time & space

by Kate Chadwick

align.Space filled a coworking venue need and morphed into a community hub



To walk into align.Space is to feel both inspired and relaxed at once—no small feat—and that's got nothing to do with the fact that it's in one of the most stunning and iconic buildings in town. Okay, maybe that has a little something to do with it.

Known as "the West Chester skyscraper," the six-story limestone and yellow brick building is a stunner in the Classic Revival style. As most people in West Chester know, the space is now a thoroughly reimagined yet beautifully up-to-the-moment incarnation of the former Farmers and Mechanics Building on the corner of High and Market Streets. Shortly before COVID, it was reborn as align. Space, a coworking and event space. And what a space it is.

The venue offers memberships for single, double, and premium offices, as well as shared "find your own desk" space. It's a bright and vibrant environment, with an underlying buzz of the collective energy that comes from many engaged brains under one magnificent roof. The offerings run the gamut from conference room to snug cubicles-for-one to cozy reading nook, from shuffleboard to sweeping views of the borough.

Please note that align.Space is not your average coworking spot, though—it has evolved into a community collective. Networking activities, private events, live music, and more quickly mushroomed, turning this "get out of the house and get some work done" environment into a more cohesive consortium.



The team at align.Space is a small but mighty one—Member Coordinator Nikki DiGiorgio and General Manager Chuck Golder. We met with Nikki DiGiorgio for a tour (Do it. Go. Now.) and for a rundown of how align.Space began, where it is now, and where it's going.

"The real vision came from entrepreneur John Ratliffe, who is the CEO of align. Space, and who got his start with a call center out of his apartment, fresh out of college," Nikki said. "One of his chief complaints with the entrepreneurial lifestyle was that he didn't have any resources, or anyone to connect with who understood where he was coming from and what he was going through. He could talk with his fellow twenty-something friends, of course, but they couldn't identify with or understand the complexity of his problems and the challenges of just showing up every day and making something that's not a thing yet work—which is what an entrepreneur pretty much does."

These days, John is a serial entrepreneur. "But align.Space was imagined by him to be specifically geared towards the entrepreneur, to give them both the resources and the community that he knew they needed," Nikki told us. "So, community was always a part of the vision, which he attested to at one of our breakfast clubs. As he said then, align.Space turned out to be a bit different from his original vision, 'but I'm not upset about it.'"

There are just so many different ways that people now use this space, according to Nikki. "The idea was a place for people without a traditional office job to have a different place to go. It is now an event space as well, which was a bit of a pivot because of COVID," she said. "We hold all sorts of business networking events here as well, whether they're internally programmed or via different organizations like chambers of commerce. The Greater West Chester Chamber of Commerce, the Exton Chamber of Commerce—they come here all the time. We have hosted fundraisers here, where the works and the food and drink are donated. It simply involves us just opening the doors and allowing the space to be used for this positive purpose." Nikki was specifically referencing a late-summer fundraiser for local artist Landon Peacock of Gingko Arts, who had been diagnosed



with a rare form of leukemia. With donated works by local artists and beverages provided by Turks Head Café and Beermill, the fundraiser brought in $30,000.

Of course, align.Space could have charged the organizers to rent the space, but they donated it instead. It's the kind of top-down attitude that John has instilled in his team—of prioritizing community involvement and engagement. "He does not micromanage us, but instead trusts us to make decisions that align with his values," Nikki said.

As a further "sidebar" testimony to John's generosity, Nikki told us that in addition to being the member coordinator here, she's also an independent artist, who throws a music and arts festival which aims to provide a platform for underrepresented artists. "When I told John about it, he started letting me hold my board meetings here—he's fully in support of anything that has anything to do with raising the consciousness of our community, even if he has no direct ties to it. 'Are you helping people?' 'Yes.' 'Okay, absolutely.' That was the conversation, and that's cool. He's not in here day-to-day, but he very much cares about what's going on here."

Chuck concurs. "We (our members) are proud to have recently donated a bunch of goodies to the WCU pantry," he told us. +We think this is an often-overlooked community service that the university facilitates and that deserves some recognition. They go out of their way to make sure that students with food insecurity—or any other need, really—at the university feel supported, and that they have a safe space to "shop" at no cost to them."

The first floor of align.Space — in the Farmers and Mechanics Trust Building at 2 W Gay St — is an open-plan, multi-purpose common area.

About that space: Capacity for offices is eight on each floor, and there are offices on the second, third, and the recently acquired fourth floor. "There is shared workspace for about half of each floor, and the other half has glass cubicles," Nikki said. "There are premium office spaces which host whole teams, and then we have single and double offices." The offices are leased monthly, so can become available at any given time.



"The fourth floor was something we had our eye on for a while," Chuck said. "There are two great offices up there—one of which is currently available—with killer views of downtown and a big open space for flex use. We were happy to have the opportunity to put our stamp on it, and all seem to enjoy the extra space. We do rent it out as a whole for team meetings and trainings, and it's a great space for groups that are too large for our Turk's Head boardroom."

If you're just seeking a "get out of this house today" scenario, but still have work to do, align.Space offers a day pass in addition to their membership packages. "For $35, you get access to this space [we were on the ground floor seated on one of the spectacular orange couches at this time], all-access during business hours—the doors lock at 6pm—hot breakfast from Market Street Grill every morning, access to the coffee, water, even White Claws if that's your thing," Nikki said.

Not enough for you? Get a membership and check out these amenities: complimentary coffee, tea, snacks, beer and wine; 24/7 member access, a gaming and recreation lounge; member-only events and workshops, and all of this in a setting that looks like it came right out of a design magazine.

"We encourage members to not only network with us, but amongst themselves—that's one of the perks of membership," Nikki said. "We want people to feel comfortable bringing in their own friends or team members. We want people to know 'this is your space now—this is your office.'"

> **"I tell people "It's haunted if you want it to be haunted."**
> – align.space general manager chuck golder

That attitude clearly resonates with members, as borne out by their attrition rate, according to Chuck. "We find that once people get a feel for what we're really about, they tend not to leave," he told us. "Most members who move on do so for happy reasons, like the team outgrew the physical office, or they relocated for a promotion. Join us for a day pass or a community membership and then try to tell me this place isn't the perfect space to be productive, meet new people, become part of a like minded community—and drink tons of coffee."

In terms of offices in the borough, it's hard to imagine one with a better view *(right)***. And it's not just co-working — the property doubles as an event space** *(above)***.**

Nikki herself is a perfect example of the power of the networking possibilities here. She found her spot at align.Space via an open mic night. "I came in for that and met Diane Miller, the previous GM, and she was always saying how she needed someone like me in here," Nikki said. "So I said 'sign me up!' When she moved on from the company, I saw a post for a breakfast attendant, 10 hours a week. Once I got that, I knew it would lead to more—once I told people just how great this place is—I just knew it." And she was right.

Nikki gestures to where the Market Street Grill breakfast spread is set up each morning. "We'll have fruit, granola, awe-



some breakfast sandwiches—unless it's sausage day—people lose their minds over that." There technically is a community board listing what's being served, but Nikki said what really got people in the door was when she started taking photos of the food and posting them to the venue's Instagram story. "That's really the unofficial calendar," she continued. "Seeing pictures of what was being served started becoming the deciding factor in whether people would come in earlier on a given day."

While we're on the topic of Instagram, there's a photo op at every turn in this space. The huge windows allow tons of natural light— "It's golden hour, all day long" as Nikki puts it. The original vault for the former bank is often utilized as a space to stash gifts for baby and bridal showers or birthday parties; the whiteboard on the interior wall pressed into service as an impromptu message board for the event. Several brides have walked down the stunning staircase to their intended, a show-stopping descent. "I've seen this place completely cleared out and a photo booth brought in for a sweet 16 party—it's an amazing and versatile venue for any event," she added. The bright, modern furniture offers a pop of contrast to the stately surroundings of a 116-year-old building, with many of its original fixtures still intact.

Who would have thought an old bank would be repurposed for such joyous occasions? "The Chester County History Center held a lunch-and-learn event here one day and were talking about the building's history—and I was just floored," Nikki said. "Apparently they had the foresight back in 1908 when it was built—they didn't know if the building would be run by gas or electricity in the distant future, so they built it



with both, which was cutting edge in the time period."

It's hard not to wonder whether such an old building is haunted. "I tell people 'It's haunted if you want it to be haunted,'" Chuck said. "The Chester County History Center has some interesting stories about it."

At least no potential ghosts are getting in the way of a day's work. As for what that might entail, "The day to day involves wearing many hats," Chuck told us. "These hats have names like concierge, IT professional, barista, event coordinator, handyman, psychologist, accountant, and more. But all that makes it sound like it is only work. The truth is, our time here is a lot of fun and the interactions with members, guests, the community at large, and even our own team is what makes the culture here such a joy to be a part of."

Whether you're a part of the COVID-driven work-from-home population who needs a day out of the house, an entrepreneur who doesn't want to invest in a permanent brick-and-mortar office space, are looking for like-minded professional connections and workshops, or just want an incredibly cool spot to throw a party, align. Space is the vibe.

With conference rooms like these, you have to admit Zoom seems a whole lot less appealing

"I love working here—it's so inspiring," Nikki said. "It's new every day."