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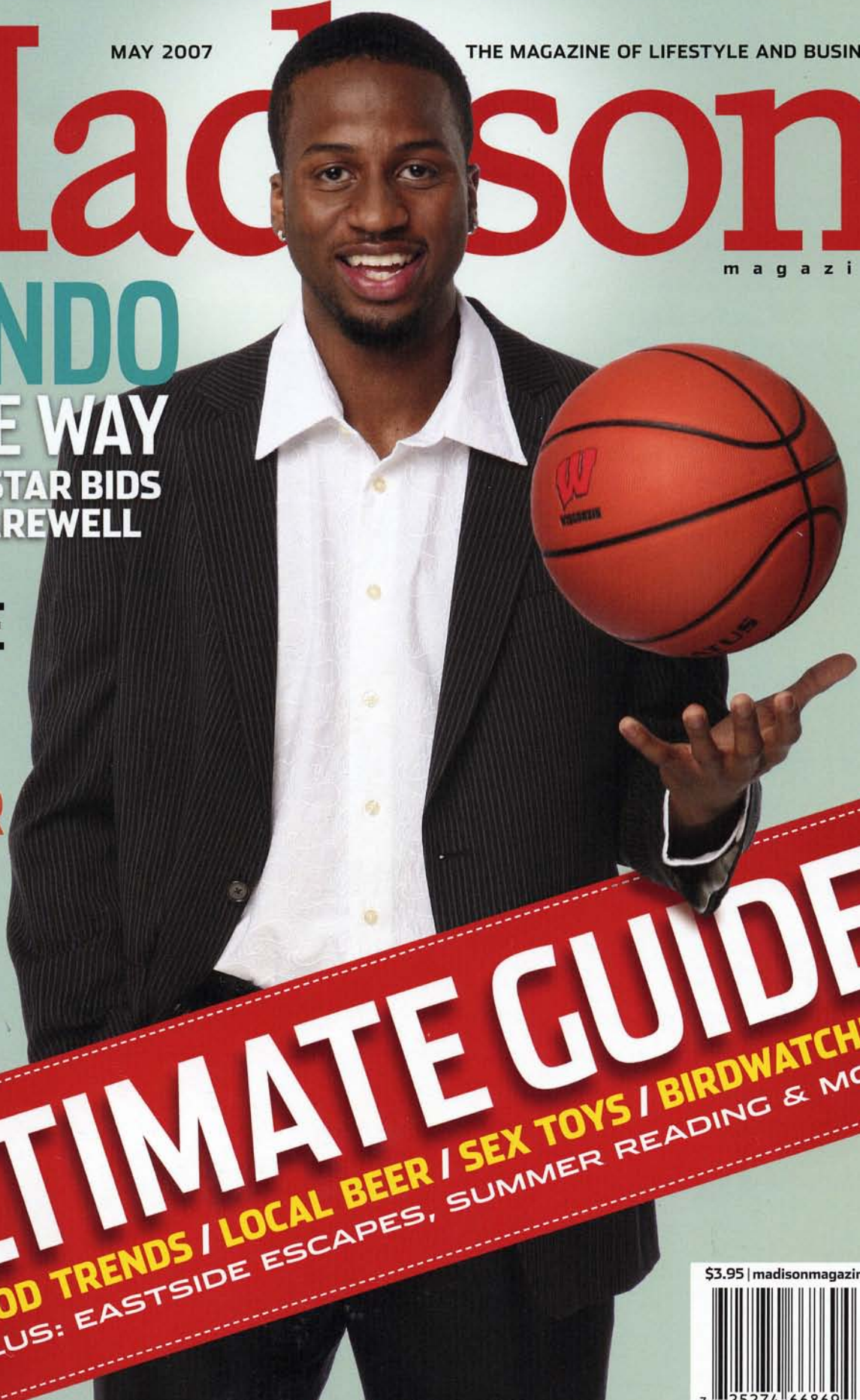
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By Cindi Krause

Together they are building the largest housing project, dubbed “Lucky,” in the history of the city of Madison—in downtown’s new University Square apartment/office/retail mega-complex. With more than three hundred-fifty apartments, amenities at Lucky will include concierge service and laundry machines connected to the Internet that are so advanced you can get an e-mail notifying you when your jeans are dry.

The “she” is Laurel Brown, owner of downtown architecture and interior design firm Brownhouse. She’ll handle the inside. **The “he” is Steve Brown**, owner of Steve Brown Apartments. He’s been buying and managing downtown apartments, among them his first residence hall, the Highlander, since 1982.

So why are they taking on this massive project? What is their vision for the future of downtown? And—the million-dollar question—do they really like being around each other at home *and* at work?

What will the U Square housing project contribute to downtown?

Steve Brown: U Square will offer a new housing alternative for downtown living. The location is unique, at the center of the convergence of State Street, campus and the downtown arts and entertainment district, just a few blocks to Overture, the Memorial Union, Kohl Center, the excitement of State Street, Chazen Museum of Art, Grainger Hall, the Fluno Center and the forthcoming Wisconsin Institutes for Discovery. For this reason, housing at U Square will appeal to young professionals as well as mature students.

What is your vision of downtown in the next ten to twenty years?

Laurel Brown: I would like to see the return of a much more vibrant downtown shopping district on a grand scale, with more retail stores (even a department store) coming to the square. And some national retailers introduced to State Street would do nothing but increase overall shopping traffic and economic vitality for the downtown as a whole. I would like to see more young, urban professionals living in the downtown area, bringing with them more of the goods and services that the demographic desires.

Steve: Downtown Madison will continue to serve as the center of the Madison metropolitan area. This is the place where civic and city life meets the university. This means the success of venues such as

Overture Center and Monona Terrace, and thriving downtown commercial and residential markets, serving all citizens, is critical for the long-term economic and cultural health of the entire area.

Regarding population growth, our city will continue its healthy debate over density versus sprawl. Additional parking is needed to serve downtown merchants so they can compete with area malls. Regional transportation is a hot issue today, one that will not be solved overnight. With population growth, we have also seen more poverty and crime. The city’s response to these issues will determine how successful we will be.

Steve—You’ve been working on programs to curb excessive student drinking for years. What impact do student drinking and safety have on your customers and what, if anything, should be done about it?

With the drinking age at twenty-one, many students unfortunately consume alcohol in private places and in unsupervised venues. In our leases, we have restrictions against illegal activity, including underage drinking, but there’s only so much we can do if we don’t know about it. Over the years, I’ve had many Monday-morning sessions with violating residents, especially those who damage our property or disturb their neighbors.

Regarding safety, we are constantly reminding our residents to lock apartment doors, to shut and secure building entry doors when entering and leaving, and to not walk alone after dark. We encourage self-defense courses and preach common sense all the time. We constantly remind residents of the connection between excessive alcohol use and their personal health and safety. But, as with the alcohol issues, we’re dealing with young adults who may or may not pay attention.

Laurel—How does your MBA and your strong business background help your clients?

I have an understanding that real estate is a tangible asset, and clients come to us to enhance or protect or grow their asset base. So, as designers, we have a great responsibility to our clients and to protecting the value of their assets. Being a business owner myself, I understand the fears, the challenges, the responsibilities of running a business, so I have a lot of empathy for our clients because I know the challenges they are facing and the questions they are asking.

What’s the best/worst thing about working with your spouse?

Laurel: One of the best parts is that there is no end to the subject matter that we can discuss—we always have something to talk about. The worst part—see, I love every aspect of being able to work on projects with my husband. However, if I had to mention something—it’s boring to know what the client [Steve] is wearing before he walks in the door to a meeting.

Cindi Krause is a freelance journalist and media consultant with Makin’ Hey! Communications, a marketing firm in Madison.