



Deflecting the spotlight

The recent announcement that Dan Slep had been promoted by Ogden Publishing as the next publisher of the Altoona Mirror was a classic case of a good guy getting a well-deserved opportunity. He has been with the Mirror since 1972 and has always been the epitome of dedication and professionalism.

From the Chamber's perspective, Dan is solid gold.



Joe Hurd

Blair County Chamber of Commerce and the community. He was an ideal board member and remains an avid cheerleader for what the Chamber is all about.

Yet there are two parts to this story. When the front page story about the transition in leadership appeared on March 27th, the focus was clearly on Dan Slep. Yet it was Ed Kruger's announcement of his retirement – after sixty years in the business and twenty-three at the Mirror – that clearly deserved top billing. Dan Slep would tell you that.

As a person with a degree in Journalism, I have always had a soft spot in my heart for newspapers. Like most people who prefer that medium to access their news, it has been painful to watch some of the country's great newspapers scale-back or shut down completely. It hurts even more to watch many of those that remain compromise their integrity for political purposes.

That the Altoona Mirror continues to publish six days a week is remarkable. So much of that is attributable to Ed Kruger. He has navigated the boat through choppy waters, making unpleasant decisions but understanding the price to be paid for survival.

My personal interaction with Ed was infrequent. He spent much of his time on the road, building the publishing side of the operation and trusting his administrative staff to handle the day-to-day management of the newspaper. When we did meet it was usually to discuss the Blair Business Mirror, the publication that the Chamber did in partnership with the Mirror for more than two decades. Ed referred to the Business Mirror as his "gift to the Chamber." Recognizing the costs associated with its production and the small amount of advertising revenue that it generated, that wasn't far from the truth.

Ed Kruger will be a tough act to follow. Indefatigable people always are. (Joe Hurd is President/CEO of the Blair County Chamber.)

Local investors fund YEA! students

Seventeen Blair County students representing five local schools pitched their business ideas to a panel of ten investors last Tuesday at The Casino at Lakemont Park.

The students are part of the Blair County Chamber's Young Entrepreneurs Academy (YEA!) program which helps young people in grades 6-12 to build actual businesses over a 25-week program.

Young Entrepreneurs Academy is a national initiative, headquartered in Rochester, New York. There are close to a hundred chambers and business organizations across the country that offer YEA! programs. The Blair County Chamber's program is one of only two in Pennsylvania.

"Our program is in its fifth year and the interest and support have been outstanding," explained Carol Gensimore of Value Drug Company, who chairs the Chamber's YEA! Committee. "Our business community and our school districts have worked closely together to assure that the program remains strong and the students have access to the people who can provide relevant information."

Gensimore also credited Program Manager Royce Boyd, who has been in that role for the past four years, with setting a high standard. "Royce is the best," Gensimore acknowledged. "She oversees the recruitment of the students, the organization of the sessions and the line of communication with the students and the parents that is essential to making things run

smoothly." Boyd also serves as instructor for the students who choose to add dual enrollment credits to the YEA! experience.

Tuesday's Investor Panel Event consisted of investors from UPMC Altoona, Sheetz, Inc., Ward Transport & Logistics, Leonard S. Fiore, Inc., Reliance Bank, McLanahan Corporation, Seltzer Financial Strategies, Blair Companies, Empower Business Solutions and Keller Engineers. The investors were impressed with what they saw and heard.

"I think it's exciting to see these young people starting their businesses and showing the enthusiasm that it takes to make a business work," noted Amy Seltzer of Seltzer Financial Strategies. "It's incredibly difficult to build a business. These new entrepreneurs are off to a great start."

Adam Ward of Ward Transport and Logistics agreed.

"The entrepreneurial spirit starts at a young age," Ward pointed out. "For some of these young people, this YEA! experience may be their end game. For others, this may be the catalyst to a brilliant business career. In either case, knowing how to build a business is a valuable asset to whatever they do later. I applaud the Chamber for making a program like this available."

The YEA! investors committed nearly \$12,000 to help the class members complete their projects. "The investors are really very serious in how they allocate money," Gensimore reported. "They can see the



Rylie Whitaker, a senior at Altoona Area High School, had her business - Revival by Rylie - named as the most outstanding by the YEA! investors.

potential in certain businesses and want to assure that those businesses are adequately funded.

The culmination of the Investor Panel Event is the selection of the Outstanding Business by the panel. The recipient represents the Blair County Chamber at the YEA! National Competition. That competition is usually held in Rochester but this year will be virtual instead.

The 2021 winner is Rylie Whitaker, a senior at Altoona Area High School, whose business is "Revival by Rylie." She is the first female to win the local award.

"Rylie's business idea and presentation were first rate," Gensimore stated. "Her passion for fashion and design and her interest in environmental issues really came together in an effective way. She will represent us well."

Blair County's new CEOs

814 Teens

Rece Boland
Peyton Paisley
Lucas Zimmerman

Anna B Fit

Anna Batrus

Blair Detailing

Tyler Faber
Lucas Hatajik

Crossfire Paintball

Ayden Craine

Goated Kicks

Zach Miller
Clay Smith

Little Sprouts Nutrition

Kiersten Biddle

Prestige Threads

Caleb Jandora
Ian DiPangrazio

RecBaitz

Zac Barton
Evan Petrunak

Revival by Rylie

Rylie Whitaker

The Claycomb Soda Shop

Hawke Claycomb

UnderPar Customz

AJ Marasco-Keene

Grande Palazzo owner Jeff Long to speak at "Breakfast Club"



The ribbon-cutting for the Grande Palazzo took place on March 30th. This Thursday, owner Jeff Long will provide a video tour of the facility at the Breakfast Club.

The long-awaited video presentation telling the story of the region's most incredible new attraction will take place this Thursday at the Blair County Chamber's monthly "Breakfast Club." The event begins at 7:45 a.m. at The Casino at Lakemont Park.

The Grande Palazzo, the latest of developer Jeff Long's residential construction projects, took the decaying Bon Secours Hospital and turned it into a palace.

"When I saw it was for sale, I started to visualize

what it could become," Long pointed out. "I submitted a bid and I knew it would be accepted because no one else could possibly want it."

Long was right. Four years and \$40 million later, he's willing to admit that the project "has turned out better than I expected." But he's still reluctant to answer the question of whether or not he'd do it again.

"It's satisfying to realize how far we've come, even though we're only done with Phase I," Long disclosed. "It's also in the back of my

mind that I could have built three more Graystones in the time that it's taken to build the Grande Palazzo.

"The pleasant surprise is that we've been able to fill all 110 apartments."

The cost to attend the Breakfast Club is \$20 for Chamber members and \$30 for non-members. Breakfast is included in the cost. To register, call the Chamber at (814) 943-8151 or register online at www.blairchamber.com. Corporate sponsor of the April Breakfast Club is Jersey Shore State Bank.

Program on fitness to debunk theories

Over the past several months, the Workplace Wellness Committee of the Blair County Chamber has hosted a number of educational programs – called Wellness Chats – to help employers and their employees to stay healthy.

The next Wellness Chat will focus on fitness and will approach that topic from a vantage point not always common among exercise enthusiasts. Betsy Simmers, Personal Trainer at the Wellness Center at the Blair Regional YMCA since 2013, will present "Fitness Doesn't Have to Hurt" on April 9th from 8:30 to 9:00 a.m. on Zoom.

Simmers has an extensive background as a fitness consultant and has also worked with rehab and post-rehab patients. The Penn State graduate will provide a



Betsy Simmers

workable strategy for how people can get in shape and stay in shape without the usual amount of discomfort.

There is no cost for Chamber members to attend the Wellness Chat and non-members can attend for just \$10. To register and access the Zoom link, go to the Chamber Website at www.blairchamber.com. Corporate sponsor of this Wellness Chat is B4 Club Therapy.

WELCOME TO THE CHAMBER

CenClear

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Levity Brewing Co.

1411 11th Avenue, Altoona, PA 16601

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