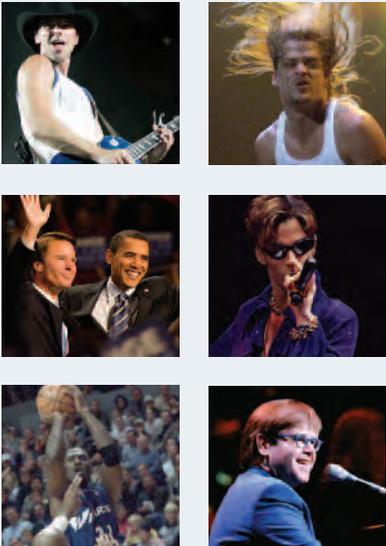




Above: Paul McCartney made his first appearance at Van Andel Arena, Grand Rapids, Mich., in August as part of the venue's 20th anniversary celebration.

Below: From sports to concerts to politics, Van Andel Arena has hosted a wide range of events in its 20 years, including appearances by, clockwise from top left: Kenny Chesney; Kid Rock; Prince; Elton John; Michael Jordan; and John Edwards and President Barack Obama.



# CONSISTENTLY GRAND, RAPIDLY GROWING

Management team keeps the Michigan venue up-to-date and super busy

by R.V. BAUGUS

Rich MacKeigan has been with Van Andel Arena for all but about three years of the Grand Rapids, Mich., venue's 20-year existence.

Tim Gortsema has been with the Grand Rapids Griffins hockey team that plays in the venue for all 20 years.

There is something to be said for consistency at the top of any organization and, as the SMG-managed arena celebrates its 20th anniversary, it does so riding the crest of a wave of momentum well equipped to carry it successfully into the years ahead. >

VAN ANDEL ARENA  
20TH ANNIVERSARY

“The arena only continues to grow and thrive,” said MacKeigan, SMG regional general manager for Van Andel Arena, Devos Place and DeVos Performance Hall. “With the support of the community, outstanding partnerships with promoters and others in the industry and continued maintenance and upgrades to the facility, we plan to host events for years to come.”

The optimism for the future contrasts with the city’s standing before Van Andel Arena came into existence. Situated on the Grand River east of Lake Michigan, the city had trouble luring most shows and saw its own residents trek to Detroit or Chicago to see concerts. There was clearly a need for a major venue, and benefactors Jay and Betty Van Andel recognized that as well as anyone. If the name Jay Van Andel sounds familiar, it should, because he is the co-founder of the Amway Corporation and donated \$11.5 million from the Jay & Betty Van Andel Foundation toward the \$75-million construction cost of the arena. Another \$17 million came in private sector fundraising.

“Grand Rapids had long been bypassed as a place for family entertainment, major concerts, and sporting events, and West Michigan residents were driving to Detroit and Chicago for shows,” MacKeigan said. “Downtown Grand Rapids at the time was not a destination, even for locals, and the planning committee hoped that building an arena would lead to a revitalization. Twenty years later, we can say that definitely has come to fruition, as evidenced by the number of restaurants, bars and other establishments that are thriving downtown.”

Grand Action, a privately-funded, non-profit organization, supported plans for the development of the arena and spearheaded the planning process. That group worked closely with the city and other private interests to make the venue a reality.

MacKeigan said that having SMG on board to manage the venue cannot be underestimated as one of the major keys to success. The management firm has a contract in place through June 30, 2018.

“There is no doubt that Van Andel Arena has benefited from being part of the SMG net-

work,” MacKeigan said. “New promoters and agents know SMG provides an extensive network of expertise in all areas of venue management, including booking, marketing and operations. They know that when they’re coming to an SMG-managed venue they can expect a certain level of service and professionalism.”

From the SMG perspective, the feeling is mutual.

“As the operator of Van Andel Arena for many years, we take pride in our role as steward for this tremendous venue, working on behalf of the Grand Rapids-Kent County Convention/Arena Authority (CAA), the City

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## VAN ANDEL ARENA BY THE NUMBERS

**10/8/96** – Van Andel Arena opens with performances by Olympic Gold Medalist figure skater Kristi Yamaguchi and the Grand Rapids Symphony

**10/10/96** – Neil Diamond performs the venue’s first concert

**10/11/96** – Grand Rapids Griffins play the first hockey game at the venue

**11,084** – Calvin College vs. Hope College men’s basketball game in January 1997 still holds the attendance record for Division III college basketball

**4** – Number of Elton John performances

**05/08** – Barack Obama holds a rally while campaigning for the Democratic primary

**44** – Luxury suites

**\$75 million** – Cost to build the arena

**\$11.5 million** – Donation gift from the Jay & Betty Van Andel Foundation toward construction

**\$1.2 million** – Cost of a concourse expansion in 2010

**29** – Full-time employees

**65,000** – Ticket sales record for any one engagement with Garth Brooks’ six-show run May 12-15, 2016

**8/15/16** – Paul McCartney makes his Grand Rapids debut and becomes the highest grossing concert in arena history

## DOLLAR DOGS, DOLLAR BREWS

Being approached by your anchor tenant hockey team about wanting to host a dollar hot dog and dollar beer night is probably not high on the list of wishes for most sane venue managers. But in the case of the Grand Rapids Griffins and Van Andel Arena, it was a deal made in a perfect partnership. And sanity even prevailed.

"It was probably a little over 10 years ago when we said we wanted to do a concession promotion on a Friday night," remembered Tim Gortsema, president of the Grand Rapids Griffins of the American Hockey League and the primary affiliate of the Detroit Red Wings. "At the time it was for dollar dogs and dollar beer."

Gortsema said it serves as but one example of what it has been like to work with the venue since both he and the facility arrived on the scene 20 years ago in Grand Rapids. It is an example that he cited of how the venue staff went above and beyond the call of duty.

"We explained about why we wanted to do it, which basically was to attract a new fan base and inject some energy into the game and the facility," he said. "We wanted to drive concessions. But in order for that to work we had to get three parties involved, which was the team, the building and the concessionaire, all on the same page to work together.

"We had to come up with an agreeable cost or reimbursement for us to pay the concessionaire and then use that to drive significant attendance increases. Again, it is with the understanding of let's not get bogged down on relative shares of slices of the pie, because collectively we're going to have a much bigger pie."

It helps that the building is an SMG-managed venue, as they are also part of creating the success of any endeavor the arena has.

"There is no doubt that the Van Andel Arena has benefited from being part of the SMG network," said Rich MacKeigan, SMG regional general manager for Van Andel Arena, Devos Place and DeVos Performance Hall. "We want to anticipate the needs of our patrons and going above and beyond expectations, while providing a safe and comfortable environment so our guests can focus on the event and have a great time."

Just as there are times to take risks with shows and to a different degree other nontraditional events or requests, there are also times when the risk might be too much. It is often a balancing act and sometimes helps to have all parties cross their fingers going in.

"I asked them to take a leap of faith with us and for them to also say we want to do this," Gortsema said. "They agreed and the numbers for that [promotion] were out in space where our attendance on those nights probably doubled. We found that concessions in the aggregate went up significantly because dad is getting his cheap beer and pizza for the kids and then popcorn with the hot dog. It grew the concession pie in a huge way."

Gortsema emphasized that whether it is trying to secure an extra weekend date for his hockey team (scheduling conversations with counterpart MacKeigan happen all the time) or something that these days has become passe (dollar beer, not dollar hot dogs), the key to working together is, well, working together.

The hockey team has its own staff just as the arena does, and the two entities are constantly communicating with each other.

"SMG has 29 full-time employees and 20 part-time employees for the arena," MacKeigan said. "We work with subcontractors to provide event staff, including security, ticket takers and custodians. Overall there are approximately 45 full-time staff at the arena and part-time into the thousands."

The Griffins employ 22 full-time staff concentrated most heavily in tickets and corporate sponsorships. The team has its media and public relations staff, director of game operations and broadcasters.

"Position by position and department-by-department we work with the arena," Gortsema said. "On game days we will often promote upcoming events at the facility. During their events they promote upcoming hockey games. It's a win-win. We don't view other events at the venue necessarily as competitors. There is a big enough revenue pool that we can all share in it proportionately. If we can help them out, absolutely we are going to do it and they've been great at doing the same."

Sometimes that means even if the request is for a dollar-dogs-and-beer night. — R.V. Baugus

**CONSISTENTLY GRAND...** CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17 of Grand Rapids and Kent County," said Harry Cann, SMG regional vice president. "The arena has been and will continue to be a tremendous centerpiece asset for the community and the region, both as an economic generator and as an enhancement to the quality of life."

Cann looks back over the recent years and sees the answer unfold for why the arena is successful in the community and region.

"The financial commitment to and investment in Van Andel Arena by our client and partner, the CAA, is truly the backbone of the venue's success," he said. "Over the past 20 years, we have worked closely together to keep this venue fresh and on the cutting edge given the dynamics in the live entertainment industry, advance in technology and the changing expectations of fans and guests.

"In addition, the response and support from the local market to the events we host and the AHL's Grand Rapids Griffins is central to our joint achievements. The ticket buyers who continue to support the arena and the valued partnerships we have with the business community contribute significantly to the success of the arena. It is a true team effort with the community and we appreciate the ongoing support and commitment."

## PARTNERS FOR SUCCESS

As president of the Grand Rapids Griffins of the American Hockey League, Tim Gortsema has perhaps had the best look at the arena's history since he has been with the team for all 20 years that it has played at Van Andel. He believes that the partnership his team and, to a more specific degree, that he has with his counterpart MacKeigan at the arena breeds success.

"We have had professional hockey in Grand Rapids before," he said. "We had the Grand Rapids Owls in the 1970s and I remember going to some games as a kid with my dad when they played at the old Stadium Arena (now DeltaPlex Arena) and the dehumidification system was terrible. You had kind of that fog in the air and a lot of people smoked so you almost couldn't see what was going on."

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# 20 years\$

# Van Andel Arena

Grand Rapids, Michigan

## It's Great To Be Here.

A growing population. A thriving city. **12,000 seats** waiting to be filled. It's all here in **Grand Rapids, Michigan**. Thanks for helping us make the last 20 years a resounding success.

**Thank you.**

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CONSISTENTLY GRAND... CONTINUED FROM PAGE 18

"But when the new arena came along the building knew that hockey would come in right out of the gate. There is instant stability to the revenue and operations of having 40-plus dates taking up hockey. And my relationship with Rich and his team is really strong. Rich is really only the second general manager that we have had here. They have had a great continuity of staff just as we have. I would characterize it as collaborative versus competitive. We realize that we are stronger if we work together

and our success is their success and vice versa."

"It's the old adage that a rising tide raises all boats, so if Rich comes to me about submitting my dates before I've got my schedule and says, 'Hey, Tim, I need this date back because I've got this great concert that's coming through,' then I am going to try and work with him. That stuff only works if people work together."

"But I work with Rich most heavily and specifically on anything scheduling-wise and dates and things of that nature."

MacKeigan said that the arena averages

130 events in a calendar year and that making guests happy is a priority of business.

"We want to anticipate the needs of our patrons and go above and beyond expectations," he said. "We strive to provide a safe and comfortable environment so our guests can focus on the event and have a great time."

Having an educated staff during an event never hurts, either, especially when it comes to entertaining questions from curious fans.

"I believe the key to their success has been their staffing," Gortsema said. "It is having the right people employed on the building side and team side and doing the right things."

That education often comes into play on game day itself. Gortsema said that his director of game operations attends the venue's staff meetings on behalf of the team. Information is exchanged about any giveaways or themes or anything that the venue should know before the puck is dropped.

"On a game night I will meet with the usher staff and the event coordinator for the building to just kind of give them a pregame pep talk about what we have going on and educate them with some hockey updates so if a fan comes up and asks why a particular player is not in the lineup they can reply that the player was just called up to the Red Wings. It's providing information and keeping people educated and up to speed so they can do their jobs better."

#### HAPPY BIRTHDAY

This year has already been huge for Van Andel Arena regardless of the actual anniversary date, which happened to be Oct. 8 with an "I Love the 90s Tour" that had \$20 tickets as well as concessions and parking prices from 1996. At the end of October, the venue will host a public open house with self-guided tours and free snacks and birthday cake.

"We have already had 20 big events, including Elton John, Garth Brooks, Kiss and Paul McCartney, just to name a few," MacKeigan said. "We have enlisted the support of downtown restaurants and bars with special 20th anniversary promotions, including food and beverage offers, Van Andel Arena 20th Anniversary-themed coasters and 20th Anniversary themed window clings. We have conducted ticket giveaways through social media promotions encouraging the community to submit their favorite memories of Van Andel Arena."

Celebrating 20 years also requires some special marketing and promotions to get the

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Photo by Derek Koepke



20 years

Van  
Andel  
Arena

Grand Rapids, Michigan

East of Chicago.  
West of Detroit.  
Far From Expected.

Van Andel Arena is located between Detroit and Chicago – a **12,000-seat facility** that's attracted **15 million people** over **20 successful years**. You've been a big part of our success and we'd like to continue to be part of yours.

**Thank you.**

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## THE ARENA THAT DEFIES AGE

From lots of fresh fresh paint to major upgrades and renovations, the 20-year-old Van Andel Arena has defied aging. Voila! The first 20 years have been good and the future is only brighter.

"We continue to receive compliments about the state of the building given its age," said Rich MacKeigan, SMG regional general manager for Van Andel Arena, Devos Place and DeVos Performance Hall. "Upgrades to our lighting and lighting control systems, ice plant, HVAC system, and more have kept the facility fresh and energy efficient."

"We continually strive to keep up with changing technology. We installed a ribbon-board inside the bowl in 2010, and a new Daktronics videoboard was installed in 2013. Installation of a public Wi-Fi system in Van Andel Arena was completed during the final quarter of 2015."

These days there truly is no better way for a venue to stay young than to utilize the latest technology available in order to meet growing fan expectations. While the talk is often about catering to a new generation of fans who were practically born with a cell phone in the baby crib, the dynamics are also shifting in the actual venue workplace as more of the patrons' peers are becoming employed at the venues, thus creating basically two groups of people speaking the same language.

"I look at my own kids," said Tim Gortsema, president of the anchor tenant Grand Rapids Griffins hockey team of the American Hockey League. "I have three kids, one in college, one in high school and one in middle school, and they have known nothing but technology. They 100 percent grew up on it. They don't know any different. The same is true of a lot of our younger workers here."

Gortsema sees another reason why it is important for venues such as Van Andel Arena to be ahead of the curve with technology.

"You can go to your local McDonald's or your local coffee shop and have great Wi-Fi," he said. "You come to a venue this size you expect the same thing. If you don't have it, it becomes an inhibitor."

That said, there are obviously other reasons that keep a 20-year-old venue such as Van Andel Arena looking as good today as on the first date back in 1996.

"One example within our state is the Palace of Auburn Hills [home to the NBA Detroit Pistons]," Gortsema said. "It's a venue that opened in 1988 yet they have continued to invest in that facility. It looks as good today as it probably did 30 years ago."

"People that come here for a concert or hockey game and maybe have not been here before ... they're surprised at the age of the building based on how great it looks. Some of that is the continued investment, technology, cleanliness, look and feel. It is younger than its actual age. Whether it is SMG or the success of the venue in the marketplace, it allows Van Andel Arena to oftentimes fight above its weight class. It can compete with either bigger venues or bigger markets because this market has shown a great ability to draw well and have quality high-end concerts that sometimes you wouldn't get at this level market."

MacKeigan likes to point out other ways that the arena has succeeded in "fighting above its weight class."

"In 2010, we underwent a \$1.2 million concourse expansion, expanding the concourse about 3,500 square feet to alleviate congestion at what was once a choke point. The new area has been named 'Amway Section A' and features two new concession stands and a fun view of the downtown area from spacious windows on the west side of the arena."

Other enhancements are on their way, including an updated marquee to highlight the current one in front of the building as well as a Distributed Antenna System (DAS) project coming soon to enhance the cellular connectivity in the venue.

"We will be installing new retractable seating in our stage end lower bowl to ease with conversions and enhance the comfort of our guests," MacKeigan said. "We have a long-term capital plan and we work closely with the Grand Rapids Griffins, our SMG corporate office and the Grand Rapids-Kent County Convention/Arena Authority, our owners, to assess opportunities that provide the best return."

The ultimate best return, of course, is when guests return, over and over again. And when they do, it will be to an arena that only gets better with age.

— R.V. Baugus

**CONSISTENTLY GRAND...** CONTINUED FROM PAGE 20  
word out about the milestone and what patrons can expect.

"We have been running a national ad campaign thanking promoters and artists for their support of Van Andel Arena, and following up with a local ad campaign as well to thank the community for their support," MacKeigan said. "We planned several social media campaigns, and 20th anniversary themed artwork on social media, our website, and in the venue, including large scale signage in the lobby and concourse. We are partnering with media to do a series of stories about the success of Van Andel Arena and the impact it has made on West Michigan, while continuing to push 20th Anniversary messaging along with our regular event announcements and updates."

MacKeigan has been at his home away from home for most of the venue's existence and, as he ponders the magnitude of 20 years, he can't help but reflect on the early days of the arena.

"When the arena opened, only one other arena in the United States (Nashville, Tenn.) could compare acoustically," he said. "The acoustic-absorbing roof and acoustically treated walls together provide a reverberation time of just two seconds, which translates to no echoes of even the deepest bass notes."

It is a fact that probably not too many in MacKeigan's shoes would note so precisely 20 years later. But this is not just any acoustic stat or any random memory. MacKeigan takes great pride in the venue in which he is a steward for the community and for his guests. It is again a reflective moment that calls another distant time in the past and a family decision that was made.

"When my wife, Terri, and I first moved to Grand Rapids, I told her we would be here for two or three years," he said. "Eighteen years later, I continue to be happy going to work and we both consider ourselves so lucky to have found Grand Rapids and the fine venues we manage here." 

Interviewed for this story: **Rich MacKeigan**, (616) 742-6600; **Tim Gortsema**, (616) 988-0249; **Harry Cann**, (610) 729-7900