Professional help

Wilkes-Barre Connect a catalyst for growth

River Street Jazz Cafe offers eclectic mix of music

Q&A: SCHOTT plant manager talks cellphones – and Duryea

Page 3

Page 6

Page 14
LUZERNE COUNTY BUSINESS NEWS

Luzerne resident expands reach downtown

By Jennifer Learn-Andes
jandes@timesleader.com

LUZERNE — Earlier this fall, Luzerne County Council members heaped praise on Danielle McGrogan when she appeared at the podium seeking a zoning change to expand her Luzerne borough business, Nucleus Raw Foods.

McGrogan, 36, rents space on Main Street for a cafe she opened in February 2014. She persuaded council to place two nearby properties she purchased into a general business district zone to allow food processing operations to increase wholesaling of her products.

One of those properties, at 120 Tener St., was zoned residential but previously had housed a stained-glass business and diner. The other building, at 121 Tener, was a borough fire station from 1890 until around 1972 and zoned to allow retail business but not food processing.

Council Chairwoman Linda McClosky Houck said she grew up in the borough and is very familiar with the area and both properties.

“It’s really nice to see it being put to good use,” McClosky Houck said of the structures.

Councilman Harry Haas thanked McGrogan for investing in the community, borough and county.

Also weighing in at the September meeting was Councilman Stephen A. Urban, who said he was “very happy” with the proposal and pleased small businesses are increasing.

“I think it’s good for the economy. It’s good for the people who use the business,” Urban said.

McGrogan’s burgers, pizzas, tacos and other culinary creations are vegan.

By Jennifer Learn-Andes
jandes@timesleader.com

NOTE TO READERS
Welcome to the first edition of Luzerne County Business News, your source for business information in the county. LCBN will be published quarterly. To submit news tips or information, email tfarkas@timesleader.com. For advertising rates, email kmiscavage@timesleader.com.

ON THE COVER
Holly Pilcavage gives tips at a small-business lecture called ‘Coffee & Confidence’ in the University of Scranton’s Brennan Hall on Tuesday. Pilcavage is the manager of Wilkes-Barre Connect, which was created early last year. (Sean McKeag | Times Leader)

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We enjoy being your neighbor. We are working hard to be your bank of choice.
By Bill O’Boyle
bobyle@timesleader.com

WILKES-BARRE — If you’re looking to create and retain jobs for your business and you need support services to reach those goals, Wilkes-Barre Connect is ready to help.

The organization was created in early 2016 by the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Commerce to encourage and foster new entrepreneurship and small-business growth in the area.

Holly Pilcavage, Wilkes-Barre Connect’s manager, said at its core, the organization acts as a catalyst for business development.

“This initiative is free to businesses within the area,” Pilcavage said.

“It works to create and retain jobs while providing support services in conjunction with its partners to help establish and grow businesses within the area.”

Pilcavage said Wilkes-Barre Connect offers support services from mentoring and networking to technical assistance and access to capital and facilities.

Larry Newman, executive director of the Diamond City Partnership, Wilkes-Barre’s downtown management organization, said Wilkes-Barre Connect is intended to do “two big things” — coordinate the work of multiple service providers who might assist local entrepreneurs as those entrepreneurs start and grow their businesses; and develop new programs that help increase the number of entrepreneurs in the Greater Wilkes-Barre community.

Pilcavage said the collaboration among businesses, local academic institutions and organizations such as Wilkes-Barre Connect is crucial to the success and forward movement of the overall program. She said Wilkes-Barre Connect guides and supports individuals from the outset to establishing a strategy to making referrals while performing touch points in between.

“Wilkes-Barre Connect acts as a ‘net’ — if you will — ensuring that no one slips through the cracks and gets the support they need,” Pilcavage said.

Led by the Greater

Holly Pilcavage, manager of Wilkes-Barre Connect, says the organization’s services are free to businesses in the Wilkes-Barre area.

LUZERNE COUNTY SNAPSHOT

The latest figures available from the U.S. Census Bureau:

### POPULATION
- 316,383 (estimate; July 1, 2016)

### HOUSING
- 18,7871 (estimate; July 1, 2016)
- Building permits: 375 (2016)

### EDUCATION
- High school graduate or higher: 88.9% (25 and older, 2011-2015)
- Bachelor’s degree or higher: 21.4% (25 and older, 2011-2015)

### ECONOMY
- In civilian labor force, population 16 and older: 60.4% (2011-2015)
- In civilian labor force, female population 16 and older: 56.3% (2011-2015)

### BUSINESSES
- Employees: 131,537 (2015)
- Total annual payroll: $5.1 billion (2015)
His calling: Fixing phones (and other things)

Wilkes-Barre shop owner expands his business

By Derek Levarse
dlevarse@timesleader.com

WILKES-BARRE — Chris Piccolotti has seen plenty of smashed cellphones, cracked screens and busted game consoles. And he’s heard the stories behind most of them.

“I’m usually pretty good at determining how it happened,” said the owner of Center City Repairs in Wilkes-Barre.

But one job in particular stood out to him when a customer brought in an Xbox One system.

“The guy comes in, and it’s just in pieces,” Piccolotti said. “I said, ‘What happened?’ And he said his girlfriend threw it out a second-story window.”

Yes, he was able to fix it.

After all, repairing Xboxes was how this whole thing started for Piccolotti, a 30-year-old Meyers High School alum who now lives in Forty Fort.

He had started fixing XBOXes in 2011 while in Colorado, where he was helping his grandfather recover from a stroke.

When Piccolotti moved back to the area, he continued doing it at The Video Game Store on South Main Street in Wilkes-Barre.

As people in town got to know him for his work in fixing electronics, the same question kept popping up.

“People would ask if I worked on phones,” Piccolotti said. “It would be three times a week I’d hear it. So I knew there was a market for it.”

It made sense to expand his business.

With smartphones becoming ubiquitous in people’s lives, the demand to quickly fix a screen, battery or a charging port has grown in Piccolotti’s experience.

So two years ago, he opened his own shop two doors down on South Main, where he repairs, buys and sells electronics with the help of a small staff.

“People are finding out about us,” Piccolotti said. “It’s a cool, friendly atmosphere.”

The customer base he originally cultivated is still there, and word of mouth has helped draw new faces to the store.

Jim Murphy of Wilkes-Barre said a friend told him to check out the place, which he did earlier this month.

“Yeah, they had a lot of different stuff for sale in there,” Murphy said before pulling out his Samsung Galaxy phone. “I actually dropped this just the other day. Fortunately, it didn’t need any work done, but I’d probably come back here if I had a problem.”

Shops that repair cellphones are becoming more common. Piccolotti said he hopes his store is set apart by his willingness to work on many models, not just iPhones and Samsung models.

The key in establishing his own business?

“Optimism, man,” Piccolotti said. “For me, I don’t let things intimidate me. That’s the only thing that can set you back. If I can open it up and put it back together, I’m confident I can fix it.”

That mindset was important when Piccolotti faced a different type of hurdle recently.

A break-in occurred in the early morning of Sept. 5, as someone smashed through the front window of his shop with a crowbar and stole a dozen cellphones that were for sale.

The estimated cost of the lost merchandise and replacing the window was $3,000. It wasn’t clear whether he had insurance, but Piccolotti started a GoFundMe page (gofundme.com/our-security-fund) to help recoup losses with the intent of adding a security gate.

But for Piccolotti, it’s about more than protecting his own store — he doesn’t want the perception of the area to be damaged in the minds of customers and other merchants.

“For a while, there was a stigma downtown,” Piccolotti said. “I’ve been down here for a huge transformation, and I’m really glad to be a part of it. Me being here is a part of that (improving) image. I’m a percentage to be factored into that, and that makes me happy.”
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Businesses Must Be In Operation 1+ Year, Businesses Must Do $100,000 Annual Gross Revenue
PLAINS TWP. — Blues, jazz, progressive rock, reggae, Americana and funk.

The distinctive elements of these musical genres can be heard at the River Street Jazz Cafe throughout the year, but they barely scratch the surface of the variety of sounds the venue offers.

The 300-person-capacity club in Plains Township was opened by local businessman Rob Friedman in 1993 and has grown to offer an eclectic mix of acts — about 120 shows a year — but the Jazz's melting-pot booking style wasn't the plan from the beginning.

Initially, the Jazz Cafe was intended to be exactly what its name suggests: a jazz club.

“That was the original concept,” Friedman said. “I love blues and jazz, and I used to drive to Philly and New York to visit Dan Lynch’s and Manny’s Car Wash and the Blue Note.”

Friedman found the venue’s space — a former furniture workshop and retail store — and was drawn to the wood flooring and prime location off Route 309.

“It had the kind of vibe I was looking for,” he said.

So Friedman renovated the place and tested the local market to see if musical audiences would respond to regular jazz performances, as they did in larger cities.

“Very quickly, other than opening night, I realized the formula wouldn’t work. For about the first six or eight months, we’d have a jazz show, and we’d bring in about 60 people who’d have one glass of wine and switch to water.”

Plants were put in the booths and tables, and Friedman opened the place to blues and rock bands.

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Smaller crowds and low patronage led Friedman to try something different. He reduced the number of jazz shows presented and focused on blues, bringing in acts such as Roomful of Blues and Johnny Copeland.

“The same thing happened,” Friedman said. “I said, ‘I’ve got to mix it up.’”

Since realizing the Jazz Cafe wasn’t meant to be a genre club, the owner has developed it into a venue that welcomes artists from all musical backgrounds.

The club has become a platform for the growth of local artists — growing bluegrass institution Cabinet started there, and the venue has always had an open slot for Northeastern Pennsylvania acts like Leroy Justice, MiZ, Subnotics and Aaron Fink.

“So many amazing musicians started here,” Friedman said.

The Jazz Cafe also has been a mainstay for local greats like bluesman Clarence Spady and the late reggae artist George Wesley.

NEPA native and music promoter Tom Moran has booked talent at the Jazz Cafe since 2002. He has supported the development of homegrown musicians while attracting acts as celebrated as Leftover Salmon, Leon Russell, Benevento/ Russo, Railroad Earth and Lotus.

“The River Street Jazz Cafe is just a great music room,” Moran said. “I love putting shows on in that room. It’s big enough to bring in national acts and small enough to make it special.”

Moran said one of his favorite aspects of promoting music at the Jazz Cafe is seeing young fans meet their heroes, such as Russell, Col. Bruce Hampton, John Fishman of Phish, and Al Schnier of moe.

Over the years, the venue also has catered to community events and fundraisers like the Women Who Rock show, which was held in 2012 to benefit the Domestic Violence Service Center.

“If I can support good causes and the Jazz Cafe can be helpful, I’m happy to do it,” Friedman said.

Manager and head bartender Heather Smith said her staff’s goal is to show that same welcome to everyone who patronizes the club.

“For the live shows … I feel our customers want great service, great drinks and a great atmosphere,” Smith said. “I want them to come in and see a live show with phenomenal sound in an intimate setting. Every night is different; that’s what I love about the place.”

Smith said the bar’s regular drink specials and menu are available on all show nights, but a dinner-feature menu and $6 martini are available on Thursday and Saturday. Recently the cafe has brought in reputable tribute acts to artists such as Prince, David Bowie and Johnny Cash — a decision Friedman calls “an experiment” to see which shows are well accepted.

“This is a club people come to specifically to hear music,” Friedman said. “The experience here is totally different.”
By Patrick Kernan
pkernan@timesleader.com

WILKES-BARRE — Walking into Musical Energi for the first time can be a bit intimidating, according to owner Jay Notartomaso.

But you don’t need to take his word for it.

Visiting the record store, at 24 S. Main St. in Wilkes-Barre, might seem overwhelming at first, considering what feels like miles of music stacked on shelves. But Notartomaso said he and his employees do their best to make the store as user-friendly as possible.

“We’re pretty good at organizing,” he said.

The 56-year-old Clarks Summit native, who now lives in West Wyoming, said record collecting has always been one of his passions. He noted that he can be seen playing with a record player in his baby pictures.

Notartomaso opened Musical Energi in 1986 as a kiosk in the Wyoming Valley Mall before moving to a second location, at 57 N. Main St. in Wilkes-Barre. That site is now the 570 Tattooing Co.

“But we outgrew both of those locations,” Notartomaso said. “And it’s great. I love being in downtown Wilkes-Barre.”

It’s been four years since he moved into the larger space, and it’s easy to see why a larger location was necessary, given the thousands of new and used records, CDs, DVDs and record players that fill the space.

But Notartomaso said it wasn’t always like this. With the advent of CDs and digital music platforms, many record stores throughout the nation shut their doors. Notartomaso said there was a period where he considered dropping vinyl from his store and shifting only to CDs.

As years went by, though, vinyl became a niche product, and buyers kept coming, especially when the store began selling to collectors worldwide via the internet.

Notartomaso said customers can find over 70,000 items on his website, musicalenergi.com. That’s just a “drop in the bucket” compared to what’s inside the store, as Notartomaso doesn’t bother to add some of the most frequently purchased records to the website. Instead, online customers can expect to find “oddballs” and more obscure items.

“There are always people who want a physical product and not just a dot on a hard drive,” Notartomaso said.

He said he owes some of his success to the proximity to Wilkes University and King’s College. He said that because college kids who weren’t alive during the height of vinyl sales are enjoying records, it shows there’s more to vinyl than longing for the past.

“For kids to get into vinyl, it’s not just nostalgia,” he said. “They enjoy the activity of it. They like taking the record out of the sleeve, sitting in front of the record, reading the liner notes, and having to flip the record over when it’s done. Records are less passive.”

Notartomaso said anyone who is interested in getting into record collecting should just jump in.

“Enjoy the activity of it,” he said. “People who want to get into it should just buy the music they like and not be afraid to look into other genres, and don’t worry about trying to buy things just for collecting’s sake.”

With genres from hip-hop to punk and jazz to funk, Notartomaso made it clear Musical Energi isn’t the kind of store to just pick up “Dark Side of the Moon” or “Thriller.”

In addition to selling records, the store offers record players and gives free advice on the best player for you. Notartomaso also offers record-player repair.

Musical Energi is open seven days a week, and if Notartomaso has his way, it’ll be like that for some time to come.

“I jumped into this business totally blind,” he said. “I wanted it, and nothing was gonna stop me.”

Reach Patrick Kernan at 570-991-6386 or on Twitter @PatKernan
Business opportunities abound in area

Why is Northeastern Pennsylvania in the midst of an economic renaissance? It’s because we are a solid business investment.

Our region offers advantages in infrastructure, supply chain, accessibility, workforce and academic capital. In turn, we’ve been leveraging these assets into solid business results. We’ve reached an inflection point and are building momentum. We have attracted national and international companies to open up shop in the area. We have retained legacy businesses to stay — and, more importantly, we have built a pathway to growth. The result is that we’re creating new jobs and opportunities that are strengthening our communities.

Online retailer Chewy.com recently opened its largest distribution center in Hanover, bringing 600 jobs. Two other large brand retailers soon will join them, bringing over 1,000 more jobs, but I’m not at liberty to identify the retailers yet.

International companies such as Itoh Denki have chosen the Wyoming Valley for its US headquarters and operations. Berkshire Hathaway Guard Insurance, headquartered in downtown Wilkes-Barre, has added hundreds of jobs in our center city, while Pepperjam, headquartered on South Main Street, has grown to be the world’s largest affiliate marketing network. In doing so, the company has added 100 tech services jobs.

MCR Productions has added a state-of-the-art business center in Forty Fort, and the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Commerce has its THINK Center used by entrepreneurs, students and businesses.

Many of our legacy businesses — such as McCarthy Tire, Wico van Genderen, Guest Columnist

Many of our legacy businesses — such as McCarthy Tire, Horton Lawson, Highmark, Colours, Cornell-Cookson and Metz Culinary Management — have invested in the area, expanding their local workforces.

These businesses and others aren’t just creating more jobs here — they’re providing the Valley with a wider diversity of employers and employment opportunities. This diversity of jobs, in different sectors and a wide variety of businesses, is resulting in a stronger, more sustainable business climate — which will give our community greater stability as we navigate the global economy’s ups and downs.

Just as powerful is the strength and expansion of our local academic capital — and that’s great news because the alignment of business and academics makes for a great local economic ecosystem.

Wilkes, King’s, Misericordia, Penn State Wilkes-Barre and Luzerne County Community College have expanded their programs and facilities, resulting in more students and deeper specializations.

Wilkes and King’s have seen the largest increases in incoming undergrad and grad students, resulting in new downtown investments and a regional “college town” vibe. That collegiate energy now extends from downtown into the Back Mountain and beyond.

Strong academic capital provides a great ecosystem for STEM-based innovation, research, entrepreneurial creativity and business activity — not just in higher ed, but in crucial specialty trades as well. With high demand for graduates of LCCC’s welding, automotive and additive manufacturing programs, there is a waiting list to enroll in the college’s Technology Center.

Add academic capital, business innovation and community leadership, and you have a strong synergy in which the sum of the parts is greater than the whole. In other words, when individual parts are connected and unified, they’re worth more than when everything sits in silos.

By connecting the academic capital of our colleges and universities to our growing and diverse businesses and to the community’s social sector, you create a fertile petri dish producing sustainable economic momentum.

This TEAM (Together Everyone Achieves More) concept has resulted in the development of an economic framework we call Wilkes-Barre Connect: our new collaborative business model to assist new or existing businesses in our region, identify their needs, and connect them to the right providers or programs — all to ensure sustainable economic growth in our region.

Because success breeds success, we’ve created five separate initiatives as part of Wilkes-Barre Connect: Pitch, Spotlight, 101, Intern and Honor.

• Pitch is our version of “Shark Tank,” linking entrepreneurs with the investment community. Our first Pitch event will be Wednesday at the THINK Center downtown.

• Spotlight is our version of a TED Talk; we recently hosted two events at our THINK Center — a Women’s “Entrepreneurs” Spotlight and a Tech Talk, App-creator Spotlight.

• The 101 initiative provides businesses and entrepreneurs with basic videos and podcasts, in which experts and mentors coach young professionals and entrepreneurs on how to turn their ideas into operational businesses.

• The Intern program links our college students to the business community, providing a stronger bridge between those groups so that we can keep our best and brightest students in the area.

• Finally, the Honor initiative channels our large local population of veterans, building on their superb training.

See OPPORTUNITIES | 21

Help

From page 3A

Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Commerce, Wilkes-Barre Connect also involves participants the Allan P. Kirby Center for Free Enterprise and Entrepreneurship at Wilkes University; Ben Franklin Technology Partners; Diamond City Partnership; Institute for Public Policy and Economic Development; Wilkes University Family Business Alliance; and the Wilkes University Small Business Development Center.

Newman said there are a variety of programs and five areas of focus — entrepreneurs, veterans, intern, finance and education — under the Wilkes-Barre Connect umbrella, which are intended to advance those areas.

Pilcavage said the Wilkes-Barre Connect team aligns people and their business with appropriate providers, services and locations to meet the goals and objectives defined within the business strategy.

Joseph A. Boylan, an economic development consultant at the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber, said Wilkes-Barre Connect was built to not only help entrepreneurs, start-ups and small businesses gain access to needed resources in Northeastern Pennsylvania, but as a tool to retain, expand and attract large companies to the region.

“A quality and available workforce continues to be the Number 1 topic that national and international site selectors seek when delivering the right locations for their clients,” Boylan said.

“By partnering with our K-12, higher-education institutions and business-service providers, WB Connect provides a more streamlined and effective system to meet all needs.”

As examples, Boylan cited business plan assistance, the understanding of markets, product development, research and development, and “the right mix of internship and mentorship programs.”

Boylan said Wilkes-Barre Connect is “now our answer to meet the workforce needs of companies and remain competitive on the East Coast, in addition to showing our commitment locally to supporting the growth and development of businesses.”

Reach Bill O’Boyle at 570-991-6118 or on Twitter @TLBil0Boyle.
**Luzerne County’s top 50 employers**

So where are the jobs in Luzerne County? They are in a variety of industries, with the government, education and health-care sectors leading the way. These are the county’s top 50 employers, as reported by the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry, Center for Workforce Information and Analysis, for the fourth quarter of 2016.

**DISTRIBUTION CENTERS**
- Amazon.com DEDC LLC, Pittstown Township, Hazle Township
- Keystone Automotive Industries Inc., Exeter
- Lord & Taylor LLC, Wilkes-Barre Township
- United Parcel Service, Pittston

**EDUCATION**
- Crestwood School District, Mountain Top
- Hazleton Area School District, Hazle Township (*District serves parts of Luzerne, Carbon and Schuylkill counties*)
- King’s College, Wilkes-Barre
- Misericordia University, Dallas Township
- Pittston Area School District, Yatesville
- Wilkes-Barre Area School District, Wilkes-Barre
- Wilkes University, Wilkes-Barre
- Wyoming Valley West School District, Plymouth

**FOOD**
- Northeast Concessions LP (Mohegan Sun Pocono food and beverage), Plains Township

**GOVERNMENT**
- Luzerne County Government
- Pennsylvania Government
- U.S. Government

**HEALTH CARE**
- Bayada Home Health Care Inc. (multiple locations)
- Benco Dental Supply Co., Pittstown Township
- Caregivers America LLC, Dallas
- Caremark LLC (multiple locations)
- C3i Healthcare Connections (multiple locations)
- Geisinger Clinics (multiple locations)
- Geisinger Wyoming Valley Medical Center, Plains Township
- Geisinger System Services
- Lehigh Valley Hospital Hazleton, Hazleton
- Pride Mobility Products Corp., Exeter, Duryea
- Wilkes-Barre Behavioral Hospital, Kingston
- Wilkes-Barre Hospital Company LLC, Wilkes-Barre

**INSURANCE**
- Highmark Inc., Wilkes-Barre
- Westguard (part of Berkshire Hathaway Guard Insurance), Wilkes-Barre

**MISCELLANEOUS**
- Bemis Company Inc., Hazle Township
- Downs Racing LP (Mohegan Sun Pocono), Plains Township
- Gruma Corp.
- Navient Solutions Inc., Hanover Township
- Prime Inc., Pittston Township
- RCN Telecom Services
- Susquehanna Nuclear LLC, Berwick

**NONPROFITS**
- Allied Services (multiple locations)
- Step by Step Inc., Wilkes-Barre

**RETAIL**
- Autozoners LLC (multiple locations)
- Home Depot USA Inc., Jenkins Township
- Lowe’s Home Centers LLC, Pittston Township
- NBC Pittston Merchants (TJ Maxx), Pittston Township
- MWImports Inc. (MotorWorld), Hanover Township
- THLK Co. Inc. — Turkey Hill Minit Markets (multiple locations)
- Wal-Mart Associates Inc., Pittston Township, Wilkes-Barre Township, Hazle Township

**GROCERS**
- Garrity’s Supermarkets, Wyoming, West Pittston, Luzerne
- Weis Markets Inc., Dallas Township, Duryea

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMPONENT</th>
<th>CITY/TOWNSHIP</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DISTRIBUTION CENTERS</td>
<td>Pittstown Township, Hazle Township</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDUCATION</td>
<td>Mountain Top</td>
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<tr>
<td>FOOD</td>
<td>Plains Township</td>
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<td>Wilkes-Barre</td>
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<td>Wyoming, Hazle Township</td>
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| DISTRIBUTION CENTERS | Amazon.com, Keystone Automotive Industries, Lord & Taylor, United Parcel Service |
| EDUCATION | Crestwood School District, Hazleton Area School District, King’s College, Misericordia University, Pittston Area School District, Wilkes-Barre Area School District, Wilkes University, Wyoming Valley West School District |
| FOOD | Northeast Concessions LP |
| GOVERNMENT | Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, U.S. Government |
| HEALTH CARE | Bayada Home Health Care, Benco Dental Supply Co., Caregivers America LLC, Caremark LLC, C3i Healthcare Connections, Geisinger Clinics, Geisinger Wyoming Valley Medical Center, Geisinger System Services, Lehigh Valley Hospital Hazleton, Pride Mobility Products Corp., Wilkes-Barre Behavioral Hospital, Wilkes-Barre Hospital Company LLC |
| INSURANCE | Highmark Inc., Westguard |
| NONPROFITS | Allied Services, Step by Step Inc. |
| RETAIL | Autozoners LLC, Home Depot USA, Lowe’s Home Centers LLC, NBC Pittston Merchants (TJ Maxx), MWImports Inc. (MotorWorld), THLK Co. Inc. — Turkey Hill Minit Markets |
| GROCERS | Garrity’s Supermarkets, Weis Markets Inc. |

**Image Description:**
- Photograph of Benco Dental building
- Photograph of Misericordia University
- Photograph of Walmart building

**Note:** The list includes a variety of employers across different industries, indicating a diverse job market in Luzerne County.
Dallas’ ‘Dog Whisperer’ wants to keep animals out of shelters

By Kulsoom Khan
kkhan@timesleader.com

DALLAS — Described as the “Dog Whisperer,” Beth Mattei-Miller has over 10 years of experience working with animals. She currently owns and operates First Class Canine, a company that provides dog training services and behavioral counseling. Mattei-Miller works mainly out of her home in Dallas, but she also travels to clients’ homes to give hourlong training sessions with dogs.

Mattei-Miller’s interest in dogs began when she worked at the SPCA of Luzerne County as the humane educator volunteer coordinator from 2002 to 2006. One of her duties was to compile packets of information on dog training techniques for those interested in adopting a dog from the shelter.

She began doing extensive research on dog training, which led to her taking online courses, completing an apprenticeship, and attending workshops.

“It ended up becoming like a giant rabbit hole that I fell down,” Mattei-Miller said.

She said the techniques and information she learned motivated her to help dog owners with training in the hopes of preventing more dogs from being placed in shelters.

In 2009, Mattei-Miller decided to start her business. Besides providing in-home sessions for her clients, she holds group classes with six to 10 dogs in the spring and fall.

“It’s the most flexible job that I can imagine,” she said.

Mattei-Miller has clients who have multiple dogs, but regardless of the number, she charges by the hour for her sessions ($70 to $100 an hour).

“People have to be patient as far as the time goes, because what I can get through with a single dog in an hour is different than what I can get through with five dogs.”

She said she prefers that clients stay in their home during the sessions so they can learn and participate in the dog training with her.

“The largest amount of my clients — I’m there to help them train their dog, not training their dog for them,” she said.

Mattei-Miller also is certified in the behavioral aspects of dog training, and she works with some dogs that have issues with fear or over-aggression. She observes the behavior patterns in these types of dogs and then decides how to approach them and gain their trust.

“It’s all about figuring out and getting a good history, and I do ask a lot of questions, and I think sometimes people get upset,” she said. “There’s no magic involved. I need to find out what’s going on in the environment — what the dog is getting from it.”

Mattei-Miller’s own dog, a pitbull, was rescued from the shelter it was staying at for eight months. Initially, Mattei-Miller noticed symptoms of anxiety and fear in the dog, saying that even though it was people-friendly, it did not like hugs or two-handed touches.

“She was very, very nervous,” Mattei-Miller said, recalling the first time she brought the dog home.

Dianne Hanlon, one of First Class Canine’s clients, said she is very satisfied with the progress her two dogs have made in 18 months with Miller’s help. One of Hanlon’s dogs needed a little more instruction than the other, because he’s bigger in size and was prone to jumping on children before Mattei-Miller “came into his life,” she said jokingly.

“It’s amazing,” Hanlon said about the transformation. “He’s just a wonderful dog, and anybody who comes into the house will say he’s wonderful with children.”

For the future, Mattei-Miller is interested in training service dogs — specifically those that assist individuals with disabilities. Even though it’s a slightly different field than what she’s used to, Mattei-Miller said she hasn’t ruled out the possibility.

ON THE WEB
To watch video of Beth Mattei-Miller training dogs, go to this story at timesleader.com.
EXETER — Rob Fumanti’s mission is to give students in Northeastern Pennsylvania an academic assist.

The 43-year-old Exeter resident started Academy Tutoring in November 2007 with the idea that more students from the region should attend top-tier universities across the country.

Fumanti is the CEO of Academy Tutoring, which employs dozens of tutors and specializes in SAT/ACT prep, college admission help and individualized tutoring services for students from kindergarten through high school.

After graduating from Wyoming Area High School in 1992, Fumanti went to the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., fulfilling a wish he had to both travel the world and serve his country as an aerospace engineer.

“I really wanted to do some good and serve (Luzerne) county,” Fumanti said. Upon leaving the Navy, he worked in a few different jobs in corporate America. After those stints, Fumanti realized corporate life wasn’t for him and that he wanted to help children.

He went back to school to get his teaching certificate and ended up getting his MBA from the University of Chicago.

From there Fumanti started teaching chemistry at Julia R. Masterman School in Philadelphia.

However, he said it was his own experience in higher education that inspired the idea for Academy Tutoring.

“I noticed there was no one from NEPA at these (elite) schools,” he said. “NEPA was so under-represented.”

He wanted students from Northeastern Pennsylvania to be able to attend top colleges across the country.

“One of my missions in starting this was to give kids from NEPA a chance,” he said.

So Fumanti started Academy Tutoring with three tutors, offering SAT prep, and the Exeter resident started building the business.

In its 10 years, the company has grown to more than 60 tutors, offering help in all academic areas as well as giving college admissions counseling.

In its 10 years, the company has grown to more than 60 tutors, offering help in all academic areas as well as giving college admissions counseling.

“I recommend Academy Tutoring all the time,” he said. Fumanti said he was able to come home and use his skills to assist local students, noting there now are students from the region in all the Ivy League schools and the military academies.

He said Academy Tutoring also has helped local students earn over $3.2 million in scholarships.

Matt Kelly, a school counselor at Dallas High School, said he has been referring students to Academy Tutoring since he started in the position five years ago. “I have no doubts they have the best tutoring services in the area,” Kelly said, adding that Academy helps higher-achieving students gain a competitive edge in their SAT scores and college prep.

And that concept is something Fumanti says he’s proud of.

He said he wants to end the tutoring stigma.

“Our mission is to help kids reach their full potential,” Fumanti said.

Reach Brigid Edmunds at 570-991-6113 or on Twitter @brigidedmunds
DALLAS — If you were driving to Harveys Lake, you probably would see the bright yellow and red sign for Little Lenny’s Cheesecake Bakery at Yalick Plaza in Dallas.

The mere mention of cheesecake makes mouths water, but when bakery owner Lenny Chieffo talks about his gourmet recipes and his passion for using fresh eggs, real butter and other natural ingredients, the mix spurs the imagination to conjure the creamy, sweet flavors of a well-designed dessert.

“You are not going to get any fresher than us,” said Chieffo, 58. “I’ve gone that extra level for taste, that extra level for crunch, and that extra level for deliciousness.”

Little Lenny’s Cheesecake Bakery is one of seven storefronts at Yalick Plaza at Yalick Farms, located off of Route 415. Chieffo was scheduled to open the store by the end of October, making the business the first to open in the plaza.

The artisan bakery offers a coffee bar, including hot chocolate and organic tea, plus a variety of fresh cheesecakes, cakes, breads and doughnuts.

“Over 250 products,” Chieffo said, adding that some are gluten-free.

Chieffo said he plans to hire as many as eight employees, who will be cross-trained to bake, operate the register and provide customer service.

But those hurdles are minor compared to the road he traveled to reach this point.

Chieffo started baking nearly 12 years ago as a hobby. But when a stroke in 2011 prohibited him from operating his painting business LJC Painting Inc., his hobby transitioned into a viable business opportunity.

“I could not be up on ladders and roofs anymore,” he said, adding that the stroke made him lose the hearing in his right ear. “I had what they called Wallenberg Syndrome that affects the brain stem for both sides of the body.”

“But I’m good now,” he said. “I’m about 99 percent back.”

Chieffo said he found baking to be therapeutic as he worked through physical rehabilitation to recover from his stroke. He remembers sitting in a wheelchair at the family’s dining table making pumpkin rolls as part of his therapy and rehab.

Then he took his interest to the next level.

Chieffo and his wife, Kim, began taking cheesecake-tasting excursions throughout the region to experience what other bakeries were producing.

He would return to his kitchen and continue to experiment with various ingredients. His friends, neighbors and family became his taste-testers, helping him narrow down the flavors and textures.

Chieffo kept at it until he hit the perfect blend of taste and consistency.

He recalled it was in the early morning one day in late 2014 when he achieved the perfect combination of flavors for his cheesecake base recipe.

He woke up his wife at 4:30 a.m., just hours before she had to get up for work, with a fork in his hand, asking her to taste his newest recipe.

Kim remembered that wakeup call.

“My first thought was ‘Oh no,” she said. “But then I tasted it, and it was excellent. I am so proud of him.”

“My wife is my biggest supporter,” Lenny said, laughing at the memory.

After many focus groups, marketing discussions and finding an investor to back his business, Chieffo found a commercial space at Yalick Plaza, a 9,000-square-foot retail space.

“It is a dream come true,” he said.

Yalick Farms developer J. Napolaro said he also has a pizza restaurant interested in one of the spaces, along with one or two national food-related chains.

Napolaro declined to provide the business names, saying he is waiting for agreement confirmations.

Reach Eileen Godin at 570-991-6387 or on Twitter @TLNews

By Eileen Godin 
egodin@timesleader.com

Lenny Chieffo, owner of Little Lenny’s Cheesecake Bakery in Dallas, stands in front of his oven at his new gourmet and artisan bakery at Yalick Plaza in Dallas.

LITTLE LENNY’S CHEESECAKE BAKERY

• What: Over 250 products, including cheesecakes, cakes, breads, doughnuts and a coffee bar
• Where: 3816 Yalick Plaza, Dallas
• Info: 570-255-4255, 570-310-1761, www.facebook.com/LittleLennysCheescakeBakery

Nonpareil sprinkles, white and milk-chocolate wafers and cinnamon are among the ingredients Chieffo uses at his bakery.

Photos by Sean McKeag | Times Leader
IN BRIEF

Distasio named one of 'Nation’s Top Attorneys’

WILKES-BARRE — Daniel J. Distasio, of Distasio & Kowalski LLC, has been selected to the 2017 list of the "Nation's Top Attorneys" by the National Association of Distinguished Counsel.

Less than 1 percent of practicing attorneys in the United States are selected for the honor.

NADC is an organization dedicated to promoting the highest standards of legal excellence. Members are selected by a blue-ribbon panel of attorneys with podium status from independently neutral organizations, and are approved by a judicial review board as exhibiting virtue in the practice of law.

West Wyoming's Strellish named a senior VP

West Wyoming resident John Strellish has been named senior vice president, commercial officer, at FNCB Bank, whose offices include Wilkes-Barre and Hazleton.

Strellish will be responsible for managing a commercial loan portfolio and underwriting new credit requests, as well as sales and service of new and existing relationships.

Strellish brings more than 30 years of commercial relationship management expertise to FNCB Bank. Most recently, he served as a commercial banking relationship manager for BB&T Bank.

Strellish is a graduate of Pittston Area High School, King's College and the Pennsylvania Banker's School of Commercial Lending. He lives in West Wyoming with his wife, Karen. He has two children — Michael and Nicholas.

Distasio, Kowalski chosen as PA Super Lawyers

WILKES-BARRE — Attorneys Daniel J. Distasio and Michael J. Kowalski, partners in the law firm of Distasio & Kowalski LLC, have been named Pennsylvania Super Lawyers for the ninth straight year.

Attorney Peter J. Biscontini, an associate with Distasio & Kowalski, has been named a Pennsylvania Rising Star for 2017.

The selection process for rising stars is the same as for the Super Lawyers, except that to be eligible, a candidate must be either 40 years or younger or in practice for 10 years or less.

HIGHEST-ASSESSED COMMERCIAL PROPERTIES

The top 10 in Luzerne County:

1. Susquehanna Nuclear LLC, nuclear power plant in Salem Township, formerly operated by PPL, $248 million
2. Downs Racing LP, Mohegan Sun Pocono casino complex in Plains Township, $151.7 million
3. PR Wyoming Valley Limited Partner, Wyoming Valley Mall in Wilkes-Barre Township, $76.1 million
4. Ambrosia US Newco LLC, Cargill Cocoa and Chocolate manufacturing plant in Hazle Township, $65 million
5. Retail Distribution East LLC, American Eagle Outfitters distribution center in Hazle Township, $46.1 million
6. NBC Seventh Realty Corp., TJ Maxx distribution center in Pittston Township, $42.3 million
7. RT Oak Ridge Road LLC, Amazon warehouse in Hazle Township's Humboldt Industrial Park, $40 million
8. Lowe's Home Centers Inc., Lowe's distribution center in the CenterPoint Commerce and Trade Park in Jenkins Township, $28.6 million
9. Wilkes-Barre Hospital Company LLC, Wilkes-Barre General Hospital in Wilkes-Barre, $27.9 million
10. Humboldt Realty, Romark Logistics in the Humboldt Industrial Park in Hazle Township, $27.2 million

Source: Luzerne County assessor's office records
DURYEA — From telescopes and airplane navigational systems to the cellphone in your hand and the equipment your dermatologist uses to remove a scar, technology from the SCHOTT optical company is involved.

The Times Leader recently chatted with Mike Platt, plant manager at the SCHOTT North America facility in Duryea.

Q: SCHOTT has 15,000 employees around the world, locations in 34 countries, and sales of $2.21 billion in 2015-2016. How did such a large company, with headquarters in Mainz, Germany, select Duryea, here in Northeastern Pennsylvania, for a manufacturing facility?

A: The plant’s been here, going on 49 years, and it’s the first plant in North America that SCHOTT made an investment in. If I go back 50 years, I believe there was a skilled workforce here, and a lot of the customers were located in the Northeastern part of the country. Also, there were a lot of recreational activities available, with hunting, fishing and the outdoors, and a closeness to New York City, the big cultural melting pot, so the environment was good. When I look at the modern day, some of those things are still here, and we have a huge distribution system here to ship products all over the world.

Q: How will you celebrate the 50th anniversary in 2019?

A: I’m still dreaming up some things.

Q: How many of your local employees are scientists?

A: We have just under 200 employees, and we are the research and development center for North America. We’re probably looking at 15 scientists who invent a lot of things right here in Duryea.

Q: What kind of exciting research has been going on?

A: Our growth in infrared materials and our growth in laser glass — they were invented here; they are produced here — those are the two big ones.

Q: Can you explain how they are used?

A: The lasers are used in medical equipment, in blood gas analyzers, wrinkle removal and tattoo removal, and the infrared materials are used in thermal imaging where you can detect heat. A consumer application would be in the home inspection market, where someone goes into your basement and looks for heat loss. A lot of glass you don’t really see because it is very deep inside machinery.

Q: How is SCHOTT technology involved in astronomy?

A: I think SCHOTT has been to every major planet exploration, in the mirrors and filters and such. But most of the astronomical uses are on the ground. At the EELP (European Extremely Large Telescope) down in Chile, the primary, secondary and tertiary mirrors are all being produced by SCHOTT, but not necessarily here in Duryea.

Q: How is SCHOTT technology used in aviation?

A: Every commercial airliner today that flies has our glass on it in the ring laser gyroscopes that are part of the navigation control.

Q: Is SCHOTT technology in our cellphones?

A: Look at the camera on a phone. There’s glass with a bluish tint to it. That gets produced by our division. Other components are internal. At last count, there were about 10 different applications of SCHOTT glass in cellphones today.

Q: How is SCHOTT technology involved in aviation?

A: Every commercial airliner today that flies has our glass on it in the ring laser gyroscopes that are part of the navigation control.

Q: How is SCHOTT technology involved in astronomy?

A: I think SCHOTT has been to every major planet exploration, in the mirrors and filters and such. But most of the astronomical uses are on the ground. At the EELP (European Extremely Large Telescope) down in Chile, the primary, secondary and tertiary mirrors are all being produced by SCHOTT, but not necessarily here in Duryea.

Q: What is SCHOTT’s philosophy as a member of the community?

A: We like to have a good presence. We’re a worldwide corporation, so we offer lots of opportunities. We’re on a growth path here in the United States, and we strive to be a preferred employer.

Reach Mary Therese Biebel at 570-991-6109 or on Twitter @BiebelMT
WILKES-BARRE — Local high-end car buffs now can get their fix of Maseratis at Ken Pollock Alfa Romeo.

The Ken Pollock Autogroup — which also owns dealerships selling Ford, Lincoln, Nissan, Volvo and Mitsubishi — acquired the Alfa Romeo franchise last year. Maserati is the latest entry for the auto group.

“The dealership, which opened in November 2016 and is located at 290 Mundy St., is the latest entry for the auto group.

It is still open, and will continue offering a full inventory of new and pre-owned cars. Until construction is complete, they are located in a complete, temporary office building on site.

“We’re still selling the same cars we have been for the past 17 years. We’re still selling Alfa Romeo and, from Oct. 1, new Maseratis as well,” said General Manager John Baloga.

The building is being rebuilt from the ground up, Baloga said, and will result in a cutting-edge sales and service facility.

“We’re doing a complete, state-of-the-art showroom and sales and service,” he said.

The dealership is the first of its kind in the area to sell high-end cars like Alfa Romeo and Maserati, according to Baloga.

“Five years ago, 10 years ago, no one would ever imagine a Maserati or Alfa Romeo in Wilkes-Barre,” he said. “This is the first of its kind in the area – a really high-end car line.”

Besides offering the unique brands, Baloga said the dealership’s commitment to its community sets it apart.

“We're part of the fabric of our community … that's why we're here, we're here for the community,” he said. “We're big on community events, community support … we actually care about the community that we're in.”

Maseratis coming to Ken Pollock Alfa Romeo

By Toni Ann Pennello
tpenello@timesleader.com

Visit our temporary office
Full Inventory Available
kenpollockalfaromeo.com

290 MUNDY STREET, WILKES-BARRE, PA PHONE: 1-855-KPALFA1
I think that’s why it’s so cool. It’s the newest thing around.

— Julie Brown, RP Management, on the Lexington Village complex

In Nanticoke, old meets new

By Kulsoom Khan
kkhan@timesleader.com

NANTICOKE — Old houses, buildings and roads are all hard to miss during a drive through the main streets of Nanticoke.

A community of new apartments on Kosciuszko Street is an exception, however.

“I think that’s why it’s so cool,” said Julie Brown, marketing director for RP Management. “It’s the newest thing around.”

The company, based in Wynnewood Township, owns several apartment communities throughout the state, including Lexington Village, which is under construction in Nanticoke and will feature two buildings of luxury apartments.

The new buildings will comprise 48 units of one- or two-bedroom apartments. Rent for a one-bedroom will start at $1,150; for a two-bedroom, $1,450.

Paul Mizak, director of acquisitions for RP Management, said one of the apartment buildings is expected to be completed in November, and the other in January.

RP management previously owned several properties in Luzerne and Lackawanna counties but ended up selling a majority of them in 2008. Besides Lexington Village in Nanticoke, the company has properties in Hazleton, Hanover Township, Clarks Summit and Scranton.

“This area in general is a transient area,” Mizak said. “It’s always been a favorite market of ours.”

He emphasized the convenient location of the new apartments — a short drive to Wilkes-Barre and to Luzerne County Community College in Nanticoke.

Brown said she thinks the new apartments will attract more new people to the city, which will help stimulate its economy.

“It seems like the area is growing,” she said.

Mizak said city officials were very interested when they first heard of plans for new construction and development in the area and were cooperative with RP Management in getting the project approved said.

“They were excited about bringing something brand new to Nanticoke,” Mizak said. “It was a project they were willing to push through.”

He also said the company hasn’t ruled out building similar apartment complexes in other parts of Luzerne County.

“We’re always looking for new acquisition opportunities and growth,” Mizak said.
Changing health-care field evident after stroke

The CT scanner that looked from inside like a sci-fi bubble helmet surprised but didn’t scare me.

Likewise the heart monitor chest patches, the forearm IV, the index-finger oximeter and the bicep blood-pressure cuff. I worked three years as a paid EMT in the 1990s and saw all of that daily, and I even applied some of it to others.

When the ER doctor said the CT showed no stroke but that an MRI was advisable, it was similarly unsurprising. Sure I wanted to go home — “it’s not a prison,” the doctor conceded — but my wife had driven me to Geisinger Wyoming Valley ER on that Saturday evening earlier this month because I recognize a dragging right foot and a fumbled remote control for what they were.

Even hours later, after the MRI showed a (gratefully) tiny but glaring bit of the left thalamus dead from a now-confirmed acute stroke at the age of 60, I felt OK. Strength and motor control had begun to return. Upon admission to the hospital Sunday morning, I already could walk better than when I left home.

No, the first shocker in my first stroke came after explaining my immediate history to a nurse — a two-day backpacking trip followed by the signs of stroke on Saturday. Her response: “You know what your first mistake was, don’t you?”

Um, considering I had recognized the signs, albeit slowly, despite having indulged in what was supposed to be a relaxing evening of wine and TV, I guessed it was the wine.

“You didn’t call an ambulance,” she replied.

Having worked in the field, that should have been obvious. An ambulance crew, she noted, would have already taken my vitals, maybe started an IV if a paramedic was on board, and certainly would have alerted the hospital to the imminent arrival of a suspected stroke victim. The time saved when seconds count could be invaluable.

It’s tough to make your own calls under the best of circumstances. Medicine, locally and nationally, has become complicated and costly. In my EMT days, we actually transferred patients from Hazleton General Hospital (now part of the Lehigh Valley Health Network) to a mobile MRI lab in the parking lot. A permanent, in-hospital MRI was reserved for mega-institutions in Philadelphia or Hershey.

A CT scanner at the ER beck-and-call was inconceivable. The transesophageal echo-cardiogram I got on a Tuesday that cleared my return home? Sticking a scope with sonar down a throat for clearer heart imaging didn’t begin until 1976, according to the National Institutes of Health, and it took a long time for advances in endoscope flexibility and equipment miniaturization to make it almost routine.

Another thing that’s changing: transparency in costs and outcomes. It’s far from perfect, but it wasn’t long ago that comparing mortality rates and prices among hospitals was akin to journeying into the mythical Minoan Labyrinth; good luck finding what you want, better luck using it effectively.

Now there are agencies like the Pennsylvania Health Care Cost Containment Council that track and publicize such data freely. It should never be used as the sole criteria for a critical decision, but here’s an example:

The latest PHC4 report shows Luzerne County’s three main hospitals — Geisinger Wyoming Valley, Wilkes-Barre General, and Lehigh Valley Hazleton — all have mortality and re-admission rates for stroke that fell within expected ranges in 2016. Total billing, however, varies substantially: $34,453 at Lehigh Valley, $50,731 at Wilkes-Barre General, and $53,745 at Geisinger.

And which hospital has the most experience with strokes? Geisinger Wyoming Valley, with 314 cases that year, followed by Wilkes-Barre General at 229 and Lehigh Valley Hazleton at 73. PHC4 is just one of a growing number of resources for such information.

In perhaps a bit of irony, I had been reading Dr. Eric Topol’s book “The Patient Will See You Now” prior to the stroke. I finished it while awaiting all the post-stroke tests.

Topol envisions a medical world democratized by the smartphone: Patients can track many of their own medical measures with small, cheap monitors and can access encrypted medical records (like my MRI scans and echo-cardiogram results) stored securely in personal computer cloud sites, analyzed not only by medical specialists online but even by advanced Artificial Intelligence systems.

Some of Topol’s predictions are more optimistic than a tot’s Christmas Eve exuberance, but others already are happening. When I made the obligatory follow-up visit to my (newly selected) general practitioner the Friday after leaving the hospital, all my hospital records were already in the hands of the nurse practitioner, acquired electronically without any effort on my part.

Health care remains too opaque to fulfill Topol’s vision of a well-informed patient not only participating but helping direct his or her own treatment every step of the way. The best example from my stroke: 24 hours of deliberately elevated blood pressure that alarmed my wife and me until a nurse explained that increasing my systolic rate (the top number in a blood-pressure reading) to 175 or higher helped assure full blood flow to tissue, decreasing the chances of additional brain damage during recovery.

Surely someone could have told us that was the plan.

But the stroke, particularly in light of my experience as an EMT, showed how radically the business of health care is changing in our area.

Yes, as local medicine consolidates primarily into the hands of three large systems, glitches and roadblocks abound. But this is a tectonic shift that has led to things such as Wilkes-Barre General getting Level II trauma certification and Geisinger’s involvement in what could be a groundbreaking genome study.

In the business of health care, it’s important to appreciate that the problems are not insurmountable, and the promise is worth the work.

Mark Guydish is a Times Leader reporter. He can be reached at 570-991-6112 or on Twitter @TLMarkGuydish.
PLAINS TWP. — Carrying a thick portfolio of photo-filled accomplishments and positive reviews, Jeff Reed confidently encourages prospective clients to call his past customers. And if that isn’t enough to land him the job, his tedious workmanship and attention to detail just might.

Within a week, in most cases, Reed’s reliability, expert craftsmanship and cost-cutting care typically have homeowners throughout Northeastern Pennsylvania fenced in.

“Our motto,” said Reed, the sole owner and operator of Better Yard Fencing, “is better service, better quality, better prices, better call us.”

Canny phrases aren’t all that make Better Yard Fencing unique.

Reed forgoes the common pre-set panels of large fencing companies for a hand-built installation and sets the foundation with a wet mix instead of a dry one. He tackles each task entirely with hand tools. And while many other area fencing companies close for the winter, Better Yard Fencing is open year-round, installing several types of fences, including vinyl, aluminum, iron, chain link and wood.

Reed, 42, does all the work himself.

“I do it the old-school way,” said Reed, who is licensed, fully insured and brings proof of both estimates, runs a budget-friendly business, stakes his reputation on honesty, and not only takes on jobs large and small, but returns to repair problems that might develop with fences affected by wear over time.

“I explain everything up front,” Reed said. “I always give my opinion. A lot of the fence companies don’t like to do the smaller jobs or the regular work; they’d rather do the big ones. Because it means more money. I get satisfaction out of somebody who needs two panels of fence put up.”

Aside from his high-quality workmanship, sometimes completed through challenging weather conditions and terrain, Reed said a few things attract interest to his fence-building business.

He said he prides himself on giving accurate estimates, runs a budget-friendly business, stakes his reputation on honesty, and not only takes on jobs large and small, but returns to repair problems that might develop with fences affected by wear over time.

“I explain everything up front,” Reed said. “I always give my opinion. A lot of the fence companies don’t like to do the smaller jobs or the regular work; they’d rather do the big ones. Because it means more money. I get satisfaction out of somebody who needs two panels of fence put up.”

Reach Paul Sokoloski at 570-991-6392 or on Twitter @TLPaulSokoloski
LUZERNE COUNTY BUSINESS NEWS

Bodegas take root in WB neighborhoods

By Jerry Lynott
jlynott@timesleader.com

WILKES-BARRE —
The window sign at the
Amigon Bakery is bright-
ly painted and inviting,
but a walk through the
front door is even better.
The smell of fresh
pastries and cakes, made
by Francisco Castillo,
draws customers to the
counter and to display
cases at the other end of
the small store, where
he’s arranged rows of
triangular turnovers in a
sheet pan.
Next to that, a half-
empty bread pudding
pan indicates the thick-
cut treat was popular.
Two shelves below, ruga-
las are piled high.
Castillo has been in
business for 2½ years
at his location on Park
Avenue, catering to the
Heights neighborhood
and beyond. Catalina
Aguilar, who helps in the
store, translated for him.
“He likes it here,”
Aguilar said.
Hand-printed signs
advertise what’s for sale
at Amigon. “Galletos $1,”
reads the one for a small
plastic bag of cookies.
“All people are wel-
come,” Aguilar said.
Neighbors and people
from outside the neigh-
borhood stop in for
pastry staples such as
seasonings, rice and
cooking oil. Many
products stocked on the
shelves are Goya and
other brand names.
Castillo also sells candy,
freshly made sandwiches
and other Hispanic
foods.
Amigon and other
bodegas, or small stores
that primarily sell those
products, have sprung
up throughout the city,
which is home to a grow-
ing Hispanic population.
According to the U.S.
Census Bureau, the
Hispanic population of
Wilkes-Barre was 4,690
in 2010, representing
11.3 percent of the city’s
overall population. The
numbers in 2000 were
683 and 1.6 percent,
respectively.
The latest data from
the American Com-
munity Survey shows a
further increase. In 2015,
Hispanics accounted for
5,803, or 14.1 percent,
of Wilkes-Barre’s total
population of 41,108.
Heidy Peralta, who has
operated the Mao Deli
for almost two years in
South Wilkes-Barre after
moving from Paterson,
N.J., counts people who
have moved from New
Jersey and New York
among her customers.
“This is a nice, quiet
town,” Peralta said, add-
ing that the cost of living
is lower than in Paterson.
Her store’s name is
painted in vibrant colors
on the outside, near the
doors on the ground
floor of an apartment
building. Inside, Peralta
sells everything from
candy bars to bleach to
bananas.
Peralta has oregano
packaged in plastic bags
for sale in a box, near
the cooler that is stocked
with easily recognizable
vegetables such as toma-
toes and onions. Other
veggies include yuca, the
root of the cassava plant;
yuaitia coco, another root
plant; and batata (sweet
potato).
She’s also got soft
drinks and beverages in
a refrigerated cooler and
meats for sandwiches in
another refrigerated unit.
Customers stop in
for milk and groceries.
Among them is Jeany
Concepcion, who lives
upstairs in one of the
apartments.
She said she likes the
convenience of getting
something quickly and
raved about Peralta’s deli
specials.
“She makes the best
sandwiches,” Concepcion
said.
Peralta said she makes
her ham sandwiches with
cheese, lettuce, tomato, a
little mayo and vinegar.

Reach Jerry Lynott at 570-991-
6120 or on Twitter @TLJerryLynott.
The following real estate transactions have been recorded in the Luzerne County Office of the Recorder of Deeds for the week of Oct. 16, 2017:

- John A. and Roxanne D. Martini to Sergio and Dina L. Palumbo, 98-D Owega Dr., Black Creek Township, $130,000.
- Sharon A. Noone to Barbara Kreselski, 609 Wyoming Ave., West Pittston, $95,000.
- Thomas M. and Judith A. Vercuski to Kevin Makarewicz, 214 St. Angela Dr., Hazle Township, $55,000.
- Paul G. Phillips Revocable Trust to Coral Lee Teixiera-Popish, 575 Suscon Rd., Pittston, $56,000.
- Robert W. Reimer to Shannon B. Bayer, 8 Hillside Dr. and Rear Hillside Drive, Conyngham Borough, $39,900.
- Gavigan Enterprises LLC to Wynn Htun, 199 Haverford Dr., Laflin Borough, $119,000.
- Frank M. and Mary Ann Diccicco to John F. and Jennifer M. Reichart, 6 Chris-ley Ln., Sugarloaf Township, $339,916.
- Brianna and Hilda D. Mendoza to Dorothy Snedden, 61 Staub Rd., Trucksville, $145,000.
- Dennis C. and Lisa M. Hughes to Michael and Isabel Guerriere, 7 Anne St., Mountaintop, $208,500.
- Russel Herron Jr. to Christine Marley, 532 Luzerne Ave., West Pittston, $190,000.
- Thomas M. and Carmelita Ann Truitt, 4603 Church St., Hazle Township, $102,000.
- Michele and John Ponko to John Stoudt and Jennifer Maddox, 57 Allenberry Dr., Hanover Township, $100,000.
- Joseph M. Palmieri to Bria C. Battista, 214 Lapman St., Avoca Borough, $175,000.
- Presidential Land Co. LTD to Joseph A. and Giuseppina Conde, 1172 Woodberry Dr., Rice Township, $511,840.
- William S. and Tiffany Ostroski to Shahid L. Hamid, 248 River St., Forty Fort.
- Raymond F. and Maureen S. Ford to John and Michele Ponko, 21 Davis St., Hanover Township, $175,000.
- Eileen Sobocinski to Home Works WB LLC, 180 Gardner Ave., Wilkes- Barre, $68,000.
- Raymond J. Jr. and Lois J. Feist to Angel Luis Rivas, 314 Vanessa Dr., Hanover Township, $150,000.
- Patti A. Peters to Doreen Bologovsky, 1002 S. Appian Way, Hazle Township, $145,000.
- Jill A. and Geoffrey W. Gribble to Carlos W. Peralta and Patrice L. Macedo, 111 Samantha Dr., Wilkes-Barre, $326,804.12.
- Stephen J. and Michelle L. Weidman to Brian Zimmerman, 10 E. Walnut St., Plymouth Borough, $57,400.
- Stephen P. and Claire M. Thomas to SNKG Realty LLC, East Main St., Larks ville, $375,000.
- Debora A. Pecora to Carol A. Knotsky, 14 Providence Rd., $162,000.
- John Pekol Jr. to James Wesley and Brenda Kay Kolb, 543 Blackman St., Wilkes-Barre, $85,795.
- Joseph REck and Jennifer Randle to Scott and Rosanna Boyer, 10 Timberwood Dr., Wright Township, $372,700.
- Paul and Monique Nikom to William A. and Lisa M. Cook, 37 General Pulaski St., Mountain Top, $334,180.
- Audi Management LLC to Daniel and Patricia Ann Bartle, 110 Ashley St., Ashley, $51,500.
- The estate of Linda Giovine to Gerardo Sosa, 69 E Main St., Wilkes-Barre, $73,000.
- Rocco and Marlene Marino to Kevin P. and Kimberly J. Doran, 12 Taft St., Wilkes-Barre, $124,000.
- BRHM LLC to Daniel Steber, 5098 Nuangola Rd., Nuangola, $173,000.
- Robert J. and Nancy R. Erwertowski to Charles J. Jr. and Rhonda K. Stitz, Lane Pinecrest Lane, Huntington Township, $292,000.
- The estate of Josephine Danishanko to Crystal Chudoba, 854 N. Washington St., Wilkes-Barre, $51,900.
- The estate of Carmella C. Debonis to Daniel and Sabine Spring, 469 N. River St., Wilkes-Barre, $50,000.
- Donald L. and Grace C. Pierce to Thomas R. Manley and Deborah A. Pasquale, 307 Whitecap Ln., Butler Township, $270,000.
- Mikhail and Natalia Sorokin to Tina M. Evans, Four Seasons Drive, Butler Township, $125,000.

LUZERNE COUNTY BUSINESS NEWS

Reorganization at Wells Fargo spurred exec Collins to retire

By Jerry Lynott
jlynott@timesleader.com

WILKES-BARRE — Retirement hasn’t stopped Greg Collins.

After more than 30 years in the banking industry, Collins is still on his journey, traveling along, so to speak, like Johnny Cash in “I’ve Been Everywhere,” when he runs down the litany of locations from Reno to Buffalo to Amarillo to Pocatello.

Collins said he’s enjoying his time off, and he and his wife, Cynthia, plan to travel before he begins the next stage of his journey.

He’ll be doing something; just what, he’s not sure.

“I’m going to be looking for other opportunities in the near future. I’d like to stay active for a few years,” Collins said.

Collins, a 62-year-old Kingston native who lives in Dallas, retired from Wells Fargo Bank in September as community bank area president for Northeast Pennsylvania. In that position, he oversaw 38 branches from Pike to Schuylkill counties.

Collins said he decided to retire because of restructuring underway by Wells Fargo, which combined the regional president and area president positions in order to remove a layer of management and provide for more direct contact within the bank structure.

Collins was responsible for 72 Wells Fargo branches in NEPA and the Lehigh Valley between 2003 and 2009 and made a daily trip to his office in Allentown. The expansive territory was too big for Wells Fargo, which divided the regions and assigned Collins to the Northeast.

He said he was proud of the team members he worked with and depended upon to serve the bank’s customers.

“We had some of the best service scores in the country,” Collins said, attributing it to the low turnover of the team members. “We had a lot of tenure in our team members. ... They know their (customers’) birthdays, anniversaries, number of grandchildren, and that resonates with customers.”

In his visits to the branches, he said he made a point to speak with all team members, starting with the ones working the drive-through windows, who usually were in a different part of the building.

Collins said he still champions Wells Fargo as a community bank but acknowledges it was hurt by the fallout of a fraudulent accounts scandal.

The San Francisco-based bank created millions of unauthorized accounts for its clients, leading to the resignation of its CEO, John Stumpf, last year, and authorities began investigating on several fronts. The bank was fined hundreds of millions of dollars.

“It wasn’t pervasive throughout the whole bank,” Collins said. “That problem did not exist in Northeastern Pennsylvania.”

Collins’ local connection, his contribution as a banker, and his community involvement weren’t lost on Wico van Genderen, CEO of the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Commerce. The organization will honor Collins on Nov. 14 with its Lifetime Achievement Award.

“He’s dedicated his life and career to the Valley,” van Genderen said. “Greg never forgot his roots and the character and integrity that we are known for in the Valley. He leveraged these strengths in business and channeled them back into the community.”

Reach Jerry Lynott at 570-991-6120 or on Twitter @TLJerryLynott.
LUZERNE COUNTY BANKRUPTCIES

The following bankruptcies were reported to the Wilkes-Barre office of the Middle District of Pennsylvania Commonwealth Court from Oct. 1-21:

- Jeffrey J. Krokos, Wilkes-Barre. Filed Oct. 4. Represented by Tullio DeLuca.
- Asaf Ben Oz, Dallas. Filed Oct. 4. Represented by Tullio DeLuca.
- Sandy Strunk, Dupont. Filed Oct. 5. Represented by Kevin M. Walsh.
- James Michael Brolley, Mountain Top. Filed Oct. 5. Represented by Tullio DeLuca.
- Wesley Wayne Sawka, Plymouth. Filed Oct. 5. Represented by Tullio DeLuca.
- Shawna Anne Orth, Duryea. Filed Oct. 6. Represented by Carol Weiss Baltimore.

From page 2

raw, gluten-free, soy-free and organic.

A New Jersey native now living in Luzerne, McGrogan worked in marketing research and said she was a heavy drinker on a “standard American diet” when she settled in the borough in 2005.

Seeking a change in her life, she converted to a raw vegan diet around 2011.

Eager to share the key to her increased energy and weight loss, McGrogan turned the garage of her house, located by the Tener Street buildings, into a kitchen and started selling juices, cookies and snacks in September 2013, increasing customers by word of mouth.

When the Main Street site opened up, some warned her against the idea of a cafe, fearful people wouldn’t be interested in that type of food.

“ But it was amazing from the beginning. It was received wonderfully,” McGrogan said, estimating she averages 1,000 transactions a month.

Most of her customers aren’t vegan and come from the area, although she has attracted visitors from other states and countries. Her concoctions are designed to mimic the textures, flavor and appearance of familiar foods so people are not scared or intimidated.

Her goal: changing the perception that healthy eating is a punishment.

One of her most popular items, the nucleus burger, is a patty of vegetables, walnuts and seasoning in a zucchini-based flatbread bun with a Thousand Island dressing made largely with cashews.

In addition to the cafe, Nucleus makes breads and snack foods that are distributed in approximately 30 locations in Northeastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York. That distribution has expanded to the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton International Airport, and the new processing space will allow the addition of more sites, McGrogan said.

Repurposing the two old borough buildings is a bonus of her expansion, she said, noting she had long eyed the firehouse.

An admirer of historic architecture, McGrogan said old buildings are part of a neighborhood’s character.

“They’re special to the town and so many people. To just rip away something people are familiar with is an injustice,” she said.

McGrogan told council members she wants to grow her business and keep it headquartered in Luzerne.

“It’s a great town, and I love it,” she said. “My intent is to continue doing good things for the borough and community.”

Reach Jennifer Learn-Andes at 570-991-6388 or on Twitter @

Opportunities

From page 8

in the US military and leveraging that for success in the entrepreneurial and business community.

There’s no question the Greater Wilkes-Barre area faces substantial long-term workforce and skills gaps — and we still have a long way to go in addressing those issues. However, these new programs and our coalition of academia, business and community leaders are building the infrastructure to bridge those gaps and build new pathways to positive economic development.

Through Wilkes-Barre Connect, we will continue to refine, redefine and execute our “Attract-Retain-Create” business initiatives to build that “ARC” into a more dynamic and vibrant business ecosystem by connecting all the business dots along our vision of Innovation Connected.

I invite you to learn more by visiting our Wilkes-Barre Connect website at www.wilkesbarreconnect.org.

Wico van Genderen is president and CEO of the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Commerce.

Call 892-5000 to subscribe to the Times Leader
Gaming industry a big concern in budget

WILKES-BARRE — Legislators say the state budget impasse has created issues everywhere, and one of the major areas of concern is the state gaming industry.

State Sen. John Yudichak, D-Plymouth Township, expressed concern about the allocation of Local Share Account (LSA) funds to counties and municipalities.

Yudichak said ensuring the continued flow of LSA dollars into economic and community development projects, as well as to host municipalities such as Plains Township — where Mohegan Sun Pocono sits — is a central priority of Democrat and Republican lawmakers from Northeastern Pennsylvania.

“Chronic state budget deficits and an ever-evolving casino industry require the legislature to examine the responsible expansion of gaming enterprises that create jobs, generate state revenue and enable the robust gaming industry in Pennsylvania to remain competitive,” Yudichak said.

State lawmakers last week approved a newly unveiled measure to expand casino-style gambling in Pennsylvania in a bid to help plug its biggest cash shortfall since the recession. It is headed to the desk of Gov. Tom Wolf, but the governor has not said whether he will sign it.

The legislation was agreed on Wednesday night as part of wider budget negotiations, after competing measures passed the House and Senate in the past five months.

State Rep. Eddie Day Pashinski, D-Wilkes-Barre, said “the industry is doing well in Pennsylvania” overall.

He offered a few “talking points” on the situation:

- Gross total gaming revenue rose from just over $3 billion in 2014 to $3.1 billion in 2015 and $3.2 billion in 2016.
- Table-games revenue rose 5.58 percent statewide from 2015 to 2016.
- For the second consecutive month, table-games revenue grew by double digits. September 2017 saw a 10 percent spike, after August experienced 11 percent growth.
- Slot machine revenue at Pennsylvania’s 10 casinos rose for the first time in 12 months.

“Please keep in mind our casino industry pays a 54 percent tax on gaming,” Pashinski said. “That is 54 cents on every dollar wagered. New Jersey gets about 10 percent.”

Pashinski said many people continue to incorrectly think the casino industry was supposed to eliminate their property taxes.

“Rather, they should correctly say that the industry was supposed to reduce their property taxes, which they do, and their property taxes have consistently been reduced since approximately 2008-2009,” he said.

Pashinski said approximately $600 million to $800 million every year funds the reduction to every resident for their primary residence only.

According to Pashinski, the breakdown of the 54 cents of every dollar is as follows:

- 34 cents to property-tax reduction.
- 11 cents to the horse racing industry, which Pashinski said is why Pennsylvania has casinos — to save that industry, which supports more than 25,000 jobs.
- 5 cents to tourism to promote Pennsylvania, which is the state’s No. 2 industry.
- 4 cents back to the local host communities and for grants that benefit the entire host county, such as Luzerne.

Under the new gaming bill, Pennsylvania, already the nation’s No. 2 commercial casino state, could see casino-style gambling at truck stops, airports, online portals and 10 new casino locations throughout the state, each with hundreds of slot machines and possibly table games.

It also would make Pennsylvania the first state to allow both casino and lottery games online, in a quest for money from new and younger players.

Here is a look at some of the gaming bill elements:

- **Satellite casinos:** Each of Pennsylvania’s 10 larger casinos would be able to bid on a satellite casino license allowing as many as 750 slot machines and 30 table games at a facility that is not within 25 miles of another casino.
- **Gambling at truck stops:** Qualifying truck stops could operate up to five slot machine-style machines called video gambling terminals. The revenue would be split among the state, the license holder, terminal operators and host counties and municipalities.
- **Online gambling:** Licensed casinos, both in Pennsylvania and potentially beyond, can apply to the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board to operate casino-style gambling on websites and mobile applications to people in Pennsylvania. Gross revenue from gambling on online slot machine-style games would be taxed at 52 percent rate, while online table-game revenue would be taxed at 14 percent.
- **Lottery:** The Pennsylvania Lottery would be able to offer keno and feature online games, including its existing games, instant tickets and raffle games. The

See GAMING | 23
Title game launches ‘grand plans’ for RailRiders

By DJ Eberle
djebberle@timesleader.com

Even though the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre RailRiders didn’t play in baseball’s Triple-A National Championship Game at PNC Field last month, the event still checked off all three items on co-managing owner David Abrams’ list.

In addition, Abrams said the game marked the beginning of “grand plans” for the RailRiders, the top minor-league affiliate of the New York Yankees.

As for the big picture, according to Abrams, three elements make a professional sports franchise successful: raising money for charity, connecting with the community, and generating revenue for the team.

In the eyes of the RailRiders’ front office, the title game — in which the International League’s Durham Bulls beat the Pacific Coast League’s Memphis Redbirds 5-3 — did just that.

The RailRiders almost doubled their fundraising goal for the Sept. 19 game in Moosic.

Check.

Former major-leaguers Reggie Jackson, Andy Ashby and Jason Grimsley made a surprise visit to patients at Geisinger Community Medical Center’s cancer center in Scranton the morning of the game. They then signed autographs, took pictures and threw out ceremonial first pitches that night.

Check.

The national championship was a near-sellout of 9,383 fans, with a 95 percent show rate. Also, RailRiders president and general manager Josh Olerud said most franchises either break even or do a little bit better than even in revenue for the event, and the RailRiders “absolutely” did better.

In fact, he said, the game “almost rivaled July 4,” which typically is one of the team’s biggest nights.

Check.

“I really believe that we’re on the verge of really doing some amazing things with this team, this stadium — just the community,” Abrams said. “Hopefully this was a launching pad for that. We have a lot of grand plans, and this is just getting started.”

In order to make the event successful from a revenue standpoint, the front office used historical data from past Triple-A National Championship games to calculate the team’s expense lines.

From there, the RailRiders created different sponsorships and partnerships to offset certain costs.

“Just a lot of logistical responsibilities by our staff that made it very seamless, but obviously there was a lot of work, a lot of coordinating, and you want to put on something successful, different, unique, memorable in front of the other 30 (minor-league) teams,” Olerud said.

“You kind of get evaluated by your peers, and I’m sure that’s one of the reasons why (the International League) selected me as Executive of the Year, for what our staff did over that weekend and for the growth that we’ve had over the past couple of years.”

The game was a success in the eyes of International League President Randy Mobley.

“It is a special game, but it is a special event, and you do have to do a special type of promotion for it,” Mobley said. “You’re not going to have a fan fest at every other game; you’re not going to do other things that they’ve done. It does take a special approach, and (they) nailed it.”

Even since he was diagnosed with cancer — which he announced at a press conference on June 23 — Abrams wanted to make the National Championship Game bigger than the game itself.

He wanted to make it an event.

From the start, he set a goal of $250,000 in fundraising efforts for the game, focusing on cancer research and the fight against the disease. The RailRiders had raised almost $400,000 as of Oct. 4, a total that is split between Stand Up To Cancer and local organizations.

The RailRiders also established the SWB Pin-stripes Foundation, which will allow them to stay in “money-raising mode 24/7, 365,” according to Abrams.

In fact, the team’s objective over the next six months is to raise $100,000 more for the foundation.

“I feel as if I am the most fortunate, blessed person in the world,” Abrams said. “I’ve cried a lot. Josh knows. I cried in front of the owners. I cried in front of the staff, but I had between my family, my friends and friends of friends probably more than 200 people that came down (for the title game).”

Columbus, Ohio, will be the site of the game next year.

Gaming

From page 22

proceeds would go into the state Lottery Fund, which subsidizes programs for the elderly.

- Local share: Casinos would be required to pay millions of dollars annually to their host communities, reinstating a mandate struck down by the state Supreme Court last year because it treated casinos differently.

- Airport gambling: Casinos could seek approval to operate an interactive gambling parlor at an international or regional airport in Pennsylvania, with an agreement from the airport authority. The machines would be accessible only to ticketed passengers, and license fees would be required. Eligible airports are: Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Erie, Wilkes-Barre/Scranton, Lehigh Valley, Harrisburg, Arnold Palmer Regional Airport in Latrobe, and University Park Airport in State College. Taxes on airport gambling revenue would go to the state and local governments.

- Fantasy sports: Daily fantasy sports betting in Pennsylvania would become regulated and taxed in Pennsylvania. Fantasy sports operators would have to pay a $50,000 license fee and a 15 percent tax based on in-state participation.

- Sports betting: Casinos could apply to the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board to offer sports betting at the casino or online, should it become legal under federal law or a federal court ruling. A license would be $10 million.

- Resort casinos: Those casinos — Valley Forge in suburban Philadelphia and Lady Luck Nemacolin in southwestern Pennsylvania — can pay a $1 million fee to be relieved from requirements in the original 2004 casino law that gamblers must also take part in other amenities at the establishment.

- Casino ownership: A 2004 provision limiting ownership of casinos to no more than one controlling stake in one casino would be repealed. That could end a lawsuit that has held up construction of the Live! Hotel & Casino in Philadelphia for nearly three years.
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