

REAL ESTATE ROCKER

Mike Herl: Proof positive that you can't judge a book by its cover.

BY JAN WILSON AND PHOTOGRAPH BY SHAWN HARPER

Mike Herl, 58, founder, managing broker, and partner at Madison Commercial Real Estate & Development, has led a remarkable life. His commercial real estate company is thriving, but the road he traveled to get to Madison could be fodder for a best-seller.

Herl's story is one of two distinct halves, from touring the world as a road manager for chart-topping rock bands, to finally settling down at age 37 in Madison to launch into commercial real estate. Along the way, the fiscal conservative spent six years as chairman of the Republican Party of Dane County (2008–2014) because he was so frustrated with how municipalities were spending money.

These days, Herl is having a blast running the business he started in 2016.

"I finally grew up," he chuckles, "but looking back, I've been blessed because I got to live what many in my generation only dreamed about — touring with a major rock band."

Tell us about Madison Commercial Real Estate.

We have 12 independent contractors here. Together with Mike Osborne of Advantage Osborne Property Management, we put together a brokerage that's been growing by leaps and bounds. We have a commercial management division, an apartment management division, a general contractor, and a lab designer for the big pharmaceutical companies that are coming to the area. We all work under one roof, but all of the real estate licenses are under me. So, instead of bringing these people on as full-time employees, each business runs independently. We get commission on anything they do real-estate wise, and in return we don't charge them rent. It's been an absolutely fantastic relationship. We're looking to grow, but we'd much rather be the most respected team than the largest.

I'd like to get more into development, but as you know, prices have skyrocketed in both land costs and building costs, and now we're heading into a recession. Now we're waiting for the economy to turn in a different direction to see if we can capitalize on any assets out there.

You were raised in the mountains of Colorado. What career track brought you to Madison?

I was the road manager for Cheap Trick for 10 years. As their "Lap of Luxury" tour was winding down, they wanted to continue touring and asked if I wanted to stay on. I did,

but then they told me I'd have to move to Madison because that's where their management company was based. I was a little stunned but agreed.

Let's talk about that rock and roll career.

I moved to Phoenix at 18 and was landscaping and going to a community college. Eventually I began working security for Rocker's, a live-music bar in the area. One night the owner, who had become a friend, insisted I hang around because he wanted me to meet someone.

A few minutes later, in walks Judas Priest, the heavy metal British band! They were in town to record their "Turbo" album. Well, I was awestruck! We played pool until 3 a.m. They returned two nights later and over time we got to know each other pretty well. The next thing you know, they asked me to be a bodyguard at press appearances.

At that time, it seemed every major band that played the Arizona Veterans Memorial Coliseum met up with Judas Priest at Rocker's Bar, and when they went out, they asked me to join them. I'm a big guy, so my role was security, which turned into tour management.

To me, that was the golden era of music. All those bands that started in the late 1960s and played through the 1970s did van tours together and they all learned to put up with each other. Many are still together today! Then, MTV came out and suddenly they didn't have to tour across the country in a van or stay in crappy hotels. MTV made them stars and changed a lot of things in the music business.

How did you connect with Cheap Trick?

Another friend owned a huge rock club in Grand Rapids and asked me to help promote shows for him. Cheap Trick was one of the national bands I brought in.

We all went out after the show and the next thing you know, their manager is calling me to ask if I would come work with them to manage the day-to-day stuff. That meant all questions came to me. If something was above my pay grade, I'd call the band manager, but nine times out of 10 it was my decision. All the major rock bands loved Cheap Trick. They did 180 shows a year! Eventually, the weight of everything got to be too much and I left. It was bittersweet because the band members were my family and best friends. We still keep in touch.

When I was Cheap Trick's tour manager, we toured with Mötley Crüe and did a lot of "one-off" shows with

them through the 1980s and 1990s. I worked independently after that. My last four years were spent mostly with Mötley's Vince Neil and Tommy Lee. I toured with Tommy Lee and his Methods of Mayhem band and then with Vince Neil's solo tour for about two and a half years.

What was life on the road like?

There's a ton of boredom, then total craziness. Back then, if you had a hit on the radio, everybody wanted you. The morning shows wanted you, the late shows wanted you, plus you had to perform at night. You were burning the candle at both ends. It was tough. It's funny but you crave that life when you're trying to get a hit, yet when you get there, all you want to do is sleep.

In 17 years, I did 3,500 rock shows. I've been to 59 countries and got to travel around the world for free and listen to my favorite bands and music every single night. Then I met a beautiful woman backstage in Rockford who was crazy enough to marry me and have two kids with me. She's kept me grounded in Madison.

"I got to live what many in my generation
only dreamed about."

— Mike Herl, Madison Commercial Real Estate & Development

How did you break into commercial real estate?

When I got out of the rock business, I was kind of lost and didn't know what I wanted to do, so with my wife's encouragement, I called some businesspeople around Madison asking to meet with them to learn more about their industries. My third appointment was with Eric Schwartz at SARA Investment Real Estate. Well, we talked for four hours! I guess I just had a natural affinity toward that industry but never really knew it. We struck a deal for me to go out and get my broker's license and then work with SARA, and I never looked back.

The night before I was supposed to start with Eric at SARA Investment, the phone rings about two o'clock in the morning. It was Vince Neil with Mötley Crüe. 'Mike, I need you to come back out here. You're not going to wear a suit and tie. It's not your persona! I'll double your salary!' My wife was glaring at me. She put her foot down on that one. [LE](#)

