

Submitted photo

A photo of Bill Lammlein when he was in art school in the late 1960s at the Louisville School of Art.



Submitted photo

Bill Lammlein in full BMX racing gear years ago.



Submitted photo

A Lammlein family photo. From left are Bill, Dottie, Billy and Valerie.

LAMMLEIN

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first thing I did when I started my business was send out about 40 or 50 letters telling all these connections that I've opened my own business, and I tell you what, in a week I was in business. It's not what you know; it's who you know. I had plenty of work. I worked for the Browns. I worked for the Bingham's. I worked in Old Louisville, the Highlands and Anchorage.

Meanwhile, Dottie and I had admired this old house in La Grange — 205 Maple Court. We even told the owners to please let us know if they ever wanted to sell their house. We were back at the farm in Trimble County, putting an addition on that house, and I was driving the last nail when we got the call that they were ready to sell. We'd only seen the outside, and now we could finally see the inside. We took a look around and Dottie turned to me and said, "We're buying this house, aren't we?" And I said, "Yeah, I guess we are." We had a contingency sale, and they gave us one year to sell our farm. The sale closed exactly one year later, and then the next day my daughter got married! It was quite hectic.

But we had completely fallen in love with 205 Maple Court. It was built in 1910, and everything is still original, except the stuff that I've done to it and the stuff that the previous owner did. It has 10-foot ceilings and 8-foot-tall doors. All the trim is what they call red pine, which is now extinct. The previous owners put a very mid-century addition on the back, which actually works well. That's one of the things I tell people about old houses: don't always try and match the original exactly, because you can't.

I think I've always loved old houses — I'm an old soul, you know. Through my career, I was learning, and I would also go to the state historical preservation conferences. And from the time we lived in our apartment in La Grange, I had become very connected to the community. Dottie and I would talk to each other about La Grange; it was a beautiful little town, but the old buildings were in such terrible shape, with nothing to protect them. In the late 80s, we contacted the Kentucky Heritage Council, and Richard Jett, who was second in command there. They came out and told us what we could be doing. We hired a consultant who did a survey for the National Trust. The city didn't have to pay anything because Dottie and I donated our time and matched the grant from the federal government. At that time, John Black was mayor. He was a big proponent of this endeavor. He knew me and knew what I could and would do. There was a lot of local support, but up until this point, no organized efforts for preservation.

We organized and wrote an ordinance. We had a public hearing, invited and sent letters to everybody inside what we thought would be the proposed historic district. And so they came. Probably 100 people showed up. People got up and made remarks, and it was a hugely positive thing. There were some negatives, there always are, but mostly it was positive. So, we went to city council and they passed the ordinance. Then we formed a commission and wrote the bylaws. And the bylaws have been revised and rewritten multiple times since 1988, to keep up with changes.



Photo by Peter Campbell and Bobbi Nelson

Bill Lammlein with his beloved pup.



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Diana Draper and Bill Lammlein found love after Lammlein visited the library Draper worked at in Danville.

One thing I wish people knew about the La Grange Historic District Commission is that it is a resource for homeowners and a resource for the city. What a lot of people don't know is that history is the biggest tourist industry in the state of Kentucky. There are more people who like to do historical tourism than anything else in Kentucky. La Grange is a historical tourism destination because of the railroad museum, the history center and the historic properties around town. I know in the last probably 20 years of my business, every client I had in Louisville would mention that. "Oh, we love La Grange. We go out there all the time." But we have to preserve and protect our old properties. It's an economic advantage because preservation keeps up the values of property. People can take pride in their community which feels good, but the payout is really economic.

We don't really tell people what to do. We help people. I would tell owners of a historic home that before they spend a lot of money, they should come to the historic district commission and talk to us. Let us hear what you're going to do and let us help guide you.

There were wins and losses over the years. I remember working on the two houses on the Oldham County History Center Campus. The J. Chilton Barnett building was basically sitting on dirt. We had to jack it up eight feet in the air, dig under it and make it a brand new foundation, and set it back down. I also remember when the old inter-urban depot was torn down to make way for the parking lot at the corner of Main and Second. The rubble is actually buried under the mound that the swings are on in the Springs Park. We've lost a few historic buildings over the years. But we've saved even more.

In 2008-2009, I decided to run for mayor against the incumbent of eight years. It was during the recession, La Grange was in debt and I knew I had the support of the small businesses. So I said, "What the heck?" and ran. I won with 66% of the vote. I carried dog biscuits with me everywhere when I was campaigning. If you make friends with the dog, you make friends with the voter.

When I took office, La Grange was nearly bankrupt. We had a $10 million bond that was called.

The city had no money. We were in the middle of a recession. People still hate me for this, but I had to implement a compensation tax in order to get the money to prove to the bond people that yes, we could refinance this bond and be able to pay for it. The compensation tax is 1%, and it let us borrow the $10 million to pay off what we owed.

I had to go to Frankfort twice to beg for forgiveness for different things. One was the Clean Water Act, which we were not following at all, and we were fined something like $250 a week! I did a lot. I did what I could. I knew what our limits were financially. We just didn't have a lot of money.

When I ran for mayor, Dottie asked me, "Why are you doing that? You're going to retire next year and I want to travel." I told her I'd only serve four years. That was the agreement. But unfortunately, in the third year, she passed away.

After two years off, I ran for city council and served from 2016 to 2024. I'm on the Main Street Board. I'm on the Wilburn Foundation Trust Advisory. It feels as if I'm doing something all the time.

I remarried eight years ago. I met a librarian from Danville named Diana Draper. She invited me to come to Danville to see the new addition that had just been added to their historic library building. Then the courtship began and has continued to today.

I am a lucky man. I have had a productive and full life. And at the center of it all has been historic preservation. Just consider my own home; somebody owned it before I did, and somebody will own it after I am gone. But we all have a responsibility to keep the residential properties like my home, and the downtown La Grange properties in good repair so that we can preserve our history. If we tear it all down, who and what is going to tell the story?

ABOUT LIVING TREASURES

The ***Living Treasures*** program is a joint venture between The Oldham Era and the Oldham County History Center. Honorees are chosen by a committee from a pool of nominations accepted year-round.

The Living Treasures program publicly recognizes people who have generously served the community with kind hearts and good deeds. Their oral histories and photographs are recorded, archived and made available to the public at the Oldham County History Center as well as on The Oldham Era's website, www.oldhamera.com.

To qualify, a nominee must be a resident of Oldham County and demonstrate qualities such as humor, civility, respect, authenticity, spirit, continuity, integrity, peace, inspiration, community, kindness, simplicity, wisdom, courage, serenity and love. It is not necessary that the nominees are native to Oldham County, only that they currently reside here. Recipients are featured in The Oldham Era and in an exhibit at the history center. Send 300- to 500-word nomination letters to Living Treasures, Oldham County History Center, 106 N. Second Ave., La Grange, Ky., 40031.