

Benton County News

Member Minnesota Newspaper Association

VOLUME 87, NUMBER 4

FOLEY, MINNESOTA - TUESDAY, JANUARY 23, 2018

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COUNTY SEAT



One line of code at a time

Laverdiere builds web-design business

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SAUK RAPIDS – Aug. 6, 1991.

It is a date that most of us probably do not remember.

But it is a date that has revolutionized communication, information gathering, entertainment and so much more.

It was the day the internet went public.

For Foley resident and technology enthusiast Brian Laverdiere, the internet in the early 1990s was a blank canvas, just waiting for artists like him to paint.

“(When the internet went live), naturally it wasn’t full of websites,” Laverdiere said. “That’s just when it became available. By 1993 there were about 100,000 websites.”

During the early days of the internet, Laverdiere was living in San Diego where he co-owned a seminar company.

“We did seminars on a variety of topics,” said Laverdiere, 61. “And when the internet went live, sometime after that, we decided to do seminars on how to navigate the internet. Now, bear in mind none of us had never been on the internet. But we knew it was kind of a big deal.”

Laverdiere said during the early ‘90s he enrolled in a CompuServe – one of the first online service providers – course and learned as much as he could about the new technology.

“In one month I learned everything I could about how to navigate the internet,” he said. “And 30 days after signing up for CompuServe I was leading seminars teaching people how to navigate the internet.”

During that process, Laverdiere said, he fell in love with the internet.

“I could tell that this was really something,” he said. “It’s not going to go away.”

Laverdiere stuck it out with his seminar company for a few more years before deciding to take the leap into uncharted waters – becoming a webmaster and develop-

ing his own company, WebWizard Works.

“So, I got started in ‘96. And by ‘98 there were 1.6 million websites,” he said. “It went from 100,000 websites (in 1996) to 1.6 million websites. I got started right in the middle of that, so some of those (original) 1.6 million websites were mine.”

During the first year of his company, Laverdiere had wanted to help teach business leaders how to create their own websites. But he quickly realized that business model was not successful, especially in the early days.

“What ended up happening was I would teach people the basics, but things were a little more complicated, and they are complicated (even) now,” Laverdiere said. “They would end up having me finish their website anyway or clean up what they had done. They would learn just enough to know that this isn’t something they could do.”

It was something Laverdiere could and still can do.

After 10 years of successfully growing his one-man web design business in southern California, Laverdiere and his wife relocated to Foley in 2006.

“Most of my clients in San Diego for the longest time didn’t even know I had moved,” he said.

To attract attention to his business in Central Minnesota, Laverdiere joined the Foley, Rice and St. Cloud Area Chamber of Com-

merces.

“I get a lot of business from that,” he said.

Word slowly started to spread among local businesses.

To date, Laverdiere has worked on websites for Henry Embroidery & Screen Printing, Benton County Title, Grand Champion Meats and Coyote Moon Grille just to name a few.

“It really varies,” Laverdiere said. “From restaurants to manufacturing type things, to law offices, car repair. It’s really quite the gamut. And while I do that I tend to learn an awful lot about the business.”

Because of the remoteness of



PHOTO BY VICKI IKEOGU

Foley resident and owner of website design business WebWizard Works Inc. Brian Laverdiere talks about founding his company during the early stages of the internet.

his industry, Laverdiere can work with clients all over the county – some clients he said are internationally-based.

“I still get a lot of business from San Diego because a lot of my clients are there,” he said. A lot of the websites Laverdiere designs through Web Wizard Works (or W3 Web Design & Hosting) are done through Joomla!, an open-source content management system. But he has worked with numerous content management systems including WordPress. Those content management sites are typically known as

“what you see is what you get” – or WYSIWYG – sites. According to

Laverdiere, WYSIWYG sites provide a good starting point. But to make a truly unique site, similar to what he does for clients, you have to dabble in code.

“So in Joomla! I keep the editor off most of the time,” he said. “There are some things that the WYSIWYG kind of screws up with. I tend to work with the raw code. And I think you’ll find that quite common with web developers.”

In addition to designing websites, Laverdiere has transitioned into the website hosting side of the business. Web hosting is the process that allows individuals and businesses to place a website or web page on the internet. A web host provider stores the data used to develop a website in special servers. Laverdiere has purchased space in a secure data server for clients. He said he manages about 500 websites through his hosting service – several of which he has acquired and did not do any of the original design work.

He also spends time counsel-

ing clients on the basics of website design, providing them with suggestions on how best to attract online audiences to their site.

“You have to make sure your website is up to date both with content and with style,” he said. “And it needs to be mobile friendly. There are a lot of choices out there. If your website looks rinky-dink, then your customers will be gone in a split second and off to the next website.”

Laverdiere is determined to keep the business he created nearly 22 years ago a small one-man shop. Because for him, web design is more than just an income generator, it is a passion.

“I was never much of a video game person,” he said. “But I’ve played enough to know just how involved people can get with them. That’s what website building and designing does for me. When I’m working on a website I get so entrenched, nothing else seems to matter. I don’t think I could do anything else.”

“I could tell that this was really something. It’s not going to go away.”
- Brian Laverdiere