could not have grown without them. Having really good people working with me has been beyond important.

I was surprised back in the beginning to find myself competing with familiar names, some larger companies in town. On the one hand you're at a bit of a disadvantage because their names are very familiar and they've proven themselves over the years. But it didn't take long for me to have a track record of my own. I try to leave a wake of happy customers in my past. I've been fortunate to be able to provide good references to (potential clients).

The other part of it is because we're smaller, we're light, we're

nimble and also very competitive on price because we have low overhead. So there have been pros and cons to competing with the bigger companies.

**Q: You're bound to fall on your face a few times when starting a new business. Are there any mistakes you look to as having been formative?**

**A:** Yeah, definitely. None of us are perfect. There have certainly been some mistakes along the way. One of the attitudes we've cultivated here culturally is mistakes are OK — as long as you fix them! — and as long as you learn from them. With my staff, I've made it clear that you're not going to get in trouble if you make a mistake, so long as you're an integral part of the solution and so long as you reflectively learn from it and learn from each others' mistakes.

I also learned from my mentors that mistakes are also an opportunity to demonstrate to your customer what you can do in response to them. They're an opportunity to demonstrate your problem-solving skills and your ability to recover from things that don't go exactly according to plan.

That's one of the things that I think is really interesting about construction: it's not perfect. There are things that come up that you just can't readily anticipate. And I think one of the things that sets us apart is we aren't daunted when the unexpected happens. They're a challenge.

**Q: CIC is an affiliate of the U.S. Green Building Council. Does that represent a direction you plan on taking the company in the future?**

**A:** Green building is obviously here to stay. There's no question

that is the direction things are heading. I've had numerous clients express an interest in using green building techniques. I think it's just a matter of time before green building is just how things are done as a matter of course.

To that end, we're trying to stay on top of the latest information as far as that goes. But it's very expensive for a building or a project to become LEED certified. What I'm finding is for the smaller kinds of projects we do, people are interested in it, but when they find out how much it costs, they tend to balk. I'm still very open to the idea, and there may come a time when it makes sense for us to be LEED accredited, but for now I haven't had a client yet who has been willing to spend the money on the certification.

So the approach we're taking now is being ready and very willing to implement green building techniques for our clients that are interested. For those who aren't, if it isn't going to make any difference to them whether we go green or not green, we're going to go green.

We've started recycling demolition materials at our job sites and doing things like that. A lot of my clients are requesting low-VOC paint, low-flow toilets and shower heads, fluorescent lighting, energy efficient appliances, a variety of things like that.

We can do green building, we offer it to our clients, it's just been without certification to this point. What I say to people is that it's just the right thing to do, let's just do it and forgo the certification.

**Q: The credit and housing crisis have hit construction companies hard across the country. Have you seen the effects in the Madison area with your clients?**

**A:** I think our region — meaning Madison and Dane County — has been somewhat insulated from what's happening with the economy. It just doesn't seem like it has hit us as hard as other areas in the state and certainly not as hard as other parts of the country.

Having said that, I do think the first half of this year has been somewhat slower than what we saw last year. Mainly, what I'm seeing is it's taking longer for decisions to be made, longer for leases to be signed, which means it's taking longer to get projects going.

The work is still out there, regardless of sector or specialty, it's just companies are having to work a little harder to find it.

I think people were nervous. For the first half of this year it just seemed like everyone I had lunch with, every meeting I went to, that was the topic. People seemed to be in this state of paralysis almost, just worried about the economy. And so plans that they may have had in place for some time, they were kind of either pulling back a little or waiting to see what was going to happen, and just taking longer to make decisions. No one was sure how bad it was going to get. When, in actuality, I don't think things were so bad right here in this area. But it's hard not to react to things that you hear and see about places farther away. People have also definitely become more cost-conscious.

It seems to me though that it's been picking up again. I don't know what's going on but it seems like people have gotten tired of waiting to put their plans into place. After a point, people get tired of being worried and nervous and the move forward in spite of it.

**Q: Do you think it's becom-**

**ing easier for women to make a name for themselves in the traditionally male-dominated construction industry?**

**A:** I do. I've had lots of support and encouragement. I really can't say anything negative about the experience.

Honestly, I was a little worried when I started that I would have some difficulties along those lines, and I am pleased to report that I have not.

First of all there are a growing number of women working in construction as project managers and even as laborers. My staff is a 50/50 split between men and women. It's becoming more common. And as far as being a female business owner in the construction industry is concerned, it's been a great experience. There's been a lot of encouragement, especially from my subcontractors.

Back when it was just me, and I was wearing all the hats and managing all these projects and running all over town, there were times when my son had to come along with me because his day care was closed and I didn't have anywhere else to take him. There were occasions when I'd be at a job site meeting with subcontractors and the plumber would entertain my 3-year-old while I was talking to the electrician, and then the HVAC guy would take over. They were just very gracious about it, and made it so I could function during those meetings even with my son there. He'd have his little toy tools that he would bring with him and the guys were very tolerant of him being there. To this day I appreciate that tremendously.

**Q: What does your son want to be when he grows up?**

**A:** He wants to be a "job site worker." He made that up. ■

NONPROFITS

# Student engineers put skills to use in developing nations

Engineers Without Borders ease day-to-day burdens

By James Edward Mills

Since he was a freshman at UW-Madison David Chen knew he wanted to make a difference in the lives of others.

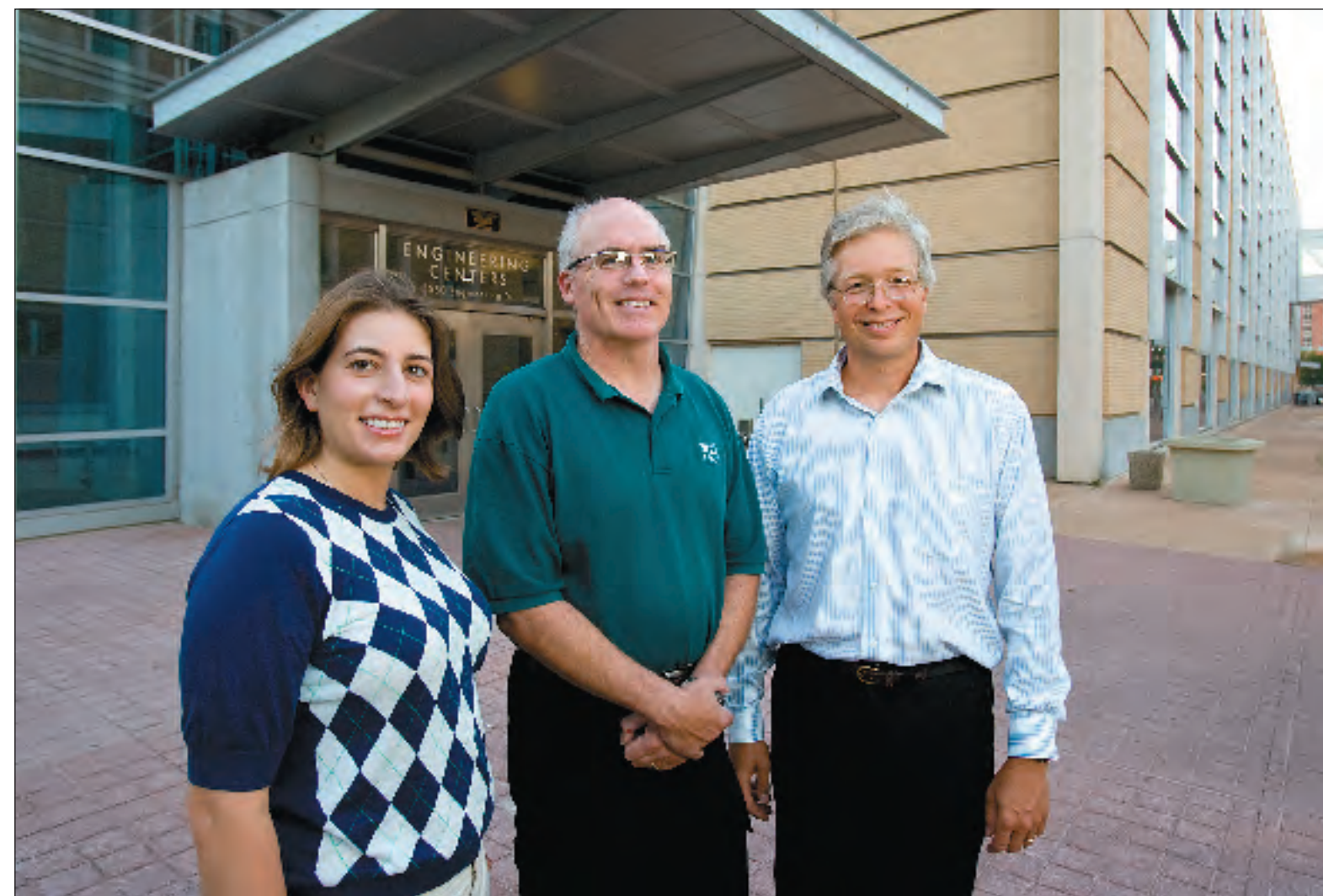
But the double major in mechanical engineering and biological conservation is a bit impatient to venture out and save the world. So, Chen went looking for a way to do some good while still in school.

"At Madison they always throw you a whole list of student organizations for you to get involved with," Chen said. "Engineers Without Borders kind of jumped off the page for me."

Now a junior, Chen volunteers his time and talent to a nonprofit organization that brings technical know-how to remote corners of the world where it is desperately needed.

While many of his fellow engineering students aspire to design the tall skyscrapers and time-saving gadgets of the future, Chen and seven of his classmates spend a few weeks through the summer plying their mechanical skills to ease the day-to-day burdens of people struggling to survive in the impoverished villages of Rwanda.

"There were plenty of student groups I could have joined, but they were all competition-based," Chen said. "You make something really cool in advanced technology and win a prize at the end. Through



STEVE APPS

Involved with Engineers Without Borders are Julia Wagner, adviser Mark Tusler and Carl Houtman.

Engineers Without Borders you could actually make something really cool and save lives."

## Helping villagers

Creating community-specific projects tailored to address the most immediate technological needs of the villages they serve, EWB volunteers build sustainable systems using indigenous materials and resources.

From making water safe to

drink to designing fuel-efficient cooking stoves, young engineers like Chen have the chance to solve real problems for people.

Engineers Without Borders was established as a national organization in 2000, and at UW-Madison in 2004. The group has chapters on college campuses throughout the U.S. and partners with engineering professionals to provide students with guidance.

Mark Tusler is a principle and senior project manager at the

Madison engineering firm **BT2**. He serves as a mentor to the local EWB organization at UW both in the classroom and in the field.

"I provide a filter for the students, someone to bounce ideas off of," Tusler said. "Being two-and-a-half times as old as the students, I've just got more experience to use. That helps to focus their efforts."

## Worthwhile projects

Mentors like Tusler advise stu-

dents to create worthwhile projects that are manageable and realistic. He also accompanies them into the field where these projects are implemented.

Tusler strives to maintain a perspective that will allow students to do as much as possible with what little the communities have to work with.

"We're not able to provide a lot of resources to this effort," Tusler

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## Fire

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ing must decide how best to deploy people and equipment to ensure fast and effective service.

The **Madison Fire Department** measures very high against the national standard of arriving at a scene in less than five minutes.

The placement of personnel and equipment must be supported by facility location: three reserve engines and two reserve ladders are distributed among the department's 11 stations.

The department's next station (No. 12, which will be totally "green") will be on the growing West Side. Meanwhile, discussion continues about the next location, which will probably be east.

Business managers will also face decisions on how to invest in mission-critical gear. Over

the past several years, the fire department has significantly upgraded its fire engines, ladders and other equipment.

The department learned that good gear provides a better return and dependability — which of course translates into safety and responsiveness.

Like in any business, communications is critical. For the MFD, two stations respond to every situation: A 911 call goes to the department's dispatcher, who provides constant voice communication about what vehicles are arriving from where.

The communications gear in Station No. 3's Watch Room allows the crew to monitor and respond to critical information. The station's audio and visual displays put the right information in the right place instantly.

## Community relations

Whenever the weather per-

mits, firefighters at Station No. 3 open the station doors. They welcome visitors in both arranged visits or parents and kids who want to see inside a fire engine.

Architecturally, Madison's stations are designed to fit their neighborhoods, rather than reflect a "brand."

Community awareness and cooperation are essential to fire prevention.

## A culture any CEO would want

The fire department has, effectively, zero turnover. While gear, fitness, food, shared spaces and community support all build a strong culture, the core fact is every firefighter knows one of their teammates might depend on their skill, strength and attitude to save their lives.

People are going to be either all in or they're out.

The firehouse reflects the crew's complete dedication to astounding service. ■



JOHN MANIACI  
Firefighter Joe Schutz demonstrates how to slide down the station's fire pole.

JOHN MANIACI

## Global

Continued from Page 36

said. "In order for something to be sustainable, it has to be taken on by the community, by the locals, so it's not a constant condition of needing support from outside the country."

The idea is to provide enough technological support so people in the community can ultimately stand on their own. EWB volunteers aim to put technical systems in place that can be maintained using local resources long after they've gone.

## Cooking fuel needed

The most immediate challenge Tusler and the students

hope to address is a severe shortage of fuel used to cook food.

"Rwanda has a deforestation problem," Tusler said. "But people still cook with wood."

The student volunteers plan to create an alternative fuel source, compressing agricultural biomass into briquettes that can be burned like charcoal.

"So people can still cook but wouldn't use as much wood," Tusler said. "So part of the project is in making the briquettes. The other part is designing a stove that can efficiently use them."

But that kind of design work is difficult to do in a classroom thousands of miles away. So students like senior Julia Wagner visit Africa to learn what kind of stove will best suit the needs of

the people who will use it.

"This trip is an assessment," Wagner said. "Basically it's a first step to implement these projects. We're going to assess design parameters for the stove. What's the typical meal? How much weight does the stove need to hold? How much can you spend on fuel? How much can you afford to buy a stove?"

Over the past year the students have kicked around these questions and may have come up with a design that can be built cheaply using materials available throughout the region.

## Learning experience

Faculty adviser associate professor Giri Venkataramanan said the EWB program provides

a learning experience that will make his students better engineers.

"Our hope is that the students who engage in these opportunities will become future leaders," Venkataramanan said. "Whether they open their own companies or enter into the corporate world they will be better prepared to approach the world's problems."

Wagner, who had visited Rwanda on a previous project, took a summer position with local kitchen appliance manufacturer **Sub-Zero/Wolf**. But she said for her there's more to it than landing a job.

"I know that working in Rwanda was a big part of why they liked me and wanted to hire me for this term. But really I don't think there's anyone on the trip right

now who thinks this is just a good resume builder," Wagner said.

"The engineers that we have are committed to the region. They're committed to the ideal of less human suffering."

Job prospects notwithstanding, the students involved in EWB are motivated by more than the promise of a fat paycheck in the future.

The volunteers pay the bulk of their expenses to visit Rwanda. They're motivated almost exclusively by their desire to do good. Wagner said when she graduates she plans to join the **Peace Corps**. ■

James Edward Mills is a Madison freelance writer. He can be reached at [james@theoutdoorprofessional.com](mailto:james@theoutdoorprofessional.com).

PHILANTHROPY DIGEST

## Culver's hits high point in scholarship aid

Culver's has reached a milestone. The Prairie du Sac restaurant chain known for its hamburgers and custard has awarded more than \$1 million in scholarships to its workers through the Culver's VIP Foundation Scholarship Fund.

Culver's this year awarded \$216,000 in scholarships to student employees and

has now helped more than 1,000 employees over the last 15 years.

This year, 200 workers from more than 100 restaurants in 13 states took part in the program.

## Radiate Hope cancer event raises \$70,000

Radiate Hope, a fundraiser for cancer research and support groups and a cel-

ebration of cancer survivors, raised more than \$70,000 in an event July 12 in Middleton. Radiate Hope is a project of the employees of **TomoTherapy**, the Madison company that makes specialized radiation machines used for cancer treatment.

## BRIEFLY

**H.E. Stark Agency**, a debt collection firm at 6425 Odana Road, raised more than \$1,500 for the **American Collector**

**Association International Education Foundation** through a carnival-themed event outside the company's offices.

The **Phenomenal Women Business Group** has donated \$1,950 to the **Aaron Meyer Foundation**, which recently opened Aaron's House at 850 E. Gorham St. The transitional housing program is for college-aged men in recovery from alcohol or other drug dependency. ■

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For more information please contact Martha Lemmus, Girls Inc. Director, at 608-257-1436 or [mlemmus@ywcamadison.org](mailto:mlemmus@ywcamadison.org).

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