

INCITE

Zoom and Gloom

Last April, when Covid-19 became more than just a threat to the respiratory health of people in Southeast Asia, the Chamber made an investment in technology. We bought Zoom.

I remember wondering at the time if we would ever actually use it. We had just been granted the dubious status of “non-essential business” by our governor and it made little sense to

venture into something new when we weren’t even certain when our office would be allowed to reopen.

As it turns out, Zoom was a Godsend. It allowed us to meet with our

board, our committees and anyone else with an interest in interacting with the Chamber. It created flexibility in communication where we previously had little. And it provided those members with limited participation options the opportunity to attend meetings, programs and events from the comfort of their home or office.

People who have experienced my technological acumen for even a few minutes will tell you that the most amazing part of Zoom was that I appeared to understand it. I was scheduling meetings, assigning co-hosts, sharing screens, initiating chats and doing all the things that a competent person would do. A business associate even referred to it as “the upside of the pandemic.”

In reality, it shouldn’t last. With every Zoom meeting has come the realization that this wonderful model of creative advancement was not augmenting in-person gatherings, it was replacing them. Much in the same way that people will admit to already feeling uncomfortable without their masks, weaning Zoomers will not be an easy proposition. I’m seeing it every time I schedule an in-person meeting.

I recognize that some people are still reluctant to go anywhere, even as the vaccine gains wider distribution. It’s not fair to draw too many conclusions about Zoom-versus-In-person until the playing field returns to pre-Covid dimensions. Yet it seems that many of the business people who are avoiding in-person meetings are not the ones using Covid as the reason.

It may be selfish to admit that the Chamber’s bread-and-butter as an organization is tied to providing networking opportunities to our members. Many of our events draw significant crowds. To consider Zoom as a networking option is a bit of a stretch. Any platform in which you can substitute a photo or a black screen for an actual person might not be the ideal way of fostering good business relationships.

Family primary focus for busy Cook’s

Running a successful business involves passion, determination and an incredible commitment of time and energy. Chris and Jen Cook understand that all too well. They do, however, have some difficulty with moderation.

The Altoona couple owns Cook’s Painting and Renovation, C&J Rental Management, Triangle Banquet Center, C&J Cabinet Company, C&J Home Improvement Surplus and Lajos’ Italian Sausage. They are also partners in The Church in the Middle of the Block and Albert Michaels Gallery. Working together? It’s second nature to the Cook’s.

“The ability to lean on one another in a different and challenging way is really the best thing about working with your spouse,” Jen acknowledges. “We can show each other our greatest weaknesses, strengths, ideas and visions for growth while feeling safe, encouraged and always supported.”

It’s a wonderful thing, she admits, especially since it comes from a higher power.

“Chris and I comple-

Working Together

ment one another with our skill sets and personalities that God gave us and working together has enabled us to learn so much more about one another on so many levels. It’s not always easy but putting God first in our marriage gives us an advantage.”

In terms of work-related responsibilities, the Cook’s have determined an effective strategy. Chris is the visionary who is always looking for new and exciting opportunities. He handles the bidding on various jobs, does the design work and product ordering and occasionally does installations.

Chris describes Jen as “the enforcer,” who takes care of the day-to-day responsibilities.

“She’s the gravity when it comes to pulling me back when it seems like I’m going a little too fast,” he disclosed. Jen also manages the book-keeping for several of the businesses and does the majority of the hiring with input from her husband.



Jen and Chris Cook have collectively built an array of local businesses that have had a positive impact on the Blair County economy. Working together has been a key to making that happen.

So which one has greater difficulty walking away from the work duties at the end of the day?

“Definitely Chris,” Jen points out. “He is a driver who gets things done and done right. This can be a stressor and cause lack of sleep on certain occasions. We’ve worked very hard on setting boundaries and we’ve agreed that once we set foot into the house, the focus changes to our fam-

ily and what’s important.”

The Cook’s have three children – Parker (16), Ohwen (10) and Gabriel (3).

“We have to be very purposeful with our family time,” Jen explains. “Because of the number of companies that we own, we can receive phone calls at all times of the day. Blocking-out certain hours of the day that are just for our children is essential.

It’s a matter of holding one another accountable and understanding what is most important. At this point, it’s worked pretty well and we’re sticking with it.”

(Cook’s Painting and Renovation has been a Chamber member since 2013. C&J Rental Management and C&J Cabinet Company have been members of the Blair County Chamber since 2020.)

Annual Meeting a fitting end for “bus driver” Tornatore

As the Blair County Chamber takes a look back at the challenges and accomplishments of 2020 at its Annual Meeting & Awards Presentation on February 26th, Darin Tornatore can finally hand over the keys to the “bus.”

Tornatore has served as chair of the Chamber’s Board of Directors for the past two years, a position he accepted when board chair elect Mike Grimm accepted a position with a company in Eastern Pennsylvania.

“Darin was a pretty easy choice,” acknowledged Chamber President Joe Hurd. “He was well-regarded by people within the membership and has been successful in a number of leadership roles. Clearly, we were in good hands.”

Tornatore was admittedly excited about the opportunity to continue and expand on some of the programs that had been developed by previous chair, Matt Stuckey.

“Simply stated, I wanted to be a good bus driver,” Tornatore explained. “Matt had been able to create an

environment within the Chamber that encouraged dialogue and feedback. It made sense for me to determine ways to build on that without deviating from the original concept.”

His first year attempt was right on the mark. He could not have predicted what his second year would bring.

“We were suddenly in a position where we needed to adapt to what the pandemic was throwing our way,” Tornatore pointed out. “I’m very proud that our board and our staff rallied together to put new technologies in place that offset the lack of programs and events that we were able to do.”

As he passes the gavel to new chair, Richard Fiore, Jr., Tornatore is confident that the Chamber will continue to meet its mission.

“Richard is the perfect fit to spear-head the execution of our strategic planning goals,” he noted. “He has great leadership assertiveness and tenacity to get the job done.”

For the first time in history, the Chamber’s Annual Meeting will be virtual



Darin Tornatore

rather than in-person. Tornatore has headed an effort among board members and Chamber staff to creatively produce an event that will simulate past meetings.

“People will be really surprised at how this event maintains an element of surprise where our awards are concerned,” he disclosed. “We’ll be accomplishing what we need to in terms of looking back at the many good things that actually did happen during 2020.”

To register to attend the Annual Meeting & Awards Presentation, visit the Chamber Website at www.blairchamber.com.

New realities are focus of Chamber breakfast

How will the business community need to adjust to the realities of a new president and a new Congress? That question will serve as the basis of a presentation at the next Chamber “Breakfast Club,” set for February 11th beginning at 8:00 a.m. on Zoom.

The speaker will be Kevin Courtois, Executive Director of Government Affairs for the U.S. Chamber’s Great Lakes Region. Courtois will speculate about what the recent election results mean and how businesses can prepare to adapt to a host of likely changes. He will also provide updates on issues like minimum wage and its potential impact on small businesses.



Kevin Courtois

The cost to attend the Breakfast Club is \$12 for Chamber members and \$20 for non-members. To register (and secure the link), visit the Chamber Website at www.blairchamber.com. Corporate sponsor of the Breakfast Club for February is Leonard S. Fiore, Inc.

AT THE CHAMBER

It’s Happening

■ The first “Chamber Chat” program for 2021 will be on February 12th from 8:30-9:00 a.m. via Zoom. The title will be, “Why Your Business Should Have a Wellness Program.” The speakers will be Mark Ritchey of Curry Supply and Christy Nau of Stuckey Automotive. Blair Regional YMCA will be the corporate sponsor. There is no cost to attend for Chamber Members. Non-members can attend for \$10. To register, go to www.blairchamber.com.

■ The Chamber’s WE-LEAD Committee is hosting, “Releasing Your Full Potential Through the Science of Emotional Intelligence.” It will be presented via Zoom by John Moore of Moore Power Sales on February 24th from 11:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. It will include a preliminary survey providing attendees with an assessment that will yield their Emotional Quotient Score. To register, go to www.blairchamber.com. Corporate sponsor of this program is Blair Companies.

WELCOME TO THE CHAMBER

Boutique Air

310 Airport Road
Martinsburg, PA 16662

Farmers Insurance-

Billie J. Friday

5 West 10th Street
Tyrone, PA 16686

G3 Physical Therapy

225 Allegheny Street
Suite 103
Hollidaysburg, PA 16648

Jimmy Johns Altoona

3420 Pleasant Valley Blvd.
Altoona, PA 16602

Rodeway Inn

1500 Sterling Street
Altoona, PA 16602

CONTACT US

Blair County Chamber
814-943-8151
chamber@blairchamber.com

Full Service General Contractor

A family owned & operated company with
over 50 years combined experience!

www.harrysconstruction.com

114 Main St., Bellwood, PA 16617

814-822-2142

10% OFF “ALWAYS” for Veterans, Senior Citizens & First Responders

New Homes • Additions • Custom Kitchens
Bathrooms • Sunrooms • Siding • Decks
Soffit & Fascia • Windows

CUSTOM MADE CABINETS

NOT FROM A BOX

~NOW OFFERING~

New GE Appliances, Flooring & Tile

If YOU can

Dream it

WE can create it!

“We will work with you to turn
your ideas and dreams into
a beautiful reality.”

