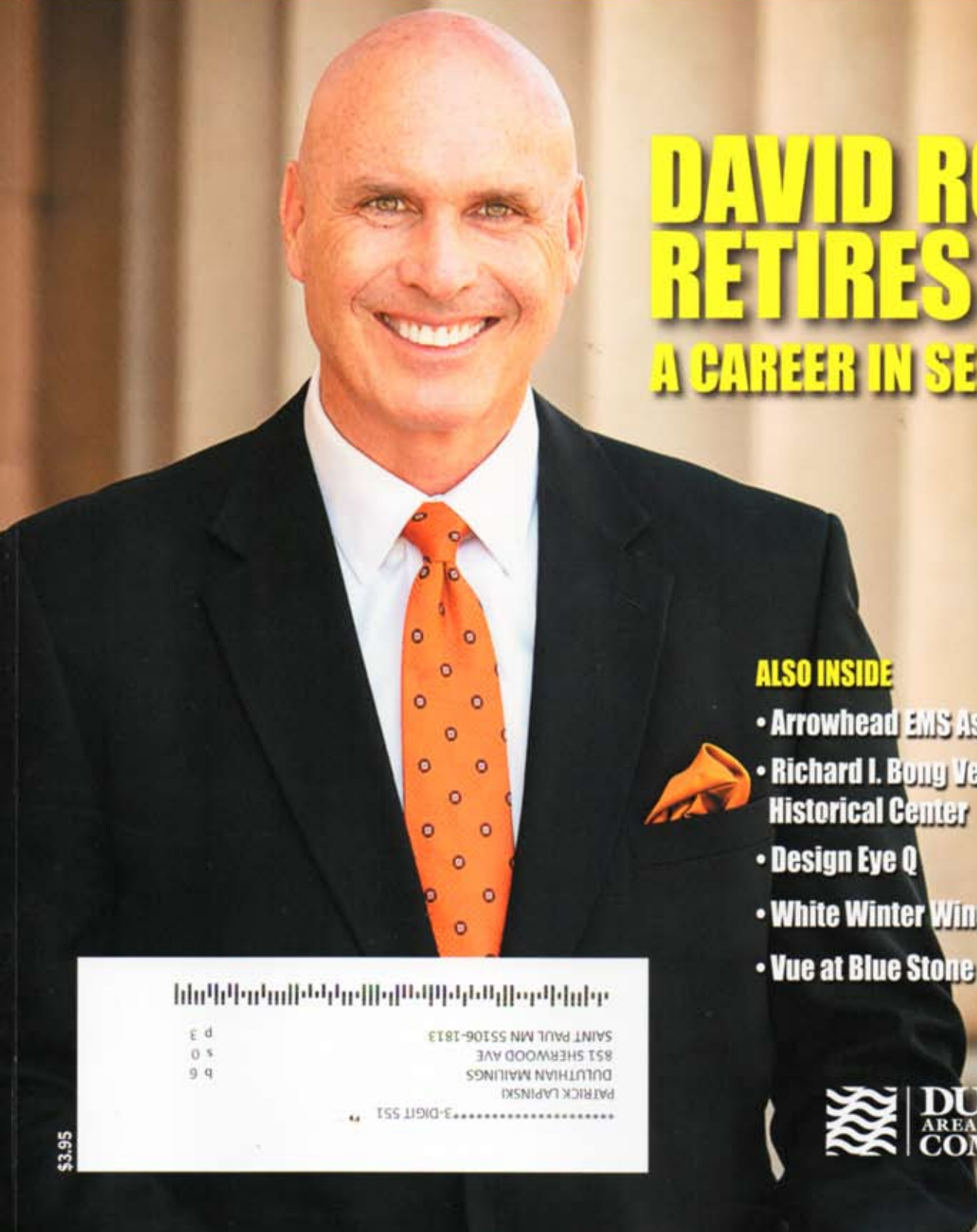


Duluthian

JULY/AUGUST 2021

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE DULUTH AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE



DAVID ROSS RETIRES A CAREER IN SERVICE

ALSO INSIDE

- Arrowhead EMS Association
- Richard I. Bong Veterans Historical Center
- Design Eye Q
- White Winter Winery
- Vue at Blue Stone



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AdMax Displays Inc.
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Editorial Committee.....Chamber Staff

Julie Aho, editor - AdMax

Creative Director.....Steve Isola

Art Director.....Tim Hunt

Photography.....Steve Isola
Tim Hunt

Advertising Sales.....Jay Ott

Jo Ellen Winship

Jim Caesar

Accounting.....Lori Jameson

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Email: inquiry@duluthchamber.com

Website: www.duluthchamber.com

On the Cover

Photo courtesy of Lynnette's Portrait Design. "I'm really proud of the fact that here we are. We started in 1870 and celebrated our 150th anniversary in 2020. We will continue to be a vibrant, go-to organization for our community well beyond my tenure," said Chamber President and CEO David Ross in reflecting on retirement.

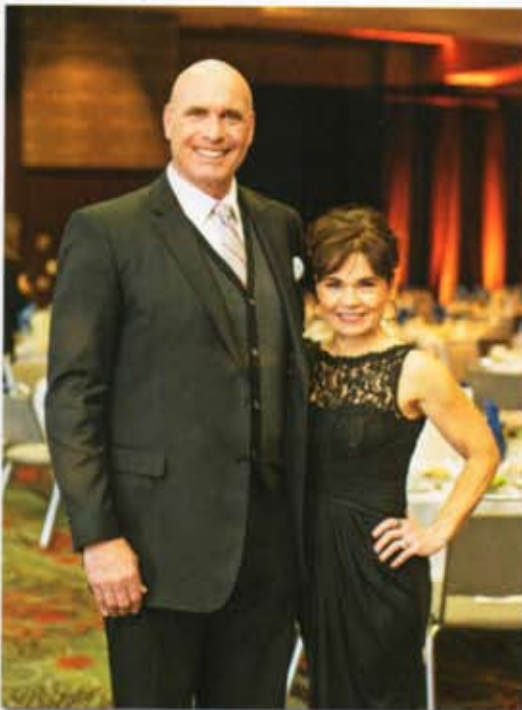


Features

8 A JOB WELL DONE

As he prepares to retire, David Ross and business and community leaders reflect on his 24-year Chamber career.

By Patrick Lapinski



18 HONORING THEIR SERVICE



The Richard I. Bong Veterans Historical Center supports veterans, educates students and the community, and draws visitors from all over the country.

By Regan Kohler

28 CRISIS COMMUNICATION



Thanks to strategic collaboration, the Arrowhead EMS Association has grown to become a driving force in emergency management.

By Tony Bennett

16 EYE ON DESIGN



Industrial firm Design Eye Q defines form, function and style for diverse industries including aviation, automotive, forestry, medical, sports and more.

By Andrea Busche

26 "WHERE THE MAGIC HAPPENS"



The award-winning White Winter Winery, Wisconsin's oldest meadery, cidery and distillery, celebrates its 25th anniversary.

By Andrea Busche

A Job Well Done

**AS HE PREPARES TO RETIRE, DAVID ROSS
AND BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS
REFLECT ON HIS CHAMBER CAREER**

BY PATRICK LAPINSKI

In the mid-1990s, Duluth Mayor Gary Doty initiated a community visioning process called Vision Duluth: 2001 and Beyond, and David Ross – who was then director of long-term care services at Benedictine Health System – recalls Doty asking him to lead that initiative. The experience became a turning point for him, igniting a passion that continues to this day.

“I co-chaired that, so when the Chamber position became available, it had enormous appeal to me,” said Ross. However, making the decision to professionally pivot from a successful health care career was difficult. “It was a big transition. I took a risk to leave a field after 18 years and enter the Chamber field,” he added.

But pivot he did, and the Duluth Area Chamber of Commerce and the region as a whole are better for it. Ross has been the Chamber’s steady and stalwart leader for more than two decades, and as he prepares for his retirement on August 4, he reflected upon his career.

“What’s impressed me about David is how he shows up. He is present at very important moments in the development of the city and the region.”

– PRESIDENT BARBARA MCDONALD, THE COLLEGE OF ST. SCHOLASTICA

“He is one of the best chamber advocates that I have seen in my work with numerous chambers of commerce in three different states.”

– UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA DULUTH CHANCELLOR LENDLEY BLACK

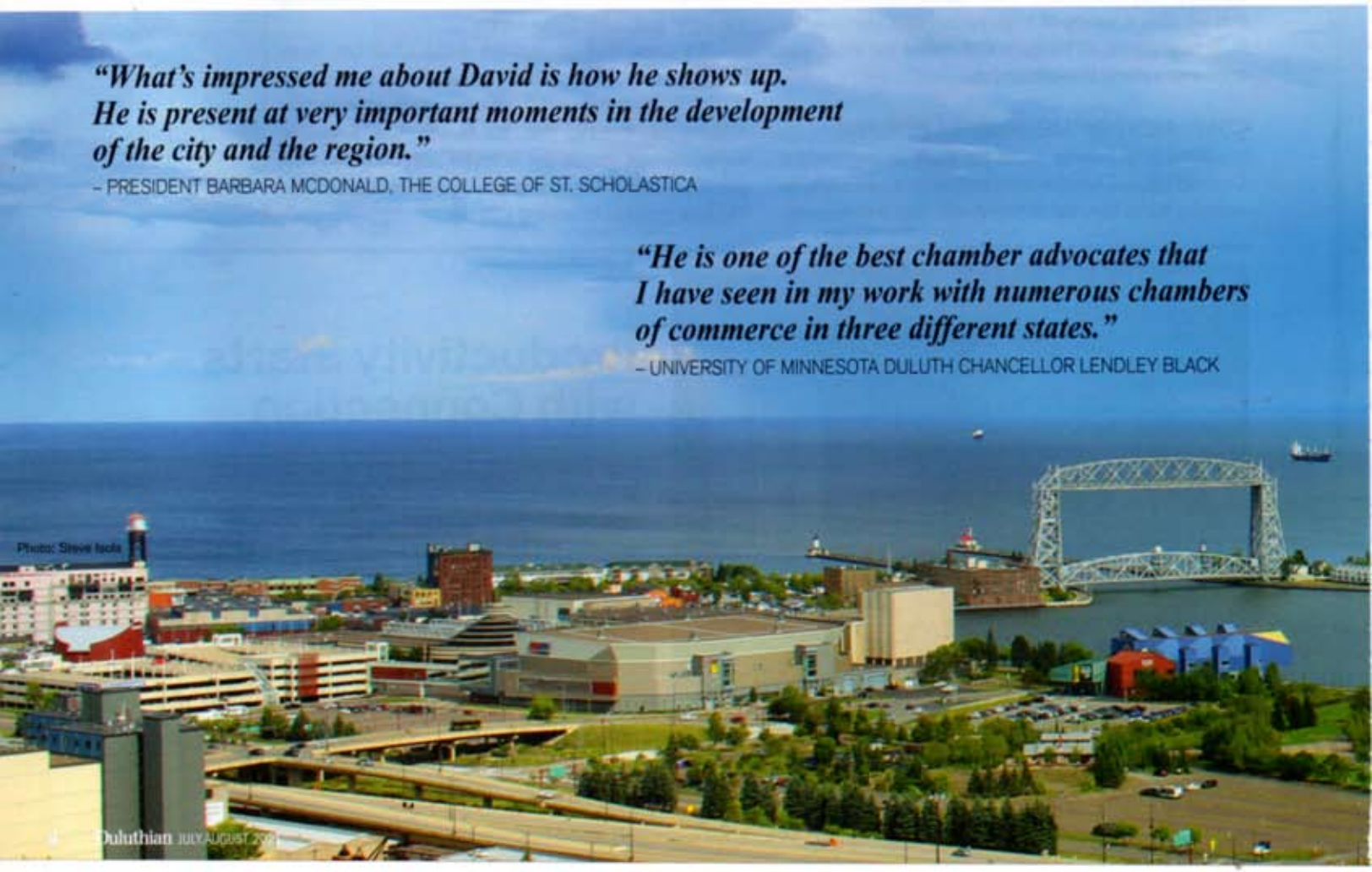


Photo: Steve Isack

“We have an exceptionally strong team that’s recognized at a state and national level as being a high-performing team.”

— PRESIDENT AND CEO DAVID ROSS

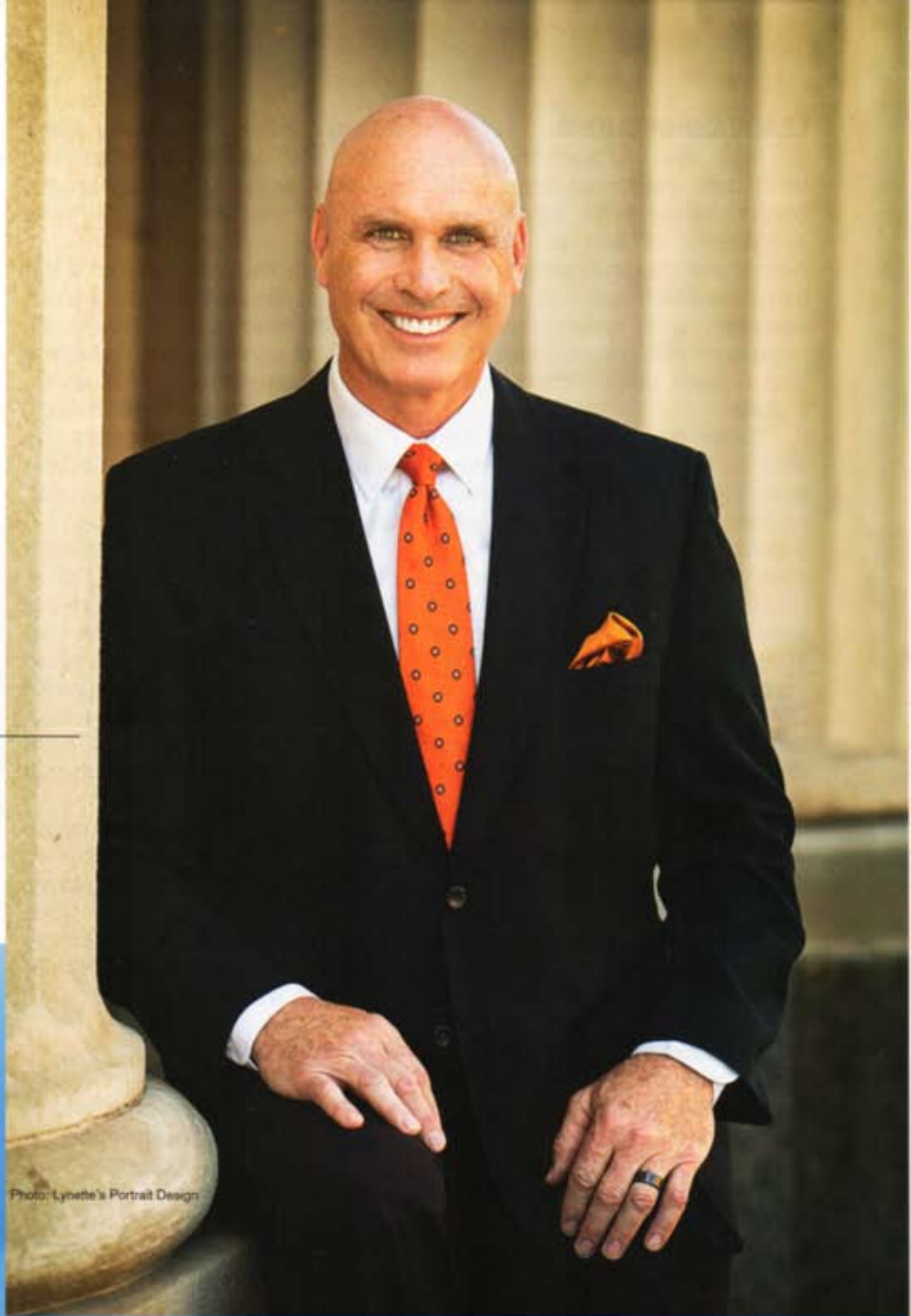
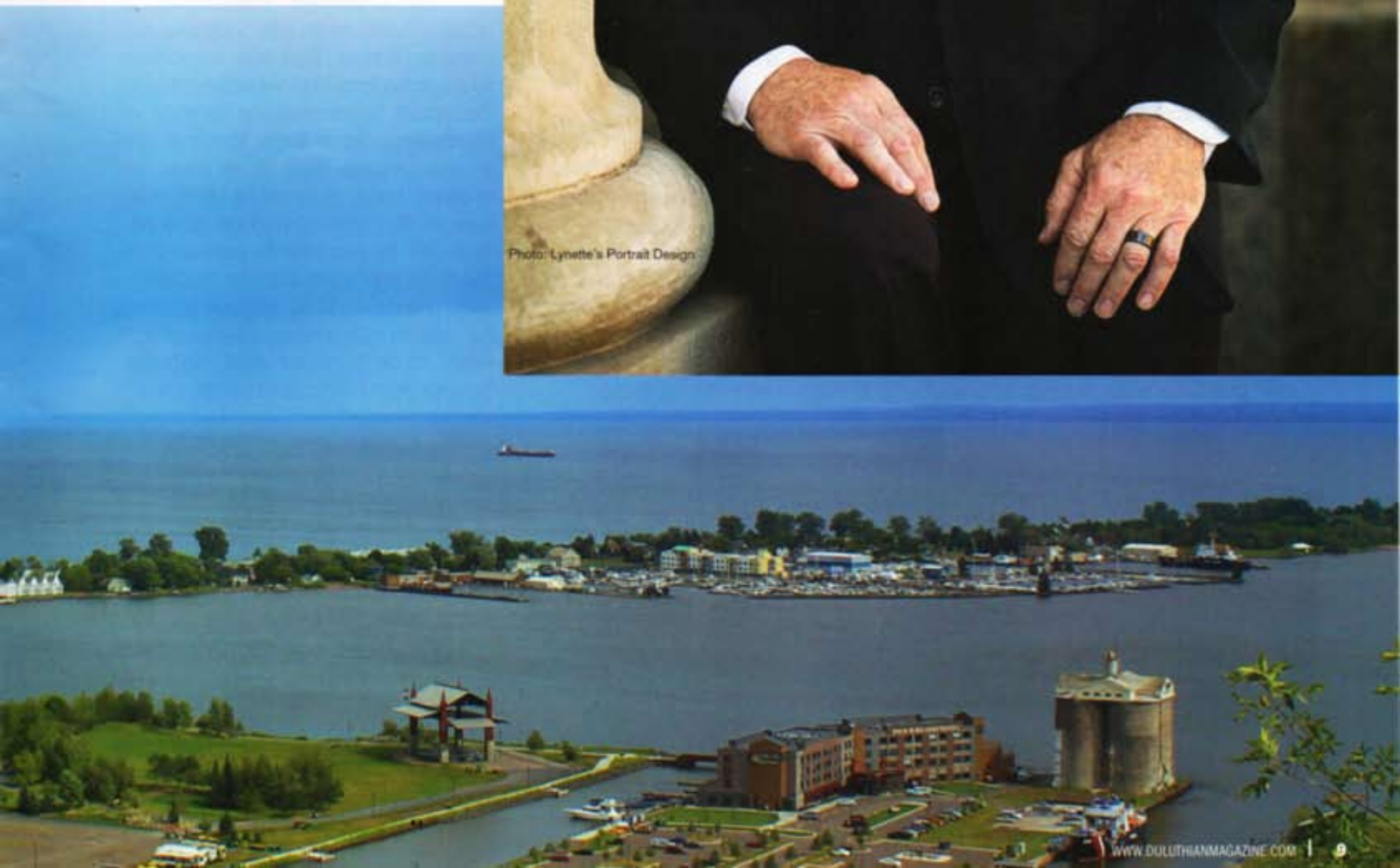


Photo: Lynette's Portrait Design



LEADERSHIP CHOPS

Ross, who was born and raised in Duluth, graduated from Concordia College in Moorhead with a Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration and subsequently earned a Master of Arts in Management, with an emphasis on organizational development, from The College of St. Scholastica in Duluth.

Those degrees prepared him well for his health care profession. He served as administrator of Itasca Health Center in Grand Rapids, assistant administrator and then administrator of Nopeming Health Center in Duluth, administrator of Presbyterian Homes of Minnesota in St. Paul, administrator of Benedictine Health Center in Duluth, CEO of Polinsky Medical Rehabilitation Center in Duluth, and director of long-term care services for Benedictine Health System in Duluth.

The experience and expertise Ross gained throughout his health care career – particularly in terms of leading organizations as well as budget and financial acumen – also served him well when he was selected as Chamber president and chief executive officer in 1997, which was a difficult financial time for the Duluth Area Chamber of Commerce.

"When I came in, our organization was in financial duress. It did not have any retained earnings, and we struggled even to make payroll," said Ross. Today, the Chamber is in a strong financial position with strong financial

reserves, he noted: "We're really a gold standard for the Chamber industry, as far as our operations and what we have produced over the years."

Equally important to him is the quality of the staff that the Duluth Area Chamber is now able to attract. Ross says the Chamber offers not just compensation, but an attractive benefits package as well. That didn't happen overnight, he noted, but over time, it is yielding great results, as evidenced by staff skill sets, loyalty and retention.

"We have an exceptionally strong team that's recognized at a state and national level as being a high performing team, in part because we've emphasized having a work environment where people can make this a career," Ross said. "We have people here that have been here nine years and two that have been here seven years."

The staff's professionalism brings strength and stability to Chamber operations. And employee loyalty pertains to Ross as well, since the average tenure for a chamber executive is three years. "My 24 years here is atypical," he said.

BUILDING EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Ross believes the challenges of leading the Chamber are different from those of most corporate CEOs, because "You have 1,000 members that you are responding to, and they feel as if they are investors in your organization," he explained. "They feel they should have a say, and that's a wonderful thing."

Each year also brings a new Chamber board chair, in other words, a new boss. "Personally, I've reported to 24 different board chairs over my 24 years," Ross said. "If I were in a business and reporting to a board or reporting to an owner, that might change once or twice or a few times during my tenure. But I have had to adapt to – and prepare for and provide orientation for – 24 different board chairs."

You can say the same thing about mayors, with whom relationships can turn cantankerous for any Chamber CEO if viewpoints often clash. But that wasn't the case for Ross. "It's been a wonderful experience to witness and interact with, and to engage with, four different individuals as mayor during my tenure," he said, "and each one was a very distinctly different individual with different strengths. Each has contributed toward advancing our community. I've enjoyed working with each of them."

The Chamber continues to work closely with city officials regarding issues that are important to its membership, which includes nonprofit organizations as well as businesses from large to small. It's a relationship that Ross says he worked hard to develop and nurture from the moment he took office. "We do our best to partner with them to advocate for our community," he said. That applies to how he views Chamber relationships with county, state and national government officials as well.



As an advocacy organization, the Chamber learned the pitfalls of endorsing political candidates early on. Ross says they found that endorsing candidates was counterproductive. "You pick winners and losers and say you strongly advocate for a mayoral candidate, and that candidate loses," he explained. "And the next day after the election, I need to go in and talk to the mayor, who we opposed publicly. It's a strange, awkward relationship going forward. So what we said is yes, we want to be a strong advocate for business. But we will advocate for particular initiatives and particular policies, rather than advocating for individuals."

Ross also knew from the beginning of his tenure that he wanted to win the support of the Duluth Building and Construction Trades Council. So one of the first things he did was walk over to the Duluth Labor Temple to introduce himself to all of the business agents and the labor leaders. He told them they needed to work together.

"We partnered in 1997, early in my time at the Chamber, and particularly with Craig Olson, the president of the Duluth Building and Construction Trades," Ross said, adding that Olson took a risk in partnering with him and vice

"You can't be dealing with the fringes; you've got to deal with the center. I think David is a very centered person. I think he's got a really nice balance of qualities."

— OWNER CAROL VALENTINI, VALENTINI'S RESTAURANTS

versa. However, taking that risk paid off in advocating for building the Duluth Technology Village. "We advocated for the development and construction of the Technology Village," Ross said. "It was opposed by many in our community. We went to the City Council and asked for their support, because the city needed to clear some of the property and make it available for this block-long construction in the most important block of our downtown – on Lake Avenue and Superior Street."

The collaboration between the Duluth Building and Construction Trades Council and the Duluth Area Chamber on the Technology Village was the first successful collaboration between the two organizations. Ross says it has since been duplicated dozens of times over the years, bringing hundreds of millions of dollars from the state legislature for bonding on various projects.

Rather than sitting on the fence regarding issues of concern to the community (whether community viewpoints merely differ

mildly or are seen as downright divisive), Ross strongly believes that "As leaders of the business community, our voices need to be heard. And they should be heard clearly and early on in emerging issues."

"We were, in fact, maybe the first organization to come out in support of the Duluth School District's Long-Range Facilities Plan, subsequently labeled the Red Plan, which brought \$315 million to our school district in the way of investing in our 13 buildings – our 13 schools within the district," Ross said by way of example. "We're in the position often of touring prospective business owners and operators that were thinking of relocating to Duluth. One of the first things they would want to see – because it's so important to whether or not they will be able to attract and retain employees in Duluth, and for their business – was what are the schools like? So that was a big one for us."

A STEADY RESOURCE THROUGHOUT THE PANDEMIC

Building strong ties to its members, as well as to helpful resources, has paid off for the Chamber. As the COVID-19 pandemic was easing, Ross reflected on how the Chamber had weathered the past year. "What we did is ensure

"His steady, calm and respectful approach has been a hallmark of his leadership style ...he is always timely, prepared and articulate."

— EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR DEB DELUCA, DULUTH SEAWAY PORT AUTHORITY

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE DULUTH AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE





Ross's vision in 1998 turned the Duluthian into a successful and award-winning Chamber publication.

that we were a source of information and education and encouragement for our members," he said. "Because of that, we survived it remarkably well. We've seen our membership drop from 1,100 to 950. Yet for those 950, we have done our best to provide them a return on their investment – and illustrate to them that it continues to be a worthwhile, necessary investment for them."

Ross says that when the pandemic hit, the Chamber staff started providing daily updates on resources for members. "We started to promote all of the multiple national, state and local resources that were available to them – grant money, loans, directions on how to proceed with masks, how to handle staff during this transition, all of it," he explained. "We provided a daily pandemic update on what was unfolding, so that they could, with a keystroke each day, tap into this Chamber resource. They could know that we have gleaned – from national, state and local sources – what we think will be helpful to them in making their decisions on a day-to-day basis."

In fact, the level of interaction between the Chamber and its members actually increased during the pandemic. "During times of crisis, you can step up. There were other chambers that closed, there were other chambers that cut their

"He knew that collectively, the perspectives of the business community allowed for better decisions and a more comprehensive view of the issues facing our community."

– EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR KAREN HERMAN, UDAC INC.

"He has a great knack for advocating for his position without beating up or denigrating somebody else. He's a class act in that way."

– ST. LOUIS COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR KEVIN GRAY

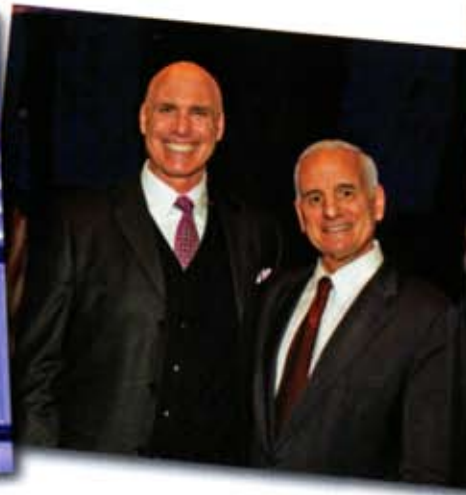
staff and radically brought down their level of activity," said Ross. "We wanted to ensure from the outset, back in March of 2020, to do more for the membership. Because of that, through our social media presence, our online presence, the resources and our training, we transitioned to virtual. We still had our meetings, we still had our offerings, we still made our resources available, but did so on a virtual basis."

COMMUNITY LEADERS REFLECT ON WORKING WITH ROSS

Restauranter Carol Valentini of the Valentini's Restaurant operations in Duluth and Chisholm has known Ross since childhood. "I think quality leadership is absolutely critical these days," Valentini said. "You need to find people that have a good balance of traits and who are able to convince the majority of people. You've got to connect with them, because if you can't, you can't lead. You can't be dealing with the fringes; you've got to deal with the center. I think David is a very centered person. I think he's got a really nice balance of qualities."

"He is one of the best chamber advocates that I have seen in my work with numerous chambers of commerce in three different states," said University of Minnesota Duluth Chancellor Lendley Black, who is a strong supporter of the Duluth Area Chamber. "He is tireless in his commitment to see our business community thrive." Black also noted that Ross lavishes praise on others and is humble about his own accomplishments.

"David has been a dedicated leader committed to inclusive participation in the Chamber – large, small, corporate, nonprofit. He knew that collectively, the perspectives of the business community allowed for better decisions and a more comprehensive view of the issues facing our community," said Executive Director Karen Herman of Udac Inc., a nonprofit that supports people with disabilities. "David loves Duluth, and his passion for the Zenith City is unending and contagious. He is able to communicate this passion to citizens, businesspeople, legislators, city officials and tourists alike. When you visit with David, you know he is sincere in celebrating the diversity of business and recreation that Duluth has to offer the community, the state of Minnesota and the nation."



David Ross and his wife, Kaytee.

St. Louis County Administrator Kevin Gray says Ross was among one of the early leaders to reach out to him when Gray was elected to talk about the Chamber's role and the importance of the businesses and members that he represented. "He has a great knack for advocating for his position without beating up or denigrating somebody else. He's a class act in that way," said Gray. "He makes his business point; he has a sense of what is possible. He is aware of

politics, but doesn't get political. He always states things very clearly and advocates in the interests of his members. And he's consistent that way. When he approaches an issue, he doesn't come at you with a sledgehammer, though he can be very firm."

As a proud College of St. Scholastica graduate, Ross was also one of the first area leaders to welcome St. Scholastica President Barbara McDonald to Duluth. "I think David is what I would call just a premier

relationship builder, and I think he has a very deep and strong understanding of the business community," said McDonald. "He has a passion for the work that he does and is completely committed to the success of Duluth and the region.

"What's impressed me about David is how he shows up. He is present at very important moments in the development of the city and the region," McDonald added. "His connections with organizations



“He lives and breathes the Chamber ... I would just add that David is just a wonderful person.”

– PRESIDENT AND CEO KEN JOHNSON, NORTH SHORE BANK

like APEX, with other businesses and industries, has really been critical. He’s a class act and somebody who just has a very strong ability to connect people, to understand relationships and to think strategically about partnerships.”

Executive Director Deb DeLuca of the Duluth Seaway Port Authority concurred. “David is consistently engaging, outgoing and welcoming,” she said. “His steady, calm and respectful approach has

been a hallmark of his leadership style. He is a consummate professional; he is always timely, prepared and articulate.” She added, with a laugh, “Won’t all of us miss his radio voice and infamous introductions [of speakers at Chamber events]?”

Ken Johnson, president and CEO of North Shore Bank, pinpoints Ross’ intense passion and enthusiasm for the business community and the city of Duluth as

David Ross - Professional and Civic Involvement

- Nominee, Duluth Hall of Fame Award
- Member, City of Duluth Comprehensive Land Use Plan Steering Committee
- Member, City of Duluth Unified Development Code Steering Committee
- Co-chair, 2001 and Beyond, Duluth’s Community Visioning Process
- Inductee, Duluth East High School Hall of Fame, Induction Class of 2016
- Member, Leadership Duluth, Duluth Area Chamber of Commerce
- Vice Chair, Duluth Area Chamber of Commerce
- Member, Duluth Rotary Club #25
- Toastmaster of the Year (Area and Division Champion), Lutheran Brotherhood Toastmasters
- President, Medical Campus Toastmasters
- Vice President, Public Awareness, Junior Achievement of Duluth
- Director, Community Action Duluth
- Board Chair, Duluth Entertainment and Convention Center Board of Directors
- Recipient, Martin Luther King Jr. Drum Major for Peace Award
- Director, Minnesota Chamber of Commerce Executives
- Graduate, Dale Carnegie Leadership Course
- Recipient, Certificate of Appreciation, Duluth Human Rights Commission
- Recipient, Labor Management Partnership Award, Lake Superior Area Labor Management Association
- Recipient, 500 Most Powerful Business Leaders in Minnesota 2018, 2019 & 2020
- Recipient, Sam Solon Lifetime Legislative Service Award
- Rep. Liz Olson presented a proclamation on behalf of the House of Representatives for his dedication and service to the Chamber and business community for the past 24 years.



key to his long tenure and success.

"He lives and breathes the Chamber," Johnson said. He noted that among Ross's character traits, the one that really stands out to him is the level of respect that Ross shows to everyone.

"I would just add that David is just a wonderful person," said Johnson. "I have really enjoyed the honor of getting to know him and spend time with him serving on the [Chamber] board."

"WE WILL CONTINUE TO BE A VIBRANT, GO-TO ORGANIZATION"

Throughout his long tenure at the Chamber, serving through both good economic times and hard economic times for the region, is what Ross is most proud of. He is even prouder of the Chamber itself.

"We're already seeing our membership starting to come back and many new businesses joining us. The worst is behind us," he said. "We will – as the Chamber has done

for 151 years, through all the wars, through all the highs, and through all the depressions and growth periods – refashion ourselves. And I'm really proud of the fact that here we are. We started in 1870 and celebrated our 150th anniversary in 2020. We will continue to be a vibrant, go-to organization for our community, well beyond my tenure." 

Patrick Lapinski is a freelance writer who grew up in Superior.