

YEA! student advances to national competition

Despite the many exciting aspects of the Blair County Chamber's Young Entrepreneurs Academy (YEA!) program, the highpoint of the 25-week business-building experience is always the Investor Panel Event.

"Our young CEO's have their eyes and their thoughts on this event, practically from the very beginning," admitted YEA! Program Manager Tim Gildea. "It's the opportunity to show the local business community how hard they've worked and why they deserve to be supported."

This year's Investor Panel Event was held on March 28th at Penn State Altoona's Devorris Downtown Center. Seventeen students, representing sixteen businesses, participated. When the presentations were completed, more than \$12,000 was distributed by investors to assist the students in bringing their business ideas to completion.

"Every business received some degree of funding," explained Carol Gensimore, who chairs the YEA! Steering Committee. "As always,

the investors were very generous and also provided great encouragement to the students."

Two of the YEA! students received specific recognition from the investors. Williamsburg High School student Chloe England was selected as having the most outstanding business. England will represent the local YEA! program in the National YEA! Competition in June. In the event that she is unable to do so, YEA! runner-up Sofia DelGrosso of Bellwood-Antis will handle that responsibility.

"I can tell you, from assisting in the process of watching and listening to the investors as they deliberate on each business, it's difficult for them to select one business over another," Gensimore disclosed. "Each one brings something special to the table."

Amy Seltzer of Seltzer Financial Strategies, a multi-year investor and member of the YEA! Steering Committee, agrees with Gensimore's assessment.

"The focus and determination of these students at such a young age is amaz-



ing," Seltzer pointed out. "This (YEA!) program gives them mentorship and experiences that they would not likely get for many years, if at all. Investing in them as they grow their businesses makes sense from so many vantage points, including our community in general."

Leonard Fiore, III of Fiore Brothers Management, another investor, echoed those comments.

"What impresses me most about the YEA! program is that when you give young adults a platform to shine, you can be blown away by what they can do," he noted. "When that happens, it motivates you to continue to support them in any way you can. It makes you proud to be part of the program."

According to investor Andrea Cohen of Blair Companies, identifying a business idea and determining ways



Chloe England (center) will represent the Chamber's YEA! program at the National Competition. Pictured with Chloe are YEA! runner-up Sofia DelGrosso (left) and YEA! investor Amy Seltzer.

to move it forward is only half the battle.

"It's clear that these students put a lot of time and effort into their written and oral presentations," she stated. "It was great not only to hear about what was involved with each business but to recognize the amount

of enthusiasm that these young people have in explaining what they've done. It's not easy to stand in front of a dozen investors and tell them why they should be willing to give you money."

It's obviously not easy, according to investor Scott

Cox of Reliance Bank.

"We too often hear of the lack of communication and networking skills of the younger generation," Cox said. "From my experience as an investor, the YEA! students always impress and present ideas effectively in-person."

Craine capitalizing on YEA! experience

As the 2023 class of the Chamber's Young Entrepreneurs Academy (YEA!) celebrates the accomplishments of its interaction with local investors, it's significant to note that a number of previous YEA! graduates are making good use of the experience offered by the program.

One of those is Ayden Craine. The 20-year-old Craine, a graduate of Bishop Guilfoyle Catholic High School and a 2021 YEA! grad, has opened Heritage Pizza in Downtown Altoona. While owning a pizza business at 20 is impressive, it deviated from the type of business that Craine envisioned when he applied for YEA!

"My business idea for YEA! was to open an outdoor paintball course called Crossfire Paintball," he acknowledged. "It didn't work out, essentially because I didn't have enough funds outside of the funding that I received from the investor panel. The more I looked into the actual costs associated with the business, the more convinced I was that the overhead would likely exceed the income I'd be making. It was an important lesson to learn."

Learning lessons about business was a big part of the motivation that caused Craine to pursue opportunities like YEA!



Ayden Craine, a graduate of the YEA! program, has turned his knowledge of business-building into a successful company.

"Beyond the educational aspects of starting a business, I was also interested in how to meet people and build a network," he pointed out. "The YEA! program provided both. It continues to make a difference. Knowing how to write a business plan helped me to move comfortably into the next business idea."

Heritage Pizza, according to Craine, is off to a great start.

"There have, of course, been challenges. I expected those. It was necessary to get creative with funding. I sought out investors and grants through networks that I was able to find. Another hard part was learning all of the back-end aspects

that impact every business, such as gaining all the licenses and permits that I needed for what I wanted to get done."

The YEA! experience, among other things, taught him to be patient and to rely on the advice of other people.

"I found pretty early that the biggest thing in business is that you don't know what you don't know," Craine admitted. "Figuring out that information can be much harder than it seems. It's almost like navigating a room looking for objects while blindfolded. There can be a lot of confusion. Having other people guide me who have been through it before helped tremendously."

Craine remains a big proponent of YEA!

"I tell young people all the time to take the class," he noted. "Even if you don't like it, you will gain so much information from it, information that you'll be able to use throughout your lifetime. Plus the people you meet will be valuable to you in some way. There's no downside."

Craine has big plans for Heritage Pizza.

"I plan to expand the business into State College as a ghost kitchen," he disclosed. "I'm confident that I'm on the right tract with the current location and I'm feeling good about the potential for what comes next. It's really very exciting!"

Businesses continue to create opportunity for YEA! students



In the seven years that the Chamber has offered the YEA! program, many sponsors have helped underwrite the cost. Pictured are representatives from the three that have sponsored all seven years. From left are Travis Sheetz of Sheetz, Inc., Adam Ward of Ward Transport and Logistics and Tim Balconi of UPMC Altoona.

For an area like Blair County to start and maintain a national program like the Young Entrepreneurs Academy has taken more than a little commitment. The Chamber of Commerce, which wasn't looking for a program to add to its extensive array of business offerings, saw its incredible potential and bit-the-bullet. Three business leaders stepped-up to serve as instructors. As many as twenty-six volunteered to serve as mentors at one time or another over YEA's first seven years. And three highly-motivated individuals agreed to take on the enormous responsibility of Program Manager.

"The program's success is due to the many businesses and individuals who see its value and its long-term impact on our community," explained Chamber President Joe Hurd. "People continue to step-up."

Some of those have stepped-up from the beginning.

"The financial piece of

YEA! is absolutely essential for the program to address on an ongoing basis," Hurd pointed out. "We've been fortunate that several businesses have emerged as sponsors or investors. In fact, three of our sponsors – Sheetz, UPMC Altoona and Ward Transport and Logistics – have sponsored at a high level all seven years."

It's an investment that just makes sense, according to Tim Balconi of UPMC.

"We support it because we're always looking for ways to positively influence the direction of our young people. YEA! is a great way to do that," he noted. Travis Sheetz agreed.

"I personally love to see how teens and young adults assess business opportunities in the market," he noted. "As a company, Sheetz feels that it's important to support and encourage an entrepreneurial spirit in the community. That spirit is what drove an 18-year-old Bob Sheetz to invest \$900 to start Sheetz."



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