



NEWS RELEASE

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2026 'Champions of Business' Honored by Junior Achievement

WAUSAU, Wis.—Outstanding area business leaders who have made a significant and lasting impact in shaping the Wausau area economy will be honored this spring at the 16th Annual “Champions of Business Dinner” established by Junior Achievement of Wisconsin - Northcentral Area. A panel of independent judges selected Anne Alexander, Jim Kemerling and Bill Reif as this year’s honorees.

The May 7 event, including dinner and awards, will be held at the Jefferson Street Inn & Event Center to celebrate the historic contributions this year’s honorees have made to the Wausau area business community. Event tickets can be purchased through the Junior Achievement of Wisconsin - Northcentral Area office by calling (715) 842-1056 or visiting www.championsofbusiness.org.

Anne Mac Kay Alexander will be honored with the Founders Award. Born in 1884, Anne married Judd Alexander in 1919, quickly becoming a pillar of the Wausau community. Anne volunteered extensively in the Wausau area and served on the Marathon County Public Library Board for 43 years. She founded the Judd S. Alexander Foundation in 1973, to honor her husband and ensure their philanthropic legacy. Since its founding, the Judd S. Alexander Foundation has distributed over \$75M in grants to support Marathon County in the areas of economic development, education, arts, culture and human services. It has been instrumental in the revitalization of downtown Wausau.

Jim Kemerling and Bill Reif will both receive the Developer Award for their outstanding contributions leading to the exceptional growth and success of Wausau area companies, community work and commitment to enriching Wausau’s cultural landscape in both their personal and professional lives.

James (Jim) Kemerling began his journey as the first in his family to earn a college degree, attending Michigan State University on a baseball scholarship. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Economics in 1961 and a Master of Marketing in 1962. Jim launched his professional career in the Wausau area as General Sales Manager with Mosinee Papers in 1968 and advanced to the role of President and COO in 1981 and ultimately to President and CEO in 1984. His remarkable career includes formal leadership roles with Shade Information Systems, Specialty Packaging Group, Award Hardwood Floors, and Riiser Energy, where his strategic vision drove growth and innovation. Beyond the boardroom, Jim enjoyed a celebrated college football officiating career in the Big Ten Conference, officiating numerous bowl games throughout the 1980s and 1990s. His influence extends into classrooms and community foundations, including the Community Foundation of Northcentral Wisconsin, Grand Theater Foundation, Medical College of

Wisconsin, United Way of Marathon County, and North Central Health Foundation. A mentor, advisor and civic leader, Jim has inspired peers and young professionals alike.

Bill Reif earned his undergraduate degree from St. John's, a master's degree from Western Michigan and a doctorate in paper chemistry from the University of Washington and worked for several chemical companies before accepting a position with Wausau Papers in 1975. During his 6-year tenure there, he learned the art and science of manufacturing pressure sensitive label materials. In 1981, he and his partner, Lawrence Wokatsch, co-founded Wausau Coated Products which utilized a manufacturing process that was based totally on water-based chemistry, a first in the industry. Some 45 years later, WCP is now a \$140 million company with 250 employees in multiple locations in the USA and sells worldwide. For the last 13 years, it has been run by his son, Ben. Bill has demonstrated leadership beyond the business sector, holding positions on numerous boards and foundations including the Chamber of Commerce, Firststar and Peoples State Bank, the PAF and the Community Foundation of North Central Wisconsin. In the late 1990s, Bill was involved in an initiative to retain Eastbay in Wausau which resulted in building their warehouse on 72nd Avenue. A few years later, he also served on a committee commissioned by the Wausau School Board to plan the relocation and building of a new Wausau East High School. In 2008, Bill and his son Will started Roastar, a label and packaging company that specializes in digital printing. It now has 100+ employees, \$25 million in sales, and is run by Will Reif. Bill's innovative approach to business and "what if" mindset have had a significant impact on both the local business landscape and the broader community.

"We appreciate the opportunity to work with Junior Achievement on this unique event to recognize the early visionary leaders and passionate innovators that have made Wausau what it is today," said Marla Kolbeck, Champions of Business Chairperson. "Junior Achievement works with area youth to inspire and prepare them to succeed as adults. Events like this allow us to look back at the achievements of those who have paved the way and to look forward to new achievements yet to come."

The event is made possible through support from the following sponsors: Title Sponsor, Ruder Ware; Awards Sponsors, Samuels Group, Peoples State Bank, EO Johnson; and Plaza Sponsor, Marathon Cheese Corporation.

All proceeds from the event will support Junior Achievement's local programming. Information about past winners and the Champions of Business annual event is available at www.championsofbusiness.org.

About Junior Achievement

Junior Achievement is the world's largest organization dedicated to giving young people the knowledge and skills they need to own their economic success, plan for their future, and make smart academic and economic choices. JA learning experiences are delivered by corporate and community volunteers and provide relevant, hands-on lessons that give students from kindergarten through high school knowledge and skills in financial literacy, work readiness, and entrepreneurship. Additionally, Junior Achievement is expanding its reach to 18-to-25-year-olds to provide young adults with critical life skills. Since 2021, Junior Achievement volunteers have taught life skills learning experiences for 64,798 students in the greater Wausau metropolitan area. For more information, visit northcentralwisconsin.ja.org.