Helen Lavelle, CEO and Chief Creative Strategist at Lavelle Strategy Group, speaks to her audience at WB Connect’s Spotlight event.

Business owners and investors at WB Connect’s most recent Pitch event.
By Mike McGinley
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Speaking to a crowd of college students and local professionals, Helen Lavelle shared her personal story of entrepreneurship. She worked as an artist in Philadelphia, before realizing that she was destined to run her own business.

It wasn’t long before she returned to the Scranton area to found the creative agency now known as Lavelle Strategy Group – a full-service creative marketing agency that handles media placement, digital campaign design and event planning for its portfolio of clients.

“I was surprised and delighted by the response that it got,” Lavelle said of her speech earlier this week, noting that “what was most delightful to me was watching how the students were embraced by the professionals in the market. From my perspective, it’s an invaluable opportunity and I wish that more folks would become involved, because I’ll tell you what there are some rockstars.”

Lavelle said she’s always pleased to work with young people, adding that nurturing college students is important to her.

“There are young professionals who from that very evening have contacted me, have stayed in touch with me, and I continue to stay I touch with them and I assist them,” she said. “And without question one or two of them will be hired by our firm.”

Lavelle was the second of three featured speakers so far at Wilkes-Barre Connect’s Spotlight Series – a Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Commerce program that connects businesses with the right resources and people to be successful.

“Through featuring local entrepreneurs, it showcases what individuals are doing, creating, and starting right here in NEPA,” Holly Pilcavage, WB Connect program manager, said. “Our target audience for the Spotlight series are students, entrepreneurs, and young professionals. We want to shine a light on the opportunities that exist or that can come to fruition if they set their minds to it.”

Pilcavage said the Connect program, implemented by the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Commerce, is an initiative created to ensure all entrepreneurs, start-ups, and existing businesses have access to the providers and services they need to grow their businesses.

Wilkes-Barre Connect has programs such as Intern, Pitch, 101 and Honor – all geared towards specific demographics: college students, first-time business owners, and military men and women.

“The initiative originated from the need to spur business and job creation, retention, expansion, and business attraction through the support services, including mentoring, training, networking, technical assistance, access to capital, and facilities,” Pilcavage said.

Another recent featured speaker was local entrepreneur Kris Jones of KBJ Capital, founder of LSEO.com and Special Guest App, among other technology businesses.

“I love to share my tips for success to fellow entrepreneurs and young professionals,” he said. “Part of my mission as a successful entrepreneur is to give back so others can follow my blueprint to succeed.”

Jones has high praise for the program, since it connects many facets of the community for a greater good.

“WB Connect is an amplifier,” he said. “While there are great organizations like the WB Chamber and Wilkes SBDC that provide support to business owners and entrepreneurs, WB Connect takes that support to the next level by connecting the dots to a range of additional services that will inevitably support a growing entrepreneurial culture in the Greater Wilkes Barre area.”
Whether you’re interested in becoming a member or attending an event, Wilkes-Barre Connect offers something for everyone. Monthly educational courses led by connect partners are tailored to meet each group’s specific needs, events are designed to connect you to peers and executives within your industry and so much more. See what Wilkes-Barre Connect has to offer with it’s 5 programs that focus on entrepreneurs, veterans, interns, financing, and education.

www.wilkesbarreconnect.org
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One of the biggest struggles entrepreneurs face when starting a business, according to Investopedia.com, is money management. How do you start and grow a business without capital?

This is where Wilkes-Barre Connect’s Pitch program, sponsored by Willary Foundation, comes in.

Comparable to ABC’s popular TV show Shark Tank, Pitch introduces start-up and existing business owners to a regional investor network, with investors like Jerry Lisman of Lisman Holdings.

While the program is similar to Shark Tank, it has its differences.

“This is real life; this is here,” Lisman said. “What you see is the story of the business and how it started. Still the same principle, but this is the real world.”

Lisman has been involved with business for years and said that for the past four he has tried his best to give back as much as possible by mentoring at the Wilkes University campus and sitting on advisory boards.

“I know what they go through,” Lisman said. “And I know we can help them take some of the pained points out of starting a business.”

Lisman said Pitch takes a lot of stress out of the investment process.

“Sometimes entrepreneurs have a tendency to overcomplicate the start-up process, but investors, often times, are here to help.”

When looking for a start-up to invest in, Lisman said he thinks of products he would consider buying himself, then he would take steps to sell them through one of the channels he works with. While Lisman has participated in only one Pitch event so far, he said he plans to attend more.

“The one thing that really gets me excited about the Connect and Pitch programs is they are allowing businesses that are homegrown to continue growing locally,” he said. “We’re showing entrepreneurs that there are opportunities to get investments here in NEPA.”

Lisman added that it’s a common misconception that business owners have to travel to get an investor, but this program makes it possible to build a business in NEPA with local investors.

“The main thing that I try and get out there is that there are opportunities in Northeast Pennsylvania,” he said. “This process is one small piece of the puzzle, and once (entrepreneurs) get through the Pitch process, there are tons of people who are willing to help.”

### Schedule of Events

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Jeff and Melissa Swire, co-chairs of the Wilkes University VEI (Veterans Entrepreneurship Initiative), are partners with Wilkes-Barre Connect’s Honor program. The Swires and the Honor program share similar goals – to improve their community and provide opportunities for veterans and their spouses to begin a business.

The Honor program gives veterans the opportunity to connect with other veterans and veteran spouses, such as Jeff and Melissa, to evaluate potential opportunities.

Wilkes-Barre Connect has partnered with the Philadelphia SBA to bring four programs to the THINK Center in 2018. The first program is Boots to Business Reboot on January 25.

Jeff and Melissa Swire

Jeff served our wonderful country for nearly 24 years; I call him my Captain America because all he ever wanted and wants to be is a soldier.

His career was cut short because of injuries suffered in Iraq. After a failed neck surgery, I quickly realized I needed to end my career and stay home to care for my hero. With no experience in embroidery or sewing, but full of determination to earn grocery money to allow me to work from home, I opened an Etsy shop in 2013.

I never imagined it would end up saving Jeff’s life.

His first surgery caused serious issues that I was able to monitor and advocate for his care. If not for CanCuddler, my hero likely would not be here today. Though he faces daily physical and emotional struggles, just as all of our wounded warriors do, he now partners with me in the creation of our designs, printing our fabric and shipping our orders.

We are passionate about helping other military veterans and spouses. The need for spouses to have a mobile career or be a caregiver is huge and unnoticed. To that end, we volunteer with American Dream U and are co-chairs of the Veterans Entrepreneurship Initiative of Northeast Pennsylvania. Jeff founded Patriots Cover, a retreat on our property to serve veterans and first responders with an amazing trout fishing experience. Visit Jeff and Melissa’s websites at www.cancuddler.etsy.com and www.cancuddler.com.

The Wilkes Barre Connect’s Honor program provides specific trainings and seminars for veterans and their spouses in order to afford them the opportunity to access the resources they need to successfully grow a business.
Through the WBC Spotlight program, quarterly events will provide an opportunity for industry leaders and entrepreneurs in NEPA to meet, discuss, and identify potential partnerships. Each event will feature a fifteen-minute presentation from an entrepreneur - WB Connect’s version of TED Talks.

Taylor Finan is a full-time student, the owner of three Fins Graphics & Printing in Tunkhannock, and one of Wilkes-Barre Connect’s most recent Spotlight students. Finan was a part of the Spotlight program for Connect’s women’s entrepreneur night.

Finan got involved with the Spotlight series, sponsored by Penn State Wilkes-Barre, because of her internship at Coal Creative, an Internet marketing company in downtown Wilkes-Barre.

“The best part of this program is that it allows for professional growth in a manner that is friendly and comfortable and at a pace that works for you,” Finan said. “The Wilkes-Barre Chamber finds new ways to entice students and businesses to become a part of this program, which in turn allows for further expansion and learning on different industries and interests.”

Finan said she recommends this program to anyone interested in starting and/or growing a business in NEPA.

“The Spotlight event allows both students and business owners to establish a professional connection in a friendly and comfortable environment,” she said. “Students are given the opportunity to network with various individuals in different industries and fields, while business owners can learn and observe the trends that are progressing in the ever-evolving world from a student’s perspective.”

Kris Jones (featured on the cover) was a recent Spotlight/Tech Talk speaker. Jones is the founder and former CEO of Pepperjam, a successful digital marketing company with an office in downtown Wilkes-Barre. He also is the founder or Referlocal, LSEO.com, French Girls App and APPEK Mobile Apps.

Jones is the author of Search Engine Optimization: Your Visual Blueprint for Effective Internet Marketing, an informative step-by-step guidebook to SEO. In his book, you’ll find a wealth of information about how to grow your business using SEO to gain new customers and increase business with existing ones.
Wilkes Barre Connect’s 101 program features videos from industry leaders that provide entrepreneurs, start-ups and existing companies with instruction in small business fundamentals. The video series will be on the Wilkes-Barre Connect’s website www.wilkesbarreconnect.org in the near future and will address the basic foundations that businesses, small or large, need in order to operate efficiently.

Approximately 62 percent of millennials have considered starting their own business, according to recent survey results from the Economic Innovation Group. But starting a business is easier said than done. Wilkes-Barre Connect and the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at Wilkes University have partnered to assist with the process.

The 101 program was created “for both experienced entrepreneurs and individuals who are interested in starting their own business,” said Dorothy Lane, director of the SBDC.

“The 101 series gives them a starting point to gather information regarding an area that they need to know more about, whether it be out of necessity or interest,” Lane said. “Once they have an idea of areas that they need to be addressing, we encourage them to contact the appropriate Connect partner to develop their project.”

The 101 series videos focus on specific areas of business, such as feasibility, your business name, structure, and ways to finance your business. All of which are important to think about for entrepreneurs. Lane said these, by far, are the most-asked-about topics at the SBDC.

The coupling of SBDC and Wilkes-Barre Connect’s 101 program was natural, considering Wilkes University’s program has been around since 1980, assisting and educating existing businesses and start-ups. With the two programs working together, they are helping not only young business owners, but “Baby Boomers and beyond,” Lane said.

Wells Fargo is another active partner in the 101 program.

“We are proud to partner with Wilkes-Barre Connect through the Wilkes-Barre Chamber to provide entrepreneurs and small-business owners with additional resources to help them succeed,” said Kevin Engelman, manager of Wells Fargo’s Wilkes-Barre District. “Those operating small companies face so many challenges, and we hope that these videos covering a wide range of topics will answer many questions. At Wells Fargo, we know the importance of small business to the local economy and job creation. These educational offerings, along with our wellsfargoworks.com resource center, is just some of the many ways the bank demonstrates its year-round commitment to small business.”

With the steady influx of new businesses to downtown Wilkes-Barre, Wilkes-Barre Connect, Wilkes University’s SBDC programs and Wells Fargo are here to help.

“The network that Wilkes-Barre Connect has established is designed to not let those seeking assistance fall through the cracks,” Lane said. “We have great talent in our area, and we hope to keep it here by assisting in any way we can.”

An initiative for Connect members, WBC Intern is designed to strengthen the collaborative effort among our academic institutions and business community through the creation of an online, regional internship program for Northeastern Pennsylvania.
Prospects visit Wilkes-Barre Connect online and complete the brief intake form.

A Wilkes-Barre Connect representative will conduct a follow-up meeting/session.

Identify a strategy to address the short and long-term needs of the connect client.

Connect client to the appropriate Wilkes-Barre Connect service provider.

The Chamber will continue to connect with the Wilkes-Barre Connect clients to provide them upcoming trainings, events, and opportunities.