



Patience paying-off

"Patience is the calm acceptance that things can happen in a different order than the one you have in your mind."

That's a great quote. It's author? I have no idea. I googled "patience" and there it was. Once in a while, the internet is actually your friend.

I'm pretty sure that the author of the quote wasn't Brian Durbin. In fact, I'm certain of it.

Brian is the general partner of Durbin Companies, a highly-respected business located in Altoona. He is also a member of the Chamber's Public Policy Committee which is the advocacy arm of the organization.

Brian has served on the committee longer than any other member. I'm guessing that his parish priest gave him the choice of committee service or eternal damnation as an act of penance. At some committee meetings, I sense that Brian wonders if he made the right choice.

Brian's challenge isn't patience, it's frustration. For at least two decades he's been part of committee discussions focused on helping Blair County's municipalities to better serve the people who reside there. As a business organization, that's important because in all but a few cases, it's the business community that stands to gain or lose, based on the stoutness of the municipality.

Despite the best efforts of Brian Durbin and his committee, progress has been slow. From an issues standpoint, what seemed like low-hanging fruit has often died on the vine. Patience is in short supply as is calm acceptance.

However, there appears to be hope. A discussion at a recent committee meeting yielded the suggestion that an academy be formed to educate people on the value of public service and to encourage their involvement, particularly at the local level (see the story elsewhere on this page). It's not a campaign to run-off current elected officials. It's deepening the pool of qualified candidates and inspiring greater volunteer participation.

How successful the academy concept will be, like most initiatives that rely on building momentum and imparting the right message, remains to be seen. This fruit is closer to the top of the tree which will increase the undertaking's degree of difficulty but also heighten its value.

The Public Policy Committee, thanks to the patience and persistence of members like Brian Durbin, will make certain that the Public Service Academy is an asset to our municipalities.

Chamber forms Public Service Academy

The reluctance of people in communities throughout Blair County to become involved politically has left many municipalities scrambling to fill open positions. To assist those municipalities, the Blair County Chamber's Public Policy Committee has undertaken an effort that would educate interested citizens on ways to be effective parts of the political process.

The Committee has created the Public Service Academy which will be launched in September with three-hour evening sessions on the 13th and the 27th.

"This idea has been in the discussion stage for quite some time," acknowledged Committee Chair Chris Michelone. "We've met with representatives from various municipalities and we're aware of the challenges they have, not only in getting people to run for office but also attracting volunteers to serve on boards and commissions. We've been looking for ways to help. The academy approach seems to have potential."

The Committee is fortunate

to have two members with more than a little experience in how the political system works. Former Blair County Commissioner Donna Gority and former Commissioner and State Senator John Eichelberger have volunteered to co-chair the Academy. Michelone believes that their involvement gets the initiative off to a good start.

"They provide credibility," he pointed out. "They understand what needs to be done and they can take any political bias out of the concept." They both look forward to what the Academy can accomplish.

"It's always important to educate the public about how government and the political system work," Eichelberger explained. "Most people, even many who are active in our community, don't really understand the structure of local government. This makes it more difficult for them to get help with problems and they miss opportunities to help others by participating in the process themselves."

Gority agreed. "I believe



Former State Senator John Eichelberger and former Blair County Commissioner Donna Gority will serve as co-chairs of the Chamber's Public Service Academy.

that serving one's community, whether as an elected official or as a member of one of the many authorities, boards and commissions that elected officials are responsible for appointing members to serve, is an important part of being a committed

citizen," she noted. "Many people have an interest in serving but have no idea where to begin and what the process entails. The Academy has been created to provide the answers in a nonpartisan manner."

So how will they judge the

program's success?

"If we see more people interested in serving as volunteers on boards and authorities or helping to fill vacancies in elected office, the program will have had an impact," Eichelberger stated.

CONTACT Altoona to celebrate 40-years of community assistance



Erin Kay (left) discusses the challenges of non-profits like CONTACT Altoona with State Senator Judy Ward.

It was September 1, 1982 that people in Blair County who "just needed to talk to someone," found a viable destination. On that day, CONTACT Altoona accepted its first calls and has been answering calls ever since.

"We're a helpline," explained Erin Kay, who was promoted to Executive Director of CONTACT Altoona last December. "We have trained volunteers who answer the phone to first listen, then offer names and/or phone numbers to agencies that can help with the issues that people are having. We also just listen to people who need to vent."

CONTACT Altoona also has a Reassurance Program where volunteers place calls to Blair County residents who need help remembering to take medication, need a safety check or just a friendly

Non-profit Focus

voice to call them to say hello. Those social call clients increased dramatically during the pandemic, according to Kay.

"We're still getting calls from people who just want to thank us for having been there when they needed us," she pointed out. "It was an incredibly tough time for so many and peace-of-mind wasn't easy to come by. We're happy to have helped. It was additional validation for what we do and why people continue to rely on us."

Like most non-profits, CONTACT Altoona relies heavily on the availability of volunteers.

"Although we do an extensive training for those who answer helpline calls,

we do a shortened training for those volunteers handling reassurance calls," Kay disclosed. "We recognize the importance of being thorough and we do our best to find people whose skills closely match the needs of people who call us. We're grateful to have such dedicated volunteers and we have a committed board as well. It's why we've lasted for 40 years."

As Kay ponders the future of CONTACT Altoona, she admits that she'd like to see the organization grow.

"I'd love to see us expand," she noted. "There's nothing quite like our services in this area and other counties need assistance as well. We like to be able to reach out wherever it would make sense to."

(CONTACT Altoona has been a Blair County Chamber member since 2000.)

Leadership Youth program graduates 24 servant leaders



Chance Schreier, Bellwood-Antis High School, receives his certificate of completion from Tami Chadick, Leadership Blair County Youth Facilitator.

The 19th graduating class of the Chamber's Leadership Blair County Youth program was feted at a luncheon on May 11th at Penn State Altoona.

Members of the class are: Isabella Knorr, Meleah Lang, Julia Schmitt, Juliana Squires and Laney Yost from Altoona Area High School; Jordan Hescoc, Olivia Hess, Chance Schreier and Miranda Tornatore from Bellwood-Antis; Holly Butler, Ryan Hostler, Marklin Myers and Finley Steinbugl of Bishop Guilfoyle; Kaytlynn Leidig of Central High School; Cameron Claycomb, Joyce Cottle and Alyssa Sacchitella of Claysburg-Kimmel; Maxwell Baronner, Shelby Beauchamp, Ava Dixon and Mary McKeegan of Hollidaysburg Area High School; and Claire Carper, Rowan Gorsuch and Roger Royer of Williamsburg Community High School.

"This group of young people really exemplifies the type of servant leadership that will represent our community well as they continue to acquire the skills to take-

on additional responsibilities," acknowledged Tami Chadick, LBC Youth Facilitator. "They recognize the challenges that future leaders will face and they have an appreciation of what it means to live and work in Blair County."

The Leadership Blair County Youth program is funded through the efforts of the Blair County Chamber Foundation. Thanks to the generosity of businesses, organizations and individuals who contribute to the Foundation, there is no cost to students to participate in LBC Youth and there's no cost to the school districts as well.

Gold sponsors for 2022 are: Central Pennsylvania Community Foundation, FirstEnergy Foundation, First National Bank, Fulton Bank, Brian & Melissa Irwin, McQuaide Blasko, Reliance Bank, Ronald McDonald House Charities of Mid-Penn and United Way of Blair County. Irwin Financial was a silver sponsor.

(For more info on LBC Youth, contact the Chamber at 814-943-8151.)

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