



Fond memories

As I helped to proofread the program for tonight's Business Excellence Dinner, I glanced through the list of past honorees and realized that one of the least significant things they had in common was that they were all older than me when I met them for the first time.

Tonight that streak ends.

I was eighteen years old when I was hired as a "stringer" for the Blair Press newspaper in 1973. Having just completed my freshman year as a Journalism major at Shippensburg University, I arrived early at the Roaring Spring office on my first day. The first person who greeted me was Mark Barnhart. He was eleven-years-old.

I don't remember much about Mark during that summer except that he seemed rather quiet and reflective. He seemed to spend much of his time at the printing office where his father "Barney" was building a business designed to attract contracts for government printing. I'm guessing that whatever Mark learned by watching his dad gave him a valuable head start, not only on the printing process but on the relentless work ethic necessary to carry a vision forward.

By the time Barney handed-off News Printing Company to his children – Barry, Mark and Charlene – it had enjoyed a high level of success. Mark took the lead in assuring that it took the next gigantic steps toward what he considered to be its potential. With the incredible growth of what is now NPC, there's little doubt that the creative genius that is Mark Barnhart has transitioned the company in ways that make the original model almost unrecognizable.

I feel fortunate to have had a "catbird seat" in watching both the birth and the maturation of a local business that has earned national recognition and which is regarded as much for its philanthropy as for the impact that it has on the county's economy. I learned things from Barney and from his wife Charlotte about the importance of being organized and never losing sight of the goal. Charlotte ran the News Printing office and was adept at bringing chaos-to-order. In a business that thrived on high-intensity, that skill was huge.

For many past recipients of the Chamber's Lifetime Achievement Award for Business Excellence, this recognition marks the culmination of an outstanding career. For some, like Mark Barnhart, it will no doubt be a motivator for what can happen next.

Chicago Rivet fastens sights on quality

Although it would be a bit of an exaggeration to say that people in Northern Blair County sometimes get confused when they realize that one of their key businesses is called Chicago Rivet & Machine Company, it is at least a conversation piece with visitors. "Few people mix up Chicago and Tyrone," admits Mike Sweitzer, general manager of the Tyrone facility. "We've become rather well-established here."

Sweitzer would be a reputable resource on that topic. He's worked at Chicago Rivet since 1976. The original plant opened in a building in downtown Tyrone in 1946 while the current plant was constructed in the industrial park at 2728 Adams Avenue.

Chicago Rivet is headquartered in Naperville, Illinois, just outside Chicago. Besides Tyrone, the company has a manufacturing plant in Albia, Iowa and a sales office in Pembroke, Massachusetts.

"Having other locations has been a great help,"

Sweitzer acknowledged. "We're able to share ideas whether it be on a source for supplies or the design on some of our tooling. We are currently making plans to have a machine that is not being used elsewhere sent here."

So just exactly what does Chicago Rivet do? In simple terms, the company is a manufacturer of cold-formed fasteners and rivet-setting machines.

"If someone has a CASE pocket knife in their pocket, we make the small brass rivet that holds the plastic moldings on the side," Sweitzer explained. "If you have Cutco cutlery in your home, we make the rivets that hold the handles on the knives. If you look under the hood of your car, we make the tube nuts that hold the brake lines on the master cylinder. Our rivet-setting equipment is also used in a wide variety of applications from small electrical assemblies to the metal straps that are used to assemble wooden whiskey and wine barrels."

Like most businesses, Chicago Rivet had to pivot when Covid-19 reared its



Mike Sweitzer (right), general manager of Chicago Rivet, watches as employee Coleman Harris assembles a rivet-setting machine.

ugly head. The company was fortunate to be considered an essential business, according to Sweitzer.

"Because we make parts that go into electrical and medical applications, we were able to operate when others could not," he noted. "But even with that, like many companies, we had to reduce our hours of operation and reduce our staffing.

It was a difficult time but our workforce did an exceptional job."

Sweitzer likes what he sees when he looks at the direction of the company.

"I believe the future of Chicago Rivet is bright," he pointed out. "The board of directors has invested millions of dollars in the facilities to keep them current. We have a core group of

employees who are invested in our future success. That, plus the fact that we are serving a more diverse customer base that's not tied so strongly to the automotive sector should only help the company be a stable employer and business for years to come."

(Chicago Rivet has been a member of the Blair County Chamber since 2011.)

Home Garden & Healthy Living Showcase unveils plans for 2022



Discussing the booth layout for the Home Garden & Healthy Living Showcase are, left to right: Chef Tom Schilling, Jimmy Burchfield, Tami Hinish and Stacy Hoover.

For fifty years, the Blair County Chamber has held an annual Home & Garden Show. For most of that time, it has partnered on the event with the Blair-Bedford Builders Association.

Covid-19 caused the cancellation of the 2021 Show, which added a "Healthy Living" component in 2020. Now the event will undergo a monumental change in 2022 that will at least temporarily end a

longtime affiliation. The March 25, 26, 27, 2022 Show will move from the Jaffa Shrine – its 50-year home – to the Blair County Convention Center.

"A number of circumstances played a role," explained Stacy Hoover, the Chamber VP who oversees the planning process. "Scheduling conflicts and a bit of a change in philosophy created an opportunity to try something different." It was not due to dissatis-

faction with the Jaffa Shrine, emphasized Dave DeBiase, Executive Officer of the Builders.

"The Jaffa has treated us exceptionally well for many years," he noted. "They always made us feel welcome."

With the Show still five months away, sponsors and exhibitors are already jumping onboard. For more information, call the Chamber at (814) 943-8151.

Committee seeks ways to assist City of Altoona



Altoona City Manager Omar Strohm (left) speaks to the Chamber's Public Policy Committee. Pictured are committee members John Eichelberger and Diana McClure.

As the advocacy arm of the Blair County Chamber, the Public Policy Committee is always seeking ways to assist municipalities in improving the business environment. The City of Altoona provides the biggest challenge in that quest.

Altoona City Manager Omar Strohm attended the committee's meeting on October 7th and discussed the importance of the City and the Chamber.

"I'd like to see the City work toward sponsoring more business development," Strohm pointed out. "We've got some economic concerns that other

municipalities don't have so partnering with the business community makes sense."

Among the concerns is the fact that the population continues to decline and 23.4% of the City's residents live in poverty.

"We understand what the City is dealing with and we're encouraged by where Omar, his staff and City Council seem to be headed," acknowledged Chris Michelone, who chairs the Public Policy Committee. "We look forward to helping where we can. All of our municipalities face similar obstacles."

Blair County Chamber...The busiest place in Blair County

■ The Chamber's Business Excellence Dinner, honoring Mark Barnhart of NPC, Inc., is tonight at The Casino at Lakemont Park. Barnhart will be the 19th recipient of the Chamber's Lifetime Achievement Award for Business Excellence.

■ Business After Hours will be held this Wednesday from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. The event will be co-hosted by two outstanding businesses located in the same retail plaza. SCG Hobby and Simply Power Yoga are located at 3200 Pleasant Valley Blvd. in Altoona.

■ The Blair County Chamber's Board of Directors will meet on Thursday morning at the Devorris Center for Business Development beginning at 7:30 a.m. The Board will get its first look at the Chamber's 2022 Budget and will also approve new members.

■ The Chamber is continuing to promote its slate of exciting trips for 2022. Those trips include the Hawaiian Islands, Ireland, the Canadian Rockies and Iceland. For information on any of those, contact the Chamber at (814) 943-8151 or go to www.blairchamber.com.

■ Save the date of November 10th for the Chamber's Farm-City Dinner set for 6:30 p.m. at the Freedom Township Fire Hall. The event features the presentation of the Agricultural Community Excellence (ACE) Award and a great Italian meal from DelGrosso's.

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