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## **Developer's success cuts both ways William Huntress is known for a bold business style that has inspired both admiration and contempt**

By Phil Fairbanks

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**W**illiam Savino still remembers that day 25 years ago when he and his top student, William Huntress, talked about the young man's future.

"I'm going to work for Price Waterhouse," Huntress said with a somewhat disappointed tone in his voice.

"That's the best accounting gig in town," Savino reminded him.

"Yeah," said Huntress, "but you can't get rich at Price Waterhouse."

Even then, Huntress had a plan, a plan that would take him into the upper echelon of Buffalo's development world and, along the way, make him lots of money.

And lots of enemies.

Today, William Huntress is both loved and despised. He is one of Buffalo's biggest and most controversial developers -- his company has built or redeveloped office buildings throughout the country -- and a businessman with a reputation for having his way, regardless of the cost.

Huntress, 49, also is the guy who recently thumbed his nose at the Town of Amherst by cutting down trees on property he owns and the town is eager to preserve.

And he did it not once. Not twice. But three times.

"Sometimes, he comes across as a nice guy," said Ann Suchyna, one of the neighbors leading the fight to save the woodlands behind her house. "Other times, he's the bully trying to get his way."

Suchyna should know. She and Huntress have gone head to head for nearly six years, and she has had more than her share of bizarre encounters with him.

At times, they're cordial, even lighthearted. Like the time he saw Suchyna walking and stopped to talk about his own desire to exercise and lose weight.

Or the time he stopped at her house for a talk and asked her, "You didn't poison the coffee did you?"

That was early on in a relationship that turned ugly. Suchyna said she still remembers that day in May 2002, when Huntress called her and threatened to turn her neighbors against her.

"He told me, 'Ann, I'm going to give you 10 days to settle this and, if you don't, you'll be sorry,' " she recalled. "He also told me, 'If someone screws me out of a dime, I'll spend \$5 million to settle it.' He was threatening me."

Neighbors say Huntress, even now, will drive by in his black Hummer and purposely slow down in front of Suchyna's house, once even stopping to talk to her kids.

"Anyway he can, he'll harass Ann," said neighbor Shirley Galanes. "He's made Ann his project. He'll drive by, give her the peace sign, but I know he wants to drop one of those fingers."

Huntress doesn't deny those stories but said his intention was never to intimidate or threaten. He admits his relationship with Suchyna has soured.

"I think she's done a great job," he said of her efforts in fighting the Wehrle Drive development. "But there's that old saying, 'Pigs get fat. Hogs get slaughtered.' "

His anger becomes visible when he is asked about Amherst's decision to rescind a request for a waiver of the 50-year moratorium against water and sewer lines at the property. He said the town's decision was orchestrated by Suchyna behind his back.

"She crossed the line," he said. "Ann has gotten greedy."

Huntress doesn't hide his disdain for Suchyna or his other nemesis, the Amherst Town Board. Twice in the past year, the town has issued stop-work orders for tree cutting on his 20 acres of land.

"Just look at the Amherst Town Board," Huntress said. "It's somewhere between 'The Twilight Zone' and 'Saturday Night Live.' "

For Huntress, the issue is not the trees or wetlands that exist there. The real issue for him is property rights.

His company, Acquest Development, bought the land in 1998 without any knowledge of the moratorium. He later learned the town had received \$5 million in federal funds 15 years earlier to maintain it as wetlands.

"They took my property rights away," Huntress said. "It's like the town taking away the water and sewer lines to your house. But it's just a matter of time. The town is either going to pay me for my investment, or I'm going to develop the whole thing."

Town Board Member Daniel Ward says the blame belongs with Huntress and suggests a developer of his size and experience should know better than to purchase land the town, state and federal government want to preserve.

"These guys consider themselves the generals of the world," said Ward, who has known Huntress for more than 10 years. "He doesn't want to let this go."

>An early start

William Huntress came to Buffalo as a boy with an early and keen interest in real estate. At the age of 19, he bought his first piece of property -- five acres of prime real estate on Camino Island in Washington state.

He bought it with the help of his best friend, Lisa Schalk. She loaned him every cent she had -- about \$350, enough for a down payment.

In the first of many deals, Huntress later sold the property for four times its original value. He also closed an even bigger deal: He married Lisa.

"He just kind of grew on me," she said. "Besides, I wanted to get my money back."

Thirty years later, they're still together, the parents of a son and two daughters, and recent grandparents. Lisa Huntress said her husband got word of his new grandchild during a business meeting in Colorado and broke down in tears.

When they first were married, Huntress was in the Air Force and the two moved from place to place, often working a second and third job in their spare time. They cleaned churches and worked on farms to make ends meet and save money.

"I've done everything from running a jackhammer to castrating bulls to working as a janitor," he said.

They returned to Buffalo and, in the early 1980s, Huntress got his accounting degree from the University at Buffalo. It was there that he met Savino, one of his instructors and now one of the city's most prominent business lawyers.

"There are four kids I taught who still stand out, and he may have been the smartest one of all," Savino said. "He's one self-assured guy."

No question about that. Even his critics say William Huntress is a risk taker. He'll take on projects no one else will and fight to the end to get them done.

His wife says it's the "game," the excitement of making a big deal, that gets him up each morning. It also may explain his passion for correcting what he considers Amherst's misguided attempts to preserve the Wehrle Drive property.

"He's the kind of guy who can look the devil in the eye and not flinch," Lisa Huntress said. "After eight years, he decided, 'I'm going to right this even if it means going to jail.' "

That drive to succeed attracts big-money investors and partners to his projects, which now include developments in Colorado, Florida and Mexico.

Huntress recently acquired 90 acres of beachfront property at the tip of Mexico's Baja Peninsula and plans to develop it as a resort and upscale condominiums.

"His tenacity is certainly a factor," said Carl J. Montante Sr. of Uniland Development, a partner in the Mexico project. "He has the ability to not let the dozens, if not hundreds, of issues get in his way."

It's that same tenacity that drove Montante and Huntress to bicycle from Buffalo to Boston, Mass., in less than five days this summer. Turns out the two developers share a passion for the sport and everything it represents.

"It's the challenge," Montante said. "It's just you and the bike. It's exhilarating and demanding and that's the nature of our business as well."

#### >The other Huntress

For years, William Huntress palled around with businessman Frank J. McGuire. They played golf each Sunday and Huntress learned to ski at McGuire's home in Aspen.

All that ended in 2004 when McGuire, a developer and nursing home owner, sued Huntress for \$42 million. The suit claims Huntress cheated McGuire when selling five buildings in which McGuire's family was an investor.

"We laughed together, drank together, traveled together," said McGuire. "This is a friend of mine who screwed me."

Huntress tells a far different story and suggested McGuire should be happy with his \$2 million profit.

"I still love Frank," he said. "He was always good to me. If I needed a million dollars, he would give me a million dollars."

McGuire said Huntress has tried to extend the olive branch, most recently a Valentine's Day card that said simply, "Let's make up."

"Of course he loves me," McGuire said. "He wouldn't have anything without me."

Even among developers and builders, Huntress has a reputation for tough, hard-nosed tactics. Just ask Mike Shevlin, president of Concept Construction in Elma.

"He's for him and him only," said Shevlin. "He's the kind of guy who gives development a bad name. He's one of those guys you want to stay away from."

Shevlin said Huntress repeatedly asked him for estimates while promising him new jobs, only to turn around and give the work to someone else.

Huntress' son, Michael, an executive with Acquest, says the solicitation of bids is a normal part of the construction business and that contractors win or lose depending on their estimate.

"We work with the best numbers," said Michael Huntress.

Huntress, for years, flew under the radar screen, doing big deals with little fanfare or public scrutiny.

That changed three years ago when Niagara Falls officials called for an investigation into Huntress' ownership of a parking lot built without permits and leased to the Seneca Niagara Casino.

They accused Ashok Kapoor, the city's enforcement officer, of going easy on Huntress at a time when Kapoor's son, Rohit, was preparing to take over management of the Tralfamadore Cafe in Buffalo. The jazz club is in one of Huntress' buildings, and the elder Kapoor later went to work for Huntress.

"When I got thrown out of there, it hurt," said jazz musician Bobby Militello, who ran the Tralf until Huntress evicted him. "Huntress is the one to blame for Buffalo losing an icon."

The Tralf, one of the country's most famous jazz venues, closed its doors in May and Huntress is looking for a new operator. He said Militello was evicted because he was months behind in his rent, an allegation Militello disputes.

"We took a chance on a new guy," Huntress said, "and I'd do the same thing again."

One thing is certain. He'll have plenty of opportunities.

The bright, young student who William Savino remembers is now one of Buffalo's most prominent developers with a portfolio that includes office buildings in Rochester, Boston, Colorado, Maryland and Florida.

"He's the type of guy who will never, ever slow down," said his son. "He's never going to retire."

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