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Vicki's Florist blossoms as a budding business

Nine years ago, Amanda Benton became the owner of a flower shop at 937 First Avenue in Altoona. The business was called Vicki's Florist and it is still known by that name today. What's changed are the enthusiasm and commitment of Amanda Benton.

"I was working in health-care when I graduated from college," Benton remembers. "I cannot say that owning a flower shop was my dream. I was always interested in art and design but just as a hobby. I knew nothing about flowers."

It was actually Benton's parents that let her know that the business was for sale and encouraged her to look into it. She doesn't recall it being a difficult decision.

"I told them no," she acknowledged. "I thought they were crazy. It turned out my boss at the time thought I should go for it as well. So I guess my parents knew what they were talking about. I'll always be indebted to them for the

time and energy they've sacrificed to make Vicki's Florist successful."

Success has mainly come from a heavy dose of trial-and-error coupled with the realization that Benton's creative juices were stimulated by the beauty around her.

"Owning a business is wonderfully chaotic," she pointed out. "I get to create art every day. My flowers are there for big moments in people's lives but also the more difficult times, from weddings to funerals and all of the moments in-between. Flowers really bring joy to people and that is very fulfilling."

"Again, I never dreamed of being a business owner and I knew it was not going to be easy. But I very much underestimated the time that I would spend working. My biggest challenge, especially as I grow older, is finding a healthy work-life balance. I'm learning that it's okay to say no to things but it is a struggle. I never want someone to feel let-down

so I only want my best work to go out the door."

While business in general tends to breed competition, Benton doesn't see much evidence of that in the local floral industry.

"There are many talented floral designers in our area," she disclosed. "We all have our own style of creating and that is what keeps customers coming to us. Our floral community works well together. If I don't have something in stock or I am already booked on a certain day for a wedding, I am happy to recommend another florist in town and vice versa. You never know when you might run out of something that you thought you had in stock and you need to phone your flower friend in a pinch."

One relatively new tradition that impacts florists is the now infamous "in lieu of flowers" statement that often appears at the bottom of an obituary. For Benton, it's not something to dwell on.

"I understand and support donations," she admitted.



Amanda Benton, owner of Vicki's Florist in Altoona, has used her interest in art and design to build a successful business.

"People still send flowers. They want the family to know that they are thinking of them during a time when words do not seem like enough. People have also

changed some of their priorities on what they send. Recently, sales on wind chimes and lanterns have increased. They make beautiful keepsakes.

"It's great to be able to provide that kind of comfort."

(Vicki's Florist has been a Blair County Chamber member since 2021.)

Non-profit committee doing great things

Blair County's non-profit businesses are alive and well and doing great things to help the business community fully recover from the financial and health-related upheaval of the past three years.

"It's been a tough time for everyone, that's for sure," acknowledged Holly Keller of Garvey Manor Nursing Home, who chairs the Chamber's Committee of Non-Profit Businesses. That committee has become one of the Chamber's largest and most active. It's also a bit of a trend-setter, according to committee member Jodi Cessna of the Central PA Community Foundation.

"We might be the only Chamber around with a committee dedicated strictly to non-profits," she pointed out. "With everything we accomplish, it will be surprising if other chambers don't ultimately follow suit."

Kate Rimbeck of the Blair County Historical Society at Baker Mansion agreed.

"Having a committee specific to non-profits allows for conversations and support that are directly related to the issues that face non-profits," she noted. "Chambers should encourage that."

Among the programs and events that the Committee of Non-profit Businesses plans and executes are quarterly best practices forums, networking functions and an Annual Legislative



The Chamber's Committee of Non-profit Businesses has effectively advocated for the role of non-profits in the Blair County Community.

Breakfast that this year will be held May 19th.

The committee is also in the process of conducting a survey of Blair County non-profits to determine, among other things, the impact that non-profits have on the local economy. The results of that survey will serve as the basis of a presentation at the Chamber's Breakfast Club, set for June 8th.

"There are a lot of misconceptions about what non-profits add to a community," explained Natalie Depto-Vesey of Home Nursing Agency Foundation. There's a perception that we always have our hands out since our funding streams come through direct solicitation, sponsorships, event fundraising, etc. There's far more to us than people realize."

COMMITTEE OF Non-Profit Businesses

Living, Giving, Serving Together

Jessica Ford Cameron	Holly Keller
Jodi Cessna	Debbie Kelly
Annie Choiniere	Jennifer Knisely
Natalie Depto-Vesey	Heather Loucks
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Billie Egan	Michelle McIntyre
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Shawna Hoover	Samantha Watters
Erin Kay	Jay Zimmerman

Next "Breakfast Club" to feature Marc Roche of the Pirates' staff

Major League Baseball entered the world of high-tech several years ago but Minor League Baseball is in the process of making a similar transition. For that reason, the Pittsburgh Pirates have promoted Marc Roche as its Technology /Video Coordinator for the minor leagues.

Roche will be the keynote speaker at the next Chamber Breakfast Club, set for April 13th at 7:45 a.m. at The Casino at Lakemont Park.

The cost to attend Breakfast Club is \$20 for Chamber members and \$30 for non-members. To register,



Marc Roche

call (814) 943-8151 or visit www.blairchamber.com. Corporate sponsor of the April Breakfast Club is Pinnacle Cleaning Services.

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| <p>Hummingbird Childcare Center
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