



A fortunate mistake

Eight years ago, Jim Patterson and Dave Madden got phone calls. Each was asked by a member of a Rotary Club if they'd be willing to spend a day helping high school sophomores learn about career opportunities related to welding. The event was the BASICS/Rotary Career Fair which annually brings more than 1,000 students into the Blair County Convention Center. Welding is one of more than 70 career fields offered that day.

What Patterson and Madden did not know was that a miscommunication had resulted in two people being invited to make a welding presentation instead of just one. When each arrived at the Convention Center, he was prepared for a solo act.

"I didn't know Dave and Dave didn't know me," Patterson admitted. "Rather than figuring out who would stay and who would go, we decided to tag team. We've been tag teaming ever since."

Patterson and Madden are just two of the business people in the local community who understand the importance of helping to build the county's future workforce. It also helps that based on reputation alone, the "tag-teaming" are top shelf. It's comparable to looking for insight on how to bake a cake and finding Betty Crocker and Duncan Hines eager to provide advice.

Welding is one of the region's high-priority occupations. It also pays well. As one construction engineer explained to me in a clever-but-emphatic way, "If you're a poor welder, then you're a poor welder."

The BASICS Career Fair Subcommittee of the Chamber and the Rotary Club representatives work together to recruit presenters who not only have a firm grasp of their craft but who also relate well to the young people seated in front of them. The students seldom understand the urgency associated with career exploration. To many of them, it's just a few hours out of school. The presenters live the reality every day of watching a fragile workforce attempting to prop-up an even more fragile economy.

Yet we are so fortunate that people like Jim Patterson and Dave Madden, who have so much to share and seem honored to be asked to share it. Eight years ago, both were working fulltime. Today, both are retired. Some might regard retirement as the opportunity to pass the responsibility to others.

Hopefully, that thought hasn't occurred to them yet.

Chamber zooms-in with new digital media

The Blair County Chamber has moved confidently into the digital age. From a number of initial marketing efforts that "dipped the Chamber's toes into the digital waters," came the hiring of a Digital Media Manager to take the commitment to the next level.

Brittany Mayer is that new employee and she has already made an impression on Chamber members as well as on Chamber staff.

"Brittany is the missing element that is allowing us to make significant inroads in how we serve our members and how we advance the organization in general," explained Linda Stotler, the Chamber's Vice-President of Communications and Marketing. "The perception of chambers of commerce has changed. The ones that remain old-school are struggling. We don't want to be one of those. We're adapting to be aligned with our community."

One of the more recent initiatives that Stotler and Mayer have collaborated on is a video presentation called "Getting Reel." It allows the Chamber to bring

together programs and events so that members and non-members can get a better handle on what's happening during a particular month.

"It came out of a brainstorming session," Mayer pointed out. "We have new digital capabilities and were looking for ways to increase our outreach. Video is the current trend. When the attention span of busy people is only a few seconds, they aren't always willing to commit that time to staying current. We try to make sure they see its value."

"We're not just getting real, we're keeping it real," Stotler acknowledged. "This is just one of the ways that we're becoming visually relevant. We've got potential to initiate all sorts of digital media offerings."

Another example of the Chamber's ability to increase awareness of the many programs that are being directed toward helping the business community is the growing use of the organization's YouTube Channel. Most recently, the Non-profit Legislative Breakfast was videoed and



Brittany Mayer, Digital Media Manager, films video content for an episode of the Chamber's monthly re-cap video, Getting Reel, which can be viewed on YouTube.

then uploaded to YouTube.

"For years, there's been frustration in not being able to get important information to members whose schedules didn't allow them to attend educational programs and events," Stotler noted. "More and more, we're connecting those people and giving them options that they haven't had before. It's

really great."

There are marketing opportunities that are also being well-received, according to Mayer.

"We created VIDEObytes which are commercials that advertisers send to us that are then included in our newsletter, on our social media platforms and on our YouTube Channel," she admitted. "They're reason-

ably priced and gain in popularity as more people become aware of them."

With all the digital enhancements to the Chamber's marketing efforts, print media will continue to play a key role in getting the word out.

"We continue to get positive comments from our members about the content of our publications," Stotler emphasized.

Leadership Blair County Adult keeps producing servant leaders



Kristopher Stern (left) and Angela Cleckner, members of the LBC class of 2022, share experiences with District Attorney Pete Weeks, class of 2016, during the justice session.

It has now been 27 years since the first Leadership Blair County class was introduced to the community by the Blair County Chamber of Commerce.

"The Chamber believed that a program emphasizing servant leadership would be an effective way to make the community stronger and better able to accomplish great things," acknowledged former Blair County Commissioner Donna Gority, a member of the original LBC Steering Committee who continues to be involved in the program today. "I'd say we've exceeded expectations."

With more than 500 graduates of the program, it would figure that the pool of applicants would be getting somewhat shallow. That has not been the case, according to Sue Griep, former Victim Witness Coordinator in the District At-



torney's Office and a 2007 graduate of LBC. Griep has been on the interview team for more than ten years and has been gratified not only by the number of applicants but the quality of those applicants as well.

"Word of mouth alone has been responsible for people gravitating toward the program," she pointed out. "Until you experience it as a class member you can't appreciate the magnitude of what you learn and the connections you make with people who become your friends for life. When you finish and look back, you're amazed."

Although the LBC program has stayed primarily the same in terms of session topics, the content of those sessions has changed as the issues have changed.

"Our committee has spent considerable time making sure that we format the sessions based on the relevant challenges of the time," Griep disclosed. "We also cast our net as wide as possible to get representation from throughout our community and we're seeing those efforts taking shape."

Julie Rothrauff is the Chamber's staff representative to Leadership Blair County and she's impressed with what she's seen.

"As the new person, I'm really amazed by the commitment of those people who have committed so much to make LBC an ongoing success," she stated. "I'm honored to be part of it."

Program Director of Mt. Lion Back Pack enjoys new challenge



Kelly Robertson is excited to form new community partnerships to further expand the Back Pack program.

Kelly Robertson knows a daunting challenge when she sees one.

As the new Program Director of the Mountain Lion Back Pack program, Robertson accepted that position in Mid-March and has hit the ground running.

"As a social worker and activist, I've always leaned toward community-minded work," she disclosed. "But it has been my background in fundraising, sales, marketing and event planning that has served me best to this point. There's a lot to accomplish."

In a school district where one-in-four children don't know where their next meal is coming from, Mountain Lion Back Pack is an incredible necessity. Each weekend, the program feeds between 800-1,000 children, providing breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks and drinks.

"Our program serves as a bridge between school and home for the children,"

Robertson points out.

"Often they come to school hungry on Mondays and this program provides them with nourishment. It's essential that we are able to attract the requisite number of donors, sponsors and volunteers to keep pace with our numbers. Fortunately, our community has been very generous."

Among the Mountain Lion Back's future challenges, according to Robertson, are to get a better handle on its summer program and also to expand its overall program to include Head Start and junior high children.

"I hope to partner with churches for our summer distribution program, easing the school staff and parents," she noted. "There's been no shortage of people and organizations willing to help."

(Blair County Community Action Agency has been a Chamber member since 2012.)



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