



The Mayor of the Mill

The Biddeford developer who walks the talk

PROFILE Doug Sanford
by Joshua Bodwell
Photography Trent Bell

Doug Sanford is talking about Biddeford. And people are listening.

On this particular afternoon, Sanford is engaged in an animated conversation with several representatives of Saco & Biddeford Savings. He is showing them the new entrance to his North Dam Mill, a complex of three interconnected, five-story brick buildings encompassing 370,000 square feet along the edge of the Saco River.

Sanford bought the former textile mill in 2004. A menagerie of more than fifty residential and commercial tenants has since moved in, setting up offices, retail space, art studios, light industrial shops, and striking brick-walled studios and lofts.

As the bankers depart into the windy afternoon with enthusiastic looks on their faces, the 50-year-old Sanford climbs the stairs into the main lobby. Tim Hewitt of myOstrich Golf—a custom golf-club and golf-club-component business—grabs Sanford’s attention. Hewitt needs an oversized mailbox to receive his frequent UPS shipments. The two men quickly brainstorm a solution.

North Dam Mill is growing rapidly and each day seems to bring new

fires for Sanford to extinguish. “When I started, there was nothing here. Nothing. *That* was the first fire to put out!” he says with a laugh as he moves briskly down a hallway. When discussing the mills, Sanford speaks with exclamation points and gently jabs arms or shoulders to emphasize his points.

The once sleepy hamlet of Biddeford is bristling with renewed energy these days. In many ways, thanks to Sanford’s gusto, North Dam feels like the epicenter of the city’s reinvention. Where else in Maine can you find a master bookbinder such as Scott Mullenberg across the hall from stringed-instrument aficionados Valerio Mongillo and William Dalbec of Old Mill Violins? The buildings are brimming with artists, designers, craftspeople, photographers, bakers, and gallery owners—if Maine ever needed a representative snapshot of the state’s “creative economy,” surely this mill would suffice.

As Sanford navigates the hallways, he occasionally knocks on doors and calls out the names of tenants in greeting. Finally, he slows and pokes his head into the doorway of Vervacious, a European-truffle and gourmet-food business. “Smells good in here!” he calls out to Heidi Stanvick, a Le Cordon Bleu-trained chef. To meet rising

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An Open Promise: Developer and visionary Doug Sanford stands in some of the raw space that still remains the North Dam Mill complex—its possible uses are endless.

Live Here, Work Here: The North Dam Mill offers both living and working opportunities under the same roof. The fourth-floor loft apartment of the painter Devin Brook and his girlfriend Erin Lobozzo is an urban space made cozy with distressed antique pieces (right).

Downstairs from the living spaces, the eclectic workspace of Carole McCarty is home to her bi-coastal business, Bottom Feeder, which she describes as “Part design studio, part art consortium, part film production house, and part aspiring T-shirt empire” (below).





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demand, however, Stanvick is in the process of refinishing a new space in North Dam that is five times the size of her present location.

Outside Vervacious, a painting crew approaches Sanford to get his opinion on a wall color. He stops to chat with the guys and lob a few lighthearted jokes. It seems Sanford has memorized the name of every person associated with the mill, whether they are tenants or just there for the day to hang sheetrock.

And then Sanford is off again, moving at a brisk pace through the serpentine hallways and up and down the zigzagging stairs. His cell phone buzzes every few minutes, and he fields each call with short, decisive instructions. Sanford possesses that rare combination of visionary thinking and managerial competence needed to make the execution of big ideas profitable.

“Back in September,” he explains, “we finally finished the first twenty-two studio apartments.” With eleven-foot-high ceilings, restored hardwood floors, and new fixtures, appliances, and cabinets, the one- and two-bedroom units were snatched up practically overnight.

By the first of November, Sanford had finished another twenty-two residential units on the floor above. “I’ve only got one of those studios left unrented,” he says with a smile. “And people told me it would take a year to rent all of those!” It’s obvious that Sanford relishes the opportunity to surpass expectations and prove the skeptics wrong.

“Hey Tammy, let me give you a birthday hug!” Sanford calls out when he sees Tammy Ackerman coming down the hallway. Ackerman is the artistic force behind North40Creative, a design studio responsible for branding North Dam’s image—including its logo, website, advertising,

and signage—as well as that of many other businesses in and around Biddeford.

“There’s a great synergy here,” says Sanford, sweeping his hand through the air in a wide arch. “Everyone works on things with everyone else here because we’re all under the same roof.”

When Sanford gushes about his mills and the town of Biddeford, it’s not just a sales pitch—he’s a businessman who walks the talk.

A New Hampshire native, Sanford has lived in Maine for more than twenty-five years. Beginning in the mid-1980s, he has bought and renovated several city blocks’ worth of buildings in downtown Biddeford. Now, Sanford has not only relocated the showroom and manufacturing facilities for



Paint, Show, Bind! You never know what you’ll find behind a door at the North Dam Mill. You might find the painter David Allen (top) in his studio at work on one of his large, lush oil paintings that manage to feel both serious and funny all at once. Or perhaps you’ll find the Kymara Gallery painted silver and wrapped in tin foil to replicate Andy Warhol’s infamous studio The Factory (middle). And you’ll always find the incomparable bookbinder Scott Mullenberg at a workbench in his Mullenberg Designs studio, turning out portfolios and books that are so stunning they have sold at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York City (bottom).

The Mill at Sunrise: Located in Biddeford on the edge of the Saco River, the North Dam Mill complex consists of three interconnected five-story brick buildings and encompasses an amazing 370,000 square feet.

North Dam Mill: northdammill.com, 207-282-5577



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River's Edge Wood Products—his custom cabinetry, furniture, and moulding business—he has also carved out a prime space on the fifth floor for his own apartment.

On the way to tour his future home, Sanford pauses at a window. “I mean, look at this location! We’re right on the water, right off the turnpike, and right next to the Amtrak stop. But it’s both affordable and sustainable here!” If Portland is the Manhattan of Maine, then Biddeford is its Brooklyn: a haven for youthful

urbanites and creative entrepreneurs that’s still a little rough around the edges.

Standing in what will soon be his living room, Sanford counts the church spires he can see out one set of windows, before turning to admire the Saco River.

“That’s 1980s thinking over there,” he says finally, gesturing across the river to the many Saco Island mills that have been converted into expensive condominiums. “It used to be all about how much money you could make and how fast you could make it. I’m more interested in affordable and sustainable over here,” he adds, using those two words again.

By growing North Dam Mill incrementally, Sanford has sought to avoid the potentially debilitating pressures and skyrocketing prices that can come with redevelopment schemes that require massive, multimillion-dollar infusions upfront.

“People thought they needed a big Boston developer to come in here, and a big out-of-state contractor,” he says. “But I’ve used local crews on everything I’ve done. Then these guys spend local and they bank local. It’s a big circle. No money here is going out the door to China! It’s *synergy*,” he says again—it’s a word he repeats often, like a mantra.

“Excuse me,” says Sanford, taking a call on his cell phone. Moments later, he pockets the phone. “That’s it,” he says, “the last one-bedroom unit is rented. Just like that.” He grins and looks out the window.

“You will not recognize Biddeford in another five years,” Sanford predicts.

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For more information, see Resources on page 88.

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