

Sylvan meets increased demand for pet care

In a business community that has experienced a dearth of pleasant surprises for what seems like forever, Dr. Brad Kissell defied the odds.

When Kissell opened Sylvan Veterinary Hospital six years ago, he was hoping that his new venture would eventually provide a service that owners of small pets would come to appreciate and support. He got more than he bargained for.

“To be honest, I never envisioned the type of growth we have experienced over the past six years,” Kissell acknowledged. “When we opened, our goal was to practice excellent medicine with a client-oriented approach that would result in exponential organic growth. We constantly maintain those close relationships with clients and their pets while expanding our offering with regard to office hours, on-call services and adding the most up-to-date technologies in the industry.”

That technology, according to Kissell, would “absolutely shock people to know how quickly the veterinary field is advancing.”

Sylvan Veterinary Hospital continues to lead Blair County with adding new diagnostics and treatments that typically require a referral to hospitals out of the area. Since its founding, Sylvan has developed a referral ultrasound program for comprehensive abdominal ultrasound and cardiac evaluation with echocardiography.

“Every patient that is anesthetized is mechanically ventilated and all vital parameters are closely monitored by our veterinary technicians,” Kissell pointed out. “We have a critical care oxygen unit that can provide supplemental oxygen for our most serious patients. We also provide many of the standard services that most hospitals provide including digital radiography, in-house diagnostic laboratory, digital dental radiography and an isolation unit for infectious animals.”

Even the greatest technology, Kissell admits, is ineffective without a top-flight staff to augment its use. Fortunately, Sylvan has put a high priority on hiring the right people and

retaining them.

“Our employees are the lifeblood of this practice,” he disclosed “I am constantly amazed by how hard they work and at what a high level they perform each day. What makes them special is both the uniqueness of each one and how they all share common goals of doing what’s best for our clients. They constantly develop new skills.

“Lastly, we are a family. We spend as much time together as we do with our loved ones at home. As a result, we’ve developed strong relationships and look forward to coming to work each day.” Sylvan currently has twenty-two employees.

While many industry sectors have been lamenting the impact that Covid-19 has had in making everyday life more manageable, veterinary medicine may be an outlier. Kissell has witnessed a considerable upside to the pandemic.

“In many ways, the pandemic has been wonderful for pets since owners have been spending more time at home,” he noted. “This has strengthened the human-



Ashley Mignogna (left), veterinary technician, assists Dr. Brad Kissell with a wellness exam at the hospital in Hollidaysburg.

animal bond and we have seen a huge increase in new pet owners. If there’s a downside it’s that we’re already starting to see the effects of owners returning to previous lifestyles. I predict that we will see some unwanted behaviors including separation anxiety as a result of the pandemic waning.”

With all the progress that Sylvan Veterinary Hospital has made in six short years, Kissell is looking forward to what happens next.

“Our next phase of growth is going to focus on expanded weekend urgent care,” he emphasized. “There are far too many trips being made to State College for acute care

not requiring extensive hospitalization that could be diagnosed and treated right in this area. We will continue to be leaders in this region and are currently working on plans to make that a reality.” (Sylvan Veterinary Hospital has been a Chamber member since 2015.)

Communication extends beyond nine-to-five

Mark and Lisa Ruston are observing two significant anniversaries during 2021. It is the 25th anniversary of the opening of their business – Empire Communication Systems. It also marks the 25th year that Mark and Lisa have worked together in that business. Both anniversaries, they readily admit, are worth celebrating.

“Our business has been successful and our working relationship has been a critical reason for that success,” Mark acknowledged. “We’ve been fortunate.”

Empire Communications is located in Downtown Altoona and is a highly-regarded source for helping businesses unify their communications. From cabling and networks to security and access control, voice, data and A/V systems that accommodate today’s mobile and collaborative workforces, Empire specializes in bringing it all together. The company’s growth has been largely triggered by having well-defined roles among its employees. That began with the owners.

“In the early days, I would handle the financials and also started doing takeoffs for contract bidding,” Lisa explained. “As we grew, I kept the role of handling the financials and now handle all the HR duties and responsibilities.”

So Mark handles everything else? Well, not quite.

“I headed-up our Communications Division and han-



Mark and Lisa Ruston have worked together at Empire Communication Systems for the past 25 years - the year the company was founded.

Working Together

dled the scheduling and ordering and early-on installed systems,” he pointed out. “Eventually, we hired more staff. Now I’m also active in Project Management on the Communications and Networking side of the business.” The company currently has fourteen employees, including a registered design specialist and a senior estimator.

The Ruston’s admit that there are benefits and challenges to working together.

“One of good things is that we know each other’s sched-

ule so there is no clearing or checking when we are planning time off or a family get together,” Mark noted. “If an emergency pops-up, we don’t have to track each other down. And after work plans are easily discussed.

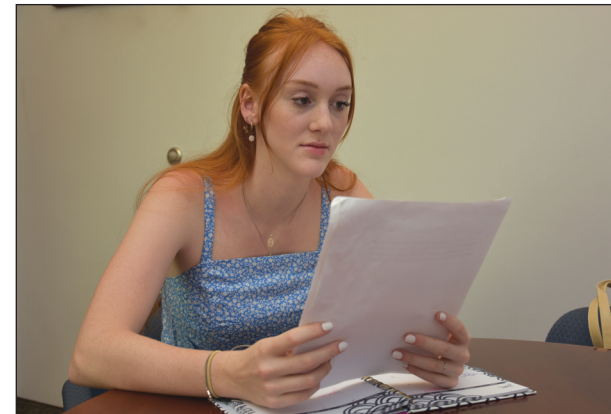
“As far as challenges, leaving work at work is certainly one although that has gotten much easier. The task was much harder when we had fewer employees. With our growth, we’ve been able to hire a fantastic group of employees who have been with us a long time and are extremely dedicated to helping Empire succeed.”

Family life, according to Lisa, has actually been easier to manage with both parents employed in the same business.

“We have been fortunate that we’ve been able to arrange doctor visits, school activities and sports or extracurricular activities around our work schedules,” she emphasized. “Our girls worked part-time in the summers during high school doing clerical duties. They have not had an interest in the business.

“All three have graduated from college and started their own lives. Chelsea is a veterinarian in Iowa, Addie is a graphic designer in New York City and Madison has just started an internship in New Jersey as a food scientist. They’ve all done well.” (Empire Communication Systems has been a member of the Blair County Chamber since 2007.)

Local grad competing for national YEA! honors



Rylie Whitaker has stepped-up her preparation for Saturday’s YEA! National Competition.

Rylie Whitaker’s time has come. This Saturday, the recent Altoona Area High School graduate will compete in the YEA! Saunders Scholars Competition as a representative of the Blair County Chamber’s YEA! program. The competition, which this year is being done virtually, brings together students from across the nation.

“As the competition gets closer I’m of course getting a little more nervous,” Whitaker acknowledged. “But more than that, I’m trying to continue to be confident in myself and my hard work. Although it is a difficult and competitive event, I am focused on the prize.”

Whitaker has reason to be confident. She won the Outstanding YEA! Student Award at the Chamber’s Investor Panel Event in April, creating a business that focused on upcycling and reworking vintage clothing items. Her presentation style was quick and effective. She’s aware that she’s still got some modifications to make for this next opportunity.

“There are different stip-

ulations, different time requirements, different people but most glaringly, different setting,” Whitaker pointed out. “This panel is not in-person which will play a major role in the judging. Before I was able to connect with the judges. This time it will be purely business, no formalities and no connection which does provide a new challenge in reaching my audience.”

No matter the outcome, Whitaker admits that the YEA! experience has been an incredible one.

“The YEA! experience has prepared me extremely well for college and beyond,” she disclosed. “I managed to start a successful business during a global pandemic while still working a part-time job, taking rigorous honors and AP courses and participating in many clubs, volunteer activities and sports. I now really know what hard work and passion can do and will be able to transfer that knowledge and skill to whatever I put my mind to.”

(For instructions on how to access the YEA! Competition, go to yea.org.)

COMING UP AT THE CHAMBER

Business After Hours ■ June 24 ■ 5 - 7 p.m.
Pennsylvania Highlands Community College - Logan Valley Mall Campus
 Call the Chamber to register at 814-943-8151 or online at www.blairchamber.com