

HURD IMMUNITY

Artificial Insanity

There are lines from Don Henley's blockbuster hit "Heart of the Matter," which lament, "The more I know, the less I understand. All the things I think I've figured out, I'm learning again."



Joe Hurd
Blair County Chamber of Commerce

Thus it is with Artificial Intelligence. As I researched AI for this column, this is what I learned:

- Despite believing that AI was a relatively new phenomenon, it has been around in one form or another since 1956. I was two-years old at that time so I don't recall anyone asking me what I thought about it. I probably understood it as much in 1956 as I do now.

- If you had asked me, even a year ago, what I thought of AI, I would likely have replied that I have always been impressed by how much Allen Iverson accomplished as a professional basketball player for some-one of his size. That, sad to say, is not even an exaggeration.

- There are approximately a zillion books available for people to buy if they'd like to learn more about AI. A number of them share the same title, "Artificial Intelligence for Dummies."

There are two in paperback form that look almost the same. One retails for \$7.99; the other for \$22.86. I'm guessing the second one is actually targeting dummies.

- Physicist and author Stephen Hawking, who died in 2018, said that AI has the potential to be useful and helpful but he worried that if we teach robots too much, they could become smarter than humans and potentially cause problems. Was Hawking's concern about smarter robots or dumber humans?

- Since agriculture is Blair County's largest industry, it's probably good that so many AI innovations have already been pointed in that direction. For example, AI can not only drastically increase how fast crops can be harvested but it can also analyze where weeds are growing. Knowing where weeds are growing has never been a well-guarded secret, at least in my yard.

It was mentioned to me by one of those highly-intelligent humans who are running neck-and-neck with AI on global supremacy that I had wasted considerable time and brain-power writing this column when AI would have been more than willing to write it for me. I know of others who have already forfeited their writing assignments to AI and are satisfied with the results.

At this stage in my life, I enjoy writing and will happily defer some other task – perhaps exercising – to some other source.

Bill Wertz & Sons creates winning strategy

Blair County has built an impressive reputation for business excellence through a variety of factors. Topping that list has been the unusually high number of family-owned businesses that bring consistency and continued investment, aiding the local economy.

Since 1940, one of those businesses has been Bill Wertz & Sons, the oldest swimming pool company in the region. Located at 4014 Juniata Gap Road in Altoona, not only does Bill Wertz & Sons have a long history of success but it also is a shining example of what can be accomplished when family members work together.

It began with the founder – Bill Wertz, Sr., transferred to his son Bill, Jr. and is now in the capable hands of Bill Jr.'s five children – Bill III (60), Kevin (59), Wendy Ratchford (59), Donald (55) and Rob (54).

"As our grandfather and father moved up in the years, we as a company had to change with the times," explained Donald, who

Working Together

serves as president. "The business has been handed down through the generations with care. There are currently five owners – the children of Bill and Joyce Wertz. In 2004, we formed the current corporation and elected officers."

So how does a small company operate with five owners. Surprisingly well, according to Donald.

"We all have our roles," he acknowledged. "Knowing what needs done and when is the key. Remember, this is a family business, so when you throw-in the brother and sister dynamic, many people might think the whole thing would unravel."

"The truth is we all get along pretty well. Like any business, you've going to agree or disagree on certain things and have to come to a conclusion to move forward. We've gotten better at it over the years."



The Bill Wertz & Sons ownership team consists of, left to right (seated): Kevin and Bill (standing): Rob, Wendy, Bill, Jr., and Donald.

A lot of that progress is the result of what the current owners have learned from watching the previous generation.

"Our grandfather was known by many as a tough person," Donald noted. "He was also known as a kind

person who had a 'get-r' done mentality. His work ethic was a major reason for our company's success and it was a big advantage to all of us.

"Our father instilled in us the importance of doing things right the first time.

It's always more expensive to do it twice. So, as you can see, we've been fortunate to learn so many important things that have impacted how we operate." (Bill Wertz & Sons has been a Chamber member since 1979.)

Students prepare for future careers through participation in Career Shadowing Week



Alternative Community Resource Program was one of the many businesses hosting students for Career Shadowing. Left to right are: Therapist Megan Garman, Altoona High student Jack Hartman, Therapist Patricia Kochara and Altoona High student Abigail Rudy.

One of the Chamber's most critically important programs for career exploration took place earlier this month with the observance of Career Shadowing Week. Planned and executed through a subcommittee of the BASICS program, Career Shadowing makes it possible for high school juniors from Blair County schools to spend at least a half-day at a local business, learning about a particular career in which they've expressed an interest.

"This is such an amazing experience for these students to see what the workplace is really all about," acknowledged Jamie Stumph of Advantage Resource Group, who co-chairs the Career Shadowing Subcommittee along with Jaime Bianconi of Reliance Bank. "We're so grateful to the number of

businesses willing to step-up to accommodate the students and provide valuable direction. There's really no substitute for that."

This year, 320 students took part, a few less than in recent years. Stumph credited the previous subcommittee co-chairs – Judy Rossi and Leanne Sidney – with setting a high standard that was difficult to duplicate.

"Judy and Leanne did a tremendous job making this program successful over several years. They knew the employers and kept the volunteers organized and motivated," she pointed out. "So many students have benefitted from Career Shadowing and we're hoping that the businesses feel that they've gained something as well. This is an annual event with an incredible upside and we're



looking forward to what comes next."

Career Shadowing is just one part of BASICS – Businesses And Schools Investing in Cooperative Solutions. It is closely tied to the BASICS/Rotary Career Fair which brings more than 1,200 high school sophomores to the Blair County Convention Center for a day of exposure to nearly eighty career choices.

"We do our best to connect these two programs," Stumph admitted. "The best way to keep our young people close to home after they graduate is to show them all the great opportunities that are available here. It's says a lot about our future as a county."

New BASICS co-chairs assume leadership roles



Craig Wallace (left) and Mark Harrington are the new co-chairs of the BASICS Steering Committee. The committee is the Chamber's largest and oversees six subcommittees.

The Blair County Chamber's largest committee has new leadership. BASICS – Businesses And Schools Investing in Cooperative Solutions – welcomes Mark Harrington and Craig Wallace as co-chairs of the BASICS Steering Committee.

Harrington, Assistant Superintendent of Altoona Area School District, has served on the committee for several years and has seen the value of what BASICS means to the business and

education communities. "So many of the important things that happen in our schools and in the workplace are the result of the efforts of this program," Harrington pointed out.

Wallace, who works at Link Computer Corporation, is relatively new to BASICS but is aware of the opportunities it offers.

"I'm excited by the enthusiasm I see from the people involved," he admitted.

Best Practices Forum to focus on benefits of college partnerships

Partnerships are important in helping non-profit businesses to work more closely with local colleges and for local college students to have access to non-profit businesses.

The next Best Practices Forum, hosted by the Chamber's Committee of Non-profit Businesses, will focus on ways to make great relationships take place. Entitled, "Colleges and Non-Profits: Partners in

Progress," the panel discussion will feature Lauren Priscilla Jacobson of Penn State Altoona, Sara Worley of Juniata College and Andrew Stopko of Saint Francis University.

The event will be held December 1st at the Devorris Center for Business Development. The cost to attend is \$20 for non-members. Register at blairchamber.com or call (814) 943-8151.



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