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## Flexible Drenning continues strong tradition

For someone with a Master's Degree in Education, Marianne Drenning never expected to build such an impressive reputation as a business leader. As President of East Side Concrete Supply Company since the 1980's, Marianne has moved that company forward in ways that are consistent with a true "family business." From the education side, the Saint Francis University graduate has the distinction of devising and teaching the first kindergarten program at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic School in Altoona.

**The Chamber: How would you describe East Side Concrete Supply Company to someone completely unfamiliar with it?**

**Marianne:** East Side Concrete is a family owned business that has been in business in Altoona for 59 years. East Side sells ready-mix concrete, a complete line of building materials that pertain to concrete & masonry, landscape materials, coal and custom made

concrete countertops. We are a small business that specializes in customer service. We sell to homeowners as well as contractors. We strive to help our customers with whatever their project.

**The Chamber: What would people in Blair County be surprised to know about East Side Concrete?**

**Marianne:** Locals may not know that we offer a wide variety of landscape materials as well as hardscape products. We also offer delivery. Our wide variety of landscape materials include: mulches, sands, topsoil and decorative stone.

**The Chamber: Your title is President and you've been employed at East Side since 1983. According to your job description, there's an incredible number of tasks to which you are responsible. Is there anything you don't do?**

**Marianne:** As most people know, those who operate small businesses wear many hats. My hats included: learning to operate

### Chamber Q&A

the backhoe and loading customers with sand or stone and learning to load concrete trucks. My day was divided between work clothes and being outside and dress attire for office work. Once I proved myself, I gave up working outside. In the beginning I handled all the trucks, employees, materials, decision making and problem solving. Now in my semi-retirement status I do book-keeping, customer service, ordering and pricing materials, etc.

**The Chamber: What are the advantages of operating a family business? What are the challenges?**

**Marianne:** Our business has always been family operated. I am second generation. My nephew, Josh Boslet, joined me around 2003. He is third generation and a Godsend. In the beginning, we had some difference of opinions on



Marianne Drenning has been the heart-and-soul of East Side Concrete Supply Company since her father's passing in 1987.

issues but managed to work through things. Throughout the years he has become a strong, smart and well liked businessman. We make all the business decisions together yet I'm taking more of a backseat to him. I value him as a person and a businessman. He is easy going and easy to work beside. His wife Melissa also works in the office and does

a great job. Josh and I own the business together so I feel so fortunate that we have a great family dynamic and that he will continue the business when I retire.

**The Chamber: Who are Marianne Drenning's business and personal role models? What makes them special?**

**Marianne:** My role models

are my parents. They instilled in me a work ethic that was unsurpassed. I've always been thankful and proud for their invaluable lessons.

**The Chamber: What's your timeline for stepping away from the business?**

**Marianne:** I still intend to work a couple of years. I just started working half days which I love.

## Leadership Blair County holds session involving youth, adults



LBC Youth and Adult session group consists of: Eric Weyant, Altoona Area High School, Aidan Schurr, Bishop Guilfoyle Catholic High School, Dustin Zazworsky, Sheetz, Inc. and Christie Yingling, SERVPRO of Ebsenburg.

It is one of the most highly anticipated sessions for both the Leadership Blair County Adult Class and LBC Youth as well.

"Getting the classes together for interaction and discussion over the course of an entire day has become a tradition that has really yielded some great information," reported Maureen Dodson, facilitator of the Adult program. "Both groups benefit. It also creates enthusiasm that the groups are not that far apart when it comes to the vision for our county."

This year's LBC Combined Session took place on March 7th at Greater Altoona Career & Technology Center. It included discussions and presentations on topics like social pressures, time poverty, personal economics and human trafficking. There were team-building activities and more than a few opportunities to

share hopes and fears.

"It was really informative," acknowledged Michael Waibel Maharaj, a sophomore at Hollidaysburg Area High School. "It gave our youth class an opportunity to learn from the adults what it takes to build a community. And it gave the adults some insight on some of the challenges that we face, often on a day-to-day basis."

Nora Bechtel, a student at Central High School, agreed.

"The adult world is quite a bit different from what we see in the youth program," she pointed out. "It's reassuring to know that there are so many adults willing to accept the responsibilities associated with leadership. Their examples were ones that inspire us to step-up."

Brad Kanuch, a member of the Adult class from Altoona Housing Authority, is happy to provide that inspiration.

"The value that you gain from a session like this one is hard to minimize. You get perspectives from both ends," he noted. "I spend a lot of time with young people as a track coach at a local school so I get an up-close look at some of the pressures that young people face. This session validates that and makes it easier to explore solutions that will ultimately resonate through the community."

Tami Chadick, who facilitates LBC Youth, has witnessed that for several years.

"Maureen and I have worked together on this session for more than two decades," Chadick disclosed. "We enjoy the considerable upside that literally happens every year."

(For more information on either Leadership Adult or Leadership Youth, contact Brittany Mayer at 814-943-8151 or visit the Chamber website at [www.blairchamber.com](http://www.blairchamber.com).)

## YEA! mentors the "secret sauce" in preparing anxious entrepreneurs



Mentors for the 2024 YEA! program are, left to right (seated): Lindsay Riley, Phil Sukenik, Jayme Rhodes, Jared Keller and Josh Barnhart. (Standing): Angie Yasulitis, Superman Berrow, Sara Fiore Gunnett, Katie Whysong, Connor McConnell and Matt Fox. Missing are: Darin Tornatore and Rob Wentz.

On March 26th, the sixteen Blair County students that comprise this year's Young Entrepreneurs Academy (YEA!) Class will have an opportunity to strut-their-stuff in front of a panel of potential investors. Thanks to the efforts of some committed business leaders, that experience is likely to go just fine.

The Investor Panel event, held at the Devorris Downtown Center in Altoona, is the culmination of a heavy dose of preparation in which instructors, guest speakers, a handful of field trip hosts and some resolute mentors help the students prepare to take a giant step toward establishing an actual business. It is this last group that is often the secret sauce.

"The mentors play a huge role," acknowledges YEA! Program Manager Tim Gildea. "They provide insight, offer feedback and just generally steady the emotions of the students as they undertake the task of putting together the presen-

tations that the investors will see. Without the mentors, this whole process becomes far more difficult."

One current mentor likely understands the importance of that role a little more emphatically than some others. Connor McConnell was a member of the first YEA! class in 2018. His mentor helped to fine-tune his business, a business that resulted in his being chosen as the Outstanding YEA! Student. "Having gone through the program, I felt that it taught me the necessary steps to start a business," McConnell pointed out. "Understanding the value of mentors inspired me to volunteer to be one. I'm really enjoying it and it's actually helping me as I look to grow my own business."

Darin Tornatore of Keystone Environmental and Safety Services has the distinction of being the only YEA! mentor to serve in that capacity all seven years of the Chamber program. For him, there's an additional motivation.

"I am a huge proponent of trying to keep our kids local rather than starting their careers outside our hometown," Tornatore explained. "If I can at least make a connection with my student who may look back on that small engagement and decide that Blair County is the right place for them, then I feel that I've done something to be part of the solution."

For Sara Fiore-Gunnett of Leonard S. Fiore, Inc., the motivation to mentor is more attached to her additional volunteer responsibility as chair of the Chamber's WE-LEaD Committee.

"A common issue I hear from businesswomen at our WE-LEaD functions is the lack of mentoring available in our county," she noted. "I believe we need to establish a support system for businesswomen as soon as possible. The YEA! program helps make this happen."

(For more on YEA!, contact the Chamber.)

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