Armstrong: So long for now

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This is my last column as executive director of the DeKalb County Convention and Visitors Bureau. By the time it is published, I will be retired. It is impossible to sum up a 13-year career in tourism in 700 words.

We can thank the visionary leaders at the city of DeKalb, which included Mark Biernacki and Mayor Frank Van Buer for their initial investment of $50,000, to hire someone to explore the possibility of establishing a certified convention and visitors bureau for DeKalb County.

I started work at the DeKalb Chamber of Commerce the day after Kite Fest in September 2006. Chuck Siebrasse was the executive director. The chamber had agreed to put us under their umbrella until we could incorporate and file for our own 501(c)(6) status. We continue to celebrate Kite Fest every second Sunday in September thanks to our sponsors and longstanding relationship with Dave Zavell and the kiting enthusiasts that are generous enough to perform for us. I always think of Chuck when Doug Nelson, past chairman of the DCCVB and current co-chairman of Kite Fest, welcomes everyone.

The process of becoming a certified bureau began with filing for incorporation in 2007. Thank you to Siepert & Co. (Mark Kermann, Bonnie Konwinski and team) for offering to guide us through the filing for 501(c)(6) status. In August 2010, we officially separated from the Chamber.

In 2011, we submitted our request for certification with the Illinois Office of Tourism. We were granted certification in our first attempt, joining only 39 other certified bureaus in Illinois.

Only certified bureaus are eligible to receive the matching local tourism grant funds to promote their area. That was what DeKalb leaders envisioned.

What will I miss the most? That's easy. I will miss the people I built relationships with. They kept my soul fueled and passion alive. It has been an honor to watch our neighbors find success from the dreams and hard work they have invested in the DeKalb County tourism industry. Yes, we are a destination and we as residents benefit from the economic impact that enhances our quality of life.

I had the good fortune to be able to share their stories to draw visitors to our region, which helped them expand and prosper, as well.

So, thank you for allowing me to be part of the hard work and dedication that made your dreams a reality. I will continue to sing your praises from the sidelines. The DCCVB is small in terms of staff and budget. However, the successes we have achieved are not. This walk down memory lane includes a successful bid to host the IHSA State Football Championships at Huskie Stadium, landing a movie that starred Dennis Quaid and Zac Efron that brought more than $1 million to our community, winning the open bid for the IESA State Wrestling Championships to continue to host them at the Northern Illinois University Convocation Center through 2021 and envisioning a marketing program I branded as the Bold Spirits of DeKalb County, which led to the first-ever Bold Spirits Fest. The second event will be at Jonahac Orchard on June 1. Back Country Roads will provide the music. Tickets are on sale now. Let's all plan to be there to toast them and what tourism contributes to DeKalb County. Cheers to the past and an even brighter future!
My dream is that this region recognizes the work and past success by investing the dollars necessary to allow the DCCVB to reach maximum potential. There is much more we can do.

And thanks for the dance, Zac.

• Debbie Armstrong is executive director of the DeKalb County Convention and Visitors Bureau.