



Sauk Valley Area  
chamber of commerce



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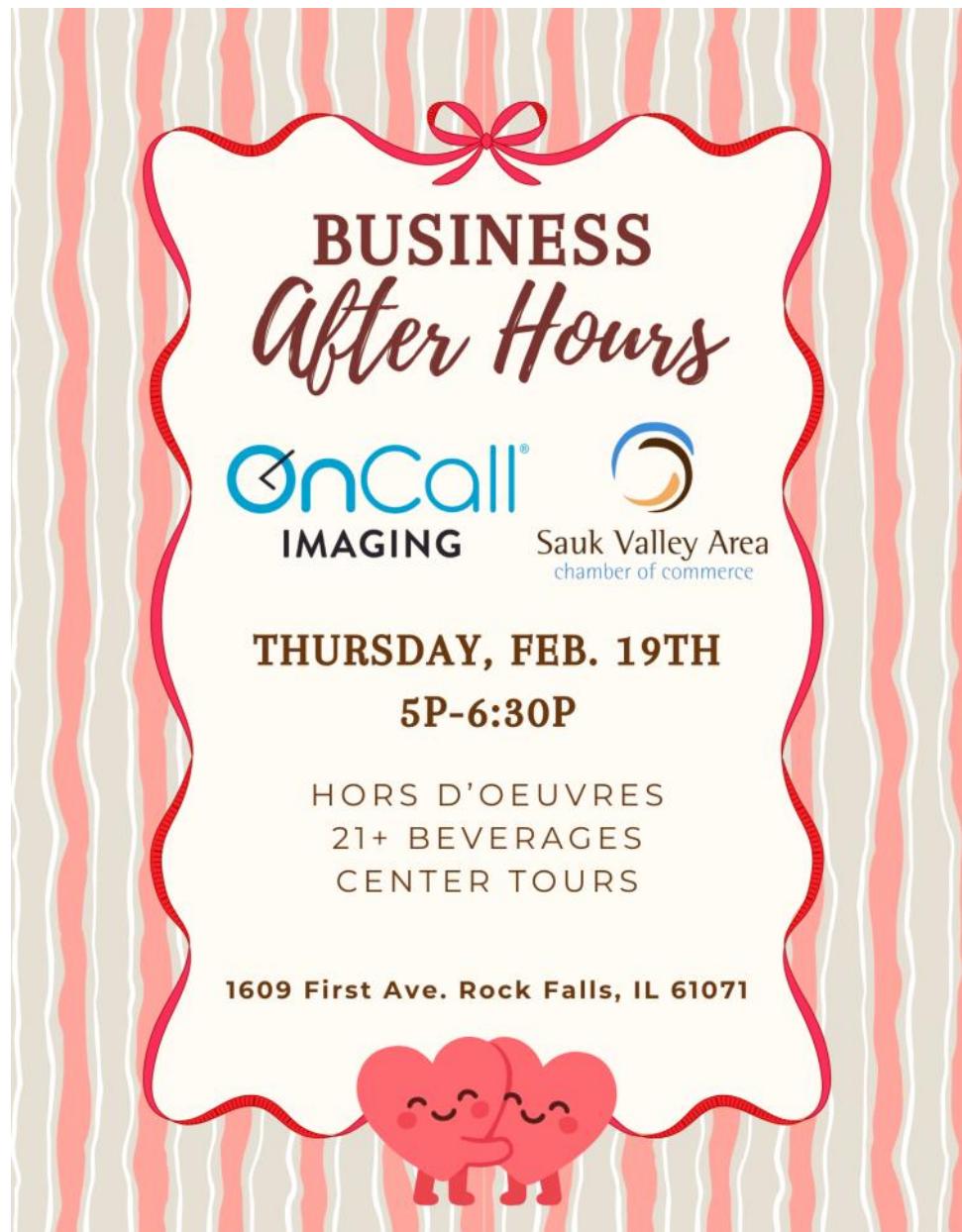
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# Partnering for Success

FEBRUARY 2026



**BUSINESS  
After Hours**

**OnCall<sup>®</sup> IMAGING**

**Sauk Valley Area  
chamber of commerce**

**THURSDAY, FEB. 19TH**  
**5P-6:30P**

**HORS D'OEUVRES  
21+ BEVERAGES  
CENTER TOURS**

**1609 First Ave. Rock Falls, IL 61071**



Choose Your Own

## CAREER ADVENTURE

— SVCC CTE OPEN HOUSE —

Learn more about SVCC CTE programs. Visit classrooms & meet professors.

**FEBRUARY 26 • 6:00–8:00 P.M. • SVCC WEST MALL**  
Sauk Valley Community College 173 IL-2, Dixon, IL 61021 • No registration required.  
Contact Sasha Logan with questions, email [sasha.b.logan@svcc.edu](mailto:sasha.b.logan@svcc.edu) or call 815.835.6334



## February Meetings

- February 10 Exec
- February 12 Ambassadors
- February 17 Board
- February 17 Agri-business Committee
- February 19 Hispanic Business Leaders

### Sauk Valley Area Chamber of Commerce Directors & Staff

#### Executive Committee\*

- President: Pam Fluck
- First Vice President: Geoff Wright
- Second Vice President: Alejandro Rivera
- Treasurer: Tim Determan
- Past President: Dr. Jon Mandrell

\*effective until 2/17/2026

#### **Term Ends January 31, 2027**

- Emily Buikema, Ward Murray Pace & Johnson
- Mike Ceruzzi, Moore Tire
- Josh Knie, Knie Appliance & TV

#### **Term Ends January 31, 2028**

- Alejandro Rivera, RE/MAX Sauk Valley
- Geoff Wright, CGH Medical Center
- Josh Johnson, Whiteside Area Career Center
- Dr. Jon Mandrell, SVCC
- Rebecca Munoz-Ripley, YWCA

#### **Term Ends January 31, 2029**

- Pam Fluck, Sauk Valley Bank
- Sandi Cavazos, US Bank
- Sami Wiggins, Castor Home Health Solutions
- Cael Sanders, Sterling Federal Bank

#### **Staff**

- Dallas Knack—Executive Director
- Ronda Borgmann—Financial Specialist
- Chrissy Palacz—Member Relations & Office Specialist

The views expressed by any member of the Chamber do not represent the Sauk Valley Area Chamber of Commerce in any official endorsement or support of any specific elected official or political party. Any products, events, statements, views or opinions offered or expressed by members are not the products, events, statements, views or opinions of the SVACC, nor endorsed by the Chamber or its membership at large.

## A Message from the Director

We've kicked off 2025 with enthusiasm, connection, and meaningful engagement, setting the stage for an exciting year ahead.

We began the year with our Annual Dinner, a wonderful evening celebrating the achievements of our business community, recognizing our Chamber Champion and Ambassador of the Year, and looking ahead to the future. It was inspiring to see so many members come together to support and celebrate the success of our region.

At the Annual Dinner we had the opportunity to share exciting news with our members regarding the launch of the **Sauk Valley Future Founders** program, a hands-on entrepreneurship experience for middle school students (grades 6–8) in the Sauk Valley. This program will span Wednesdays from June 11 until July 1, and culminate with a pop up event on July 11 for the community to join in the fun.

Through a partnership with the Small Business Development Center at SVCC, Whiteside Area Career Center, and University of Illinois Extension 4H Program, Sauk Valley Future Founders is designed to spark creativity, confidence, and leadership. The Sauk Valley region has an excellent program for high school students in place, but our goal is to start the conversation of entrepreneurship sooner, at a middle school level and establish a pipeline of entrepreneurship from middle school, into the existing high school program, and right into our downtown storefronts. We know these kids are the future of our community, so let's give them the tools to be the leaders we need.

With such a strong start, we're keeping the momentum going! We have a full year of exciting events ahead, including the Golf Outing, Fiesta Day Parade, Manufacturing Dinner, and many more networking and educational opportunities.

Your engagement is what makes these events so impactful, and we encourage you to stay involved!



# Investor Update February 2026

## NEW INVESTORS

**American Legion Post 296**  
601 1st Avenue, Sterling  
(815) 716-0436

**Sterling Box Company**  
1980 Eastwood Dr., Sterling  
(815) 626-9657

## INVESTOR RENEWALS

Arthur's Garden Deli  
Birkeys Farm Store  
Candlelight Inn Rock Falls  
Community State Bank  
Crown Exterminator, Inc.  
Destinations Travel Services, Inc.  
Edward Jones, Nick Lareau  
Franklin Creek Conservation  
Gold Star FS, Inc.  
Healthcare Plus Senior Care  
Holiday Inn Express & Suites  
Kelly's Restaurant, Inc.  
Ken Nelson Auto Group

K's Korner Trading Post  
LK Design Source  
Mattox Insurance Agency  
Momentum ABA Services  
Moore Monument & Granite Co.  
N & C Cleaning Service  
NCI Works/BEST, Inc.  
RE/MAX Sauk Valley  
River Country 101.7, WIXN  
1460AM/95.1FM, Sky 95.7FM  
Rotary Airlock  
Sauk Valley CPR  
Sauk Valley Food Bank  
Schilling Funeral Home  
Scholl Insurance Agency  
Select Employees Credit Union  
St. Mary's School  
Stahr Media  
The Dixon: Historic Theatre  
The IFH Group  
Treja Management LLC  
United Electric  
United Way of Whiteside Co.  
Valor Support Project  
Wahl Clipper Corporation  
Wal-Mart D.C. #7024  
Willett, Hofmann & Assoc.

## Over \$1000 Invested

Central Bank Illinois  
CGH Medical Center  
Community State Bank  
Farmer's National Bank  
Midland States Bank  
Sauk Valley Bank  
Select Employees Credit Union  
Sterling Federal Bank  
The IFH Group  
US Bank  
Wahl Clipper Corp.  
Wal-Mart DC #7024  
Ward, Murray, Pace & Johnson

We would like to give special recognition to the following groups who provide extra support to the Sauk Valley Area Chamber of Commerce. This extra effort and support is truly appreciated. If you have the opportunity to express your sincere appreciation to these members, please do so!

## 150% Club

Helm Civil  
Hill's Electric Motor Service, Inc.  
Lance's Plumbing  
LK Design Source  
Loescher HVAC  
M5 Industries, LLC  
Mattox Insurance Agency

RE/MAX Sauk Valley  
Reagan Mass Transit District  
Rock River Hospice & Home  
Select Employees Credit Union  
Stratus Networks  
Surf Internet  
United Craftsmen

## 110% Club

Allure of Sterling  
Altran Magnetics  
Astec Industries  
Bargain Exterminators  
Best Cob  
Bollman Auto Center  
Brown Construction Company

Bushel Basket Candle Co., Inc.  
Compeer Financial  
Dennis Electric of Tampico, Inc.  
Gold Star Cleaning LLC  
Hollyhock Hill Farms  
Kiwanis Club of Sterling  
N&C Cleaning  
Rock River Lumber & Grain

Sauk Valley CPR  
Scholl Insurance Agency, Inc.  
SERVPRO of Sterling  
Showplace Antiques & Treasures  
Smeltzer Insurance Agency  
St. Vincent DePaul Society  
The Mertes Law Firm, P.C.



## Chamber Ambassadors

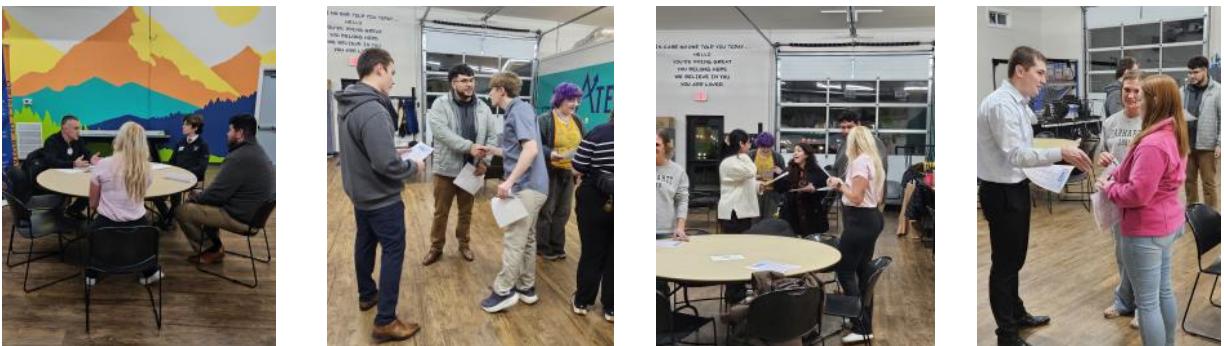
Allie Johnston – University of Illinois Extension  
Brian Hawkins—Brian Hawkins Insurance,  
The Cornerstone Agency  
Cael Sanders—Sterling Federal Bank  
Cassi Pistole—Allure Healthcare  
Ethan Harrington—Ken Nelson Auto Group

Esther Salazar —CGH Medical Center  
John Kelly—Culver's of Rock Falls  
Karen Voss – Morningside of Sterling  
Lyndsey Kelly—Sauk Valley Community College  
Mary White – Community State Bank  
Sami Wiggins — Castor Home Nursing  
Tygen Bausman—Sauk Valley Bank

## Sauk Valley Under 40

SVU40 had the best time meeting new people and learning about area opportunities during Connect & Cultivate in January! We had lots of new faces join us, looking to network and get involved. After a quick round of speed networking, everyone had a chance to hear from Rotary, Dixon Kiwanis, Jaycees, and learn about committees and boards in our area.

The group is already looking forward to our next event on Saturday, April 25. Keep an eye out for details on an Earth Day themed event!



## Annual Meeting and Dinner

The SVACC Annual Meeting & Dinner on January 29, 2026, was a lovely evening hosted by the CEO East and West class! They provided a Dinner Undercover for this year's annual event, providing an opportunity for our members to gather, connect, and celebrate the accomplishments of our community in 2025. The CEO students shared “top secret” information they have uncovered on local businesses during their time in “spy academy” AKA CEO Program, and provided a fun way to get to know the students.

Thank you to our members who joined us for the event; CEO for planning and executing the evening; Walmart DC for sponsoring the CEO class's meals; and McCormick Event Center for being a wonderful host.

*Continued on page 5.*

#### *Annual Meeting & Dinner continued*

We celebrated incredible individuals who have gone above and beyond for our community, including Chamber Champion, LeAndra Hartman; Ambassador of the Year, Sami Wiggins; and Sauk Valley Under 40 Emerging Leader, Gracie Young.

#### **Chamber Champion: LeAndra Hartman**

Le had a dedicated career at Eastland High School serving countless students before moving to the CEO program, serving as a facilitator for the past 13 years and helping build the program into a nationally recognized model. During her time with CEO she has prepared the next generation, not just for jobs, but for life. She has connected students to business owners, civic leaders, and opportunities that many never imagined for themselves, strengthening both individual futures and the future of the Sauk Valley.



Beyond the CEO program, Le has played a key role in the Sauk Valley Community Leadership Program as both a facilitator and guest presenter and has been instrumental in facilitating Professional Women's Network workshops and Chamber board retreats. Known for her selfless service and preference to work behind the scenes, Le consistently invests in others while keeping her family—her dad, sisters, daughters, and grandchildren—at the center of her life. Her dedication to mentoring future leaders and strengthening organizations across the Sauk Valley makes her a deserving recipient of the Chamber Champion Award.

#### **Lavonne Colloton Ambassador of the Year Award: Sami Wiggins of Castor Home Health Solutions.**

Sami is a true force in the Sauk Valley community, always showing up with energy and enthusiasm at events across multiple organizations. She's often the first to celebrate local businesses—whether at ribbon cuttings, Customer Service Award presentations, or Chamber gatherings—cheering on her neighbors and lifting up the community wherever she goes. She champions leadership development with a special focus on empowering women. She is currently part of the Sauk Valley Community Leadership Program cohort and serves as chair of the Professional Women's Network, inspiring others to step into their potential. With her passion, dedication, and unwavering support for the Sauk Valley, Sami exemplifies what it means to be a true community ambassador.



#### **Sauk Valley Under 40 Emerging Leader Award: Gracie Young, Sauk Valley Bank**

As a member of the SVU40 steering committee, Gracie has risen to the occasion over the past year, playing a key role in rebranding and reinvigorating the group. She combines her expertise with a genuine attentiveness to her peers, helping shape new events and initiatives that reflect the feedback and interests of the group. Gracie's passion for the Sauk Valley region is contagious—she actively highlights the area's many offerings and inspires her colleagues to get involved. She is always armed with a professional development tip, a life hack for combating burnout, or a TikTok trend that we all have to try. Though early in her leadership journey, Gracie is already making a meaningful impact and setting a standard for emerging leaders in our community.



## Written by: Trail Stonitsch, Rock Falls High School

Over the past few weeks in our CEO class, we have been heavily focused on developing our class business and really learning what it takes to turn an idea into something real. We started by breaking the business down into smaller, detailed parts so we could understand every aspect, from the product or service itself to pricing, marketing, and sales strategies. Instead of just talking about ideas, we've been putting them into action by reaching out to potential customers, practicing sales conversations, and learning how to clearly explain the value of what we are offering. This process has pushed many of us outside of our comfort zones, especially when it comes to talking to new people, handling rejection, and speaking confidently about our business. Through this experience, we are learning that confidence doesn't come from being comfortable, it comes from being willing to be uncomfortable and still showing up. Each challenge, mistake, and small win has helped us grow not only as entrepreneurs, but also as individuals who are more confident, adaptable, and prepared for real-world situations.

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## Written by: Charles Nawrocki, Sterling High School

The past few months in CEO the West Class has been working to put together our class business, A Global Gala. The main struggle that I think we have run into is learning how to work together on a larger scale. Everyone in the class is on a committee and communication between them is essential to making progress and ensuring that we don't do something someone else has already done. For example, reaching out to a business for a potential sponsorship but a classmate already contacted that business. I've learned many lessons in CEO that I hope I can continue to use in my life. One in particular that has stuck out to me is to not decide someone else's answer for them. Recently this has come up when talking about selling tickets for our class event. It isn't up to me to decide if someone wants to buy a ticket, and I won't know until I ask. As a matter of fact, I am wondering if you would like to buy a ticket to our Global Gala? It is February 12, 6-8:00 pm, McCormick Event Center and will feature heavy hors d'oeuvres from around the world and a very interesting variety show with student performances and audience participation. Here is a link to purchase your tickets at \$45 each: <https://app.autobooks.co/pay/sauk-valley-college-foundation>. Overall I have thoroughly enjoyed my experience in CEO and I am excited to apply the knowledge I have gained from all of the tours I have been on.



**Details on the CEO class businesses can be found on pages 12 & 13.**

# Sauk Valley Community Leadership Program (SVCLP)

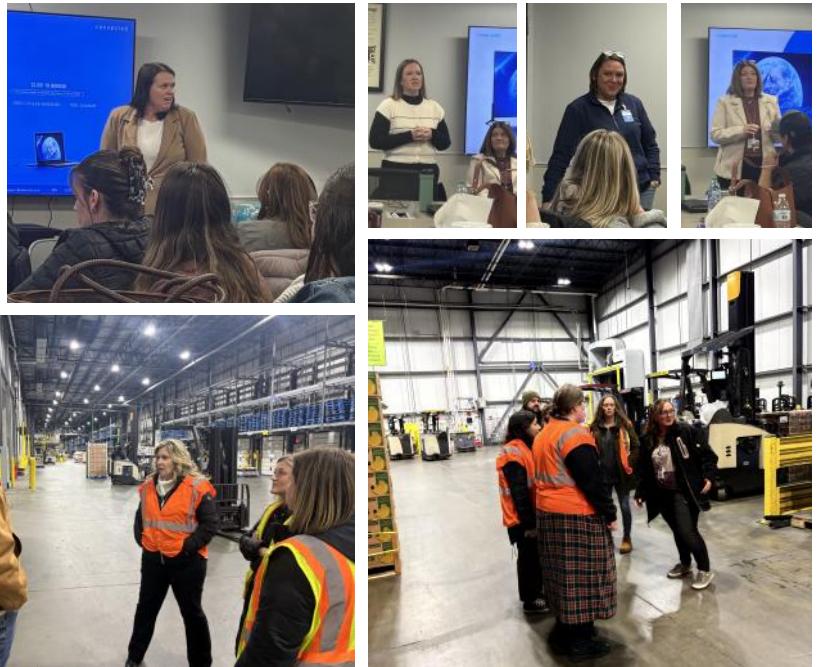
Written by Laura Carbaugh, SVCLP Facilitator

Dr. Sara Dail, Sterling Public Schools Assistant Superintendent, spent the first session of the morning with the Sauk Valley Community Leadership Program cohort, hosted by Joanna Thiede, Human Resources Director of Walmart Distribution Center #7024. Dail's interactive "Difficult Conversations" presentation created thoughtful sharing and discussion.

The cohort then toured the incredible Walmart facility. Rounding out the morning, a panel of human resource experts shared their leadership journeys, answered our burning questions, and gave us great advice.

Thank you to Megan Kuhn, Director of Human Resources, Sauk Valley Community College; Sandi Baylor-Schmidt Director of Human Resources, CGH Medical Center; Dail and Thiede.

A wonderful lunch from Emerson's Pub - Rock Falls deliciously finished off our morning of learning.



**Applications are now open for the 2026-2027 cohort!**

**For more information, and to apply, visit [svleadership.org](http://svleadership.org)**

Throughout December and January the SVACC Agribusiness Committee visited local high schools to presented checks to support their FFA programs. We're proud to invest in agricultural education and the next generation of leaders. Funds were awarded to the following programs: Ashton Franklin Center, Lee County Ag in the Classroom, Whiteside County Farm Bureau, Amboy High School, Amboy Middle School, Bureau Valley High School, CEO Program, Challand Middle School (not pictured), Forreston High School, Morrison High School, Oregon High School, Prophetstown High School, Polo High School, Fulton High School, Sterling High School, Northern Illinois 4H, and University of Illinois Extension Pre-K Program (not pictured).



Dear Friends and Supporters,

For more than 40 years, the Steak Fry in the Country has been a cherished Sauk Valley tradition. Thanks to your generosity and commitment, this event has helped raise critical funds for agricultural education, scholarships, and FFA program grants—making a lasting impact on local students and their futures. We are deeply grateful for the role you have played in that success.

As you may be aware, another organization has recently launched a similar event. After careful consideration, the Sauk Valley Area Chamber of Commerce has made the decision not to host the Steak Fry in the Country in 2026. This decision was not made lightly. We do not wish to compete with another event of the same nature, nor do we want to see support divided when the ultimate beneficiaries are our local students. For that reason, we believe having the SVACC Agribusiness Committee not hold the Steak Fry is the most responsible path forward at this time.

The SVACC Agribusiness Committee will be using 2026 as a year to regroup, reflect, and explore how the group can thoughtfully reapproach this effort in the future. While the SVACC's Steak Fry in the Country will not be held this year, please know that our commitment to supporting local students remains unwavering. Agribusiness scholarships for the 2026-2027 school year are already underway along with the SVACC's other scholarship areas. We were proud to distribute grants to 17 FFA chapters and organizations over the past few months and are exploring ways to continue support in the future.

We wish the other event success. When it comes to supporting our youth, there is room for shared purpose, and we hope the community will continue to support opportunities that benefit students across the Sauk Valley.

Thank you again for your decades of support, trust, and partnership. We look forward to staying connected and sharing future opportunities to support the next generation.

With appreciation,  
Sauk Valley Area Chamber Board of Directors



Sauk Valley Area  
chamber of commerce

211 Locust Street | P: (815) 625-2400  
Sterling, IL 61081 | F: (815) 625-9361  
[www.saukvalleyareachamber.com](http://www.saukvalleyareachamber.com)

# NON-PROFIT ROUNDTABLE

TUESDAY

## March 10

9:00 a.m. | SVACC Office  
211 Locust St, Sterling



Join fellow non-profit leaders and staff for an open, welcoming roundtable designed to create space for honest conversation, idea-sharing, and peer support. This is an opportunity to connect with others who truly understand the work you do, exchange perspectives, and serve as a sounding board for one another.

Whether you're looking to gain fresh ideas, offer your own experiences, or simply connect with others who "get it," this roundtable is for you. Come as you are. Leave feeling heard, supported, and inspired.

**For questions or to RSVP, email**  
[director@saukvalleyareachamber.com](mailto:director@saukvalleyareachamber.com)

**This event is FREE to attend;  
however, an RSVP is requested.**

## » WHAT TO EXPECT

- ✳ Candid conversation about shared challenges and opportunities
- ✳ A supportive environment to ask questions and share insights
- ✳ Collaborative problem-solving and idea exchange
- ✳ Relationship-building with peers across the non-profit community



A meaningful way to give back while making new connections

Sauk Valley Area Chamber of Commerce cannot do the work we do without volunteers on our committees. Opportunities include:

Agribusiness  
Ambassadors  
Golf Outing  
Hispanic Business Leaders  
Professional Women's Network  
Sauk Valley Under 40  
Sights & Sounds  
Workforce Development



# Real Colors

**WEDNESDAY, APRIL 29**

**11:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.**

**Woodlawn Arts Academy**  
3807 Woodlawn Rd, Sterling

Join us for an engaging, hands-on workshop that uses the **Real Colors four-color personality assessment** to help you better understand your own temperament and improve communication with others, personally and professionally.

Learn what motivates you—and those around you—as we explore the Gold, Green, Blue, and Orange personality types in a fun, interactive setting.

**\$35 members | \$65 non-members**

Includes Real Colors personality assessment, tools to put to use in the office immediately after the event, networking opportunity, and a catered lunch.



Scan the QR Code or  
visit <https://bit.ly/3Yu6RWd>

**Register by April 22.**

Participants will receive an email link to complete. Must be completed by April 28 to have their results available for the session.

**Presented by  
Karla Belzer**

Karla Belzer serves as the County Director for University of Illinois Extension, providing leadership and support for programs that strengthen communities across northwest Illinois. In her role, she works with staff, local government, and community partners to bring trusted, research-based education to residents of all ages.

With a background in health and human services, Karla has nearly 20 years of experience before joining Extension. As an Extension Educator, she focused on mindfulness, brain health, and family well-being, helping people reduce stress, build resilience, and live healthier lives.

Karla is passionate about empowering others to be their best selves. She is active in her community as a member of the Lee County United Way Board, Salvation Army Advisory Board, and President of the Board for the YWCA of the Sauk Valley. She is also involved with Oneighty Church and Dixon High School Boosters. Outside of work, she enjoys gardening, traveling, hiking with her family, and walking her dogs.

PWN series sponsors

HBW HB Wilkinson Title Company, Inc.

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Services



**SAUKVALLEYAREACHAMBER.COM/PWN**



PARTNERING FOR SUCCESS

WEST CEO CLASS PRESENTS

# GLOBAL GALA



FEBRUARY 12<sup>TH</sup>

6-8 PM

DOORS OPEN AT 5:30

Don't miss this special evening!

Recommended attire is black and white formal wear. Enjoy global dishes along with entertainment preformed by students!



\$45

MCCORMICK EVENT CENTER  
205 E THIRD ST  
ROCK FALLS, IL 61071  
UNITED STATES



WACC CEO  
EAST  
PRESENTS

# 80'S & 90'S TRIVIA NIGHT



**TICKET**

Price: \$30



In Note: Type East

## LOCATION

THE DIXON ELKS LODGE

1279 FRANKLIN  
GROVE RD.

DOORS OPEN AT 5:30  
EVENT STARTS AT 6  
DINNER INCLUDED  
4 ROUNDS OF TRIVIA  
SILENT & LIVE AUCTION  
50/50 RAFFLE  
BEST DRESSED PRIZES

our platinum sponsors:



THE  
MCBRIDE  
AGENCY

Midland



1<sup>ST</sup>  
Amboy  
Chamber • MainStreet • Tourism  
Discover  
Dixon



MMC  
FISCHER  
Excavating  
STONE & MATERIALS

RAYNOR  
GARAGE DOORS  
Culver's



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