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WORCESTER'S POPULATION SURPASSES 200,000 Now New England's Fastest-Growing City

by **DAVID SULLIVAN**, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & BUSINESS
RECRUITMENT ASSOCIATE

The much-awaited 2020 U.S. Census data revealed what many who call Worcester “home” have already recognized the past few years – that the city’s momentum in economic development is rapid and is attracting more residents and businesses to the Heart of the Commonwealth.

The data, preliminarily released in August, shows that the tally for Worcester’s population reached 206,518 – the largest population in the city’s history. The last and only time Worcester was above 200,000 residents was in 1950, at the peak of the city’s industrial economy in the twentieth century.

Worcester grew 14.1% between 2010 and 2020, making it the fastest-growing city over 100,000 people in New England. This represents an increase of 25,473 residents. It also means Worcester retains its title as the second-largest city in New England, only behind Boston.

The city’s 2019 population estimate based on the 2010 census was just 185,000, demonstrating how far the city’s growth overperformed the estimates.

City of Worcester Chief Development Officer Peter Dunn told the Chamber that the population numbers reflect the work the city has put in over the past few years to make it a desirable place to live with a high quality of life.

“Worcester’s significant growth is a result of a number of factors, including a concerted effort to grow the available housing stock as well as other public and private investments that have contributed to quality of life,” said Mr. Dunn. “In addition to housing development, we have seen commercial investments leading to job creation, small business startups adding to the city’s amenities,



Above: At 206,00+ residents, the City of Worcester’s population grew 14.1% over the past decade, according to U.S. Census data. Photo by Pagano Media.

entertainment options, and investments in public assets like the public schools, public parks, and the public library, among others.”

Since 2010, the city has seen \$4.5 billion in public and private investments, including in projects like Polar Park, the Blackstone Heritage Visitor Center, several new hotels, Gateway Park, the redevelopment of Main Street and Kelley Square, the mixed-income Courthouse Lofts, and CitySquare – the half-billion-dollar downtown development campus anchored by the Mercantile Center. In the same time frame, 2,080 units of both market-rate and affordable rental housing have been built within the city, with 2,000-plus more units in the pipeline.

When the data was first released, City Manager Edward M. Augustus and Mayor Joseph M. Petty both agreed that economic development momentum was

WORCESTER POPULATION GROWTH/CENSUS DATA, PG 10

Chamber’s Annual Worcester Women’s Leadership Conference Returns to DCU Center

by **DOMINIQUE GOYETTE-CONNERTY**, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS

For the first time in more than two-and-a-half years, hundreds of (primarily female) professionals from across Central Massachusetts were able to gather again in person last month for the Worcester Women’s Leadership Conference.

A signature event of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, the annual Worcester Women’s Leadership Conference (WWLC) is the largest women’s conference in Central Mass. and is designed to offer attendees opportunities for professional development, personal growth, and business networking.

After being held virtually in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic, on Oct. 28, 2021, approximately 400 individuals were on hand at the DCU Center for the

conference’s highly-anticipated return to an in-person format. Thirty-plus months had passed since the last in-person WWLC, held on April 11, 2019.

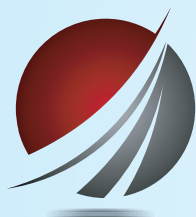
With coronavirus still a concern and a public health threat, stringent protocols were in place to help keep attendees safe, including vaccine and mask mandates, capacity limitations, and readily-available hand sanitizing stations throughout the venue.

Acknowledging the difficult times everyone experienced during the pandemic, WWLC Committee Chair and AVP of Community Relations at The Hanover Insurance Group, Kimberly Salmon, opened the conference by welcoming everyone back. “It’s really incredible seeing

WWLC, PG 14



Above: Cynthia “Cynt” Marshall, CEO of the Dallas Mavericks, addresses nearly 400 attendees during a morning keynote address at the 12th annual conference. Photo by Matt Wright.



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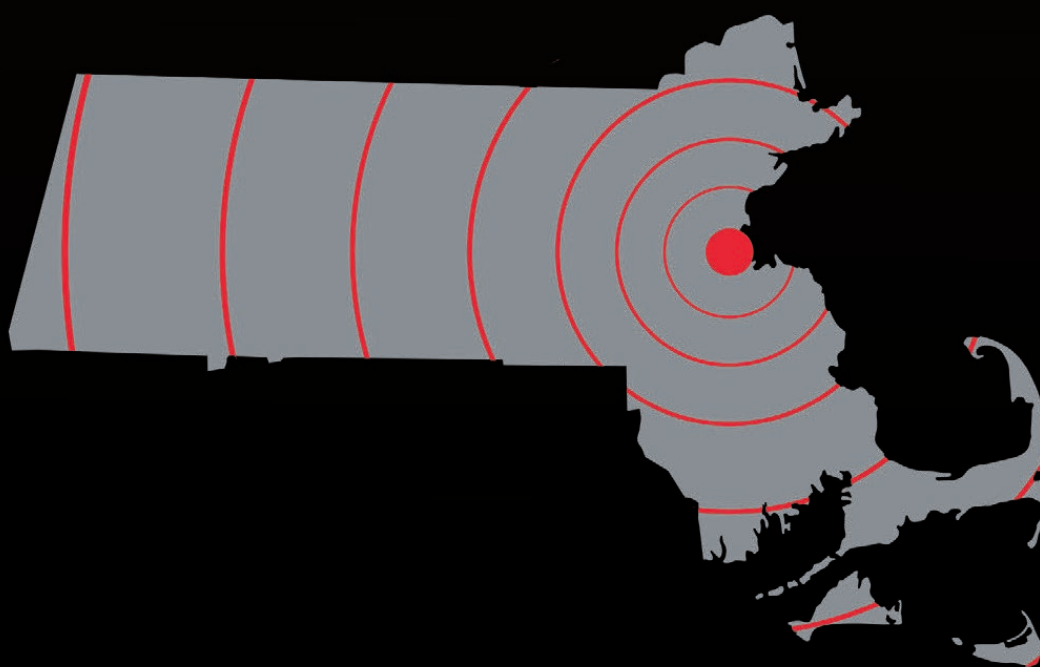
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With publication dates in February, May, August, and November, *Chamber Exchange: The Newspaper* is a quarterly publication written and produced by Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce staff and members. Content is geared to business professionals, members, elected officials, and engaged citizens.

Each quarter, almost 18,000 copies are mailed to approximately 4,600 members and business professionals, and roughly 13,000 City of Worcester registered voters.

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Unless otherwise noted, the editorial content herein is the opinion of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce and does not reflect the opinion of any specific member, business, or partner of the Chamber.

Worcester Regional Chamber

CALENDAR of EVENTS

November

- NOVEMBER 17 • 4:30PM • GREAT WOLF LODGE**
MEGA Business After Hours with six area Chambers
Sponsor: Great Wolf Lodge
- NOVEMBER 18 • 8:00AM • AC HOTEL BY MARRIOTT WORCESTER**
Diverse Professional Roundtable w/Dr. Gibbs of UMass Memorial Health
Presenting Sponsors: Umass Memorial Health and UniBank

- ## December
- DECEMBER 3 • 11:30AM • DCU CENTER**
146th Annual Meeting
Sponsors: UniBank, UMass Memorial Health, The Hanover Insurance Group, AT&T Sevices, Inc.
- DECEMBER 7 • 10:00AM • VIRTUAL ON ZOOM**
HR Roundtable: How to Recruit, Train & Retain Top Talent w/ Tom Herald
Presenting Sponsors: Aetna and Worcester State University
Supporting Sponsor: Bowditch & Dewey
- DECEMBER 7 • 4:00PM • VIRTUAL ON ZOOM**
Chamber Travel Presentation: Italy
- DECEMBER 9 • 7:00AM • MECHANICS HALL**
The Breakfast Club
Presenting Sponsor: Bay State Savings Bank
Supporting Sponsor: Western New England School of Law
- DECEMBER 14 • 2:30 PM • CHAMBER OFFICE / HYBRID**
Seminar Series: Making the Most of Your Chamber Membership
Sponsor: TD Bank
- DECEMBER 16 • 5:00 PM • GREATER GOOD BREWERY**
Business After Hours
Sponsor: Rockland Trust

PLEASE NOTE: OUR OFFICE WILL BE CLOSED
NOVEMBER 25 & 26, AND DECEMBER 24 & 27.

FROM OF ALL OF US HERE AT THE CHAMBER:

Happy Holidays!

WE LOOK FORWARD TO A GREAT 2022!

Right: In front of a sellout crowd of 10,508 fans, Boston Red Sox ace Chris Sale pitched on a rehab assignment at Polar Park in July. Photo by Pagano Media.

REFLECTIONS ON WOOSOX' INAUGURAL SEASON IN WORCESTER



In lieu of a message from our president & CEO, in this edition of Chamber Exchange, our editorial staff sat down with Tim Murray following the conclusion of the Worcester Red Sox' inaugural season to get his reflections on the team's first year in Worcester, given the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce's role in recruiting the team to the Heart of the Commonwealth. Below are edited excerpts from the interview.

Now that the Worcester Red Sox have completed their first season at Polar Park, how would you evaluate the past year?

Overall, it was a tremendous success, especially given the challenges presented by Covid-19 which impacted the construction schedule, delayed the start of the season, and limited the number of people that could attend the games in the beginning of the season into the month of June. These challenges notwithstanding, the Worcester Red Sox had one of the largest attendance rates in all of Minor League Baseball, bringing hundreds of thousands of people to the city from across New England during the spring and summer months. The feedback that I received from many people directly about their experience at Polar Park and in the city as well was overwhelmingly positive.

What (if any) negatives did you hear of?

Clearly, there were some hiccups early with parking and the delay in implementing the tiered payment parking plan, as well as people getting accustomed to walking to the park from different vantage points. The other thing is making sure the city is clean and free from litter and debris. Hopefully, programs like the Worcester Green Corps — which will seek to facilitate better partnerships with neighborhood businesses and resident groups — can improve this situation in the Canal District and Green Island neighborhoods, as well as across the city. The Worcester Green Corps is off to a great start in terms of collecting trash, initiating beautification programs, and building partnerships.

Why do you think Worcester was successful in bringing the team to Worcester from Rhode Island?

Well, I think there were a number of factors. First, there was political dysfunction in Rhode Island in that the state leadership could not come up with a package to keep the team in Rhode Island. Secondly, in Worcester, there was a level of collaboration starting with the Canal District Alliance, business community, institutional leaders, and obviously city and state government officials. Lastly, we had 22 acres of property (owned by Wyman-Gordon) that were vacant for 40 years and had been included in the Worcester Redevelopment Authority's (WRA) Downtown Urban Revitalization Plan that was completed in April of 2016. The inclusion of Wyman-Gordon's 22 acres signaled to the company that the city was serious about taking the property by eminent domain authority. The Chamber also shared the WRA's plan with Denis Dowdle from Madison Properties, who bought the land from Wyman-Gordon. Essentially, we had a site, though it was not pad ready in a traditional sense infrastructure-wise.

What role did the Chamber play in this process?

First, we lobbied hard for and participated throughout the process of the WRA's Downtown Urban Revitalization Plan. Secondly, our board of directors was supportive of the effort to bring the Red Sox to Worcester and OK'd us spending money to research the issues involved in support of the effort. Clearly, the Canal District Alliance's post card campaign and the City Council resolution asking the City Manager to reach out to the Red Sox were important factors. As a result, the City Manager asked me to set up a meeting with Larry Lucchino given my work with him as Lieutenant Governor when he served as President of the Boston Red Sox. We met in December of 2016 in Boston to discuss Worcester's interest, and he acknowledged he was impressed that Worcester was being so proactive in reaching out, but that he had given Rhode Island and Pawtucket a deadline of July 1, 2017 to reach an agreement.

When Rhode Island did not meet that deadline, what happened next?

Immediately, working with the City Manager and Mayor's office, the Chamber invited Larry Lucchino and his team to Worcester for a detailed briefing and tour that lasted several hours at Ed Russo's restaurant in the Canal District. Larry Lucchino brought his entire team including Janet Marie Smith, Dan Rea, Mike Tamburro, and others. It was clear they were impressed by Worcester and the momentum underway in the city. Shortly thereafter, the City Manager and I went to the State House to meet with the Secretary of Housing and Economic Development to discuss the opportunity. Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito arranged

Q&A, PG 19



Below: The sun sets on downtown Worcester. Photo by Pagano Media



by **ALEX GUARDIOLA**, VICE PRESIDENT OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS AND PUBLIC POLICY

November is the time for turkey, football, early Christmas shopping, and oh yeah, the single most important vote impacting Worcester businesses that Worcester's City Council has each year: tax classification. While surrounding communities continue to make strides to move to a fair and equitable tax rate, Worcester continues to overburden

our businesses by adding more taxes on them. These businesses are the same businesses who employ our residents, sponsor our little league teams, and donate to the many charities in this community — and what is the thanks they get? A larger tax bill. Because for council candidates, campaigning on the lowest residential tax rate is a great sound bite in August.

Worcester is one of just a handful of municipalities in the Commonwealth that has a dual tax rate, meaning that residential properties and commercial properties are taxed at different rates. Over the last five years, Worcester City Council has increasingly widened the gap between the commercial/industrial rate and the residential tax rate. What some of our councilors fail to mention on the campaign trail is that our businesses not only have to pay taxes on their property, but also must pay taxes on their equipment at the same high tax rate. For example, a biomanufacturing company with millions of dollars in high-tech equipment is dealing with two tax bills each year.

This year's City fiscal operating budget totals approximately \$733.8 million. The majority of that funding comes from the collective property tax revenue. Currently, the residential tax rate is \$16.28 per \$1000, compared to commercial tax rate which is more than double that at \$36.20 per \$1000, making it the sixth highest commercial tax rate in the Commonwealth. As developers tour the city and contemplate whether they want to build here in Worcester, one of the main factors they consider is the commercial tax rate. If we lose businesses to surrounding communities and states, that \$733.8 million will still have to be made up elsewhere; Ironically, it will be pushed back on to the residents. On the other hand, if we lure more companies to the city, the commercial tax base will increase, and all of our taxes will go down because the 'budget pie' will be divided up into more slices.

Recently, Worcester companies which have employed thousands of residents have moved to neighboring towns. Just look across the bridge on Route 9 into Shrewsbury and Westborough: that entire corridor is packed with new businesses. Both have single tax rates at \$13.19/\$1000 and \$18.54/\$1000 respectively. In 2019, an optics company with a strong presence in the medical device industry was looking for a site in the region and finally decided on Westborough. The president of the company publicly stated that they "picked the site because Westborough has a fair single tax rate."

Similarly, as Worcester Mayor Joseph M. Petty pointed out at a mayoral debate in October, in 2019, City Councilor Donna Colorio ran on the lowest residential tax rate, touting that, as a businesswoman, she understood the trials and tribulations of running a business — including paying taxes. She failed to mention that her business is not in Worcester, but rather just over the line on Creeper Hill Road in Grafton. If her business was located in Worcester, she would have had to pay \$53,000 more in property taxes this year than what she pays in Grafton.

BUSINESSES STILL RECOVERING FROM PANDEMIC

Many of our neighborhood brick-and-mortar businesses have seen historic losses due to the pandemic. While the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) helped some of our businesses stay afloat, others weren't as lucky. Further, those which did survive are now getting hit with an onslaught of rising labor costs. The Unemployment Assistance Trust Fund is projected to have a \$5 billion deficit by the end of 2022. Unemployment assistance premiums are expected to increase at least \$319 per employee in 2022, which is a 60% cost increase to employers.

Health care premiums for small businesses will increase by an average of 7.9%, despite the low use during the shutdown. This represents an annual increase of \$648 for individual coverage (\$8,808 annual cost) and \$1,788 for family coverage (\$24,084 annual cost). The Paid Family and Medical Leave (PFML) program will cost employers \$1 billion when fully implemented, offering 12 to 26 weeks of paid family leave and 20 weeks of paid medical leave.

The commercial tax percentage change over the past five years has increased by 22.72% versus the residential which has only increased 12.03%. While residents had a state and federal eviction and foreclosure moratorium to help them keep their homes, commercial building owners did not have the same options.

Lastly, most of our small businesses have Triple Net Leases: lease agreements on a commercial property where the tenant or lessee agrees to pay all real

estate taxes, building insurance, and maintenance, on top of their typical rent and utility payments. While many on city council say they support small businesses, voting to increase the taxes on their Triple Net Lease indicates otherwise.

TAX INCREMENT FINANCE (TIF) DEALS

When companies come into Worcester to redevelop a site, factors such as taxes, brownfield remediation, and zoning all play a role. Because of the dual tax rate, the city administration must become creative to incentivize these developers, and sometimes a combination of tax credits (historical, brownfields, etc.) and Tax Increment Finance (TIF) deals must be made in order to make the numbers work. Fortunately, the city administration (specifically the Chief Development Officer and his team) work tirelessly to weed through the applications and make sure the numbers not only work for the developer, but also for the City of Worcester. Unfortunately, in the recent city council campaign, a candidate inaccurately commented on social media that the City Administration gives out TIFs like candy. The reality is there are only 16 active TIFs with one ending next June. Approximately, there are more than 9,000 businesses in the city.

There are only two other municipalities in Central Mass that have dual tax rates: Auburn and Clinton. For the past three years, Auburn has continued to vote to narrow the tax gap toward a single rate. Clinton has also narrowed the gap, bringing the commercial tax rate down from \$31.24/\$1000 in 2015 to \$27.10/\$1000 today.

Some on the council floor have argued that it's not apples to apples when comparing Worcester to a small surrounding town. Well, there are only two other gateway cities in Central Massachusetts: Fitchburg and Leominster. Leominster has had a single tax rate and is currently at \$18.13/\$1000. Last year, Fitchburg's city council voted to go to a single rate and is currently at \$19.03/\$1000. ♥



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Community Organizing Essential to Keeping Worcester Clean

by **MIRANDA HOTHAM**, WORCESTER GREEN CORPS COORDINATOR



Worcester residents have many things in common, and there are plenty of city characteristics we can bond over. The hearts on street signs, the seemingly endless road construction, the diverse offerings of local cuisine, and of course: the charm of Worcester drivers. Worcester residents are also able to agree on some of the most important issues across the city and mobilize as groups to motivate and implement change. If we can agree on the issues that need to be prioritized, we can also

come together as a community and contribute to the solutions.

Worcester's litter issue is evident. Trash is accumulating on sidewalks, in alleys, and in our green spaces. Illegal dumping, lack of understanding, and deflection of responsibility are all reasons the problem has persisted for years. This is a city-wide issue and requires a city-wide solution. It's essential that, as a community, Worcester residents all take responsibility for their individual role in the issue and make efforts to alleviate it any way they can. If individuals and small groups can come together to work toward a solution, eventually, we'll be able to resolve the litter issue for the long-term.

There is strength and power in numbers. As the fastest-growing city in New England and the second largest, Worcester is abundant with diverse people and resources. At the Worcester Green Corps (WGC), we're working to bring together various groups and organizations from around the city and giving them the tools and opportunities to address Worcester's waste issues. The responsibilities vary from data collection, litter cleanup, outreach and education, and increasing awareness of the issues. We're able to work in collaboration with groups who may have thought that they had no role in the issue and may not have imagined what their contribution to the solution would look like.

We're also having conversations with long-term residents and community members to understand how they envision the future of Worcester, and what they think the biggest contributors are to the litter issue. We constantly receive feedback from community leaders and are working to develop innovative solutions. By having these conversations, we're able to inspire one another and think in unique ways to design programs and system-level solutions we may have not considered otherwise. Afterall, a community-wide problem requires a community-wide solution.

The WGC has held seven volunteer events so far, bringing together 170 volunteers of all ages from across the city. We've had the support of various groups at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Clark University, and Assumption University. Berkshire Bank and the United Way of Central Massachusetts have also supported our cleanup and beautification efforts. We've received support for our greenery projects from the Worcester Community Action Council and the City of Worcester and have relied on assistance from the city's Department of Public Works for our cleanup efforts.

Individuals from around the city have reached out and asked how to get involved in the movement, knowing that their individual contributions can be valuable when part of these collective efforts. Through the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, we've been able to communicate with many local businesses and entrepreneurs to help them understand the extent of the issue and what their role in the movement can be. We've been able to educate individuals on best practices and how to improve their recycling purity. We've also started working with FreshStart508 to mobilize even more individuals to assist in our cleanup efforts; this nonprofit organization has been instrumental in our outreach efforts with Worcester Public Schools.

In the first few months of our programming, we've had conversations with hundreds of people around the city. It's clear from these dialogues litter is one of the most widely recognized issues in the city, and there's a strong desire among many to envision and contribute to a long-term solution. By coming together with these individuals and organizations, we've already been able to create tangible change and show residents they're not alone in their concerns. To get involved in our movement, reach out to me, Miranda Hotham, at mhotham@worcesterchamber.org or call (508) 753-2924. ♥



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Worcester Green Corps by the Numbers

since July of 2021:



164 streets

43.55 miles



172 volunteers



6,080.16 pounds



726 bags



Above: Synergy Founder & CEO David Greaney delivers keynote address to 200-plus Chamber members at the September Breakfast Club. Photo by Matt Wright.

SYNERGY FOUNDER & CEO ADDRESSES CHAMBER MEMBERS AT BREAKFAST CLUB

by **DOMINIQUE GOYETTE-CONNERTY**, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS

Many Central Mass residents and visitors had the opportunity to enjoy a hot dog or a cold beer at Polar Park this summer. But on an early-September morning, 200-plus Chamber members gathered for what can only be described as a first-of-its-kind experience at the brand-new addition to Worcester's Canal District: breakfast at the ballpark.

For the first time ever, the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce held their quarterly Breakfast Club event at the new home of the Boston Red Sox' Triple-A affiliate team. Attendees had the chance to network

with other Chamber members and guests, celebrate six member businesses and organizations for their milestones, and hear from a dignified keynote speaker, all while enjoying their morning coffee and breakfast in the DCU Club at Polar Park.

David Greaney, commercial real estate expert and founder & CEO of Synergy, a Boston-based real estate investment and services company, served as the event's keynote speaker.

Recognized as one of the most active and successful building owners and managers in the region, Synergy has a robust portfolio in Boston, operating 40 commercial assets in the greater Boston area totaling more than 5 million square feet. Now, the firm is breaking into the Worcester market with their 2019 purchase and ongoing multi-million-dollar renovation of the glass tower downtown at 446 Main St.

Mr. Greaney said, "All of the same things that prompted us to invest heavily in Boston 20 years ago — you have all the same characteristics here in the city of Worcester." He rattled off a laundry list of characteristics and assets that attracted Synergy to Worcester, including its prominence as New England's second-largest city, access to transportation, strong school system, network of hospitals, and amenities like several restaurants and Polar Park.

"We're here for the long term," he said of Worcester, adding that everyone in the city has already been exceptionally welcoming. "We're delighted to be here."

During his address, Mr. Greaney also offered insight into the office space market, given the COVID-19 pandemic. He said, unsurprisingly, he isn't a fan of the work from home model, but there's no ignoring that coronavirus has changed how we work, when we work, and how employers operate.

One example he cited was office layout. "People are thinking about their physical space differently," and won't tolerate being lined up shoulder-to-shoulder in cramped environments anymore, Mr. Greaney said. He believes this is beneficial for the market, as design firms will program office space to be more spread out, allowing for more square footage per person.

Synergy is optimistic office occupancy will return to pre-pandemic or near pre-pandemic levels in the future. "The return to office is coming. It's just a bit delayed," he said, noting that Massachusetts in particular is better-positioned than many other states in the nation when it comes to rebounding from the pandemic. In fact, the Boston Business Journal recently ranked Worcester No. 12 on the list of top 30 metro areas with the strongest job growth during the COVID-19 recovery. Bloomberg ranked Worcester eighth out of 100 largest U.S. cities most likely to recover from the pandemic and lockdown.

Presented by sponsors Berkshire Bank and Harvard Pilgrim Health Care (A Point32Health Company), and with support from friend sponsors AIS and The Willows at Worcester, the September edition of The Breakfast Club saluted six Chamber members for new leadership and key anniversaries.

The Christopher House was recognized for 25 years in operation, Crown Trophy for 25 years of serving local customers, Anna Maria College for 75 years of transforming the lives of students, and Worcester Regional Airport for 75 years of helping connect Central Mass to the rest of the country and world. Moreover, two members in new leadership positions were saluted: Chris Hendry, president and CEO of IC Federal Credit Union; and Deb Hall, executive director of YWCA Central Mass.

The Hanover Insurance Group's AVP of Community Relations Kimberly Salmon served as emcee.

Held four times each year, the next Breakfast Club will be held at Mechanics Hall on December 9. Visit worcesterchamber.org to register. ❤️



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Office Furniture Manufacturer AIS Inc.'s People-Oriented Approach Leads to Success

by DAVID SULLIVAN, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & BUSINESS RECRUITMENT ASSOCIATE

Manufacturing Month is an opportunity to highlight the work of some of the region's best manufacturing companies. AIS, Inc. is undoubtedly one of the best – a successful Massachusetts-grown company that is a generous corporate citizen as well as an advocate for the region and its people. Bruce Platzman, CEO of AIS – which stands for Affordable Interior Systems – co-founded the company with current Chairman Arthur Maxwell back in 1989. They originally started as entrepreneurs in reconditioning or repairing damaged or old office cubicle panels for reuse.

Today, AIS is an office furniture and workspace manufacturer with more than 800 employees at a 600,000 square foot facility in Leominster. They have a national presence and annual sales of over \$200 million a year. AIS even has a contract with the federal government, meaning they also manufacture for military bases overseas.

To Mr. Platzman, a successful company is the number one priority – but not for the bottom line of profit. “It’s all about the 800 employees we have,” said Mr. Platzman. “If we’re not successful, how it affects 800 people is very compelling, and we don’t take that lightly.”

AIS has proven that placing people first is not just talk. In 2012, AIS was ready to expand past its headquarters in Hudson. The board recommended to Mr. Platzman that the company relocate abroad where labor costs are cheap. Mr. Platzman, recognizing that moving out of Central Massachusetts would hurt the workers who had been with him for years, asked the board for 30 days to identify a new location in the region.

He worked with then Governor Deval Patrick and Lieutenant Governor Tim Murray, who is now the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce’s president and CEO, to keep AIS in Massachusetts. AIS moved to Leominster in 2017, a city hurt by offshoring which led to a relatively high unemployment rate.

Mr. Platzman is thankful that he was able to keep AIS local. “Central Mass has a really good manufacturing workforce – it’s known that our roots go back to the industrial revolution,” he said of the local workers. “I wasn’t going to tell my employees that we were moving to Mexico,” he said.

After settling down with the new headquarters in Leominster, AIS began to find ways to support the community. Mr. Platzman joined the board of the United Way of North Central Massachusetts and told the mayor of Leominster, “We will be the number one supporter of every charitable initiative you have.” AIS has since kept its word, donating to the Make-a-Wish Foundation, and running toy drives for the children of military service members.

The pandemic changed many things, but one thing it did not change was AIS’ commitment to community. Like many manufacturers facing uncertainty in supply chains and customer bases, AIS needed to pivot. The furniture manufacturer began producing antimicrobial, adjustable face masks using excess fabric in their inventory. Many of these masks ended up being donated around Massachusetts.

In the spirit of mobilizing the manufacturing industry to help combat the pandemic, AIS found approximately 1,000 volunteers – mostly older women at home at the start of the pandemic – to help sew and donate 650,000 high quality masks. They were called “Rosies,” as in Rosie the Riveter from WWII.

AIS donated masks made in their facility to fire departments, police departments, homeless shelters, and hospitals in the region. They also provided 22,000 masks

to 235 municipalities in Massachusetts to give to poll workers in November of 2020.

Diversity and inclusion are also important metrics for AIS. Over 300 AIS employees are women, and 40 different countries are represented among the workers. Most of the floor workers are Hispanic, and Mr. Platzman says the company sponsors English Language Learning (ELL) courses for those who take them.

Sustainability is another important goal for AIS. The roof of their headquarters features 10,000 solar panels, which is one of the largest freestanding panel arrays in the state and offsets about 60% of the facility’s power needs. They also sell excess fabric and particle boards for recycling, materials which would otherwise sit in landfills. Moreover, another initiative is in the works to recapture heat from machines to put into offsetting heating costs.

Mr. Platzman says that despite a great year for AIS, increased unemployment benefits are creating challenges for the company in finding and retaining talent. Workforce is of course a significant obstacle for the manufacturing industry at large, and Mr. Platzman says AIS is “getting creative” by working with Seven Hills Foundation in Worcester to upskill workers who previously worked as cleaning staff during the pandemic to train them to be on the production line. There is also an ongoing effort to hire Afghan evacuees once their work status is set by the federal government.

AIS was named Manufacturer of the Year by the Worcester Business Journal in 2018, recognized for a Corporate Citizenship Award by Boston Business Journal the past three years, and has been selected as the national Office Furniture Dealers Alliance Manufacturer of the Year nine times since 2008. They are proud members of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce. ❤️



Above: AIS employs more than 800 workers at their Leominster facility. Photo courtesy of AIS.



Above: In 2017, AIS moved their headquarters from Hudson to the 600,000 square foot facility pictured here on Tucker Drive in Leominster. Photo courtesy of AIS.

Above: Some AIS office furniture on display at their Leominster headquarters. Photo courtesy of AIS.



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WORCESTER POPULATION GROWTH/CENSUS DATA, CONTINUED largely responsible for the massive population growth. “This is people voting with their feet,” said City Manager Augustus. Mayor Petty said, “These census results are an affirmation that over the last 10 years, we have worked together to build a city that is not just a place people want to visit, but a place where people want to live.”

Over the past decade, Worcester grew faster than Boston, which increased by 9.4%. It also grew faster than Providence at 7.2%, a city which, until now, had challenged Worcester for the title of second-largest city in the region. The latest data keeps Worcester’s title by a comfortable margin. Not only that, but Worcester is now larger than several significant U.S. cities such as Salt Lake City, Utah; Tallahassee, Florida; Little Rock, Arkansas; and Huntington Beach, California.

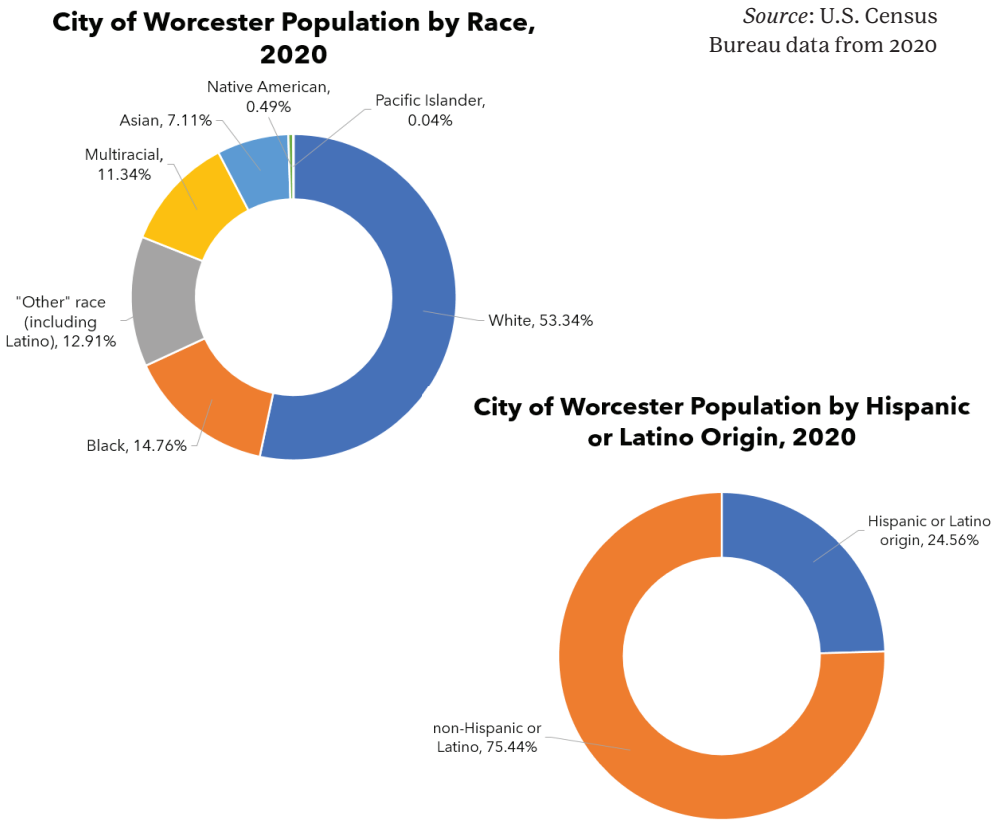
Worcester County experienced an 8% population increase representing 63,560 new residents from 2010. This was higher than Massachusetts’ overall population growth of 7.4%.

The county also grew far more diverse since 2010, with the Hispanic population increasing by 48.4%, or 36,480 residents; the Asian population increasing by 45.9%, or 14,606 residents; and the Black population increasing by 44.1%, or 14,708 residents; among other groups. The county’s population is still majority white, constituting 73.57% of the population.

The number of those identifying as bi- or multiracial grew by a dramatic 300.1% in the county, representing a growth of 56,301 people. This was partially fed by growth of this group in Worcester, which was 224.7% or 16,207 people more than it was in 2010. In both the city and county, the group of multiracial residents was the fastest-growing group by far, in line with similar demographic trends statewide and nationwide and reflective of America’s growing diversity.

In the city, the share of white residents decreased by 12.4% or a decline of 15,548 people to make up 53.3% of the population. The City of Worcester’s Black population grew by 44.8%, or 9,429 residents since 2010; and the Hispanic population grew by 34.2% or 12,918 residents. The number of people identifying as two or more races grew by a sky-high 224.7% or 16,207 residents.

Those categorized by the census as “Some other race” — a self-identification with any single race that is not white, Black, Native American, Asian, or Pacific Islander — increased by 75.5%, or 11,471 residents, in the city. “Hispanic” or “Latino” were not options for race on the 2020 census. Past studies by the Census Bureau and other organizations show that respondents who self-identify as Latino often write it into the space on the census form under “Some other race - Print race or origin.” “Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish” was an option for respondents to self-



identify their origin, regardless of their race. It is also worth noting that “White” in the 2020 census includes European races as well as certain North African and Middle Eastern races. Across the board, all groups grew significantly besides the non-Hispanic white and Pacific Islander population - of which there are now 81 residents counted who identify as Pacific Islander in Worcester. The diversification of Worcester and Worcester County at large is a trend seen elsewhere in the U.S., but Worcester has always been proud of its heritage as a destination for foreign-born families and as a culturally rich city. In 2018, a Worcester Regional Research Bureau study found that more than a third of the city’s business owners are foreign-born. This ratio, if it stays true to the ratio in population, will undoubtedly increase. The latest census data definitively demonstrates that Worcester’s momentum is real, and that the prospects for the city’s future are bright. ♥

ADVANCED MANUFACTURER SOLVUS GLOBAL CELEBRATES OPENING OF NEW CENTRAL MASS FACILITY

by DAVID SULLIVAN, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & BUSINESS RECRUITMENT ASSOCIATE

Aaron Birt, CEO of Solvus Global, walked up to the outdoor stage on a warm October afternoon. “Thank you from the bottom of my heart,” said Mr. Birt, whose company was celebrating a ribbon cutting for its newly renovated, 32,000 square-foot manufacturing space in Leominster. Dozens of attendees from all over Central Massachusetts, including Congressman Jim McGovern, gathered in the facility’s parking lot to congratulate Solvus on its expansion.

Mr. Birt is a Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) graduate, entrepreneur, and member of the 2021 class of Worcester Business Journal’s 40 Under Forty and the 2018 class of Forbes 30 Under 30. He

first started his journey of business ownership with EventTree, a mobile app designed to help students in Worcester find events near them. As part of EventTree, Mr. Birt was a member of StartUp Worcester’s very first cohort in 2015 while a master’s student at WPI.

StartUp Worcester is an incubation program run by the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce which offers startups free memberships to the Chamber, the WorLab coworking space, and the Venture Forum.

Mr. Birt left EventTree to pursue his PhD in materials science. In his doctoral thesis, he helped to pioneer a new approach to additive manufacturing using machine learning control for advanced manufacturing.

He then founded Solvus in 2017 with his business partner and fellow WPI graduate Sean Kelly. Solvus moved into an office space on Rockdale Street and then lab space at Prescott Street in Worcester. With revenues and staff quickly growing, Solvus began the search for a large manufacturing facility, which led them to Leominster. Solvus still retains its Worcester office at 104 Prescott St. in Worcester in addition to the new facility at 272 Nashua St. in Leominster.



Above: Solvus Global representatives and local leaders gather for a ribbon cutting to celebrate the opening of the new Central Mass facility. Photo by Virginia Murphy.

Solvus specializes in additive manufacturing using in-house AI software to develop computer-controlled cold spray manufacturing. Additive manufacturing is similar to 3D printing in that it adds to a product rather than subtracts, as cutting or sawing would, for example. Cold spray additive manufacturing reduces the waste that is produced by traditional manufacturing by essentially spraying metal particles onto a surface using a cold stream of gas.

Solvus’ additive manufacturing process has innovative implications for the aerospace, biomedical, automotive, oil and gas, and defense sectors.

Those in attendance at the ribbon cutting included the Mayor of Leominster, Congressman Jim McGovern, State Senator John Cronin of Leominster, WPI administrators, Worcester Chamber representatives, North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce representatives, and Mr. Birt’s mentors.

Congressman McGovern said manufacturing has been an important part of Central Massachusetts for generations, and new companies with new innovative processes are still choosing the region as their home.

“The expansion of this facility, especially by such a young company, demonstrates a belief in Central Massachusetts,” he said. “This is just another indication of how things are taking off for our region.” Congressman McGovern also indicated that he is working closely with Solvus to find appropriations funding in Congress to help additive manufacturing in the defense industry. Sen. Cronin also touted the region’s “remarkable history of manufacturing.” While older methods of manufacturing brought economic vitality to Central Massachusetts, it is new and innovative processes and companies which will be the future, according to Sen. Cronin. Christine Nolan of Massachusetts Tech Collaborative also spoke at the event and announced a \$1.6 million grant from the state to help Solvus develop new additive manufacturing processes. Ms. Nolan indicated that the grant would help students at WPI, Wachusett Community College, and Worcester Technical High School work with Solvus on certain projects.

Mr. Birt noted that WPI graduates continued to be the backbone of Solvus, saying, “We promise we’ll keep hiring WPI grads, so keep sending them our way!” Reflecting on the ribbon cutting, which featured prominent figures from all across Central Massachusetts that demonstrated the company’s roots in Worcester and future in Leominster, Mr. Birt said that the new facility was a perfect fit. “This location really represents the intersection of people, partners, and problems to solve,” said Birt of the new Leominster facility. “Solvus is made up of partners and people from all over — from Worcester, Leominster, and around the globe — and we couldn’t do it anywhere better than this. It’s the perfect nexus of opportunity.” ♥



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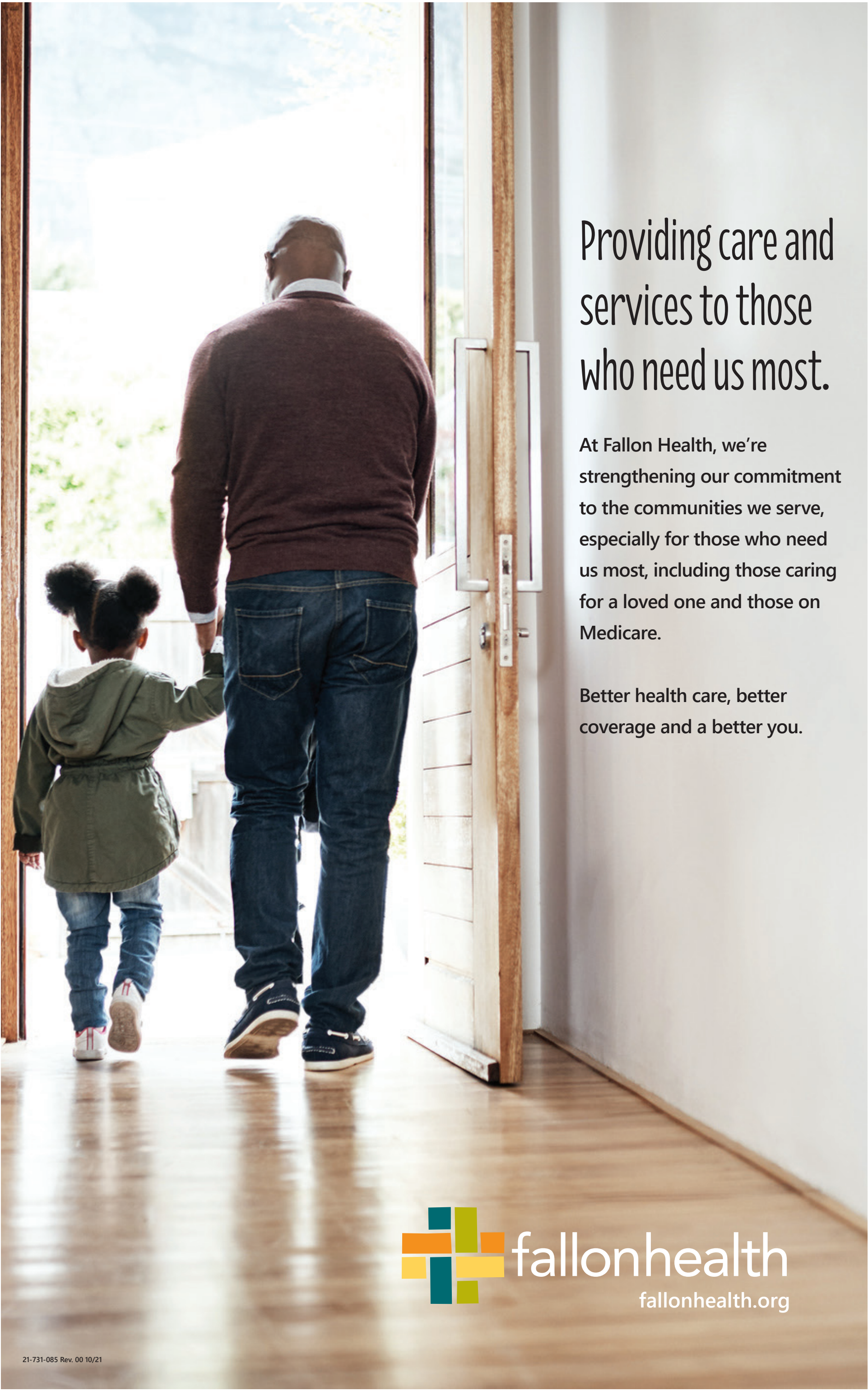
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'TIS THE SEASON TO SHOP SMALL

Support Local Businesses When Holiday Shopping

by **MONIQUE MESSIER,**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AT DISCOVER CENTRAL MASSACHUSETTS

Gift giving can also give back to your community when you shop local. Whether you're supporting a new local maker or a family business rooted in the region for generations, when you shop at a local business during the holiday season, know you're making an important economic impact in Central MA.

GIFTING BY TYPE

Here's a shortlist of ideas to help you find the perfect present for the many types of people on your list.

FOR THE BOOKWORM: Feed the imagination of a friend or family member with a book from TidePool BookShop or Annie's Book Stop in Worcester, MA.

FOR THE FASHIONABLE: It's all the rage to support local pride with a cool shirt or crewneck from Worcester Wares. For something more sophisticated while still casually chic, try Lake Road Living in Sturbridge, MA.

FOR THE SPORTS FAN: Between the WooSox' inaugural season, the Massachusetts Pirates winning their league championship, and the Worcester Railers HC back on the ice, it's never been a better time to be (or shop for) a sports fan in Worcester. The Worcester Bravehearts and Holy Cross Athletics also have team stores online.

FOR YOUR PETS: Discover Crate & Howl's new location in downtown Worcester, or visit Quite Fetching Barkery and Pet Boutique across from the Grafton Town Common.

FOR YOUR WHOLE FAMILY: Live theatre is back in action! With vaccine checks and safety protocols in place, tickets to see a holiday show make an excellent early present everyone will enjoy. The Hanover Theatre for the Performing Arts is hosting numerous holiday shows, such as 'A Christmas Carol,' 'The Nutcracker,' and the Boston Pops Holiday Tour. The Saturday after Thanksgiving, catch the Trans-Siberian Orchestra at the DCU Center.

LOCALLY MADE

When you give a locally made gift, there's a strong chance it's also one of a kind. Central MA is home to a wide variety of skilled artisans, so you're bound to find a special present that shows how thoughtful you are when you visit one of these establishments.

CC LOWELL | WORCESTER, MA | Inside America's oldest art store, you may also find work by the artists who shop there! For even more art, keep an eye on their social channels for details about upcoming Maker Markets, typically hosted on Saturdays.

WACHU MAKIN? | HOLDEN, MA | This gift shop is home to a variety of artisans from the Wachusett and neighboring areas. You'll find woodwork, jewelry, essential oils, glasswork, and more.

VAILLANCOURT FOLK ART | SUTTON, MA | While the online store is excellent, we suggest visiting Vaillancourt Folk Art in person to meet the makers behind these treasured chalkware ornaments and collectable Santas. Not only can you watch the artisans work, but you'll also find a Christmas museum and displays that will inspire your holiday spirit.

WORCESTER PUBLIC MARKET | WORCESTER, MA | A huge benefit to holiday shopping at the Worcester Public Market is the variety of vendors at one destination. We recommend a gift set from Girly Girl Soaps, leather goods from Alan James Co., and a warm wool sweater from Tinker's Cart.

IDEAS FOR BIG SPENDERS

The holidays can be a great time to surprise your partner (or treat yourself) to the big ticket items you've been keeping your eye on all year.

JEWELRY & CRYSTAL | Gifted in their signature silver and purple packaging, presents from Sharfmans Jewelers in Worcester have sparked joy since 1937. From exquisite diamonds and gems to Seiko timepieces and Waterford crystal bowls, you'll find a wide selection of gift options. On the less expensive side, locals may also appreciate their ornaments featuring landmarks like the Burnside Fountain and Salisbury Mansion.

UPGRADE APPLIANCES | From stainless steel French door fridges to QLED 4K flatscreens, Percy's TV & Appliance is a local family business that stands the test of time. With the shortage of electronic components on the rise, it's the right time to shop what's in stock locally so you can enjoy your upgrades sooner than later.

Below: Vaillancourt Folk Art in Sutton offers chalkware ornaments, collectable Santas, and more. Photo courtesy of Vaillancourt Folk Art.



NOT SURE WHAT TO GIVE?

When you have no idea what you're looking for and prefer to shop at a bigger store, take a walk around **KLEM'S** in Spencer, MA, where you'll find a little bit of everything for anyone on your list. Or sit back from the comfort of home and shop their curated gift box section online, where they've done all the selection work for you!

The **WORCESTER ART MUSEUM'S GIFT SHOP** is an excellent choice for unique and artful gifts for people of any age. With gifts like inspiring activity books for kids, a beer stein made from a baseball bat, and a Monet Water Lillies tea set, your taste in gift-giving will be elevated simply because the museum's shop is as thoughtfully curated as their galleries.

When in doubt, why not wine? Head to Worcester's urban winery, **SAIL TO TRAIL WINE WORKS**, to shop by the bottle or give the gift of a wine club membership. In honor of the founder's grandfather, who fought fires in Worcester on Ladder 7 for 35 years, \$7 from every 6-Alarm or Let-It-Burn wine club shipment will be donated to the WFD Box 4 Special Services truck, that provides invaluable on-scene services to first responders in the city.

The City of Worcester and surrounding towns are full of excellent places to shop, so it couldn't be easier to buy local this season. For more ideas, visit DiscoverCentralMA.com and download our mobile app to discover itineraries that guide you on a local shopping spree. From the Worcester Women-Owned Shopping Trail to the Holiday & Winter Bucket List, consider us your local treasure trove for ideas on what to do and where to shop. ♥

Monique Messier is the Executive Director of Discover Central MA, the official destination marketing organization for Worcester and Central Massachusetts.



Above: Independent bookstore Tidepool BookShop LLC is located on Worcester's Chandler Street. Photo by Karen Pelletier.

WWLC COVERAGE, CONTINUED

everybody [...] We are the resilient ones. We are the women that kept this country running.”

She reassured the ballroom of women, “You are in a room with hundreds of others who intimately understand the challenges the pandemic presented to working women and care-givers — the setbacks and disappointments, the disruptions to our careers, the intense screen time, the extra effort, and the logistics to make everything happen,” and encouraged attendees to use the day as a way to “recharge, reenergize, and reinvent” themselves.

The day-long conference was headlined by two keynote speakers: Cynthia “Cynt” Marshall, CEO of the Dallas Mavericks; and Michelle Poler, author and founder of the social movement “Hello Fears.”

Ms. Marshall was hired as the NBA’s first Black female CEO in 2018. “I told Mark [Mark Cuban, owner of Dallas Mavs] basically, ‘I’m all in,’ and ‘all in’ means to me that we’re going to lead with INtent, INclusion, INsight, and INspiration,” she recalled.

Upon joining the Mavericks organization, Ms. Marshall said there were no women or people of color whatsoever in leadership positions for the team. Her sights set on cultural transformation, she completely evolved the company’s makeup within the first 100 days on the job by transforming her executive team to consist of 50% women and 50% people of color, for starters. She also ensured her staff were being paid equitably. “I can tell you right now, ladies, we do not have a gender pay equity issue at the Dallas Mavericks,” she said.

Ms. Marshall also spoke about key distinctions between diversity and inclusion, saying, “Diversity is about counting the numbers. Inclusion is about making the numbers count.” She explained ‘diversity’ often means making sure one person of a certain type has a seat at the table, but ‘inclusion’ takes it further by making sure that person is a valued part of the team who has a voice and is given the resources they need to succeed. In other words, she said, “Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance.”

Ms. Poler, a social entrepreneur, keynote speaker, and author of *Hello, Fears: Crush Your Comfort Zone and Become Who You’re Meant to Be*, was the afternoon keynote speaker. She founded the social movement “Hello Fears,” which empowered millions to step outside of their comfort zone, tap into their full potential, and live life to the fullest.

As someone who would describe herself as “comfortable” in life, but not necessarily “happy” or “fulfilled,” Ms. Poler realized (via a challenge from a professor of hers) that fear was the one obstacle getting in the way of her dream life. On a mission to “become braver,” she embarked on the project “100 Days Without Fear,” tackling a new fear everyday over 100 days — skydiving, getting a Brazilian wax, eating oysters, public speaking, and much more; documenting all the feats on YouTube along the way.

“People were not seeing a fearless girl online doing all these reckless things,” Ms. Poler said. “They were seeing a very terrified person showing up again and again because she’s working on herself.” And thus, after the 100 days, the project became a social movement which inspired many more to do the same.

Ms. Poler’s message to conference attendees was to get uncomfortable on purpose: “Make sure we can keep fear in its place and not let it hold us back from making all those bold decisions,” she said. She encouraged, instead of constantly asking, “What’s the worst that can happen?” start asking, “What’s the best that can happen?”

In between the keynote addresses were two breakout sessions consisting of four workshops each. They featured expert speakers and panelists from the local community who provided educational sessions and inspirational discussion around timely topics relevant to female professionals, including: work-life balance, motherhood, advancing your career post-pandemic, DE&I, practicing mindfulness, pandemic leadership, and leading through organizational change.

The day closed with recognition of the seven Worcester Public School (WPS) students in attendance. The young women were at the conference as part of the “Susan Mailman Aspiring Young Women Leaders Scholarship,” a fund that, each year, allows for up to 10 students enrolled in WPS to attend the conference free of charge and for one WPS senior to receive a financial award of \$1,000.

Sue Mailman is a long-time Chamber member who served as WWLC’s first committee chair and also served as chair of the Chamber’s board of directors at one point. This year, the young women selected as WPS scholarship recipients represented Doherty Memorial High School, South High Community School, University Park Campus School, Claremont Academy, Abby Kelley Foster Charter High School, and Burncoat High School.

The winner of the \$1,000 scholarship was Malia Montalvo, a senior at South High, and a soon-to-be first generation college student who plans to study sociology. Ms. Salmon thanked the WPS students for participating in the day and wished them all success, saying, “There is so much opportunity that lies ahead for you and the young women of your generation, and we can’t wait to see how you take control to seize it. You are our future leaders.”

WWLC 2021 was made possible by the generosity of presenting sponsors The Hanover Insurance Group and UMass Memorial Health, keynote sponsors Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts and Digital Federal Credit Union (DCU), and more than 30 other businesses and organizations.

“We’re proud to be long-time sponsors of this event because of the important impact it has on women in our community,” said Ms. Salmon on behalf of The Hanover. “This conference brings together strong female leaders from across our region and offers a space for them to advance their careers, skills, and networks, and to share their own experiences with others.”

Event organizers are already planning for the 13th annual conference, to be held June 16, 2022. *New York Times* bestselling author Luvvie Ajayi Jones is slated to be one of the speakers. A request for proposals (RFP) for workshop speakers will be out by the end of 2021; tickets will go on sale March 1, 2022. As more details become available, they can be found on the conference’s website, worcesterwomenleadership.com. ♥



Above: Author and Founder of the social movement Hello Fears, Michelle Poler, speaks to WWLC attendees about tackling their fears and living life to the fullest. Photo by Matt Wright.

Managing Difficult Times, Difficult Conversations: WWLC Workshops Offer Advice for Women Leaders

by ALLISON CHISOLM, CORRESPONDENT

C OVID-19 and the country’s heightened consciousness of racial inequities have created difficult work environments. Two Worcester Women’s Leadership Conference workshops held Oct. 28 offered practical advice to women leaders navigating uncharted workplace challenges.

At times, the leadership stresses seemed never-ending in the UMass Memorial Health system. In a panel presentation, “Leading through Lemons: How to Support and Inspire When the Going Gets Tough,” five female department chairs at UMass Memorial Medical Group reflected on their experiences during those first weeks of the pandemic and how they manage their staff and themselves differently because of it.

One speaker started as department head a month before the first wave, another had to lead with her writing arm in a sling, a third was hired mid-pandemic. All five addressed the uncertainty and fear – their own and their staff’s – when little was known about the virus and patient death rates were higher than few had ever encountered.

“I remember the day it became a reality for me,” said OB/GYN Department Chair Tiffany Moore Simas, MD, MPH, Med, FACOG. Faculty members reported that many women late in their pregnancies in New York suddenly wanted to transfer their care to Massachusetts. “I became very aware that ... the scope of the decisions we were making had ripple effects,” she said. Her position as department leader morphed overnight to community and regional leader.

More communication, more meetings were the panelists’ constant refrain. Nightly emails became a form of journaling for Moore Simas. Frequent town halls open to the entire community were hallmarks for M. Diane McKee, MD, MS, as she led the Department of Family Medicine & Community Health.

“These were important for me to convey information that was rapidly changing,” said Dr. McKee. “But it was almost as important for me to hear what was bothering people.”

Several leaders felt strongly they needed to be physically present and available for staff. Founding Dermatology Chair Mary Maloney, MD, knew that her rotator cuff surgery recovery didn’t affect her ears or her mouth. Her visibility gave people a sense of security, she said, seeing “someone was still leading the department and making the decisions that needed to be made.” Others took hospital shifts wherever needed.

Connecting with her team on a personal level was essential for Department of Ophthalmology Chair Shlomit Schaal, MD, PhD, MHCM. Weekend calls to each staffer had her asking how they were doing, then giving them “the space and psychological safety to answer truthfully.” Panelists also recommended frequent signs of appreciation, posting thank-you notes written by community members, and bringing in special treats, recognizing the demands their jobs placed on their families as well.

Audience questions led to discussions of self-care for leaders under so much pressure. “We had to be very, very intentional,” said Psychiatry Chair Kimberly Yonkers, MD. Walks in nature, swimming, mandolin playing, and reading novels were among the activities that gave them the energy and strength to lead and guide others.

An afternoon interactive session with two Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts diversity, equity, and inclusion leaders, “DE&I: Creating and Sustaining Workspaces that Promote Inclusion and Wellness,” had participants sharing their current roles before learning new approaches to difficult workplace communication, whether remote or in-person.

Presenters Maria Fernandes-Dominique and Nicole Ferraro combined technical tools and wellness interventions as resources to facilitate conversations. Ms. Fernandes-Dominique reviewed ever-changing definitions of inclusion and belonging — creating a welcoming space and once there, feeling recognized and respected.

Ms. Ferraro practiced breathing and body work to help focus facilitators’ energy.

Before a meeting, Ms. Fernandes-Dominique asked attendees to examine their role, who to partner with, and how they can be a safe “container” for the emotions likely to emerge, and what outcomes they want. Establish group agreements for honesty and confidentiality.

Using the “5 Cs continuum,” she walked through alternative responses to unwelcome behavior, such as encountering past racist social media messages. In today’s culture, many “call out” or “cancel” the offending author, making public demands for behavior changes coupled with punitive consequences, such as job loss.

Consider “call in” instead, she said, using active listening skills for difficult dialogues with others while respecting their differences. Without those skills, simply “call on” them, asking they consider their actions, but not offering them a way to learn how to change. Or “call it off,” disengaging from the conversation, she said.

Attendees at both workshops gained new leadership tools for unanticipated conditions. ♥

Note: UMass Memorial Health was a presenting sponsor of the 2021 conference; Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts was a keynote sponsor.

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FOR BUSINESS



Starting up in Worcester is a Game Changer

INSIGHT FROM A PROGRAM ALUMNA & SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS OWNER *by* GISELLE RIVERA FLORES, CO-OWNER OF CRATE AND HOWL



Entrepreneurship is not for the faint of heart and the notion that it is an easy alternative to a life of corporate ladder climbing is far from the truth. The life-changing risks filled with hopes of “later rewards,” the financial constraints of pouring every dollar into the success of the brand; and the multi-role tasks of everyday duties is draining, exhausting, and never-ending; and yet, we are obsessed with the icon of an entrepreneur. We thrive on the ideas of success and what it will mean to our personal unlimited potential and to the doors it will open for the future generation. It’s a thrill that can never be replicated. A thrill that can only be supported and understood through the networks of other thrill-seekers that want to water the seeds of labor and watch the growth unfold with enthusiastic cheers.

That network of thrill-seekers lays heavily within the dynamics of StartUp Worcester. As a program intended to provide wrap-around support, services, and space to upcoming entrepreneurs, StartUp Worcester is one of the most unique business opportunities offered in the city. With access to mentorships, workshops about capital sourcing and branding, and brainstorming sessions among peers, the program allows entrepreneurs to discuss the various facets of entrepreneurship and

gain better insight into how to manage the daunting topics of business without compromising time nor effort to make a business successful.

As an alumnus of the program, there is a great level of respect for others who have decided to launch or grow their brands through StartUp Worcester and dedicate their time to learning as they go.

For me, it became a platform to solidify my concepts and boost my confidence through the perfection of my business pitch, my brand, and my overall perspective on the level of impact I wanted to create. I created and launched The Learning Hub, a STEAM learning program hyperfocused on increasing STEM and art accessibility through free and low-cost programming for elementary school students. At the start of the program, I entered as a fiscally-sponsored organization with a retail space on Pleasant Street. After a week, I rebranded, left my retail space, and restructured my brand to enhance accessibility of the program through mobility. Almost instantly, my brand took off.

This quick change came after a conversation with my SBA mentor who helped me understand how I was limiting my reach by enforcing my location as the only way to teach classes. Within the month, I created marketing and collateral material and started to visit the areas and neighborhoods in which I wanted to make the greatest impact. I started to see other educational institutions as potential partners who shared some of the same interests as The Learning Hub. Our passion



for increasing educational resources modeled by hands-down learning became a common denominator when deciding where I wanted to teach. The model of teaching in libraries was born, and from there, The Learning Hub became synonymous with STEAM learning and we began to expand to other library locations such as the Wayland Library, the Concord Library, and the Lincoln Library, to name a few.

Although The Learning Hub was my first, official business in the city of Worcester, I have since started Be Studios — a photography co-working studio focused on the elevation of accessibility to the creative fields for people of color and a platform for work display to spark conversation about racial inequalities, neighborhood empowerment, and the important role of culture within the fabric of society through visual arts, storytelling, and personal experience. And I helped my 14-year-old daughter launch her first business, Crate & Howl — a dog boutique specializing in healthy dog treats, high-quality yet affordable dog accessories, and the enhancement of the dog owner community through educational programs and events.

I give a lot of credit to StartUp Worcester for giving me a platform to start my journey because for many entrepreneurs, starting is the hardest part, and this program helped ease the struggle and allowed me to expand beyond my original ideas. ♥

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LIFETIME CONNECTIONS

What Leadership Worcester Taught Me

by **THEONA SCOLA**, DIRECTOR OF STRATEGIC DONOR OUTREACH, WORCESTER POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE, LEADERSHIP WORCESTER '21



I'm incredibly grateful for the opportunity to have met and collaborated with such a diverse network of talented individuals. While I was surprised to learn about the critical issues and challenges in Worcester, I left most every monthly session extremely motivated and empowered to help drive change. I have grown in my understanding of how interconnected the city of Worcester is and the extent to which collaboration has on impactful change for our community. I hope I can

make a difference and be part of the change that leads to a better Worcester. Please join me in celebrating my colleagues – Leadership Worcester 2021 – who, like me, are passionate, dedicated, and driven to lead Worcester.”

I often refer to my Leadership Worcester declaration for inspiration and motivation to continue to find ways to make a difference. The 11-month Leadership Worcester program was an enlightening experience in so many ways! I recognized during our Opening Retreat programming how driven and like-minded every individual in that room was: each one of us was invested in Worcester and was truly committed to helping drive change in our community. Learning about each team member's experience, knowledge, and community contributions was inspiring. Every month of the program, I learned more about the challenges and opportunities for growth in Worcester, all while developing strong connections with my teammates. Our discussions were thoughtful and provided a breadth of perspective.

The challenges that we learned about during the program were complex and not easily solved. In many cases, I was inspired to contribute to a solution, though sometimes it wasn't obvious how I could help. I left every session feeling motivated and inspired to tackle the challenges that had been presented to the group. And,

more importantly, I felt empowered and prepared to act. Eleven months later, during graduation, we listened as each team member recited their declaration, personal and reflective of our leadership intentions. While that day marked the conclusion of the program, I realized while listening to all 27 leadership declarations that this marked a beginning for many of us. I felt a sense of responsibility to put my words into action. I am compelled to be part of some measurable difference in one of the areas about which I felt passionate.

Supporting local leaders to enable others to have this experience is one of those passions. The Leadership Worcester program has been so transformative to my understanding of our community and the realization to how impactful we can be if we think and work collaboratively. Creating this diverse network fosters a broader and more diverse experience. Helping to alleviate financial barriers to broaden the participant pool is the reason the Leadership Worcester Alumni Scholarship Fund was established. There is a need for tuition support, especially if we want to foster applicants from diverse backgrounds, industries, and sectors. I'm extremely proud to be chairing the committee that is leading this initiative and look forward to seeing the impact and outcomes of the program. Details on the alumni-supported scholarship fund can be found on the program website, leadershipworcester.com.

The Leadership Worcester experience has provided significant opportunity to be involved and to help drive change in many different areas. The experience has fostered a rich and diverse network of problem-solvers. I find inspiration when learning about how each of us continue to make strides in strengthening our community, and I feel a sense of pride to be part of this growing network. The connections that I have made have led to new collaborations, introductions, and opportunities. The supportive and collaborative ecosystem of the Leadership Worcester network is an influential force that helps support our growing city. ♥



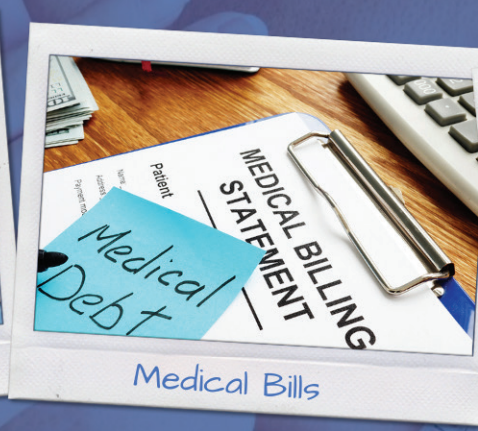
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MEET RUTH SEWARD

Coordinator of Night Life Education at Worcester Public Schools

By DOMINIQUE GOYETTE-CONNERTY, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS

In each edition, Chamber Exchange: The Newspaper includes one question-and-answer-style interview with a Chamber member who’s really making a change in the community. This month, I sat down with Ruth Seward, the new coordinator of Worcester Night Life Continuing Education at Worcester Public Schools (WPS). Night Life provides lifelong learners opportunities to develop hands-on skills and knowledge for employment or just for the fun of it, all at an affordable price (and sometimes even discounted, depending on grants and funding for the class). Ms. Seward took over on February 1, 2021, when the coronavirus pandemic still prevented many in-person activities; accordingly, Night Life classes were only being held virtually at the time. Below are excerpts from the interview with Ms. Seward, edited for length and clarity.

When you started this position in February, pandemic conditions still required classes to be held remotely. As of September, classes are back in person at Worcester Tech. How’s it been going so far? And what are the benefits to being in person?

I was holding my breath for the fall because this was a real learning experience for me. I have not done in-person classes in the past. When I arrived in February, we had a few licensure classes that were being conducted online. So, it’s been fun to piece everything together and really it’s been interesting for me to visit classes where there’s a lot going on — like the welding classes, plumbing code & theory, electrical code & theory [...] all of those classes have been really wonderful to have in person because it allows for hands-on learning. Especially with the trades classes, you do need the element of hands-on learning to be successful. It’s been great for people to come in and have more than just class books to look at.

We say it all the time at the Chamber: the No. 1 issue we hear from our member businesses is finding talent and lack of access to a skilled workforce. How does Night Life play a role in solving that problem?

We’re part of the bigger picture for filling jobs. We have community partners who are very interested in providing good training to either unemployed or underemployed individuals. One of the hands-on and skills-building programs we offer is our welding program — we provide a partnership between English-as-a-second-language (ESL) training and basic welding training & exposure. This helps people who are navigating English while trying to learn a good job skill so they can get a better-paying career.

We’ve been partnering with the Worcester Jobs Fund, MassHire, and DESE (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education) to provide quality programming. One of the new programs I started up this fall is diesel technology and that is being housed over at South High through a DESE grant. [...] We run a certified clinical medical assistant program and that’s a partnership with UMass Memorial Health and MassHire. [After 14 weeks of training,] we funnel every student into an externship over at UMass, and sometimes at Reliant Medical Group. We’ve had an almost 100% job placement rate doing that program. We’re [also] running a [Commercial Driver’s License] CDL program again with WPS transportation department as well as MassHire. As you know, there’s a lot of opportunity for bus drivers and the first step to getting their CDL is to get the CDL permit; we have a really fantastic instructor that comes to Worcester Tech to teach everybody the ins and outs of driving a school bus. So those are examples of some of the programs we provide. We’re always willing to work with employers. For instance, if somebody had a welding manufacturing job that they really needed people for, we can tailor our welding class to that [...] We’re very willing to navigate what it is that a specific employer needs.

Beyond workforce training and licensure classes, Night Life also offers community classes. So it’s safe to say you really have something for everyone, right? Yes, we have all kinds of training classes and those include what I like to call “community engagement



"We're part of the bigger picture for filling jobs. We have community partners who are very interested in providing good training to either unemployed or underemployed individuals."

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classes.” So yes, we have our plumbing and electrical code & theory, our CDL, diesel technical classes, phlebotomy, [and many more], but we also offer classes that are really for enjoyment: basic quilting, photography, golf, stained glass, baking, exercise classes. If someone’s just interested in a hobby, we had an Adirondack chair making class — I mean, how fun is that? In addition, [we have] soft-skill-building classes, like how to start up your own business, and basic computer classes for if you’re trying to re-enter the workforce and just forgot how to do [Microsoft] Excel.

Prior to starting at Night Life, you were the program coordinator of the nonprofit organization Worcester Tree Initiatives. What is it about that position that prepared you for the role you have now with WPS?

When I worked for the Worcester Tree Initiative, I engaged a lot with different community partners, and that’s exactly what I’m doing now at Night Life. I also was able to develop my own education programming, class series, and tree stewardship programs. So, I had to reach out to a lot of different types of people with a lot of different expertise. I coordinated many instructors and also advertised in the community. My favorite part of working with trees was working with people to engage with trees. I just really enjoy interacting with the community and interacting with all kinds of different people, and that’s really worked well in the Night Life job.

If there’s one major lesson you’ve already taken away from this new position that you could pass on to others, what would it be?

The one major takeaway for me is recognizing there are valuable and good paying jobs that you don’t necessarily need to go to college for. And that’s really a prominent conversation we’re having a lot, especially with this generation. Night Life is part of a bigger goal to make tech schools more open to the community. ♥

For more information on Night Life and a list of available courses, visit WorcesterNightLife.org, or call the office at (508) 751-7612.

Auburn Goes Big to Bring New Business to Town

by AUBURN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE DIGITAL MARKETING COMMITTEE

Auburn Town Meeting Members passed several zoning bylaw amendments at Town Meeting on October 26. The zoning bylaw amendments aim to ensure Auburn remains competitive for commercial development. The zoning bylaw warrant articles include increasing maximum building heights in commercial and industrial zones, adding and/or amending the description of uses, and updating the Zoning Bylaw use chart. Appropriate zoning is essential to community development because it dictates land usage. Building communities that “work” – inclusive, healthy, resilient, and sustainable – requires intensive policy coordination and investment choices. There has not been a complete substantial update to the Zoning Bylaws in Auburn since 1941.

The Town of Auburn Economic Development Strategic Plan, completed in 2017, outlines a number of strengths, weaknesses, and strategies to help facilitate economic development in Auburn. Much of the report identifies a need to review the current zoning bylaws and make strategic changes consistent with economic development opportunities, including changes to height restrictions. Closely related, a few interviewees included in the report felt that outdated zoning designations may be the biggest deterrent to development in Auburn (Economic Dev. Plan pg. 20). Warrant articles # 21 & 22 will help ensure that zoning bylaws are updated to match economic opportunities for today and tomorrow.

In the past 20 years, there has been an increasing desire for greater ceiling heights for warehouses and commercial buildings. Auburn currently allows a maximum building height of 35 feet in our industrial and commercial zones. Due to this restriction, the existing building heights are not always conducive to attracting more modern uses to Auburn (i.e. biotech, high-tech, modern distribution). Many of these modern uses are economic development incubators and bring higher paying jobs to the region. Recently, other surrounding towns changed their height restrictions due to demand. Sutton recently approved a maximum height of 70 feet. Charlton recently changed their maximum height to 75 feet (up to 110 feet with special permit). Oxford, Upton, Millbury, Spencer, Uxbridge, Leicester, Dudley, and Webster all have maximum building heights of 45 feet to 55 feet, well over the allowable 35 feet in Auburn.

Auburn cannot rely on location alone to attract business anymore. Auburn has some of the lowest building heights for commercial and industrial areas and limited available commercial land. Commercial investment helps generate revenue for town services, creates new jobs, and presents opportunities to improve infrastructure. Additionally, many commercial developments utilize and promote more sustainable and environmentally friendly features and practices. It’s important to note that the town is not proposing allowing 80-foot buildings in residential zones. These height changes aim to facilitate more development along commercial corridors and industrial zones.

Large, horizontal buildings not only require more land, but they also create difficulties for public safety. Through discussions with the Auburn Fire Department, they mentioned that many of the larger, low-rise commercial and industrial buildings in town present more difficulties with fire remediation than 80-foot-tall buildings. For example, if the Auburn Mall was turned vertically, it would be as high as the Empire State Building. Although this building has sprinklers and fire alarm protection, it does not require increased structural fire resistance ratings, smoke-proof exit enclosures, smoke control systems, and/or smoke removal systems — all of which are required for “high-rise” buildings. In Massachusetts, the state building code classifies any building over 70 feet as a “high-rise.” This height threshold includes additional code triggers that are designed to provide increased occupant and firefighter safety, as well as increasing the overall building resistance to fire and smoke.

In addition to raising the commercial and industrial building heights, it’s important to reflect current/more modern businesses on the town’s zoning use chart. Currently, the town doesn’t always have an appropriate classification for newer businesses. An accurate and updated table of uses will help facilitate appropriate development in areas of town.

Examples of added uses include: bed and breakfast or inn, indoor amusement or recreation facility (e.g. escape room, trampoline park), outdoor recreation facility (e.g. mini golf course), fitness services (e.g. martial arts, gym, dance studio), vehicular charging stations, auction house or artist gallery, brewery/winery/brewpub, conference center, grocery store or market, specialty market, gift shop, research facilities (biotech), collaborative workspace and technology incubator. ❤️

Q&A CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

this important first meeting with the state. Lt. Gov. Polito was a strong advocate throughout this process, working closely with the City and business community.

What other important moments or milestones happened during this process?

City Manager Augustus and his team (including outside counsel Jeff Mullan) worked extremely hard throughout the process with challenging negotiations and construction hurdles amid a pandemic. However, there were three other moments that I thought were important to demonstrate to Larry Lucchino, his staff, and team owners, that the business community in Central Mass would be supportive of the team if they came to Worcester. First, when word got out that the city of Worcester was being considered by the Red Sox, Worcester Railers Hockey Club owner Cliff Rucker invited Larry Lucchino to a Railers game. It was a day game with 5,000 – 6,000 Worcester Public School students in attendance. The place had great energy and Larry and his team witnessed firsthand the broad array of corporate sponsors of the Railers via their advertising at the DCU Center. Second, as negotiations with the City were progressing, a number of city business leaders gathered with Larry Lucchino and Red Sox brass and told him we had secured more than double the number of corporate sponsors they had asked for and that it was time to make an announcement. Third, the Crowley family and Polar Beverages’ commitment for the naming rights of Polar Park really helped put things over the top.

How do you think Covid will impact the timeline of the ballpark development district?

Like the construction of the ballpark, it has delayed things. However, I am an optimist. First, The Cove’s market-rate housing and retail development, as well as Boston Capital’s affordable housing plan – which were not originally in the plan – have been added and are moving forward. The site work for Madison Properties’ 300 units of housing has begun and the parking garage is nearly complete. There is a heightened interest from life sciences companies in Worcester given our biotech and health care cluster. In just a few years, this mixed-use district will be complete, thereby adding density that will assist area businesses; encourage pedestrian activity that is less reliant on cars; and knit the Canal District and Green Island neighborhoods back together with downtown, Main South, lower Chandler Street, and the Vernon Hill neighborhoods. The benefit to that is invaluable to the long-term vibrancy of the city. ❤️

CHAMBER AND WBDC LAUNCH NEW ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & RECRUITMENT VIDEO FOR WORCESTER

By DOMINIQUE GOYETTE-CONNERTY, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS

In an effort to capture Worcester’s momentum, energy, and great strides in recent years, the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce and the Worcester Business Development Corporation (WBDC) released a new economic development and recruitment video this fall, A City Redefined (2021).

The two-minute video is an updated version of the Chamber’s original A City Redefined video created in 2016.

Produced by Chamber member Pagano Media and with support from members AbbVie, Fallon Health, and UniBank, the video highlights Worcester’s many attributes and touts the region as a great place to develop, invest, do business, and reside.

“Worcester’s come a long way in just the past five years. With the opening of Polar Park and arrival of the Worcester Red Sox, construction of surrounding developments in the Canal District, establishment of The Reactory biomanufacturing campus, and 2020 U.S. Census data revealing Worcester is the fastest growing city in New England as the population has surpassed 205,000 — to name only a few bright spots — the city has, appropriately, garnered regional and national attention,” said Worcester Chamber President and CEO Timothy P. Murray. “This video works to shine a spotlight on all of Worcester’s positive growth and will help us at the Chamber continue our mission to Recruit, Retain, and Incubate businesses and talent.”

“We are happy to partner with the Chamber on this important recruitment tool for the City of Worcester. Pagano Media perfectly captured the incredible momentum Worcester is experiencing, paving the way for future private investment,” said WBDC President and CEO Craig L. Blais.

The video will be used as a recruitment tool, shown to potential developers and investors, site selectors, and companies considering a move or expansion to the area. Artfully demonstrating the activity and energy in the region, the goal of A City Redefined (2021) is to continue to attract developers, businesses, top talent, and residents to Worcester.

For longtime Worcester resident and business owner Joe Pagano, the video’s creator, A City Redefined (2021) is more than another successful client project – it takes on a personal meaning, too. “This project gave voice to my experience and convictions about Worcester. When my grandparents stepped off the train at Union Station 100+ years ago, the grit and innovation that defined the city then, is driving our future today,” said Joe Pagano, Pagano Media’s president and founder. “I’d say that’s cause for optimism for the next 100+ years.”

The video can be seen on the Chamber’s website homepage, worcesterchamber.org, and on their YouTube channel. ❤️

MEDICARE CHECKUP:

Here are Answers to Three Common Medicare Questions.

by **DEB DAVIAU**, VICE PRESIDENT OF MEDICARE AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF NAVICARE, FALLON HEALTH



If you're a baby boomer, chances are you can tell when fall has arrived. Not by the changing colors of the leaves or the cooler temperatures, but rather the amount of advertising targeting people with Medicare.

Medicare beneficiaries — predominantly people ages 65 and over — are in the midst of what's called Medicare's Annual Election Period, or AEP. Savvy boomers know how important this

time of year is to review their plan, see if there have been any changes to premiums or copays, and decide if there's another plan that is better suited to their needs. Changes made during the AEP become effective on January 1 of the following year.

All of the information and options can be a bit overwhelming, even to seasoned Medicare shoppers. I get it. For years, I've been helping people, including my own mother, navigate this complex and intimidating process — and have learned a lot along the way. Here are three questions I'm often asked:

1. As a Medicare beneficiary, what should I be doing right now?

This is the time to figure out how your health care needs and your health may change over the next year.

A few questions I recommend asking yourself are:

- Do I take any prescription drugs that my current plan does not cover?
- Have I recently developed a new illness or disability that requires different coverage?
- Has my financial status changed?

The next step is to remember that you don't have to go through this process alone. With more than 40 years of experience under our belts, Fallon Health has become a trusted name in Medicare. We've been innovating in this space for decades. In fact, Fallon was the first health plan in the country to offer a Medicare Advantage plan.

Our team of local experts is available to help simplify things, where and when it's most convenient for you. We're hosting in-person presentations across our service area on various dates throughout October and November.

Online presentations are available in English and Spanish, and one-on-one meetings can also be scheduled. You can also give us a call and speak with one of our representatives.

2. What if I'm happy with my plan?

If you're happy with your plan — hopefully a Fallon plan — that's great. You won't have to do a thing. You should automatically roll into your 2022 plan. If you're not currently our member, we suggest making sure your plan is still offered in your service area.

If you do have any questions, Fallon is here to help. Our experts would be happy to discuss your options with you. Call us toll-free at: 1-888-377-1980, from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., seven days a week.

3. What if I plan to work past 65? How does that impact Medicare?

According to Pew Research Center and the Social Security Administration, a wave of baby boomers is retiring — 10,000 every day. If that does not match your plans, that is okay.

If you have job-based health insurance through your (or your spouse's) current job, you don't have to sign up for Medicare while you are still working. You can wait until you stop working or you lose your health insurance, whichever comes first.

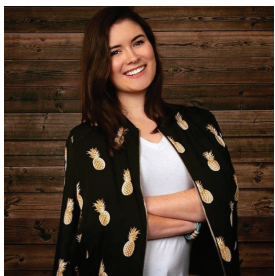
If you don't have health insurance through your employer, or your spouse's, you should review the options that are available to you. Medicare can be confusing and if you enroll late, you could be responsible for penalties — in the form of late fees. This is the time to get the information you need, from a trusted resource.

Now, more than ever, health — and health care — are top of mind. The bottom line is, you should start early and be informed. With the right help, you can have the confidence you need to make the best decisions possible. ♥

Deb Daviau serves as Vice President of Medicare and Executive Director of NaviCare for Fallon Health. An expert in innovative health care programs that care for those who need it most, Deb advocates for solutions that focus on helping older adults — and support working caregivers — including PACE, SCO and Medicare Advantage.

WHAT I KNOW ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

by **ADDY BRENNAN**, CEO OF PINEAPPLE GIRL PRODUCTIONS



In today's world, it's a need, not a want. You don't need to post the #ThrowbackThursday picture of your vacation, but as a business, you do need to create credibility and establish trust with your customers.

Anyone who has gone on a date in the past decade can attest: you meet someone (online or in person), you get their name, and you look up their social media profiles. You find their likes,

dislikes, values, and you start to create connections. The same rules apply with businesses!

Trust between a consumer and a business can create sales — plural! Once you establish trust in your business, the customer knows they can go to you with their needs. The customer also knows how to show support for your business beyond a direct purchase. Gone are the days of "I got you this online." Thanks to social media, we welcome: "I got you this awesome gift from [insert YOUR business name here]! You should follow them on..." Statements like this can grow your business.

What I learned from being a social media manager is, as a business, you need it. You need to be strategic about it — share your "why," earn your next follower, show them why they should be your next customer, and as a result, grow your business.

Looking for strategic social media management for your business? Contact Pineapple Girl Productions today! ♥

Note: Pineapple Girl Productions is a graduate (and current sponsor) of the Worcester Chamber's StartUp Worcester program.

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Food Hub Member Connecting People Through Cookie Decorating

by DOMINIQUE GOYETTE-CONNERTY, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS

The holidays are traditionally a popular time for decorating cookies with loved ones. But a Worcester Regional Food Hub member is taking this oftentimes seasonal activity year-round with her business.

The path to becoming a small business owner and professional “cookier” (as in: a baker who makes cookies) wasn’t a straight and clear one for Veronica Adams. A 2008 graduate of Worcester State University with degrees in biology, chemistry, and Spanish; Ms. Adams worked in a lab for eight years at a biopharmaceutical company.

Years into her career, she started considering a major change. “I realized I wasn’t feeling completely fulfilled all the time in terms of what I was doing, so I started soul searching,” she recalled. Ms. Adams spent two years contemplating her options, trying to get to the root of what it was she really wanted to do.

Baking was something she’d always enjoyed — so much so, she would bring baked goods to her coworkers regularly. Wowed by her tasty treats, they would encourage her to open a bakery, but that wasn’t of interest to Ms. Adams. Recognizing that she “liked the low pressure of baking for [coworkers]” and her favorite part was decorating cupcakes, Ms. Adams thought she could try her hand at decorating sugar cookies.

After taking some decorating classes — and discovering her talent for it — Veronica decided to open a cookie business.

She established The Cookie Lady’s Daughter (TCLD) at the end of 2018, developing it part time

while still working at her biopharma job full time. About a year-and-a-half later, she was able to take TCLD full time.

“The Cookie Lady’s Daughter” name is a tribute to her mother, Sue Adams, who taught Veronica how to bake when she was young. One of five children, Veronica remembers how her stay-at-home mom would go to their father’s place of work with all siblings in tow to deliver dozens of cookies. The drop-offs became a weekly affair, and Sue became known around the office as “The Cookie Lady.”

“She was an amazing mom, but that was another aspect of her life where she was able to spread joy so easily to people by just bringing them freshly-baked cookies,” Veronica said. “So, when I decided to open this business, I wanted to make sure my mom was included in some way.”

At first, TCLD specialized in custom cookie orders for events, then geared toward selling decorated cookies at markets. Now, Ms. Adams is taking the business in a different direction: focusing on cookie decorating events and take-home activities.

TCLD offers DIY decorating kits (six cookies, three bags of icing, sprinkles, and photo of decorated cookies for inspiration), paint your own cookies (cookie with a stenciled image like a coloring page that comes with an edible paint palette), “Sip and Ice” nights (cookie decorating classes taught by Ms. Adams at local businesses like Redemption Rock Brewery and Sail to Trail Wine Works), and other cookie decorating classes for corporate events and team bonding activities (which



Left: Veronica Adams is owner and cookier at The Cookie Lady’s Daughter. Right: Worcester-themed cookies from TCLD. Photos courtesy of The Cookie Lady’s Daughter.

she’s done virtually to engage a company’s remote employees).

“I think the cookie activities get people more involved,” Ms. Adams said of the decision to take her business in this decorating direction. “People are so proud of themselves when they’re done decorating cookies. Kids will come up to me at cookie events to show me the cookie when they’re done decorating — and that’s the feeling I really do this for, [as opposed to] them eating a cookie that I decorated.”

Eventually outgrowing her residential kitchen in Millbury, Ms. Adams gave the Food Hub a call to express her business’ need for more kitchen space and larger ovens. “The Food Hub really enabled me to scale up and produce more so I could reach more customers,” Ms. Adams said of becoming a member. Additionally, their expanded hours “made it a lot easier to run my business while still doing my corporate job.”

Ms. Adams also cited the access to a network of other local bakers as a benefit. Moreover, she said the availability of resources for food entrepreneurs like info on wholesale and pop-up events are helpful. “Sometimes, when you own a business, it can be very lonely. So knowing that I have a little circle I can reach out to is great,” said Ms. Adams. ❤️



“

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– Andrew, WCU Member
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WARM WELCOME: RAILERS SUPPORTERS COME OUT STRONG IN DCU CENTER OPENER

by JOE MCDONALD, TELEGRAM & GAZETTE REPORTER

Worcester ECHL franchise aims to build community brand and winning hockey, and appears to be accomplishing both.

When the hometown coach wears a scally cap on the bench during Opening Night, the message is clear: The Worcester Railers mean business. Railers fans have been clamoring for hockey after a nearly two-year layoff due to COVID-19, so David Cuniff’s choice in headwear seemed appropriate for the Heart of the Commonwealth.

“It says he better win,” Railers owner Cliff Rucker said with a smile. The Railers responded with a 4-3 victory over the Maine Mariners (Boston Bruins’ ECHL affiliate) in front of 10,508 in attendance Saturday, October 23, at the DCU Center.

The Railers’ theme during the league shutdown, and especially now that the game is back, focuses on community. The team found creative ways to stay engaged and actually built its brand. The organization’s dedication was evident with the turnout for Opening Night.

“It means a lot to the community. People want to have some sense of normalcy and the ability to get together in a safe way is a wonderful thing for a lot of people, the team, the community, the staff, the players — everybody,” Mr. Rucker said.

PLENTY OF ATMOSPHERE BEFORE GAME

The celebration began two hours before puck drop outside the DCU Center with music blaring and fans excited for the start of a new season. Fans enjoyed a block party and then an entertaining hockey game.

“It’s great to have hockey back,” Railers Chief Operating Officer Mike Myers said. “It’s validation that after that long layoff you’re able to keep pace and keep relevant and keep in the public eye with different community initiatives. We really beefed the team up during the offseason to be able to fill the building again. It shows this is a hockey town.

“This fan base wants to see hockey back, and it’s nice in this crazy time of COVID and everything around us that schools, businesses, and families still want to come out and still want to participate in activities like sporting events.”

The community presence was strong Saturday night, including many youth hockey teams and other local organizations in attendance.

In fact, there were 4,500 group tickets sold for Opening Night, along with another 1,500 season ticketholders in the building. There also was a surge in full-season flex packs and sponsors leading up to the season. It was all on display Saturday night.

“You want to keep pace, and our goal is always to knock it out of the park on Opening Night and then run downhill from there,” Mr. Myers said. “Everybody in this building, if they have a great time tonight, they’re going to want to come back for another game, and that’s our goal from Day 1 to game No. 36. We want to provide a nice, family-friendly and affordable night out in the middle of winter.”

Sure, the pomp and circumstance is important, and fans enjoy the family atmosphere, but the product on the ice needs to be relevant. This level of hockey tends to be about the entertainment, but the Railers said they want to also focus on winning.

PURSUING A WINNER, A CHAMPIONSHIP

“We have an owner who has made it very clear that winning is something we need to do, and it’s something that has alluded us the past three years,” Mr. Myers said.



Above, left: Railers players celebrate after a goal. The team won their Opening Night game 4-3 over the Maine Mariners. Photo by Rich LeBlanc.
Above, right: Railers players celebrate after a goal. The team won their Opening Night game 4-3 over the Maine Mariners. Photo by Rich LeBlanc.



“In (2017-18) we had a good run and reached the playoffs, but we want to bring a championship to Worcester.”

That’s the No.1 goal.

It’s still too early in the season to know the exact identity of the Railers, but the owner’s message is also clear that he wants a solid product on and off the ice.

“First and foremost, we are part of the community, so I want them to represent the team to the community in an appropriate way, in an appropriate fashion to give back,” Mr. Rucker said. “And, I want to win. We have two principles: We want to make a big impact in the community, and we want to win the Kelly Cup. What do I want my team to do? I want them to win.”

After an impressive pregame ceremony that focused on the Railers community accomplishments during the pandemic, it was time for hockey after a 595-day hiatus. The DCU Center was packed. It was full of energy, and fans were thrilled to participate.

“We’re proud of that,” Mr. Rucker said. “We’d like to continue to do our part.”

After the final buzzer sounded and the Railers had their first victory of the 2021-22 season, a fan walked by Mr. Myers and said, “What a great night. Thank you.”

Hockey is back. Maybe the team’s next giveaway should be scally caps. ♥

Joe McDonald is a sports reporter at the Worcester Telegram & Gazette, where this story originally ran.



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A tip of the cap to the Worcester area collegiate athletic directors at Anna Maria College, Assumption University, Nichols College, and Worcester State University for establishing the first “WooCup” men’s hockey tournament. There was some terrific college hockey played at the Fidelity Bank Worcester Ice Center on Halloween weekend between these area hockey teams. Nichols knocked off Worcester State in the Friday opener, and later that evening, Anna Maria defeated Assumption in a thrilling overtime period and shootout between the Amcats and Greyhounds. In Sunday’s championship game, Nichols defeated Anna Maria in overtime. Assumption defeated Worcester State in the consolation game. Hopefully a women’s “WooCup Hockey Challenge” is in the works.

Sports Street is still buzzing over the big sports weekend that featured the Worcester Railers home opener at the DCU Center and the Holy Cross Football team playing the school’s Edward Bennett Williams Classic homecoming weekend game at Polar Park. The Railers defeated the Maine Mariners 4-3 in an up-and-down thriller in front of more than 10,000 people — the second-largest attendance in Railers history. Earlier in the day, Polar Park was sold out as the Holy Cross Crusaders defeated Colgate 42-10. This, coupled with performances at The Hanover Theatre and Palladium, had the city alive with activity at local businesses.

A new must-visit for sports fans and history buffs is the recently opened Major Taylor Museum that has been incorporated into the redevelopment of the old Worcester County Courthouse on Main Street by the owners of the building, Trinity Financial. Marshall “Major” Taylor, a world champion cyclist who came to Worcester as a teenager and made the city home for most of his life, was the true pioneer in terms of athletes breaking the color barrier, including in bike racing, which was exclusively white. Taylor became a world-renowned cycling champion in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s.

SPORTS STREET Mass Pirates are Champions, Major Taylor Museum Opens

by TIMOTHY P. MURRAY, PRESIDENT & CEO



Above: Mass Pirates Founder, Co-Owner, & President Jawad Yatim receives a key to the City of Worcester from Mayor Petty at a rally celebrating the team’s championship win. Photo by Dominique Goyette-Connerty.

He overcame racism and sometimes violent threats to integrate the sport of bike racing. As Todd Balf, author of *Major: A Black Athlete, a White Era, & the Fight to Be the World’s Fastest Human Being* said at the reception held prior to the formal opening and ribbon cutting of the museum, Major Taylor’s courageous effort and personal sacrifice to break down color barriers was a model that has been cited as an example and motivation for Black athletes such as Joe Johnson, Joe Louis, and Muhammad Ali in boxing; Jackie Robinson in baseball; and others that would follow to use their platforms and example to create equal opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their color.

Also, kudos to the Worcester Education Development Fund, an organization that raises funds for the Worcester Public Schools. At their recent annual dinner where they honor distinguished Worcester Public Schools alumni, they posthumously recognized Major Taylor’s daughter Sydney who was raised in Worcester and went on to have a distinguished career in several fields. Sydney Taylor Brown was a graduate of South High where she was an outstanding student and athlete for the Colonels. Also recognized was Tim MacDonald, a Burncoat High grad and co-owner of Chamber member business Worcester Fitness. For over 10 years, Worcester Fitness has sponsored the Worcester Public Schools Mini and Special Olympics competition that elementary schools across the city participate in annually.

Lastly, congratulations to the Massachusetts Pirates for winning the Indoor Football League (IFL) Championship. The Pirates, who call Worcester’s DCU Center “home,” peaked at the end of the season and sailed through the playoffs, leaving a wake of destruction for their opponents. A salute to the Yatim family, local business owners who also own the Massachusetts Pirates, on capturing the United Bowl trophy in a 37-34 victory over the Arizona Rattlers. Pirates nation is already looking forward to the 2022 season. ❤️

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WHEN YOU’RE READY TO TRAVEL AGAIN, TRAVEL WITH US Chamber Reviving Travel Program With Trips to Nashville & Italy

by KAREN PELLETIER, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

The Chamber is reviving our travel program in 2022 with trips to Nashville, Tennessee, and Italy. Guided group travel is a stress-free way to see the world. Our tour company, Collette, is a 100-year-old, family-owned company which carefully plans all the trip details including sightseeing, cultural experiences, meals at authentic restaurants, and more. Chamber member travel agency, Ted n’ Tom Cruise Planners, will be taking care of all your booking questions and can even extend your vacation if you want. You can visit our website, worcesterchamber.org, to learn more about both trips.

“Spotlight on Nashville”

APRIL 25-29, 2022 | \$2,599 PP/DBL OCC.

Walk in the footsteps of musical legends and feel the beat of the city’s dynamic energy. Highlights include: Country Music Hall of Fame, RCA Studio B, George Jones Museum, Ryman Auditorium, Wildhorse Saloon, Grand Ole Opry show, historic town of Franklin, and a choice of Carnton tour or a whiskey distillery tour and tasting.

“Reflections of Italy”

OCTOBER 31 - NOVEMBER 9, 2022 | \$4,199 PP/DBL OCC.

Embark on a captivating journey that takes you from the piazzas of Rome to the canals of Venice. Discover the rolling hills of the scenic Tuscan and Umbrian countryside. Highlights include: Rome, Colosseum, Assisi, Perugia, Cortona, Florence chianti winery & cooking class, Venice, Murano Island, Milan, and more. Join us for a virtual informational session and overview of the program on Tuesday, December 7, at 4:00 p.m.



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