

Make Main Street SHINE: Add 101 Airstreams



In a time of clicks and swipes, small-town America has suffered. Online retailing—and indeed, even online socialization—has whisked away the bustle and cheer of many of our heartland downtowns. It might seem peculiar that the cure for a down downtown could be to bring in 101 Airstreams and their upbeat owners, but the vitality powering a phalanx of bright, shiny trailers populated by bright, shiny people has a way of spreading.

The maestro behind this Main Street magic is Kirk MacKellar, who has been hosting middle-America booster events since 2012. MacKellar is the founder and event producer of Urban Air®, held annually first in his home state of Michigan and now in Ohio. When he's not being an event impresario, he runs MacKellar Screenworks, a graphics and screen printing business.

At Urban Air, Airstreams (up to 101 of them) are parked for three nights along the main street of a small Midwest town. While camping downtown, attendees explore the local community and take in a series of special events, and the event raises funds to support local causes.

By Tom Bentley

Main Street USA, in this case Logan, Ohio, gets a makeover courtesy of 101 Airstreams camped in the center of town.



MacKellar describes the philosophy of Urban Air like this: “We help out small towns by drawing attention to their long-forgotten downtowns, which are always where the town started and which contain interesting stories, buildings, and businesses.” He adds, “We bring in new visitors that can stay where there are often no local overnight accommodations. They return home as ambassadors for the venue.”

Parking 101 Airstreams on a town’s main street smacks a bit of cat herding, but MacKellar engages with the town’s mayor and other officials to cover logistics—and the Airstreamers are often Urban Air returnees, so they know how to deal with any hitches, literally and figuratively.

The Rebirth of Main Street

The 2020 event—already sold out, though spaces are available at the nearby fairground—will be in Logan, a town of about 7,000 in southeast Ohio, from April 30 to May 2. “Our theme this year is Wake Up Downtown,” says MacKellar. “I would expect to see lots of people in pajamas and curlers. We will raise money for the restoration of a long-abandoned theater. Once it reopens, it will really accelerate the rebirth of Main Street.”

Logan is the gateway to the Hocking Hills Appalachian region, noted for its varied and picturesque landscape featuring waterfalls, caves, lakes, and abundant hiking. Airstreamers will converge there from all over the country. “Since they travel so far, they usually extend their visit and explore the area before and after the event downtown,” says MacKellar. Early arrivals can set up at the fairground.

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The Airstreamers don’t just sit in their rigs downtown and hope some townfolk admire their awnings. They get out and mingle and bring energy and enterprise to the event. Gatherings include a potluck dinner, live music around street campfires, and a “Pimp Your Blimp” trailer-decorating contest.

“Tours of local businesses and attractions are also a big hit,” says MacKellar. “If the host city has something going on, we show up in droves. We also encourage our Urban Airforce to bring original works of art and crafts to sell and donate to charity.”

In thinking about the effect on the local community, MacKellar recalls a remark from the electrician who strung over a mile of cable in one town for the event. “He said, ‘Our townspeople really needed to see our city visited by a bunch of nice people.’ I took that to mean that perhaps they were taking the place for

Airstreamers visiting downtown don’t just hang around their trailers. They explore the charms of the local businesses, make music, and give back to the community.

RIGHT: Jay Cullis of Airstream plays guitar for the group. **BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT:** Jay Cullis, Dominic VanWyck and Chris VanWyck stand by some of the signs contributed by McKellar Screenworks; Mark and Kelly Wriggelsworth; Diane Hopkins of Columbus Washboard Factory; James Martin and Audrey Martin (not related) stand by a pile of donations for the Food Bank; Dave and AnnMarie McKeever, John Couger, Rune Moeller, Mike Stallings, and M.J. Stallings jam in the street.





granted, and maybe it was eye-opening to see people from all over the country check out their town and ooh and aah over it. The events are always a catalyst for improvement.”

MacKellar says he’s had a charmed, informal relationship with Airstream Inc. for 15 years and that it helps out in small ways when asked. Airstream shouldn’t mind paying attention to one of their stellar customers, since MacKellar owns three of their rigs: a 17-foot 1967 Caravel, a 22-foot Safari, and a 19-foot 2009 Flying Cloud. He could almost hold an event by himself.

But being solo isn’t what Urban Air is about. “It’s about people meeting people and helping each other,” says MacKellar. “The Airstreams get us there, unite us, and provide us with a comfortable place to sleep in the streets. They are a People Delivery Device, but it’s still about people.”

Those People Delivery Devices have been popular for a long, long time, and MacKellar has a few thoughts about why. “It’s probably the classic art deco design that makes them a favorite of artsy people,” he says. “Owners tend to be a creative crowd made up of artists, musicians, designers, photographers, writers, and people who weave, knit, love to explore, or love to hang out with the other like-minded souls. Per capita, you’ll find more open-minded, accepting, free-thinkers than in normal society,” he says.

“It’s like everyone is on the same wavelength.”

The wavelength for Urban Air is tuned in to camaraderie, fun, commerce, and charm—and a big sweeping tip of the hat to reviving the soul of the American heartland: Main Street USA. 📺

See more about Urban Air® at wakeupdowntown.com.

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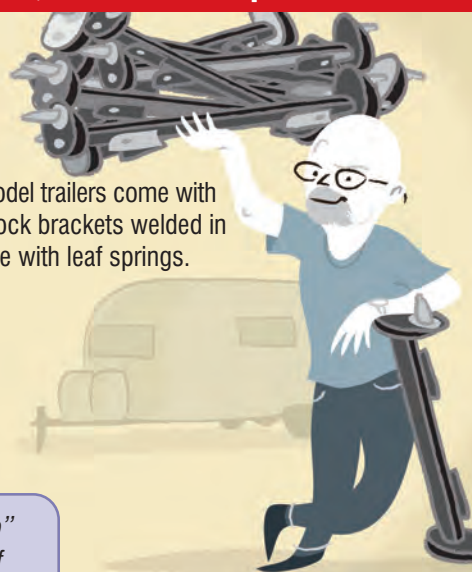
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