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## Altoona funeral home “a better place”

Among the industry sectors that have had to adjust to the incredible consequences of Covid-19 are those associated with death and dying. Funeral homes are high on that list. The adjustments, according to Jeffrey Somers, supervisor and funeral director at Myers-Somers Funeral Home in Altoona, are more procedural than clinical.

“On the clinical side, not much has changed from our standard operating procedures,” Somers pointed out. “We still take the same universal precautions we have always taken. Even with Covid-19, the ‘old goodies’ such as hepatitis, meningitis and HIV are still out there.”

“The largest change we’ve seen are the ever-evolving government guidelines under which we operate, such as how many can attend gatherings like viewings and funeral services. It is exceedingly diffi-

cult to inform a client family that we cannot hold the type of gathering they desire because of imposed limits. We know that we need to protect public safety. It’s not an easy situation to balance, especially with large client families.”

Myers-Somers Funeral Home is a full-service facility providing every type of end-of-life choice including traditional, contemporary, cremation and non-traditional service options. The home opened in 1936 at its current location (501 Sixth Avenue) as the Daniel R. Myers Funeral Home.

Somers has been a licensed Pennsylvania Funeral Director since 1990 and has worked in the funeral business since 1985. His experience, among other things, gave him a perspective on the industry that has guided his motivations since he took over as supervisor.

“As a business, we believe most folks dread a

visit to the funeral home because of a pre-conceived notion that the home will be a dark, dreary, intimidating or downright scary place,” Somers disclosed. “We pride ourselves on being anything but that.”

“We maintain a modern, light, warm and inviting atmosphere and our staff are extremely outgoing, approachable and friendly. Our ultimate goal is for client families and guests to be in a ‘better place’ when they leave us than when they arrived.”

He has similar goals for his industry.

“The most significant challenge I see in our industry in the near future is a shortage of folks entering the field to become funeral directors,” Somers predicted. “Even if many of the same people become licensed, a high percentage of them will leave the profession in a few years. It’s an extremely demanding job for individuals



Jeff Somers has been a licensed funeral director in PA since 1990. Not only does he operate a successful funeral business, Somers also mentors mortuary students to become future directors.

and their families. We literally are and must be available 24/7/365. Unfortunately, many come into the field with unrealistic expectations.”

To help prepare for the fu-

ture, Somers has been mentoring mortuary students from the Pittsburgh Institute of Mortuary Sciences to become licensed funeral directors.

“In essence, we are training our hopeful successors.” (Myers-Somers Funeral Home has been a Blair County Chamber member since 2013.)

## New SAMA site coordinator believes tough circumstances will yield creative opportunities

“Starting a job in the middle of a pandemic has been quite an interesting adventure,” acknowledges Hannah Harley, the new site coordinator at Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art (SAMA) in Altoona. “We’re met with a whole new set of problems than we were facing a year ago. There’s an expectation of change to face these new challenges.”

Harley comes to SAMA with an impressive background in education and experience. She was the founding director of Spruce Arts, an art residency program in Indiana, PA, which has hosted artists from around the world. Over the past two years, she has been an adjunct professor at Point Park University and Youngstown State University. Her credentials in many ways contribute to her belief that art can play an important role in how communities recover from Covid-19.

“Art can provide unique and creative solutions to difficult times and unclear futures,” Harley pointed



Hannah Harley, SAMA's site coordinator in Altoona, inspects the artwork of April Riges. In the background is the artwork of Steven Gilbert. Harley also serves as an adjunct professor at two colleges.

out. “In that respect, I’ve been excited to mix things up a bit and bring new exhibitions and programs to the museum. There’s such a vibrant art community here in the Altoona area and SAMA is fortunate to be part of that network.”

Her greatest regret is the restriction that forbids at-

tractions like SAMA to hold events without restrictions on attendance.

“What I miss most is seeing a large crowd together, celebrating, being together and being united in one cause or a shared vision,” Harley noted. “There’s really a magic in art that brings people together.”

She’s currently planning a lecture series that is all virtual so that people can watch from wherever they are.

“It’s been wonderful to explore new ways to reach people.”

(SAMA has been a Blair County Chamber member since 2001.)

## Chamber Board elects officers to lead in 2021



Becky Crilly



Stephanie Doliveira



Richard Fiore, Jr.



Dr. Randy Frye



Sarrah Lyons



Clark Stapelfeld

The Blair County Chamber will have a number of new officers leading the organization during 2021.

Richard Fiore, Jr. of Leonard S. Fiore, Inc. will replace Darin Tornatore as Chair of the Board. Tornatore, who has served in that position for the past two years, will remain in leadership as Immediate Past Chair.

Stepping into Fiore’s spot as Board Chair-Elect is Clark Stapelfeld of New Pig Corporation. Becky Crilly of Reliance Bank begins a second year as Treasurer of the Board.

All three Vice-Chair positions, whose responsibility it is to oversee the various divisions of Chamber committees, will be in their positions for the first time. Sarrah Lyons of Mill Hill Farm Supply will head the Education Division;

Stephanie Doliveira of Sheetz, Inc. will oversee Promotions/Events; and Dr. Randy Frye of Saint Francis University will be in charge of Communications/Advocacy.

“It’s an impressive group that really has a solid understanding of the direction of the organization and its role in community and economic development,” acknowledged Chamber President/CEO Joe Hurd. “We’re anticipating a great year.”



Darin Tornatore

## LBC Alumni grant creates porch library

There’s nothing quite like a pandemic to launch creative ways to get around it. Just ask the staff at Roaring Spring Community Library and alumni of the Chamber’s Leadership Blair County program.

Thanks to a grant from the LBC Alumni Committee, a Pop Up Porch Library was created in the wake of Covid-19. It allows patrons to access materials from the library collections (puzzles, dvd’s, periodicals, books, etc.) and it features bins of books, puzzles, children’s activities, magazines and

other materials that do not need to be returned.

“It features contactless delivery bins as well as walk-up window service,” explained Library Director Michelle McIntyre. “Patrons can telephone, email, send messages via social media or use our online catalog to reserve materials. Many patrons have expressed that being able to come to the library have given them a sense of normalcy in these not so normal times.”

(Roaring Spring Community Library has been a Blair County Chamber member since 2012.)



Michelle McIntyre, director of the Roaring Spring Library, sorts books and publications at the Pop Up Porch Library. The Library was made possible through an LBC Alumni grant.



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