

INCITE

Preserving a tradition

This Friday is the Chamber's Annual Meeting & Awards Presentation. For the first time ever, the event is being held at the end of February and will be virtual rather than in-person. Neither of those things makes me particularly happy.

The date of the Annual Meeting was pushed from its usual January date with the hope that the later it was



Joe Hurd

Blair County Chamber of Commerce

scheduled, the more likely it could be held in-person. The restriction on gatherings, coupled with the trepidation that many in our community still feel about the contagious nature of Covid-19, would have landed the meeting sometime in mid-July.

To hold it virtually, in my estimation, was to destroy its entertainment value. As most Chamber members would tell you, the Annual Meeting was quick, well-organized and most of all fun. Presenting seven awards which recognize individuals for doing outstanding things and not alerting the recipients in advance built a healthy amount of suspense. It also practically guaranteed that the recipients would have short acceptance speeches. No one, after all, would want to give the impression that they expected to be an award winner.

So I guess it's the element of surprise I miss. I miss Joe Keller of Keller Engineers getting the Small Business Person of the Year Award in 2013 and thanking his employees who attended the breakfast for "using their vacation" to come see him receive it.

I miss the late John Shields, who received the Chamber Spirit Award in 2018 along with his wife Evelyn, gathering his emotions quickly enough to explain why the two of them make such a great team. "I tell her what to do and she tells me where to go." Priceless.

And I miss Bill Scully of Freedom Excursions, the 2020 Small Business Person of the Year winner, admitting that he suspected that something was up when he awoke that morning and his wife mentioned that "it was more important for my hair to look better than hers." You would have to know Bill to understand the significance of that remark.

Alas, all is not lost as Friday approaches. Thanks to the creativity of some of our Chamber staff, some board members and, to an incredible degree, James Gerraughty of Southern Alleghenies Planning & Development Commission, all seven award recipients will have the good fortune of being surprised. How did we do it? There's still time to register to find out. Go to www.blairchamber.com.

(Joe Hurd is President/CEO of the Blair County Chamber of Commerce.)

Creative business makes things right

What started as a family-owned shoe manufacturing company in 1986 has transitioned into a trusted place where companies can turn to for help when imported goods did not meet specifications or quality standards upon arrival in the United States.

Quality Corrections & Inspections, headquartered in Duncansville, works with companies and goods from around the world. They regularly do business with overseas manufacturers from many companies.

"Some of the goods we have processed over the years arrived from locations like China, Vietnam, Bangladesh, India, Dominican Republic, Cambodia, Jordan and many more," acknowledged Mark Shaw, Global Operations Manager.

The company was the by-product of founder Ronald Burk's industry expertise and relationships in the footwear sector combined with the entrepreneurial spirit of Burk's son Randy.

"We've had the privilege to serve as the creative problem solvers for a variety of talented professionals in importing, retail, product sourcing, logistics and overseas manufacturing," Randy

pointed out. "For anyone who imports, it's not a question of if they are going to have a problem, it is when. We are uniquely positioned to step-in with the talent, services and capacity to help many businesses minimize unfortunate supply chain disruptions."

In 2003, Quality Corrections & Inspections expanded by opening a second facility in the Las Vegas suburb of Henderson, Nevada to better service retailers and distribution centers dispersed across the U.S. and Canada. Combining fulltime and part-time staff, each facility employs about fifty. Changes in the business landscape may create the need for further growth.

"Many of the product reworks we perform are from imported goods," Shaw disclosed. "The volume of goods imported from overseas has increased dramatically since 1986. Today, in the clothing and footwear categories alone, approximately 98% brought in the United States are imported. Categories such as accessories and consumer goods have very high import volumes as well. Fortunately, we have been well-positioned to serve importers for many years."



Quality Corrections & Inspections is an international business that flies under the radar when people in Blair County discuss companies with worldwide reputations.

Like most businesses, Quality Corrections & Inspections was impacted by Covid-19.

"The onset of the pandemic certainly impacted our business as many key customers were subjected to retail closures across the country," explained Paige Shaw who handles Business Development. "Our Duncansville location was subject to closure for a short time as well during this time. However, both of our production

facilities quickly pivoted. Utilizing our expertise in product rework we were able to find some new contract manufacturing and assembly opportunities making a variety of components with personal protection and safety equipment manufacturers."

After 35 successful years, Quality Corrections & Inspections is poised to consider new opportunities and new markets.

"We hope to continue finding and identifying new

customers and products that can benefit from our services," Randy noted. "While we continue to have an international reach, we believe there are many untapped opportunities to do more business locally and throughout the state of Pennsylvania as new distribution centers, e-commerce and manufacturing hubs open."

(Quality Corrections & Inspections has been a Blair County Chamber member since 2000.)

YEA! students get high marks from CEO Roundtable panel

The Chamber's Young Entrepreneurs Academy (YEA!) class gained valuable insight on business development February 9th as a group of local CEO's converged at the Blair County Convention Center for one of YEA!'s high profile events.

The CEO Roundtable is designed to put students in direct contact with people who have experience either building a business or growing one. This year's panel consisted of Chuck Bickel of Ace fix-it Hardware, LaVonne Falbo of LaVintage Décor, Kim Hofer of Salon Professional Academy, Tom Schneider of Freedom Rentals and Gary Stern of Canary Labs.

"This panel really imparted a lot of knowledge that will be important as our students continue to move through the process of writing their business plans and finalizing their presentations for the Investor Panel event next month," acknowledged Royce Boyd, YEA! Program Manager. "The students really connected with this group of CEO's."

The feeling was mutual, according to the panelists.

"The students were great," Falbo noted. "They all had good ideas, each unique and all of them solid. Their interest in succeeding was genuine and I envision them following through with their ideas."

Bickel agreed.

"Talking with the students, I felt very encouraged with the enthusiasm these young people put into their businesses," he pointed out.



Members of the CEO Roundtable, who spoke to the Chamber's Young Entrepreneurs Academy Class on February 9th are, left to right: Gary Stern - Canary Labs, LaVonne Falbo - LaVintage Decor, Tom Schneider - Freedom Rentals, Chuck Bickel - Ace fixit Hardware Stores and Kim Hofer - Salon Professional Academy.

"Our communities get better when our leaders get better. Listening to these new entrepreneurs offers hope of emerging leaders creating positive work attitudes, building businesses with integrity that will be assets to their community."

Hofer was particularly impressed by the passion of the students.

"To see and hear the passion from each of them as they explained their business ideas was extremely motivational," she disclosed. "These young adults are learning real life skills by working with mentors and changing their lives by participating in a program like this one. It was an honor for me to be part of the panel."

The YEA! program also impressed Schneider.

"I wasn't familiar with the program prior to being

asked to be part of the panel," he stated. "This is a great learning experience for these students and a great Chamber outreach. I thoroughly enjoyed the interaction and was impressed by the well-thought-out business plans. I'm hoping to have the chance to watch how these businesses continue to progress."

Stern described the students as "very polite and articulate with very good ideas."

This year's YEA! class consists of eighteen students from five Blair County schools. According to Boyd, the many obstacles associated with school schedules have made this class even more special.

"We've had to overcome a lot," she admitted. "Most of our sessions have been virtual which creates even greater challenges. Still, things are going well."

11 Trial Members now moving to full status



Bob Egan, who co-owns the Altoona Jimmy Johns with his wife Billie, looks forward to full Chamber membership.

When the Blair County Chamber created a trial member program late last summer, it hoped that once businesses got to see the many advantages of Chamber membership, they'd become full members.

"We were excited but concerned," explained Chamber VP Jessie Covert who oversees member recruitment. "Because so many of our programs and events were cancelled due to Covid, we were limited in what these trial members would be able to see and experience. We couldn't really put our best foot forward."

Evidently, they saw enough as more than half of those who signed-up for the trial have already moved to full-member status. The current count is eleven and Covert is hoping for more.

"We allocated up to six months of free membership and we still have a few who haven't been through the orientation yet," she noted. "We're confident

that once they do, they'll consider full member status."

Superman Berrow, owner of B4 Club Therapy, shares that confidence. He was one of the Trial Members who has since stepped-up.

"For me, it was a no-brainer once I got all the information about what the Chamber does and the resources it offers," Berrow pointed out. "I realized that Chamber membership was what I needed to move my business forward. If I knew then what I know now, I would have joined sooner."

Bob Egan, who owns the Jimmy Johns franchise in Altoona with his wife Billie has a similar experience.

"The networking opportunities are important," he emphasized. "A lot of people forget that some of the national businesses are owned by local people. The Trial Membership gave us a great look at what the Chamber can do to make us successful. We're already seeing it."

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