

HURD IMMUNITY

The Hotel California

It's early January and Christmas vacation seems like a long time ago. For the first time in 27 years, I think I am no longer an employee of the Blair County Chamber of Commerce. Or



Joe Hurd

Blair County Chamber of Commerce

maybe I still am. Mergers can be funny things until all the details are firmly in place. Until then, it seems like we're all just along for the ride. The many months of collecting information, comparing policies and procedures and integrating staffs and boards have not been for the faint-of-heart. No one, as far as I know, expected them to be. Other chambers and economic development organizations that have merged were quick to advise us not to get discouraged. There are reasons, they pointed out, why we were separate organizations to begin with.

The game plan for officially becoming The Alliance for Business Growth and Economic Development is both simple and complicated. Spend 2024 looking at all aspects of the what the Chamber and ABCD have been doing to make Blair County business successful, take the best of both, mix well and introduce the finished product in 2025.

Already much has changed. More change is on the way. That's a good thing although some days you're not quite sure. What hasn't changed, at least from my vantage point, is the resiliency of the employees and their commitment to making this whole thing work. The expression, "going above and beyond," has never been more appropriate.

Case in point: If you call the Chamber telephone number, the person who answers will be Marilyn Templon. What you need to know about Marilyn is that she is an exceptional receptionist and secretary. By the way, she retired less than two weeks ago. Why is she still coming to work? Because she wants to make sure that nothing falls through the cracks during the transition.

Marilyn Templon is the rule and not the exception. Former employee Judy Juda retired in 2020 and came back on two different occasions to help train three replacements. Cindy Cessna, another longtime employee, didn't retire but took a position with another business. For several months, she left her new job at the end of each day and returned to the Chamber Office to train two replacements.

It's little wonder that people familiar with our staff call the Chamber "The Hotel California." You really can check out any time you want. Thankfully, you can never leave.

Annual Meeting to focus on talent

The creation of the Blair County Alliance for Business and Economic Growth will mean a variety of new opportunities for the local business community. But it will not change the priorities of the two organizations that have merged to form the Alliance. And workforce development remains at or near the top of the list.

Work force development, in particular talent recruitment, will be front-and-center at the first-ever Alliance Annual Meeting, set for January 26th at Blair County Convention Center. The keynote speaker at that event will be Winona Dimeo-Ediger, a digital content creator for nearly a decade, writing

about culture, travel and politics for publications like National Geographic and Rolling Stone. As editor-in-chief of Livability.com, Dimeo-Ediger created talent attraction content and marketing campaigns for communities around the country and oversaw proprietary research about the factors that drive relocation decisions.

"She's a leading voice in the area of operationalizing talent attraction," explained Steve McKnight, President/CEO of the Alliance. "She's created an IT platform which will allow us to engage people who move or who are thinking about moving into our community." McKnight had an opportunity to

hear her speak at an economic development event in Reading, PA last fall.

"Reading engaged her to assist with some of the aspects of organizational merger that they were encountering during their recent merger," he pointed out. "That merger, by the way, is going very well. We're looking forward to hearing Winona's message and incorporating it in our strategy during 2024 when we examine all of our programs, events and policies."

The cost to attend the Annual Meeting is \$30 and includes a full buffet breakfast. To register, call (814) 943-8151 or register online at www.blairchamber.com.



Winona Dimeo-Ediger, an expert on talent recruitment, will be the keynote at the Alliance Annual Meeting.

Early childhood education remains priority with Neely



Jennifer Neely brings enthusiasm and expertise to her role as Executive Director of Child Advocates of Blair County.

Jennifer Neely has always believed that education opens doors to opportunity and economic mobility and she continues to share that gift with others as the new executive director of Child Advocates of Blair County. Neely has Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Education from Penn State and a graduate certificate in Leadership in Enrollment Management from the University of Southern California. She and her husband Andrew live in Altoona with daughters Joan (9) and Rose (5).

The Chamber: How would you describe Child Advocates of Blair County to someone unfamiliar with it?

Jennifer: Child Advocates of Blair County (CABC) has been an important non-profit agency in Blair County for over 40 years focusing on early childhood education. Today, CABC primarily provides outstanding early childhood programming and services to over 400 children and families across Blair County through the Head Start and PA PreK Counts programs. These preschool programs are funded through federal and state grants, making high-quality early childhood education accessible to all families across the county and in each of the seven school districts.

The Chamber: What is the connection between Child Advocates and Head Start?

Chamber Q&A

Jennifer: Head Start is a federally-funded program that is overseen by the US Department of Health and Human Services and the Administration for Children and Families. It was first introduced by President Lydon B. Johnson in 1965 as part of his "War on Poverty."

The Chamber: What makes your role as Executive Director so special? What part of that role do you enjoy most?

Jennifer: For almost 20 years, I have dedicated my working days and personal time to support non-profit organizations whose missions I hold close, serving as a passionate employee, volunteer, and board member and bringing my enthusiasm and expertise to further their causes and increase their impact. Child Advocates of Blair County's mission to provide high quality programming around the needs of the whole family, from preschool to adulthood, inspires me and aligns with experiences throughout my career and volunteer work. I have enjoyed the evolution from high school English teacher, to school administrator and volunteer mentor, to CABC's Executive Director, where my contribu-

tions serve the greater good by ensuring the program's viability and success.

The Chamber: What are the current challenges facing Head Start and how many of those challenges came about as the result of Covid?

Jennifer: Head Start, and early childhood education in general, is facing a workforce crisis due to low compensation and challenging working conditions, both of which have been exacerbated since the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic. It has never been harder to recruit and retain staff, and the needs in the classroom for more individualized instruction are greater than ever. CABC's Head Start program is no exception.

The Chamber: Who are Jennifer Neely's personal and professional role models and what makes them so special?

Jennifer: I am fortunate to be surrounded by people I respect and admire. I am inspired by their grit, tenacity, and reliance. Their empathy, compassion, grace, and kindness. Their humor, wit, and playfulness. Their thoughtfulness, introspection, and willingness to change. Their intelligence, creativity, and work ethic. I am grateful for those who care about the greater good and their neighbor. Who keep their hearts open to bear witness to the pain and suffering of others and, yet, don't lose hope.

Speaker to address future challenges in workforce development



Bradley Burger will address issues of population decline as keynote speaker at the next Chamber Breakfast Club.

As President & CEO of Goodwill of the Southern Alleghenies, Bradley Burger has had an opportunity to confront more than a few of the challenges that not only face the communities in the region in the present but in the future as well. Burger will share his insight on both at the next Blair County Chamber "Breakfast Club" on January 11th beginning at 7:45 a.m. at The Casino at Lakemont Park.

His presentation, entitled "Building a Prosperity Ecosystem," will focus on some harsh realities.

"The population of the Southern Alleghenies region is forecasted to decline by over 30% by 2060," Burger disclosed. "Less population means less potential workers. There is a direct correlation between the amount of employed persons and the regional real Gross Domestic Product.

"Increases in worker pro-

ductivity can produce a positive force against the downward trend of rGDP. Regional employers will need financial and technical support to adopt emergent technologies and practices to increase productivity with a shrinking workforce. That's a little bit of what we'll talk about on the 11th."

Burger holds a Master's Degree in Adult Education from Penn State. He received his undergraduate degree in biology education from California University of Pennsylvania. He also has numerous certifications in Career Deevaluation.

The cost to attend the Breakfast Club is \$20 for Chamber members and \$30 for non-members. To register to attend, call the Chamber at (814) 943-8151 or register online at www.blairchamber.com. Corporate sponsor of the January Breakfast Club is PS Solutions.



HumpDay@5:00
Jan. 24 • 5-7 p.m.



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