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Editorial: Take the gloves off — and give this guy a hand

By **PIONEER PRESS EDITORIAL BOARD** | Pioneer Press

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It's not every day that a cabinet-level federal official comes to call in St. Paul. When the point of the visit is to meet a local entrepreneur, it's a stop worth noting in a community that aspires to a business climate that draws people in and lets them thrive.

The woman who is the voice of small business in the Donald Trump administration was in her element on Tuesday. Linda McMahon — founder and CEO of World Wrestling Entertainment before her confirmation in February to head the Small Business Administration — visited Element Gym in the Hamline-Midway neighborhood. A boxing ring is a focal point of the facility, and the class schedule includes cardio boxing, “boxing boot camp” and kickboxing.

She was there to meet owner Dalton Outlaw, who in April was named the SBA's Young Entrepreneur of the Year in Minnesota. A few weeks earlier, he received the “Reflecting St. Paul Award” from the City of St. Paul, honoring a business owned by a person of color who is committed to equity and empowerment.

“We put people over profits,” Outlaw told us, describing the gym founded in 2011 with a “socially conscious business model” that works to turn profits into resources that go back into the community.

The SBA cites Element Gym programs that allow area youth — many of whom would otherwise never have such an opportunity — to get in shape and keep a positive focus in life. The city noted a commitment to keep programs affordable, if not free, for at-risk youth in St. Paul who might otherwise be on the streets.

Element's website says it is "the first co-working and collaborative-benefit-corporation gym in the world."

That emphasis is evident in another class on the gym's schedule: "Ballet for boxers." The Element complex at 655 N. Fairview Ave., a former printing company building, also houses the St. Paul Ballet.

Their collaboration, "The Art of Boxing. The Sport of Ballet" — a 2016 Knight Arts Challenge winner — played last weekend to a sold-out audience at the High School for the Recording Arts on University Avenue.

The ballet company describes the performance on its website as "an exhibition that explores the similar beauty behind the movement and preparation of the dancer and the athlete." It's one in which company members and professional athletes "create an experience that celebrates our shared rituals and commonalities ingrained in the art of ballet and the sport of boxing," the company says.

Outlaw, 30, grew up in the city's Frogtown neighborhood, attended Concordia University of St. Paul on a football scholarship and graduated with a degree in business administration.

It took hard work and dedication to build his business, he told us, including selling his car to help raise the capital he needed. Outlaw was nominated for the SBA award by the Neighborhood Development Center in St. Paul from which he received technical assistance in getting started.

Now, bringing the enterprise to the next level, he told us, includes a vision for a Center for Movement. The ballet company and gym in a brochure note that an "incredible partnership has blossomed" and that both organizations are excited to work together far into the future in a space that meets the needs of both artists and athletes.

Outlaw shared his progress with McMahon during the visit in which she toured the gym, good-naturedly posed for pictures beside the ring and observed a ballet class in an adjacent studio.

She's visiting more than 60 cities across the nation in a two-year outreach campaign the agency says is aimed at "fueling small businesses with tools and resources to grow their companies and create more American jobs."

In our conversation, McMahon echoed words from the president that the nation is on the verge of a "golden age" for small businesses, with efforts that include tax reduction and regulatory and health care reform, as well as a plan to increase internships and apprenticeships.

Her visit to the Twin Cities included addressing a conference in Minneapolis of the National Association of Women Business Owners. In a nation that's "looking for role models," she told us, small-business owners shouldn't hesitate to share their knowledge and expertise.

On these pages, we appreciate business success stories. We thank Outlaw for sharing his, Linda McMahon for putting an exclamation point on it.

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