

# People's Liberty opens offices near Findlay Market in Over-the-Rhine

**'I think it could change the face of philanthropy'**

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Emily Maxwell | WCPO

CINCINNATI – People's Liberty is open for business.

The philanthropic laboratory unveiled its newly renovated office space Friday in the old Globe furniture building near Findlay Market in Over-the-Rhine.

"This is a big day in the life of [People's Liberty](#)," said CEO Eric Avner. "This is the real concrete beginning of our activities."

For People's Liberty, those activities all revolve around investing in people to show that philanthropy focused on individuals can change communities.

The organization announced its [first two Haile Fellows late last year](#), awarding each a \$100,000 cash prize and 12 months of working space in the Globe building. Its first gallery installment at

the building will open Friday evening. And in the coming months it will be awarding project grants of up to \$10,000 each, too.



Eric Avner, CEO of People's Liberty, led a tour through the building on March 27, 2015. Emily Maxwell | WCPO

The building renovation has allowed People's Liberty to invest in other important ways, too, Avner said. [The Carol Ann and Ralph V. Haile, Jr./U.S. Bank Foundation](#) – one of the People's Liberty funders – has spent about \$3.6 million on the renovation. And the vast majority of the work on the project has gone to businesses located in or near Over-the-Rhine, Avner said.

Camp Washington-based [Brush Factory](#) was among them.

Owned by Rosie Kovacs and Hayes Shanesy, who live in Over-the-Rhine, Brush Factory designs and makes furniture for homes, offices, restaurants and retail spaces.

The company made more than 40 custom pieces for People's Liberty – its largest job to date, Kovacs said.

The project has become a showcase for the small company, and Kovacs said she hopes it will lead to more business.

"Because it was our biggest project to date, I feel like they had to take a leap of faith," she said. "I think they saw a little spark in us and wanted to give us that extra boost."

For Avner, that's an important part of what People's Liberty is all about: Giving promising people an extra boost, whether that's to grow a business or launch a project that will help transform the region.



Rosie Kovacs and Hayes Shanesy of Brush Factory designed and furnished all of the interiors of the renovated People's Liberty space inside the Globe building. Emily Maxwell | WCPO

Along the way, he hopes that the People's Liberty location can bring more life to that part of Over-the-Rhine, too.

He estimated that at least 85 percent of the food that People's Liberty purchases would come from [Findlay Market](#) just across Elm Street. And he hopes the sleek office space itself will show other business owners how the neighborhood's historic buildings can be reused.

"We picked the building intentionally because we wanted to be in a neighborhood that had this positive trajectory but still could use a spark," he said.

People's Liberty is funded by the Haile/U.S. Bank Foundation, where Avner is a vice president and senior program manager, and [The Johnson Foundation](#), where People's Liberty co-founder Amy Goodwin is the CEO.

Goodwin said she also wants to see People's Liberty help launch talented people and their good ideas and improve Cincinnati and the region in the process.

But she and Avner have an even bigger goal, too.

"It sounds a little pie in the sky, but I think it could change the face of philanthropy," she said.

People's Liberty staff members are keeping track of how they do things, what works and what doesn't. The plan is for all that information to be available to the community and to other philanthropists. And the hope is that once People's Liberty starts having some success, other foundations in other places will want to follow the organization's lead.

"For 200 years, philanthropy hasn't changed much," Goodwin said. "Time will tell. If it's successful, it will serve as an example and a model that it doesn't have to be the same old way."

For now, though, Avner and Goodwin are celebrating this latest milestone.

Avner estimates the building is about 90 percent finished. Like any big construction project, there are still finishing touches and tweaks to make.

But the important things are there.

A big, yellow custom-made kitchen counter sits in the building's kitchen, designed to remind People's Liberty staff and grant recipients of the yellow kitchen table that Carol Ann and Ralph Haile had in their home.

Avner said he envisions groups sitting and standing around the counter, hatching big ideas.

"God knows what else is going to be cooked up in here," he said.

And tucked behind the kitchen, three enlarged letters hang in frames near some bathrooms. Two are typed and went to Ralph Haile's parents when he got caught setting off stink bombs at Walnut Hills High School as a student there. The third is Haile's hand-written response, apologizing for his actions and respectfully requesting that he not be expelled. (He and his co-conspirators were suspended instead.)

The letters are reminders of the man whose wealth is helping to make People's Liberty possible. And they prove that even a high school stinker can grow up to make his community a better place.

**Members of the public can tour the Globe building office space from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday. When Globe Gallery exhibits are live, the gallery will be open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday and from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturdays and for all Final Friday festivities.**

**The gallery space and front door for People's Liberty are located at 1805 Elm St.**

<http://www.wcpo.com/news/local-news/hamilton-county/cincinnati/over-the-rhine/peoples-liberty-opens-offices-near-findlay-market-in-over-the-rhine>