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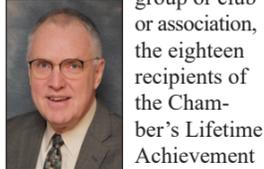


Planting trees

There's a Greek Proverb that goes like this: "A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in."

Rex Kaup was a tree planter. Fred Imler and Bill Thompson were too. Within the last two years, we lost all three of them.

Although it has never been officially established as a



Joe Hurd

group or club or association, the eighteen recipients of the Chamber's Lifetime Achievement Award for Business Excellence have a connection that goes well beyond simply sharing a special night and a glass obelisk.

Rex Kaup's recent passing only brought it to the forefront one more time. As a grieving business community spoke with near reverence for the kindheartedness and civic altruism that made Rex special, it had quite a familiar ring to it. I'm sure I heard those same sentiments, or something very close, about Fred Imler. About Bill Thompson and Tim Sissler and Don Devorris. About Ernie Wissinger, the award's first recipient.

Pity that it takes death to remind people how important someone was in life.

There is little doubt that the term Business Excellence carries a high degree of subjectivity. Most people will tell you that they know it when they see it but too often the eye-test only lends itself to controversy. The "tree planters" in the Greek Proverb have possibly unearthed the closest thing to a common denominator. Validation should take no more than a glance at a person's legacy.

When I think of the eighteen award recipients I come to two conclusions. Every one of them fits the tree planter definition and Ann Benzel would not be enamored with being described as one of the Proverb's "old men."

In October, Mark Barnhart, Owner and Chairman of the Board of NPC, will be the 19th recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award for Business Excellence. Mark has the distinction of being the only honoree to be selected one year and honored the next. Covid-19 changed a lot of plans.

Consider this: Last September, Mark and his company donated 140 laptop computers to the Claysburg-Kimmel School District to help students impacted by the pandemic to be able to learn virtually. That act of generosity is consistent with the dozens of similar things that NPC does without regard to short-term recognition.

Do you think Mark Barnhart understands the importance of planting trees?

Virtual Career Fair a creative option

Damage control is becoming the calling-card of the Blair County Chamber's BASICS Committee.

"With all the obstacles that Covid-19 has thrown in our direction during the past year, we've had to be innovative," explained BASICS Co-Chair Chris Farrell. "Our committee understands how important it is to maintain the programs that help students in our schools to gain information on careers and grow in aspects like leadership and entrepreneurship. We've looked for creative options."

One of those options involves the BASICS/Rotary Career Fair, held each April to help high school sophomores to gain access to business leaders who provide presentations on nearly 100 careers. That event takes place at the Blair County Convention Center. Or at least it did.

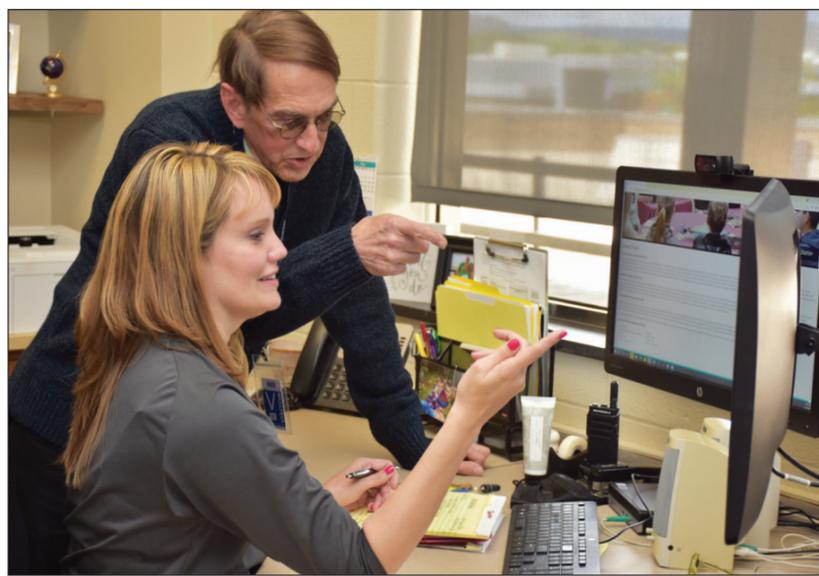
"Bringing more than a thousand students together in one place – even a big place like the Convention Center – wasn't happening," according to Nicole Zernick, CTE Coordinator at the Greater Altoona Career & Technology Center and chair of the Career Fair Subcommittee. "We cancelled the Fair in 2020 and 2021 and set-out to find a viable alternative. Hoping that stu-

dents would find career information on their own left too much to chance."

It was not surprising that the alternative has turned-out to be virtual. BASICS Committee members began contacting business leaders, asking that they put together videos showing what their companies were all about, how much education and training was involved with working there and what career steps were most logical for students to pursue in getting the process started.

"Our local employers never cease to amaze us in their willingness to support our area students," Zernick pointed out. "It would be easy for them to say that they were too busy and could not participate. They went above and beyond. They see the benefit of empowering students with knowledge to make informed decision about their futures."

The process of creating the videos was left entirely to the business. Some simply recorded with a cell phone, others got a little more sophisticated. Some were just a few minutes in length, others considerably longer. All, Zernick reported, provided the type of career information that would help high school students proceed confidently along the career pathway.



Nicole Zernick and Paul Hutchison, members of the Chamber's BASICS Steering Committee, update the Virtual Career Fair listing.

"The traditional Career Fair had the advantage of allowing for interaction between the presenters and the students," she disclosed. "The Virtual Career Fair allows the students the opportunity to view a presentation at their own pace. Either way, the information is available and the value of the experience is obvious."

Students can access the videos either by going to the Blair BASICS Website at www.blairbasics.net or by going directly to the YouTube Channel at: Blair BASICS Virtual Career

Fair. Zernick credits BASICS Committee member Paul Hutchison with making the project come together.

"Paul compiled the videos, created the YouTube Channel and developed the information sheet that was sent to area school counselors. Without Paul, this doesn't happen."

The challenge ahead for Zernick and her subcommittee is to continue recruiting videos. There are many careers that are not currently represented. Many of those are careers

of greatest need in Blair County.

"We've prioritized those because we want students to understand where the job opportunities are, close to home," Zernick noted. "Too often our young people believe they need to leave the area to find something that interests them when actually it exists here. We'll continue to grow our video library to encompass as many careers as possible."

Any business interested in providing career information should contact Zernick at nicole.zernick@gactc.edu.

Gearhart's Meats involves family in all aspects of business success

Blair County has built an impressive reputation for its number of family-owned businesses. Gearhart's Meats & Country Store on Turkey Valley Road in Hollidaysburg takes that reputation to an extreme. Not only is the business 100% family-owned, all of the employees are family as well.

"We've been in the business for more than 40 years," explained Tom Gearhart, Sr., who along with his wife Amy oversees the operation. "We've developed a loyal customer base and have found many diverse ways of meeting their expectations."

Gearhart's offer unique products that are made from scratch, onsite.

"From our Cajun crab dip to our bourbon steaks, someone in our family was involved in the creation of the products from start to finish," Tom acknowledged. "Our store also has a nostalgic, old-time country store feel and is open six days a week. We offer grocery and deli items. As a family, we spend a lot of time cooking and preparing the food together. Plus there's a lot of time packaging which guarantees that our products are extremely fresh."

Among the more popular items, according to Amy, are Jalapeno Cheese bologna, Texas-style roast beef and multiple flavors of jerky.

"We also have USDA-



Tom Gearhart, Sr. has helped Gearhart's Meats to enjoy a 40-year history of success.

inspected bison and elk products," she noted. "Much of our year is devoted to custom butchering. We have many customers that we see almost every year. We take pride in handling and processing wild game. We also follow strict guidelines when it comes to testing deer for Chronic Waste Disease. Cutting meat is a skill and we pride ourselves in saving as much meat as possible and also assuring it is processed and packaged in a very sanitary environment."

Besides in-store commerce, Gearhart's has had a successful catering business for two decades. That end of the business has suffered dramatically, thanks to Covid-19.

"The pandemic has practically destroyed our catering," Tom pointed out. "Most of our catering re-

quests are for weddings or other kind of large events which essentially went away the past twelve months. We're picking-up a little now and have ventured into some other areas that have allowed us to generate sales to stay afloat."

Despite the challenges, the Gearhart's have stayed optimistic.

"The catering business will come back as more of the regulations are relaxed," Amy predicts. "We're starting to get calls for graduation parties and weddings. Our schedule is filling-up. We can customize a menu for any event and word-of-mouth has sent a lot of new customers our way. We'll be just fine."

(Gearhart's Meats & Country Store has been a member of the Blair County Chamber since 2009.)

Public Policy Committee rolls-out survey on jobs



Chris Michelone (right), Chair of the Chamber's Public Policy Committee, welcomes State Representative Jim Gregory.

Blair County businesses, like many throughout the country, are growing desperate for people to work. To help address the problem, the Chamber's Public Policy Committee is looking for ways to assist employers by developing strategies to ease the immediate burden while other Chamber committees look for longer term solutions.

The first challenge, according to Public Policy Committee Chair Chris Michelone, is to get a firm sense of the gravity of the situation.

"We need to know how many businesses need workers and what those specific needs are," Michelone explained. "Right now, everything is a ballpark number. The speculation is probably more drastic than the actual reality but there's little doubt that we've got a lot of businesses struggling.

We've got some work to do."

That work started a little more than a week ago when the Chamber sent a Job Vacancy Survey to its members. The survey is to ascertain the number of employees the business has and how many it actually needs to operate effectively. The survey is for all Blair County businesses to complete, not just Chamber members.

"We'll be promoting this survey for the next couple months to get as many people to share their information as possible," Michelone acknowledged. "It's clear that we have businesses that are contemplating closure and others that have reduced hours or services, due to insufficient staff."

To access the survey, go to www.blairchamber.com. The survey icon is on the homepage.



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