

INCITE

The travel frenzy

Hardly a day goes by that I don't get a call or an email from someone about travel. Either they want to book a trip, encourage us to offer a trip to a certain destination or just simply inquire about where we're planning to travel next. Chamber travel, for better or worse, has taken-on a life of its own.

It wasn't in the long range plan or the short range plan

or really in any plan at all. It was a chance meeting of a few chamber directors over some adult beverages when one of those directors began to provide details of a trip

her chamber had sponsored to China. It wasn't strictly for entertainment purposes. It was more about "non-dues revenue," the incessant fascination of all chambers. Two drinks later, we were all headed to China.

That was twelve years ago. Since then, our Chamber has traveled to China five times. We've been all over Europe, to Central America and South Africa. From one trip a year, we are in discussions about the possibility of doing four. It's madness but it's also an essential part of staying financially afloat at a time when opportunities to expand programs and events are becoming few and far between.

Unlike many chambers that use national providers to plan and execute trips, we've hooked-up with our member travel agencies to avoid creating competition with the businesses that actually do travel for a living. They've been fabulous to work with and understanding of our plight.

So where are we headed next? That depends on a variety of factors, very few of which we control. If circumstances spin our way, we'll be sending travelers to the Canadian Rockies at the end of July and to the French Riviera in late October. In 2022, we're planning a January departure to Australia and New Zealand, then to Ireland in the spring, Iceland in the early fall and, perhaps the Hawaiian Islands in November or December.

We are encouraged by the fact that the travel industry is predicting a huge uptick in people looking to resume their travel habits. We've been able to develop an impressive list of people who have traveled with us in the past and we look forward to seeing them again.

Will we ever go to China again? Never say never. Even an old travel broker like me can't predict that one. (Joe Hurd is the President/CEO of the Blair County Chamber.)

Yon & Associates an industry leader

Among the many industry sectors in Blair County knocked back on its heels by Covid-19 has been real estate. Buying or selling a house was considered a non-essential business transaction and companies that fell under that broad umbrella were forced to close.

Clyde E. Yon & Associates, located at 702 18th Street in Altoona, was one of those that ceased operations. The company first opened its doors in 1961 and has built a solid reputation as a full-service real estate appraisal business, specializing in residential, commercial, industrial as well as farm and land appraisals.

"We not only provide appraisal services for banks and mortgage companies, but we also do appraisals for estate purposes, tax appeals, divorce and for homeowners' personal use," explained Patrick Altiero, one of three partners who operate the business. The other two partners are Randall K. Yon and Christopher McCartney. The Yon & Associates' staff consists of eight certified appraisers, one appraiser trainee and an office manager.

"Our team has nearly 300 years of combined appraisal experience under one roof," Altiero disclosed. "Our appraisers cover a large territory which includes all or parts of seven different counties."

While the real estate industry in general has still not made a full recovery from the Market Crash of 2007-2009, Altiero believes that better times are on the way.

"Although it's hard to predict the future, we hope that the market will not only retain some stability but will continue to grow at a steady pace as we recover from the Covid-19 pandemic." He tries hard not to dwell on the impact that Covid has had on his business and instead focuses on how well they've complied with the mandates.

"It was very challenging dealing with the two month shutdown," Altiero acknowledged. "It did not allow us to perform about 95% of our services. When we opened back up, we did so in a safe manner. We followed the guidelines that would allow us to provide our services and make homeowners feel comfort-



Clyde E. Yon & Associates has built an impressive 60-year history in Blair County that has also included 60 years as a Chamber member. Shown here are the business's three partners (left to right): Christopher McCartney, Randall Yon and Patrick Altiero.

able when we entered their homes while also protecting the safety of our appraisers."

He's looking forward to returning to better times at the office.

"The inability to socialize has been an adjustment," he noted. "We are like a family here at the office. We stopped having our group

luncheons where we would celebrate birthdays and special events together. We miss friends and family that would drop in for lunch or a cup of coffee. We're optimistic that those things will return soon."

Clyde E. Yon & Associates has been a member of the Blair County Chamber for the past 60 years.

"The Chamber has a great reputation that we are glad to be part of," Altiero admitted. "The Chamber provides a sense of community which is essential to our business and helps us identify potential customers. It's helped us in many ways."

(Yon & Associates has been a Chamber Member since 1961.)

Austin's Texas Hot Dogs strive to exceed customer expectations



Buddy Austin hasn't allowed the challenges associated with Covid-19 to keep him from being optimistic about the future of Austin's Texas Hot Dogs.

Buddy Austin knows the hot dog business. He's been living it, first-hand, since his teenage years. Buddy's parents, Gloria and Art, purchased the Texas Drive-In in Bellmeade in 1978 and Austin's Texas Hot Dogs was officially born.

Despite a strong customer base, Austin's fell victim to the construction of I-99 and was forced to close. In 1992, it reopened at the invitation of the DelGrosso Family on the Bland's Park property with Buddy and his sister Jenny becoming the owners.

Three years later, Austin's Texas Hot Dogs moved to its current location at 4384 East Pleasant Valley Blvd. in Tyrone. Jenny has moved away from the area so Buddy runs the day-to-day opera-



tion. He's more than a little happy that he doesn't have to do it alone.

"We have an incredible staff here," he disclosed. "All of our employees are part of the family. Our two managers - Shelly Thomas and Shane Ferry - are what has made us so successful. Shelly has been with us since our Pinecroft days; Shane's been here since junior high. I've been so lucky with the employees we've hired. I couldn't do what we do without them."

What Buddy has been able to do is establish a

following for his products that brings customers from all directions. Although the menu isn't what you'd call extensive, the core products keep people coming back.

"Hot dogs are still the main attraction but the fries and the custard have their share of supporters," Buddy explained.

Like most businesses, Covid-19 has taken a toll on Austin's.

"Since (DelGrosso's Amusement Park) didn't open, it impacted our customer base rather dramatically," Buddy admitted. "You count on the summer to carry you through the slow months. This year that didn't happen. We're hopeful that it's only a temporary setback."

(Austin's Texas Hot Dogs has been a Chamber member since 1994.)

Best Practices to focus on Human Trafficking

With all the challenges that the business community has faced during Covid-19, not all have been directly associated with business itself. One in particular pinpoints a challenge that cuts to the core of societal well-being. That devastating threat is Human Trafficking.

On February 5th, the Blair County Chamber's Committee of Non-Profit Businesses will hold a "Best Practices" Forum from 8:30 to 10:00 a.m. at U.S. Hotel in Hollidaysburg. The event will also be available via Zoom to anyone who would prefer to attend virtually.

"This was a topic that we've discussed as a committee and felt strongly that we needed to direct more attention to," admitted Natalie Depto-Vesey of Home Nursing Agency, who chairs the committee. "As non-profits, we've become aware that people in Blair County have a reluctance to believe that Human Trafficking takes place here or anywhere close to here. People will be surprised."

The Chamber program will feature a speaker who has an incredible knowledge of the topic. Ashley Owens, JD, is Children's Advocacy Center Director at Family Services, Inc. and has gained an impressive reputation for understanding the dangers and the risks associated with Human Trafficking and working with local agencies to help spread the word.

Earlier this month, Owens participated in a Human Trafficking awareness event in cooperation with Operation Our Town and a local



Ashley Owens, JD

group called HART (Human Anti-Trafficking Response Team). HART is comprised of prosecutors, law enforcement and service providers. At that event, attendees filled the cracks of sidewalks with red sand to represent people (and particularly children) who have "fallen through the cracks" by having their Human Trafficking situations ignored.

Owens, who is a graduate of the Chamber's Leadership Blair County program, will provide data on how extensive the problem is and will describe measures that are in place to discourage it.

"She has a real desire to keep this awful problem from becoming what it's become in other communities," explained Depto-Vesey. "Our committee really hopes that our Best Practices Forum will help people become engaged in efforts to stop this in its tracks."

The cost to attend the Best Practices Forum is \$15 for Chamber members and \$20 for non-members. A Continental Breakfast is included. To register, visit www.blairchamber.com. Corporate sponsor of the Forum is Independent Catholic Foundation.