



A vintage Ford truck sits in front of The Venue Hastings.



The Dennis family

THE VENUE HASTINGS — REVITALIZATION RESPECTING HISTORY

story by **LEIGH CORT**
photos courtesy of
DOROSH DOCUMENTARIES

Driving down North Main Street in Hastings feels like stepping into a place frozen in time.

There's a quiet charm in the air — an old Southern stillness that hasn't changed in decades. Just when it seems untouched, something catches your eye: a vintage Ford truck. In that moment, you realize — this town isn't stuck in the past. It's waking up.

That truck isn't decoration. It tells a story. Once used by the Smith family to haul potatoes, it stands as a symbol of Hastings' roots and a tribute to the building's past as a Ford dealership. It's one of the most photographed features of The Venue Hastings — a blend of history and revival. Constructed in 1927, the Stanton Ford Motor Co. evolved into various commercial uses — remaining as a central part of Hastings history.

Allyn and Jena Dennis, owners and stewards of The Venue Hastings, happened upon the building unexpectedly. Living in St. Augustine with their young children, they sold a previous commercial property in Jacksonville's Springfield area. They hunted for opportunities closer to home, landing at the traffic light in Hastings and turned down North Main.

They didn't see a structure; they saw potential. They connected with people, embraced the town's spirit and realized they could bring life to Hastings without erasing its past. Their vision? Create a place that honors history and build something meaningful for the future. They built relationships. They listened and learned



The reception area

that revitalization could respect history and still dream about creating a humble genuine new destination. Authentic roots and vibrant new businesses was possible!

When Jena and Allyn fell in love with Hastings, it was the people that inspired them to invest in the future, not just a property.

Purchased in 2021, the building seemed to bravely step into a new chapter. It deserved to be respected for its significance; the Dennises felt a responsibility to honor its past while preparing for a meaningful future.

Their children became part of the restoration. Ayden, Collyn and Ella accompanied their parents through months of weaving preservation into the tapestry of architecture, modern updates and character. It became obvious that what mattered was ensuring that the building's history remains visible and valued.

The building's original purpose was to serve community. Today, its role as The Venue Hastings is the same: a place where people come together! Imagine yesterday in America when people respected automobiles symbolizing possibility and



Grooms' suite

movement; people gathered to celebrate life's meaningful moments.

Stepping into the Venue takes your breath away. It's a stunning tribute to early 20th century when buildings lasted a lifetime, melding innovation technology. A modest brick structure in 1927, The Venue Hastings opened in March 2026 paying homage to pioneers in architecture, although in a fertile farm settlement in Northeast Florida.

Imagine Allyn and Jena in their pre-hospitality years immensely successful in other businesses. Real estate, yacht captain and eco-tour cruise industry defined Allyn's career. Auctions and estates, law enforcement and entrepreneur for Jena. Their backgrounds guided them in The Venue Hastings where they are intentional in its design, and long-term stewardship. Restoring a historic structure, their goal has been to leave something "...better than we found it, something that contributes to community as a legacy."

Incorporating vintage elements and an-

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VENUE

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tiques is a balance to the simplicity of the vast spaces that comprise The Venue Hastings. Standout pieces like the Victorian mirrored Eastlake back bar — the groom’s suite that came from a Victorian home in St. Augustine and curated pieces that reflect history are positioned throughout each area. There are surprises from day to day with moveable pieces that add authenticity to each experience. Allyn and Jena select the exact furnishings and accessories that perfectly define an event’s theme!

As The Venue Hastings establishes a benchmark for the beautification of Hastings Main Street, this agricultural town is not going to be lost amidst growth and revitalization. The Venue Hastings is helping spark a revival of Main Street. New businesses are opening, and a sense of pride is growing within the community.

The Dennis family continues to invest in the town, restoring buildings and helping to shape a future that respects its past. Their dedication and vision, plus an incredible team that are helping to manage events, play a huge role in opening the curtain on a bright future of Hastings Main Street USA.

TWO OF US

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significance as the site of the first legally recognized free Black settlement in what is now the United States.

We also value how easy it is to get outside. We are often hiking at Guana, kayaking on the river or spending time at the beach. With a 4-year-old daughter and a baby boy on the way, much of our free time revolves around family, and this area makes that easy.

How do you spend your free time?

Mostly outdoors and with family.

We try to stay active through walks, hikes, beach days and kayaking, and we are big believers in simply being outside whenever possible.

We also travel whenever we can, often with architecture, coffee, food and drink guiding the itinerary. We recently spent time in Barcelona, balancing family vacation with what we jokingly call research, visiting cafés and wine bars throughout the city. Our daughter now has her own ranking of the best chocolate croissants. Whether it is a road trip or

a new city, we are constantly blending inspiration, curiosity and family time.

It is less about chasing trends and more about staying inspired.

What’s next for Bar Citra?

We are still in a formative season. We are just over a year in and only recently began running our coffee program fully in-house. Right now, the focus is refinement, continuing to sharpen the craft and build something lasting.

We are committed to developing an excellent specialty coffee program and continuing to shape the space as a thoughtful gathering place for the community.

We have hosted a limited number of live music events and plan to continue doing that in a curated way. We are also exploring design-oriented talks and salon-style gatherings, creating opportunities for cultural exchange and conversation.

Rather than expanding quickly, our priority is deepening what is already here. If Bar Citra becomes a place people trust for quality, atmosphere and connection, that feels like the right next step.

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