

Wedding venues continue Covid struggles

As the chokehold that has brought many industry sectors to their knees in Pennsylvania shows encouraging signs of regaining a heartbeat, one group of impacted businesses continues to feel the effects of Governor Tom Wolf's mandates.

Wedding venues and the businesses that complement them have been given permission to move to 25% capacity along with other providers of indoor events. That's hardly a workable situation for an industry that traditionally caters to much larger crowds. To call attention to the need for reconsideration, an effort spearheaded by the Pennsylvania Restaurant & Lodging Association yielded a website known as "LetPAMarryUs.com." Ben Fileccia, Director of Operations & Strategy for that organization, felt that the website was an obvious step to consider.

"The website was necessary because the caterers and professional event planners have been hardest hit by the governor's mitigation," he pointed out. "Un-

like restaurants, there was no easy way for them to pivot to other business models. As the restrictions have been lifted for restaurants, the event industry is still hurting. Because there is no roadmap for reopening, many events are being cancelled here in PA and moved out of state."

The PRLA is asking the governor to give a timeline for reopening so that brides and families have the confidence to book their upcoming wedding without having to consider leaving the Commonwealth. The website contains suggestions as to how people can make their voices heard. Doug Simon, owner/chef at The Casino at Lakemont, has been a strong supporter of the effort and believes that it has potential to make a positive difference.

"The goal has been to urge the governor to create a system of benchmarks that would allow us, as operators, to better inform our clients of what lies ahead for them in terms of planning successful events," Simon disclosed. "The website is an excellent method

of involving the public in our efforts to reopen banquet and event facilities at occupancy levels that make sense."

Tara Saltzburg, Sales Manager at the Blair County Convention Center agrees.

"Planning a wedding takes months of preparation and communication between the couples and our event planners," she acknowledged. "We would be preparing under one set of guidelines only to find out the week of the wedding that there would soon be a whole new set. It was challenging and frustrating."

That frustration is extended to more than just the venue operators and the planners. According to Simon, the event industry is like a family tree.

"There are numerous vendors involved in even the simplest events," he admitted. "There are photographers, dj's, bands, florists, cake designers, printers for invitations, vendors for party favors and many more. They've all lost out."

Employment also took a significant hit.

"As businesses we've got



Doug Simon, owner/chef at The Casino at Lakemont Park, poses above the empty Grand Pavilion which usually is one of the area's top destinations for weddings.

an incredible responsibility to do whatever we can for our customers and our employees," explained Lindsay Danella, general manager of the Altoona Grand Hotel, which also does a large number of weddings. "We value health and safety but being able to operate at only 25% hasn't even been worth

it. It really isn't substantial enough to bring any staff back fulltime."

So will the LetPAMarryUs.com website bring hope to venues and providers that some measure of progress may be on the horizon? Perhaps if enough people step forward to remind the governor of

the importance of the wedding industry to the overall economy of Pennsylvania.

"The Pennsylvania wedding industry is a \$2.1 billion business, second only to agriculture," Saltzburg pointed out. "It's imperative that we get back on track and that we accomplish that very soon."

Holland Brothers enjoys impressive history of providing national award-winning meats

The email address alone provides a pretty blatant hint to the nature of the business.

Bacon@hollandbros.net. Yet Holland Brothers Meats, located on Duncansville Highway in Duncansville, is more than just about bacon. For that matter, it's more than just about meat. Its catering menu features a wide variety of salads, vegetables, and desserts.

"We're a lot of things to a lot of people," acknowledges Brock Holland, who owns the business along with his cousin Mike. "We've been here almost 60 years and have been able to build a strong customer base. As my dad (Rick) always said, 'not everybody knows us but we're famous.' I guess we've made an impression."

On more than just the customers. Despite being a small business off the beaten path, Holland Brothers has been nationally recognized for the excellence of its products.

"We've won national awards for our bacon, our kolbassi, our ham and our hotdogs," Brock pointed out. "It's a source of pride for us because there are so many other meat producers out there. To us, these awards are a big deal."

As competitive as the Hollands are on the national stage, they take a somewhat different strategy close to home. They are aware of what the local grocery stores charge for similar products and so they do their best to keep their prices in the same ballpark. But otherwise their focus stays squarely on their own domain.



Michael (left) and Brock Holland, co-owners of Holland Brothers Meats, take particular pride in the company's long history of award-winning products.

"We're only concerned with those," Mike Holland stated, pointing at the two front doors that allow customers to enter and exit the business. "When you start worrying about others then you get distracted and your own quality begins to suffer. Our goals start and end with the things we can control."

One of the major changes that has taken place at Holland Brothers during the past several years has been the growth of the company's catering business. Pig roasts have become the picnic meal of choice, particularly for corporate outings.

"We do many of these each year," Brock disclosed. "Not only is it a convenient way for companies to offer something a little different but it also gives us a chance to showcase many of our products." For nearly a decade the

Highmark/Chamber Golf Classic has featured a Holland Brothers pig roast prior to tee-off.

"People have told us that they get tired of box lunches that they have to balance in their golf carts," explained the Chamber's Stacy Hoover. "They really like getting a good meal before they head to the course."

Unlike many of the county's businesses that were heavily impacted by Covid-19, Holland Brothers Meats was fortunate to have the right credentials at the right time.

"Being able to process local beef and pork under U.S.D.A. inspection gave us a tremendous advantage over the large supermarket chains, who at the time were having trouble supplying meat from the big factories," Brock admitted. "Buying local livestock kept our prices in check and

our quality in line. The peak of the Covid crisis made us realize how important our local farmers are. We have also gained a lot of new customers that came in for the first time during this crisis."

Holland Brothers Meats has been a longtime Chamber member. The affiliation has been a valuable one for a number of reasons, according to Brock.

"We've reached out to several businesses that belong to the Chamber for everything from phone systems to catering vans," he said. "They are an incredible resource. Dealing with a business that is a member of the Chamber gives us peace of mind that we are dealing with someone who is reputable and established."

"We're proud members of the Chamber and very thankful for all the opportunities we have gained by being a member."

What a difference a year makes. Or does it?

That will be the central point of discussion when the Blair County Chamber's Safety Committee holds a virtual event on April 23rd from 8:30 to 9:30 a.m. Dr. Andrea Knab of Geisinger Health System's Mount Nittany Medical Center will be the keynote speaker. Her presentation will be, "One Year of Covid: What We Have Learned and Where Do We Stand?"

Among Dr. Knab's points of emphasis will be (1) front-line worker experiences; (2) new variants – how did they come about and do they possess a threat?; (3) new CDC recommendations for the public and for businesses and (4) Covid-19 vaccines.

"With safety issues front-and-center for businesses of all sizes, it's incumbent upon us to address as many of these challenges as pos-

Join the Chamber's Safety Committee

If you are responsible for the safety/security of your workplace, let us be a resource for you while you share your experience with us. Email Stacy Hoover at shoover@blairchamber.com.

sible," acknowledges Lynn Gardini, who chairs the Safety Committee. "We're delighted to have a knowledgeable speaker like Dr. Knab to provide a first-hand perspective."

The cost to attend the event is \$10 for Chamber members and \$20 for non-members. To register, visit the Chamber website at www.blairchamber.com. Corporate sponsor of the event is Manpower, Inc. of Altoona.

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