

CEO's share insights with YEA! class

The challenges of building and maintaining a business are at the very heart of the Young Entrepreneurs Academy (YEA!) program. So it figures that hearing from a panel of business leaders who have already experienced those challenges would be a huge advantage to the YEA! students.

"It was amazing to hear what these people accomplished and how difficult it can often be to get where you need to go," acknowledged Bishop Guilfoyle student Brennen Myrick. "It provided a way for us to move forward."

And, in some cases, change direction, according to Hollidaysburg student Marisa White.

"Based on what I heard from the panel, my mindset has changed on a couple things," she noted. "I know I need to be more innovative and have more drive to get my business on a track that will sustain it. I feel



better about where I'm headed."

The CEO Roundtable Panel consisted of Deb Arnsperger of Creative Expressions Florist, Chris Cook of C&J Rental Management, Marcia Cumming of MarCia's Chocolates, Tracy Dutko of Just Breathe Salt Spa & Yoga Studio and Travis Sheetz of Sheetz, Inc. The panelists described their businesses and then met with the students in small groups.

"I was impressed on how interested and engaged the students were," Cook admitted. "They asked us so many good questions that you don't often hear from people at that stage of build-

ing a business. I'm looking forward to seeing their end-products."

Sheetz agreed. "I was intrigued with their interest in marketing, specifically pricing and customer acquisition strategy," he pointed out. "(YEA!) is a great program. I'm really impressed with the great exposure they're getting at such a young age."

Dutko believes that the interaction between the students and panelists was ultimately a benefit to both.

"After reflecting, I feel that there were so many other things I could have shared," she reported. "I feel this program is wonderful and so encouraging for the students. They asked great questions and were looking to incorporate what they heard into their own evolving ideas. I really enjoyed being part of this event."

The CEO Roundtable session, which was held February 15th at Blair County Convention Center, is one



The panelists for the YEA! CEO Roundtable for 2022 are, left to right: Deb Arnsperger, Chris Cook, Marcia Cumming, Travis Sheetz and Tracy Dutko.

of the key components of the YEA! program. The next step in the business development process will be the upcoming Investor Panel event on March 29th at The Casino at Lakemont Park.

"Clearly, the Roundtable panel did a tremendous job in helping the students to put their own business ideas into a workable perspective," said YEA! Program Manager Tim Gildea. "The Investor Panel event will

provide the opportunity for the students to get even more valuable feedback. That's important as they put the final touches on their businesses."

(For more information on YEA!, go to yeausa.org.)

BBBS creating long-term successes

In a county that recognizes the importance of keeping young people from feeling the need to settle elsewhere, certain organizations play a huge role in keeping those young people close to home. Big Brothers Big Sisters of Blair County is one of those organizations. BBBS is a youth-serving organization that trains community residents to be positive mentors for at-risk children in the area. The mentors or "Bigs" take the children "Littles" to participate in positive activities and experiences to help form a bond between the mentor and mentee.

"The mentors stay matched with their mentees for years, helping to change their lives for the better and forever," explained Samantha Watters, Executive Director of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Blair and Huntingdon Counties. "They encourage them to be the best they can be."

Watters is one of five employees and eighteen volunteers that help with events and fundraising. There are thirty other volunteers who serve as mentors. That might seem like a lot until you consider the actual breadth of the BBBS program.

"We're more than just a community-based program," Watters pointed out. "We have school and site-based programs running in school districts through the county where high-schoolers or



Samantha Watters (right), Executive Director of Big Brothers Big Sisters and Nyah Parker, Customer Relations Specialist prepare buckets for an upcoming fundraiser.

Non-profit Focus

even college students mentor middle or elementary school students under a facilitated session.

"In addition, BBBS offers engagement opportunities for the families of our Littles, such as Curve game outings, picnics through the summer, bowling parties among many other events. We also offer resources to children participants like school clothes, winter coats, backpacks and school supplies and any hygiene prod-

ucts they may need."

The training aspect for mentors is thorough and effective, Watters reported.

"Besides taking background checks, all of our Bigs go through various training courses online," she pointed out. "Some of those are Youth Protection, Understanding Children's Behavior, Mandated Reporter Training and others. Each training is easy and interesting and provides valuable information for Bigs but also for anyone who has a child, knows a child or just wants to be a better and inspiring role model in someone's life."

Watters, her staff and vol-

unteers are gearing-up for a busy year. Covid-19 created recruitment challenges that are only now bringing BBBS back to a comfortable place.

"Throughout the shutdown, volunteer application stalled," Watters noted. "Now we're lucky to have an influx of applications with more coming in each week, which is phenomenal since we have over 70 children waiting for a mentor. We're hoping by the end of 2022 that we can cut our waiting list in half and change the lives of more children."

(Big Brothers Big Sisters has been a Blair County Chamber member since 2008.)

Sustainability event will begin discussion of potential strategy



Chris Foster (left) and Stefan Long, of the Chamber's Sustainable Blair County Committee, strategize about the Sustainability Workshop, set for March 1st.

The business community has a lot on its plate. As it prioritizes, certain aspects of importance fall off the radar. In far too many cases, sustainability becomes one of those casualties.

"We understand that it's hard to address everything because there are only so many hours in the day," admits Chris Foster of Stiffler McGraw & Associates, who chairs the Chamber's Sustainable Blair County Committee. "We need to keep feeding the message and hope it gets the requisite amount of attention."

Foster and his committee will continue to craft that message based on the results of a Sustainability Workshop that will be held on March 1st from 8:00 a.m. until 10:30 a.m. at the Devorris Center for Business Development. The event is open to anyone in the Chamber membership who would like to either learn more or share what they already know on sustainability.

"We want to really make a difference for the businesses in our community



that can benefit from being more sustainable," Foster pointed out. "The economic aspect of sustainability really hits home for businesses like restaurants or any business that discards a high percentage of its products."

"We're hoping that people attend our workshop who are willing to share their ideas and experiences so that our committee can get a better handle on what the specific needs are and how local businesses can benefit from programs directed to them."

The workshop begins with a buffet breakfast at 8:00 a.m., courtesy of Prime Sirloin. The format will be focus group discussions that will emphasize ways to help develop a strategy that the committee will use in future program development. The event will end by 10:30. There is no cost to participate. To register, contact Joe Hurd at (814) 943-8151.

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