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Contents



Greetings one and all and thank you for taking time to peruse our Chagrin Valley Magazine. This annual publication is proudly offered through a partnership between the Chagrin Valley Chamber of Commerce, The Chagrin Valley Times and Chagrin Valley businesses. We hope you will find it as helpful, resourceful and entertaining as we have intended it to be.

Businesses in the Chagrin Valley care a great deal for their community and we are sure you will find this to be true during your visit. The Chagrin Valley Chamber of Commerce boasts more than 550 members and is available to members and visitors alike to help make the most of your time spent here. For more information feel free to stop by the chamber office located in the historical Town Hall at 83 N. Main St., Chagrin Falls, or check our website at www.cvcc.org.

Throughout the seasons and regardless of where your interests may lie, there is much for you to discover here with many things to see and do.

Whether you are spending an afternoon, planning a weekend, new to town or a lifelong resident, the Chagrin Valley has something for you to experience and we look forward to seeing you here soon.

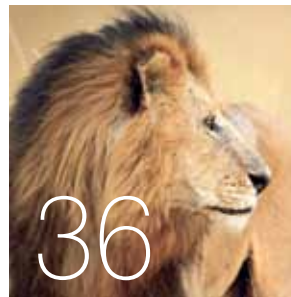
— *Jeff Griff, President,
Chagrin Valley Chamber
of Commerce*



Valley eats (starting on page 12)



Fairmount director



Safari



Matt Dolan



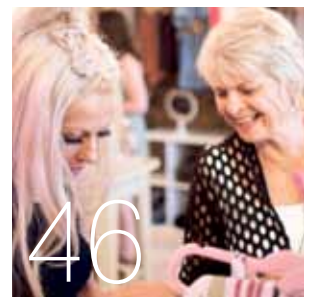
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ON THE COVER

Photographer David Petkiewicz captures a gorgeous sunset at Frohring Meadows.

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Photos by Peggy Turbett

Luna Bakery and Café in Moreland Hills offers an assortment of house-made pastries including s'more cups, French macarons, salted caramel chocolate cupcakes and almond-topped buttery croissants. Owner Bridget Cavanaugh Thibeault opened the second Luna location in June of 2018.

Recipe for success

Luna owner combines signature cookies with crepes and more

By PARIS WOLFE

When Bridget Cavanaugh Thibeault worked for advertising agencies in Chicago and New York she moonlighted as a baker. After a day of corporate meetings, she sought solace in her tiny apartment kitchen creating signature sugar cookies and the occasional wedding cake. When she moved home to Northeast Ohio, that moonlighting morphed into Luna Bakery in Cleveland Heights. And, in June 2018, she opened a second Luna in Moreland Hills, just minutes from downtown Chagrin Falls.

The path from advertising to bakery owner includes a detour to the Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago for culinary credentials. Mrs. Thibeault then combined culinary and marketing as a recipe developer and food stylist for clients like “The Today Show” and Bon Appetit magazine.

The Cleveland Heights native enjoyed the gigs and had no intention of moving back. That is until her cousin introduced her to Marc Thibeault, during his visit to Chicago. Their romance blossomed and they decided returning home to Northeast Ohio would be the best place to buy a house and raise children.

In Northeast Ohio, Mr. Thibeault was and still is the baseball coach at John Carroll

University, while Mrs. Thibeault’s first official job was pastry chef at Fire Food + Drink at Shaker Square.

Of course, the Marquette University of Milwaukee, Wisconsin graduate was also moonlighting as a cookie and wedding cake maker. Her undergraduate degree was in advertising and marketing.

After the birth of son, Cavan, in 2009 Mrs. Thibeault quit her day job to slow down. Or so she thought. It wasn’t long before John Emmerman and Tatyana Rehn, owners of The Stone Oven tapped her to join forces and open the first Luna bakery. By June 2011, the 15-seat shop/30-seat patio was serving housemade European-style pastries and gourmet coffee to lines that stretched out the door. The momentum continued and the bakery now has 75 indoor seats and a separate cake shop.

Synchronicity once again pushed Mrs. Thibeault – now mother of two (daughter Cecelia is now 3) – into the second Luna. Customers had been asking for additional locations further east and west. Then the perfect about 1,800-square-foot space became available in the Moreland Hills Towne Center plaza at Chagrin Boulevard and SOM Center Road. It's the same size as the first shop (minus the basement production space) but has an entirely different layout.

After signing a lease in late 2017, Mrs. Thibeault worked with Richardson Design to develop a clean, chic 65-seat space and plans to add even more seating. The room has individual and communal tables with convenient outlets to charge laptops and mobile devices. There she continues to serve European-style bakery, paninis, savory crepes, salads and grain bowls. Committed to a great cup of coffee, she works with a small, local roaster to source Eccentricity Coffee Co.

Despite the continental flair to the menu, the old-fashioned chocolate chip cookie is still the best seller. And, the salted caramel macaron is a daily favorite. The shop sells four flavors of French macarons. Three flavors change daily, but salted caramel is always on the menu.

Today Mrs. Thibeault is sole owner of both bakeries and employs more than 65 people,



including students from the Cleveland Institute of Art who decorate the signature sugar cookies at the Cleveland Heights location. While most of the recipes are her own, her role has moved from kitchen to management.

Luna's Moreland Hills location on Chagrin Boulevard is open weekdays from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. and weekends from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. ■

Bridget Cavanaugh Thibeault is the owner of Luna Bakery and Café, with another location in Cleveland Heights. Mrs. Thibeault worked for advertising agencies in Chicago and New York before opening the first Luna in Cleveland Heights in June 2011 with John Emmerman and Tatyana Rehn of The Stone Oven.

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Restaurants across the Chagrin Valley have unique selections on their menus with some gaining reputations for their tastiness and satisfying flavors. Here are four fan favorites recommended to us. What tastes do you find tempting? Let us know on the Chagrin Valley Times Facebook page or by commenting on chagrinvalleytoday.com. Feel free to share a photo. By TIM TEDESCHI

Don't miss these tempting tastes



Burntwood Tavern: Jack and Jill

This smooth cocktail has been a fixture at Burntwood since the first location opened nine years ago, Training and Beverage Manager Nicole Balogh said. The drink begins with a five-day process of infusing Sobieski vodka with fresh blueberries, one of an ever-rotating selection of vodka infusions featured on Burntwood's drink menu.

"It's not a long process, but it is one liter of vodka to fruit, so realistically, especially for the Jack and Jill, you're making a lot of blueberry vodka," Ms. Balogh said. "We do everything from blueberry to pear. We have bacon, jalapeno garlic, so when we start to develop menus it's really exciting because it's like what else can we infuse?"

The blueberry-infused vodka is then mixed with house-made simple syrup, fresh lemon juice and muddled fresh blueberries and served on the rocks with two blueberries as garnish. Ms. Balogh said the Jack and Jill is a top seller year-round, especially during Burntwood's famous daily happy hour, since blueberries are an all-season fruit.

"It's super refreshing," she said. "People love this one because of the color, and it's very, very easy to drink."

Firebirds Wood Fired Grill: Chile rubbed Delmonico

Like all of Firebirds' steaks, the Delmonico is freshly hand cut daily, Executive Chef Nick Keichel said. The meat is then covered from top to bottom with a mixture of ancho chile powder, cayenne pepper and sugar, "so it's almost like a sweet heat," Chef Keichel said.

After being well-seasoned, the steak is cooked on the signature wood-fired grill featuring hardwood from local vendor Madden Brothers.

"They do a phenomenal job with their wood the way they season it. So the wood we use is great," he said. "Along with the seasoning, (the wood) really adds a lot of flavor to the meats that we use."

Because the cut of meat is heavily marbled, Chef Keichel said the fat comes to the surface and liquefies with the seasoning while cooking "to give it the bold flavoring that we're looking for."



Chef Keichel said he recommends ordering the Delmonico medium to get the most out of the sweet and spicy flavors. The steak is typically served with Southwest au gratin potatoes, which have a kick of their own from diced jalapenos.



Flour Restaurant: Eggplant meatballs

Partner and Chef Matt Mytro said his restaurant can barely keep up with prepping this vegetarian take on a classic Italian meatball, a two-day process. Chef Paul Minnillo and Chef Mytro were inspired to create their version of the eggplant meatball after trying a similar ver-

sion of the dish at a restaurant in Chicago.

"We made it and it became a staple that now you can't take it off the menu," Chef Mytro said. "Nowadays you have so many people who are vegetarian; it's just good to play around with vegetables in different ways."

Chef Mytro said the eggplant is cured with salt and sugar and pressed for a few hours to remove moisture, then sautéed and added to a mix of caramelized onions, ricotta cheese, shredded mozzarella and vinegar. Once rolled, the meatless meatballs are breaded in a mix of flour, egg wash and panko breadcrumbs, deep fried and served in a cast iron skillet with marinara and a Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese and parsley finish.

"Everyday we're making eggplant meatballs," Chef Mytro said. "That's how popular it is."



ML Tavern: Lobster crabcake

This filling customer favorite takes the traditional crabcake to the next level by starting with jumbo lump crab and adding lobster, sweet corn coulis and roasted corn relish. The lobster crabcake is served with fresh off-the-cob sweet corn on the side.

Joe Saccone, president of the Hyde Park Restaurant Group, said diners aren't cheated, as the cakes are overwhelmingly made of the crab and lobster with "maybe a pinch" of filling.

"It's a little more decadent, little more flavor, changes the flavor profile because everybody has crabcakes. This changes it up a little bit," he said. "You're getting all crab and all lobster."

The appetizer, which has been on ML Tavern's menu since it opened, takes its inspiration from East Coast summers, Mr. Saccone said.

"You think of crabcakes and you think of East Coast, you think of Maryland, you think of lobster and summertime," he said. "You think of corn on the cob in August and then clambakes and the whole season, so the inspiration was to tie that crabcake and lobster with corn from that standpoint." ■

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Photo courtesy of Dan Pribanic

Dan Pribanic's love of fishing led him to open Chagrin River Outfitters in 2016.

Love of fly fishing prompts opening of outfitters store

By PARIS WOLFE

Dan Pribanic has loved fishing since he could carry his own rod. Maybe even before. He jokes that, with nine older brothers, he didn't have a choice. They taught him to "spin" fish before he was 10 and to fly fish by age 12.

With a 9- to 10-foot long, light-weight graphite rod, fly fishing requires a bit of physical coordination to gracefully arc a line and flip a faux fly into a moving stream. That whip-like casting finesse – different from spin casting – takes a bit of practice.

"The first couple of times I tried, the line got tangled in trees and bushes," Mr. Pribanic said. "I was ready to quit." His brothers encouraged him and he persisted. Once he got the rhythm he was hooked by the zen-like state that comes with hours of trying to outsmart a fish.

Mr. Pribanic has traveled around the world and become a fishing expert over the years. In 2006 he opened Chagrin River Outfitters in the northeast corner of downtown Chagrin Falls. He and Peter Alves, destination travel adviser and managing partner, outfit anglers, teach fly fishing and conduct local, national and international trips.

On a random Tuesday you'll find Mr. Pribanic dispensing seasonal fishing tips, admiring a new fly-tying pattern and listening to a customer's Alaskan salmon stories. And, of course, managing his 1,100-square-foot store as shoppers choose essentials like rods, reels, line, waders, polarized sunglasses and other clothing. The shop carries a variety of flies for steelhead, trout, bass, salmon, bonefish, tarpon as well as fur and feathers for home fly-tiers.

Clunky spin fishing lures have nothing to do with fly fishing. Nearly weightless "flies," which are imitation insects and baitfish, are required. They're created by tying feathers and/or fur to a hook to resemble natural prey. Tying one's own flies is a science and an art that many a "pure" fisherman takes on. Chagrin River Outfitters has books, kits and classes to make it easier to learn.

Once outfitted, fly fishing is plentiful all year in Northeast Ohio. The biggest draw – from October through March – is a steelhead trout. While not exactly indigenous, the fish thrive in local waterways. Each spring the Ohio Division of Wildlife stocks Lake Erie tributary streams with nearly one-half million yearling steelhead. These 6- to 8-inch fish are released into the Rocky, Chagrin, Grand and Ashtabula rivers and Conneaut Creek. Over the summers, which they spend feeding in Lake Erie's cooler waters, the fish grow and mature. They return to the streams from fall through spring.

The typical fish caught by anglers has seen a few seasons and averages about 25 inches weighing in at as much as 6 pounds, according to the division of wildlife.

A "reel" treat is hooking an older fish over 30 inches and more than 10 pounds. Most anglers practice catch and release, claiming cooked steelhead flesh is uninteresting.

The same rivers that attract steelhead also offer world-class smallmouth bass fishing May through June. And during the summer months, fly fisherman often angle for bass, pike, musky, carp and more.

Mr. Pribanic is one of them. ■

Touch of elegance



Cru Uncorked creates fine dining experience with French New American cuisine

By PARIS WOLFE

In the kitchen of Cru Uncorked in Moreland Hills, Chef John Stropki points out an ice cream machine, a pasta-making station, a blast freezer, a combi-oven and a 60-gallon steam jacket kettle. The first three are self-explanatory. The combi-oven allows for moisture control while roasting and baking; the kettle is used daily for fresh stocks.

Cru's kitchen is equipped to hand-craft every element of a multi-starred, French-inspired meal. And, the dining room is designed to coddle diners while they enjoy it. In fact the entire facility was created for the ultimate dining experience.

Before the first shovel went into the ground, owner Sandy Cutler was polling diners about what – beyond food – makes a restaurant great. Armed with several hundred responses, he worked with Dick Kawalek Architects and Larsen Architects, Barbara Gisel Design and Albert Higley Construction to develop an

Continued on page 22

Dual of lamb, prepared by Executive Chef John Stropki, features saddle of lamb with dijon persillade confit, panisse and natural juices at Cru Uncorked in Moreland Hills.

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experience that starts with pulling into the classic French chateau's circular parking lot with a fountain and continues through a congenial "goodbye" as customers claim cars from the complimentary valet.

Mr. Cutler identified four pillars to a successful restaurant – ambiance, food, service and wine. Then he and son Bill set their sights on overachieving in each category. Bill, an experienced restaurateur with European training, operates the front of house.

The 9,100-square-foot restaurant, which opened in May 2017 on the southeast corner of Chagrin and SOM Center roads, looks like a French chateau inside and out. Just inside heavy oak doors, the lobby features two 10-foot tall, color plaster-cast reliefs of dancer Josephine Baker from her famous performance at the Folies Bergere in Paris. A central allee divides the space into four intimate dining rooms each with its own theme and character.

Each dining room seats about 25 to 30, while the patio seats 60 in good weather. Custom-made chairs offer broad seats and high backs, while tables are generously spaced. Two of the four dining rooms and the grand allee boast fireplaces imported from France. Another dining room displays antique collections of taste vins and corkscrews. The décor is elegant and meaningful.

The dining rooms artfully minimize sound. During their survey, the Cutlers found private conversation topped the list of desires. So, heavy curtains, carpet and baffling absorb sound from nearby. Custom HVAC – for example, heat radiates from the floor – is nearly silent. Thus diners can enjoy each other's company without sound pollution.

A hallway between wine cabinets – framed by heavy, iron garden gates imported from France – leads to a cozy lounge where diners wait for tables or retire after dinner.

With the stage set, Chef Stropki's kitchen sends out fully plated entrees. That means, for example, the lavender duck arrives with



Ambiance and design, as evidenced by this dining room, are paramount to the success of Cru Uncorked, a fine dining restaurant featuring French New American cuisine, in Moreland Hills. Each of the four dining rooms features its own theme and character with heavy curtains to ensure private conversations.

vanilla-parsnip puree with beets, plums and caramel orange sauce to complement its flavors. Meanwhile sides are completely different for the lamb. The seasonal menu changes four times a year, though customers have insisted Chef Stropki keep favorites like

halibut with salty, sweet and sour accents from accompanying raisins, nuts, capers and brown butter. Chef Stropki also punctuates the menu with daily specials.

What diners don't see is that everything – even butter – is made fresh daily. And,

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The lounge at Cru Uncorked offers an array of pre-dinner cocktails.

custom-blended cooking oils hold up to high heats thus minimizing any intestinal distress.

Servers are attired in the French-style with aprons, vest and ties. They start dinner by serving a complimentary amuse-bouche of the day. When entrees are ready for an entire table, multiple servers present all guests with plates – from the left – simultaneously. Ceremony contributes to the experience. Dining

concludes with a custom-molded chocolate tastevin.

Each server has multiple weeks training on the list of 400 wines from around the world. The wine cellar of 6,000 bottles, which is 75 percent red, includes a range of Champagnes and sparkling wines which are stored, appropriately, in the dark.

The Cutlers see wine as an important

component of enjoying food. To demystify the beverage they schedule wine education tastings (\$50) and dinners (\$150) throughout the year. For these Chef Stropki pairs either hearty appetizers or multi-course meals.

The restaurant also has a private banquet room that can be reserved for business or personal events. To learn more, including dress code, visit www.cruuncorked.com. ■



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Photos by Alana Clark

Market Xpress, with five locations including one in South Russell, creates fresh, high-quality pizzas, pepperoni rolls, breakfast items, sides, wings, burgers, salads and more, taking gas station food to the next level.

Made 'on-site, fresh, high quality. Period'

This market is an unlikely place to find tasty pizza strictly from scratch

By TIM TEDESCHI

If asked to list the best local pizza joints, it's not likely you would see gas stations named near the top. Convenience store pizza isn't usually anything special, unless, of course, you live near a Market Xpress convenience store, like the one at the corner of Bell and Chillicothe roads in South Russell.

Ken Ashba, co-owner of the Market Xpress chain of stores with his wife Lynn, said all five locations feature a full menu of pizzas, pepperoni rolls, breakfast items, sides, wings, burgers, salads and more. Everything on the menu is prepared daily in full kitchens within each store.

"All of our ingredients are fresh. Everything is made on site. We don't bring it in and just heat it," said Mr. Ashba, 59.

A Newbury High School graduate, Mr. Ashba said the family bought their first gas



Aimee Moore prepares a fresh pizza at Market Xpress in South Russell. The gas station is known as one of the best local pizza joints in the Chagrin Valley.

station in the mid-1980s but didn't start developing their own brand of food until after becoming familiar with the food industry when they opened the Dairy Queen franchise in Middlefield.

"When we decided to remodel Parkman

and Claridon, we knew to do our own proprietary food. We didn't want to be a franchise," Mr. Ashba said. "So we spent a few years developing our recipes, developing our menu, coming up with things that we thought would work.

"But the key ingredient to what we did was on-site, fresh, high quality. Period. We do buy the best available stuff for what we build."

Mr. Ashba said he understands that people may be wary of the quality of Market Xpress's food because of the stigma of what he calls "GSP," gas station pizza, but it doesn't take long for customers to taste the difference.

"We don't want you to have gas station food. We want you to have fresh food at a gas station or at a convenience store," he said. "Give them fresh, hot, real food and let them grab it and go. And then at the same time, create a menu for those who have time to wait or call in if you want something special, they'll make it for you right on site."

Mr. Ashba said while he can't say definitively, he believes Market Xpress was one of the first convenience store brands to expand its food selection with pizza and other items. He recalled "undercover" employees of bigger gas station brands coming in to research how Market Xpress was operating their food service as the industry was ramping up in the early 2000s.

"We kind of pride ourselves on literally being the pioneers to do what you now see in all stations," Mr. Ashba said. "I believe they came to us, they saw what we were doing and started putting them in their stores, and that's where we are today."

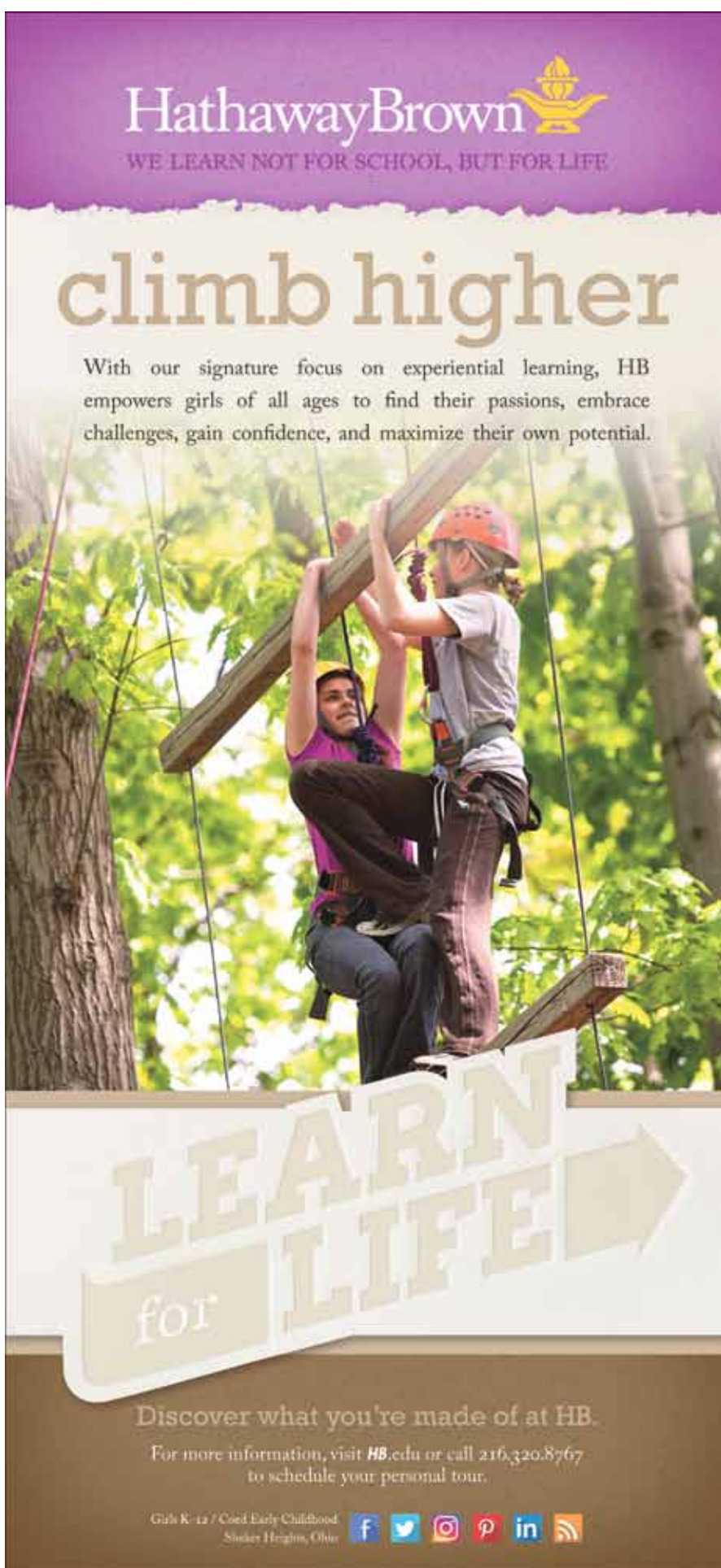
Between their five locations in South Russell, Newton Falls, Claridon, Andover and Parkman, Mr. Ashba estimated Market Xpress stores sell approximately 50,000 slices of their fresh-made pizza every month.


"That does not count our pepperoni rolls, our breakfast rolls, so we do now have a following," he said. "We're creating a nice little brand, which is hard to do."

A contractor by trade, Mr. Ashba designs and builds the locations, but credits Mrs. Ashba as the "central processor" that keeps the day-to-day business running.

"Without her, I'm toast. She's it. Everything goes through her on the operations," Mr. Ashba said. "Without her I'm just a dirt digger."

Mr. Ashba and his wife live in Burton Township and have two adult daughters, Lindsay, a dolphin trainer who lives in Florida, and Amber, a lawyer in Woodmere Village. ■



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Photo by Peggy Turbett

State Sen. Matt Dolan, who represents District 24, has raised his family in Chagrin Falls, and has a son on the soccer team at Chagrin Falls High School. Sen. Dolan, R-Chagrin Falls, represents the residents of 28 communities, including Chagrin Falls village and township, Moreland Hills, Hunting Valley and Gates Mills.

Looking to Ohio's future

Sen. Matt Dolan keeps an eye on innovation

By TIM TEDESCHI

Matt Dolan is happy to talk with you about the Cleveland Indians, but he would also like to have a conversation about Ohio's future.

The Republican state senator from Chagrin Falls said he has no day-to-day responsibilities with the Tribe, as he manages other businesses and represents Ohio's District 24, but he never grows tired of talking about the baseball team his family owns and that he grew up dreaming of playing on the major league squad.

"The Dolan name is affiliated with the Indians. I get a lot of questions about the Indians and I thoroughly enjoy them," Sen. Dolan said. "I thoroughly enjoy talking about

baseball and listening to people's ideas. I control as much once the ball's thrown as anyone else, so I'm just a fan as well."

A Gilmour Academy graduate, Sen. Dolan, 53, is in the midst of his first term in the Ohio Senate after three terms representing the 98th District in the Ohio House of Representatives from 2005 to 2010. He said the biggest difference between the two chambers in Columbus is the size, as he is now one of 33 senators compared to 99 representatives in the House.

"So you have more lengthy and intimate conversations about a policy matter than you do in the House," he said. "We have three House districts in the one Senate district so the amount of constituent work you have is triple. The amount of opportunities you have to interface with your constituents triples as well, so you learn a ton more."

District 24 stretches from Lyndhurst to Rocky River and is comprised of 28 communities including the Village of Chagrin Falls,

Chagrin Falls Township, Moreland Hills, Hunting Valley and Gates Mills.

"I love representing it. It's a very knowledgeable group," Sen. Dolan said. "I get a lot of letters on a variety of topics. It's a very well-read district, which I like."

The Republican state senator said his district faces the same issues many around the state are working through, such as school districts not getting "their fair share of school funding." He said he is working to reduce the amount of state education mandates that seek to solve problems that some local school districts may not even be dealing with.

"There's a disproportion of local taxes going toward schools despite the fact that I represent some of the best performing schools in the state, but we do it on the backs of local taxpayers," Sen. Dolan said. "So we want to free them up. If I can't get them more dollars, I want to extend the dollars they do have."

A similar issue facing the district is the

cutting of local government funds, especially since the district is a net donor to Columbus, meaning they send more tax dollars than what they receive back, Sen. Dolan said.

"That brunt has been borne by us, and not only have the local government funds been halved, but the ability for the locals to make decisions on their behalf has been cut," he said. "I think for proper business development, for getting families to locate here and want to stay here, we need to be a low tax state across the board, local and state and federal government."

More broadly, Sen. Dolan said he is focused on "preparing Ohio for tomorrow."

"Ohio has been really really good at defending what we have. We are not so good at promoting where we can go, and I want to change that culture," Sen. Dolan said. "Start thinking where are we going to be five years from now, and that's how we're going to maintain our young folks."

One way Sen. Dolan has pushed for Ohio to prepare for the future is by helping pass an amendment in Senate Bill 220 in June of 2018 to recognize blockchain technology as an official electronic signature compliant with state electronic records statutes.

"Blockchain is nothing more than a decentralized ledger, so it allows for companies to be able to be more transparent, more reliable and allow the state government to ultimately run its government more effectively and efficiently," he said. "The attractiveness to me in blockchain is not only will it save us taxpayer dollars, but it is putting Ohio in a lead position in the new economy."

Sen. Dolan said he has also introduced a bill to allow benefit corporations to operate under the state's corporate statutes. Benefit corporations would be permitted to "articulate a philanthropic mission" and invest a small portion of their funds to that end while also being committed to increasing profits in the best interests of shareholders, he said.

"Now that's more than just a do-good idea; that's where investment is going. The young men and women who made a ton of money on the tech industry now have become investors and they want to invest in companies that further some sort of philanthropic mission,"

Sen. Dolan said. "I have met with investors who will say 'I'm not investing in Ohio until you get benefit corporations.'"

Sen. Dolan said he also wants to see Ohio at the forefront of advanced energy, including allowing industrial wind farm development that would bring in "billions of dollars of investments." He noted that both tech companies like Google and well-established corporations like General Motors are asking about reliable and sustainable energy sources when choosing where to locate, or relocate, their businesses.

"If we can't answer that question in Ohio,

they'll move," he said.

Sen. Dolan graduated from Boston College and Case Western Reserve University School of Law. He is a former chief assistant prosecutor for Geauga County and assistant Ohio attorney general. He is now a partner at the law firm of Thrasher, Dinsmore & Dolan.

Sen. Dolan makes his home with his wife Jessica, son Sam, 17, and stepson Maddox, 16. Mrs. Dolan is an equestrian eventer and Sam and Maddox are active in sports at Chagrin Falls High School. They enjoy hiking and spending time with family. ■



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Photos by Peggy Turbett

Eric Schneider, left, president of Schneider Saddlery, with his parents CEO Stanley and Karen Schneider, marks the 70th anniversary in 2018 of the family-run supplier of horse tack, supplies and riding apparel in Bainbridge.

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Platinum anniversary

Schneider Saddlery remains vital family business serving Chagrin Valley for 70 years

By RYAN DENTSCHIEFF

When Milton Schneider began buying and selling equestrian supplies and equipment in the 1940s, it was unlikely he imagined an international business with the family name thriving for seven decades.

But that's the case with Schneider Saddlery in Bainbridge Township which celebrated its 70th anniversary in 2018.

Now run by Eric Schneider – grandson of Milton and son of Stan and Karen, who helped operate the family business for decades until their son took over in 2015 – Schneider Saddlery employs about 80 people, does wholesale and retail business across the globe, and operates out of an 80,000-square-foot space

on East Washington Street.

Long before a business model was established, things got started because of Milton Schneider's love for horses, Stan said.

"Dad was involved in horseback as a hobby

Continued on page 30



Cover art for the 1988 Schneider catalog is one of the many catalog covers on display at Schneider Saddlery, a horse and rider supply store established in 1948.



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Continued from page 29

his whole life,” he said. “He loved it.”

In addition to helping his father with a separate family business, Milton would go to horse auctions with friends to buy and sell horses and used equipment. One year in the early 1940s, a place where Milton kept his horses went out of business and he decided to purchase all of the failed business’s used equipment to sell at auction. The auction was a success, Stan said, and Milton then began seeking out more used equipment to sell on a regular basis.

Eventually, the family sold the prior business and Milton began focusing on buying and reselling equestrian-related materials and horses full-time. From there, the business that would later be known as Schneider Saddlery was born.

That operation continued through the 1950s, and in the early 1960s, Stan’s brother Don, and then in the late 60s, Stan himself, joined the business.

“My brother brought a great deal of business acumen to it in terms of turning it from a hobby into more of a business,” Stan said. “He began starting to do more importation of products from overseas and expanded into a lot of areas we were not in at the time.”

When Stan joined his brother and father in the late 1960s, he sought an area where he could flourish.



Schneider Saddlery specializes in horse blankets and other equine protective gear available online and at the store in Bainbridge Township.

“I always assumed I would go to law school and be a lawyer,” he said, “but we went to our first horse show in 1966 and it was a great success not just as far as business, but more than that, I met some wonderful people and really enjoyed the weekend.”


At that first show, Stan recalled, he was asked about getting some specialty products that weren’t available elsewhere, particularly for Arabian equestrians.

“They asked, could I get them made? I

said yes, even though I had no idea,” Stan said with a laugh. But he was able to get the request filled and immediately began offering the new products across the country.

From that experience, Stan said he had found his niche in the business – product development and marketing. The business continued to grow into the company it is today.

One of the things that made Schneider Saddlery successful from the beginning, the Schneiders said, was Milton’s dedication



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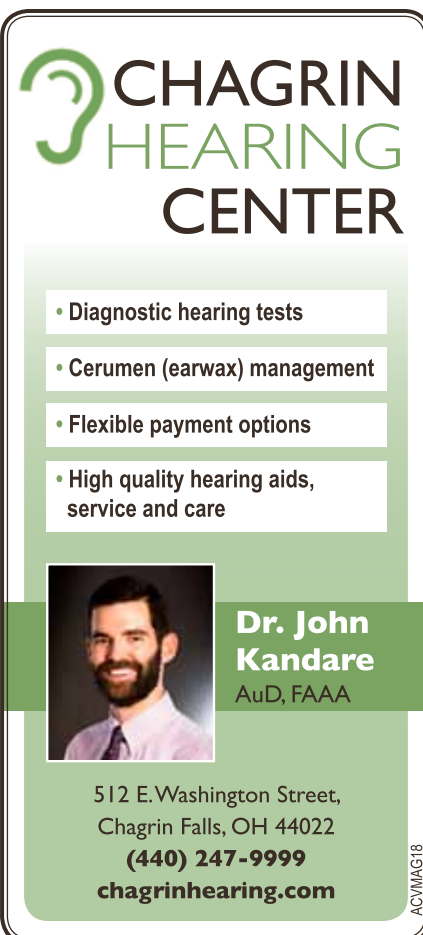
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to his customers and innovation within the equestrian merchandising field.

"What was unique about what my dad did at these auctions that had not been done previously was twofold," Stan said. "He sold goods at the auction with a money back guarantee, which never existed at auctions. It was always buyer beware. And secondly, he started selling new merchandise at auctions.

"Those two things had never been done before in this country and it gave him a real impetus. And people really fell in love with my dad because the service he provided."

Today, Eric said the business is run with a similar mission.

"What we're doing today really isn't that different from what we were doing 70 years ago," Eric, the third-generation Schneider said. "We may operate in different channels and at a different scale, but essentially it's the same business, which is being totally customer focused.

"Whether that's from Milt listening to people at auctions and understanding what they wanted, to us listening to people on social media, or in our store, or at the shows, we make sure that we have what they want. And we really pay attention to the details, because those details matter," Eric said.

The business in 2018 spreads across the world with hundreds of dealers selling Schneider Saddlery products. In addition to selling products for horseback riding and competitions, such as saddles, bridles, blankets and more, they also sell a large selection of apparel and products simply for the horse enthusiast, such as toys, fashionable boots and attire, and home decor. The store on East Washington features 10,000 square feet of retail space.

Beyond the business within Schneider Saddlery, the family also is working to build on the tradition of horses in the Chagrin Valley. Prior to working at Schneider Saddlery, and later marrying Stan, Karen Schneider, formerly Karen Jackson, was always heavily involved in the riding and show side of the sport. She added that aspect of expertise when she joined the business and said continuing the local equestrian tradition was a big motivator for the family's purchase of the 85-acre equestrian center Chagrin Valley Farms last September.

"In my era," Karen said, "Red Raider (Stables in Russell) was the place to go and learn to ride. You could learn to love horses and learn to become enthusiastic about riding. You could take lessons, go trail riding, go to camp, all of the things that people grow to love.

"That's been kind of missing in this area. So when Chagrin Valley Farms went up for sale, it either could have gone to a development, or maybe we could bring back that energy with lesson programs and camp and all of the different things. That's the energy behind it." ■



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Spotlight on new leadership

Photo by Michael Johnson

Jeannie Flemming-Gifford teaches at a children's summer camp at Fairmount Center for the Arts. Mrs. Flemming-Gifford took over as executive director of the Russell Township art center organization in March of 2018 after 10 years at the Willoughby Fine Arts Association.

Director taking Fairmount arts center to new heights

By KRISTA S. KANO

In 2017, Fairmount Center for the Arts was in limbo.

After nearly closing in May of 2016, the Russell center had just been saved by the Figgie Foundation, and the organization needed a new executive director.

The chair of the foundation and arts center, the late Matthew P. Figgie, knew that filling the vacant seat would be a challenge. The future leader of the organization would have to be someone who had expertise in nonprofits and fine arts, who could create programs and spearhead fundraising campaigns, who could maintain Fairmount's community and bring in new students and who could find a balance between honoring the center's 50-year history while ushering it into a new age of growth and prosperity. It was a tall order for any candidate.

Thirty applied. Twelve were interviewed. And in 5 minutes, Mr. Figgie knew Jeannie Flemming-Gifford was the one.

"There was not a close second," Mr. Figgie

confessed in May. Mr. Figgie died unexpectedly on Aug. 25, 2018. "I said to the folks who were helping on the search, 'If Jeannie doesn't take the position, I'm screwed.'"

Lucky enough, after 10 years at the Willoughby Fine Arts Association, Mrs. Flemming-Gifford of Willoughby was ready for a challenge, and she took over as executive director in spring of 2018, bringing with her years of experience, a playful management style and a drive to overcome any obstacle.

As she sat in a mirrored dance studio covered with colorful pieces from local artists, Mrs. Flemming-Gifford explained that her career, like most, began with good teachers.

"I didn't come from musical parents, but I came from a band program that put a trumpet in my hands," said the Brewster, Ohio native. "They called me 'Trumpet Lips' and that term of endearment inspired me, like maybe I can be good at this."

She eventually switched to French horn and played in the Akron Symphony Youth Orchestra under Keith Lockhart, the current director of the Boston Pops Orchestra. That experience connected her to William Hoyt, a University of Akron music professor, who encouraged her to apply for music scholarships at the school.

"I knew I was passionate about the arts and because I didn't have a family who went the college route, I didn't know what to ask. I just knew to pursue it," said Mrs. Flemming-Gifford.

To supplement her scholarship, she taught private music instruction and earned a student work assistantship in an early childhood development program that included a music component. After graduating with a music bachelor of arts, Mrs. Flemming-Gifford continued her work with the early childhood development program as a graduate assistant, earning her master's degree in family consumer sciences with a specialization in child development.

"I knew I was passionate about music, but I've always been passionate about children and families as well, and I was always scared to pursue formal teaching. I didn't have that in my family and I didn't know if I could accomplish that. But those two put together in that work assistant environment really showed me that yes, I have the skills and I can gain the skills to work with children and families in a teaching capacity," she said.

Upon earning her masters, she was offered two jobs: one as a dispatcher with the state highway patrol and another as a COSI on

Wheels demonstrator.

"I look back now and it's comical," Mrs. Flemming-Gifford said. "I accepted the job to go on the road in a truck and drive around the state doing a program on the Science of Sound and Music for grades kindergarten through fifth. I could have had a full-time, year-round, great benefits and a retirement fund, but I took the nine-month position driving a truck and teaching kids and it was the best job ever."

Every week, she was in a different town, pretending to be the stage manager for a rock band whose bus had broken down for a program called Good Vibrations. She brought students on stage to play guitars and drum kits while wearing crazy wigs, and trained parents how to manage different stations like demonstrating how sound waves work using Slinkys.

After nine months on the road, she rose to a workshop program supervisor at COSI, developing preschool workshop programs, which became her master's thesis program. While there, she developed her management ethos.

"Their leadership walked the walk and talked the talk. It was a playful and fun environment. It was high energy. There were moments of professional development and moments of celebration," she said. "When COSI was moving to the riverfront, I was part of that team and we went to the new site, built kites and flew kites. It was that kind of playfulness."

Mrs. Flemming-Gifford also recalled an incident when she took off her shoes and they went missing.

"I'm starting to freak out because I have to do a show and my shoes are missing. I can't do a show without shoes in public. I'm panicked. I went into my supervisor's office and she just reached down. She's crying, her face is red from laughing and she hands me the shoes," she said.

"Work should be joyful and you should be passionate about what you're doing. If you're not, this probably isn't the right place for you. We come here every day, and sometimes work is boring but you should be passionate about what you're doing. It's not always going to be glamorous, but you should always be grateful to be there."

In 1998, Mrs. Flemming-Gifford was in her mid-20s and she went to the Columbus Symphony Orchestra. As she was browsing through the program, she realized that a director of education was not listed. She inquired just as the orchestra was ending its search for the position.

"For some reason they took a chance on me," she said. "I had administration for the art form and being a musician, and attending concerts I was familiar with the product. I love education and music and making a career in arts can be a scary thing. I'm not going to be a band director or performer, so where is my place to be a part of something

that I believe is good for our community and for me? The orchestra job just seemed like a right fit."

While working for the orchestra, she developed a music education curriculum, collaborating with the Ohio State University and the professional musicians. She convinced the superintendent of the Columbus City Schools to send every fourth-grader to a concert after a 15-minute pitch.

In 2001, she was ready for a change of scenery. She got married and Northeast Ohio was home to the families of both Mrs. Flemming-Gifford her husband Mark. She landed another job as the director of education at Young Audiences, now called the Center for Arts Inspired Learning, and developed ways to use music to teach math and dance to teach science.

After four years developing an early childhood multi-arts program called Chabam, she was at a crossroads. She had just had her daughter Ella, and the Fine Arts Association of Willoughby, which was right in her backyard, was looking for a new director of education. She stayed for 10 years before moving to Fairmount Center for the Arts.

"I knew that Fairmount had some really challenging financial struggles, and people said they heard they're not doing well, but Matthew Figgie has really invested in saying this organization deserves to be here for

generations to come.

"As an adult we don't have as many opportunities to continue to grow. We become very comfortable professionally, and this has lit that fire in me. There's a lot of work yet to do, and I have a lot to be a part of in helping to ensure the arts stay here."

One of her first tasks was creating summer camps. She was three months in and people told her she couldn't do it.

"When I started with the Fine Arts Association, there were two camps and when I left there were 17. I know what they look like I know how they function and I know how to build them.

"So I said let's try it, and now I'm proud to say 'Watch us.'"

This year, they launched 14 summer camps. She's also been working to bring the culture of COSI to Fairmount, never using the word staff and always looking at the whole team.

One of her first team meetings focused on the budget. She brought in a pie and made a pie chart on it to explain how their revenues come in. Around Easter, she hid candy filled eggs in people's desks. She celebrates birthdays, and channels her inner Elsa to belt out, "Let it Go" in the middle of the office. And she's ready for more.

"Jeannie wasn't a home run," Mr. Figgie said. "She was a total grand slam." ■

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Wildlife adventures

Auburn photographer captures beauty of African animals

By TIM TEDESCHI

As crammed tour vehicles whiz by after snapping a few quick pictures of a leopard in a tree, Peter Balunek and his tour group take photos and wait comfortably in their vehicles, enjoying the expansive views of Kenya's Maasai Mara National Reserve as they wait to see what the big cat will do next.

"We're happy to sit there in the beautiful countryside of Africa and wait for this leopard to come down," Mr. Balunek said. "And if he doesn't come down, we don't feel like it's time wasted."

Guests Mr. Balunek leads on tours with his company, Peter's Wildlife Safaris, have plenty of time to observe, appreciate and photograph the animals and also are taught about conservation and community projects during their trips to Africa, India and other places around the world.



While leading others on tours, Peter Balunek snaps plenty of pictures himself, like this image of an Indian tiger he took on a trip to the Bandhavagarh National Park in April of 2017.

Photos courtesy of Peter Balunek

An insurance salesman from Auburn, Mr. Balunek said he went on his first African safari in 2014. Shortly after he returned, he heard of the poaching murder of Satao, a big tusker elephant who had roamed Africa for nearly 50 years and was most likely the largest elephant

on the continent at the time of his death.

"I never met him or photographed him but later learned he was born the same year as me," said Mr. Balunek, 49. "So I had this strong emotional reaction to his death and decided that I wanted to do something to create

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An insurance salesman by trade, Peter Balunek has spent 22 weeks in Africa since 2014 leading tours with Peter's Wildlife Safaris, photographing animals and forging relationships in the community. He was stirred to begin leading tours after the poaching death of Satao the big tusker elephant in 2014.

awareness about what's going on over there with the animals and talk about their plight."

After some research, Mr. Balunek decided the best way to help conservation efforts and encourage the same passion he felt after Satao's death was to lead tour groups to witness the beauty of the animals for themselves.

"My words and photographs can't do Africa justice. It's something that needs to be experienced," Mr. Balunek said. "And maybe in some small way their efforts, my efforts will help bring more awareness and make some positive movement for the animals and animal rights."

Since his first trip in 2014, Mr. Balunek said he has spent 22 weeks in Africa leading groups, researching for upcoming tours, strengthening relationships with community leaders and, of course, photographing the animals.

Mr. Balunek has visited Rwanda and Namibia in Africa as well as India, Brazil and Alaska on various trips, but said his favorite place is probably the classic "Lion King" safari at Maasai Mara due to the diversity and volume of wildlife found there.

"You come around the corner and there's a couple zebras playing, and the next time there's lions, and we're going for the leopards, and then there's the cheetah and a giraffe along the way, and the elephant," Mr. Balunek said. "What's interesting when you see that is how well they all live together and exist together, except of course when the carnivores are hungry, and then everybody's on the menu."

Local resource

Since the majority of his customers are from Northeast Ohio, Mr. Balunek said he enjoys customizing trips as much as possible after meeting face to face with his clients. He said his trips are for everyone, from those who simply take in the views in their

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mind to iPhone photographers all the way to professionals with bulky camera equipment.

Dewey Forward of Chagrin Falls has taken two trips with Mr. Balunek, one to Kenya and another with his son Dylan, an avid photographer himself, tracking mountain gorillas in Uganda.

"In a word, it was fabulous," Mr. Forward said. "It was just a trip of a lifetime. It was like going to first and second semester photography in college, but we're doing it as we're taking pictures of gorillas, and (Dylan) learned a lot."

"It's really special because (Mr. Balunek) does kind of know what we want to do and what kind of accommodations we want, what kind of things we want to see, the comforts we want and the kind of custom design

itinerary that suits us and maybe not somebody else he doesn't know."

Mr. Balunek said his personal involvement throughout the process sets his trips apart.

"There are travel agents that do wonderful jobs in booking trips," Mr. Balunek said. "Probably the difference is that I'm on these trips. But if you were to just go online and find a trip and it has 12 to 18 people in the vehicle, you don't know what the interests are of all the people in that vehicle."

Speaking of vehicles, Mr. Balunek said no matter how large of a group he is leading, he ensures that everyone has plenty of space, as only three guests are in each vehicle, "whether that's for camera gear or whether it's just to slide to the other side of the vehicle when the animal comes to the other side."

Mr. Balunek said the typical African safari he leads is six days, with morning and evening game drives as well as visits to surrounding communities and guest lectures from conservation organizations.

"I want my clients to be educated about the wildlife," Mr. Balunek said. "I want them to be educated about the people and the culture and the country that they're visiting, so it's kind of an all-encompassing type of experience."

Other than the occasional mock charge from a rhino or an animal "marking its territory" on a tire, Mr. Balunek said he hasn't experienced any threatening or dangerous situations.

"We're going to sit back 30 or 40 yards, give the animal some space. If they choose to get up and move around and come to our vehicle now, it's because they want to do it," Mr. Balunek said. "For the most part, they'd rather go in the other direction. They're not looking for a fight."

Wildlife advocate

Mr. Balunek said he became interested in



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photography in high school, shooting for his school newspaper and yearbook, and eventually came back to the craft with digital photography around 2005. He said these days his insurance business is taking more of a backseat to his wildlife photography, planning and leading tour groups and speaking to various community groups about conservation.

When he gives talks on his travels, Mr. Balunek said he tries to highlight the “human side of animals” with photos from his trips combined with statistics on the state of wildlife conservation efforts to educate and inspire action from those he is talking to.

“I think it’s arrogance on the human race to think just because these animals don’t speak our language and we don’t understand them that they don’t have feelings, emotions, family dynamics, arguments, show joy, mourn the loss of others,” he said. “It’s clearly documented that elephants have all of those emotions, and if you ever watch a pride of lions, you can see the emotions that they have, and they have little scuffles like the rest of us.”

Mr. Balunek has also established the Satao Wildlife Foundation, a nonprofit named after the big tusker dedicated to “improve the lives of wildlife by improving the lives of people through community conservation programs in Africa.”

According to Mr. Balunek, there are three main basic threats to wildlife: illegal poach-

ing, loss of habitat and local human/animal conflict, such as communities along the reserve retaliating and killing elephants after a single elephant ate some of their crops.

While the first two issues require national and international governmental intervention, the Satao Wildlife Foundation focuses on the third issue: improving the relationship between local residents and the wildlife by completing small projects that make life easier for people living around the reserves. The foundation has adopted the larger community conservation model that seeks to aid and educate people on the benefits to local communities through tourism dollars for those coming to see the animals.

“It’s like explaining to this generation of young kids whose parents grew up with, ‘Just

kill everything that moved;’ now the kids are saying, ‘But these animals are bringing in people who are then helping us,’” Mr. Balunek said. “Some of the other conservancies have built medical clinics, they’ve done empowerment programs for women, they’ve done microloans for residents and helping them get started in business, and all of this time they’re letting the people know that it’s because of the environment of tourism that’s helping them do that.”

Mr. Balunek said his daughters Emma, 20, and Sophia, 15, have both picked up an interest in photography and have traveled to Africa and India with him and his wife, Molly. Emma is a junior at Colorado State University studying ecosystem science and sustainability, and Sophia is a sophomore at Kenston High School. ■




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Photos by Alana Clark

Chas Geiger, left, and Gordon Geiger are the owners of the sporting goods store Geiger's, located in the Chagrin Shopping Plaza. The Geiger family has been selling sports clothing and equipment since 1932.

Geiger family continues long tradition of serving the sporting community

By VALERI FURST

At the heart of Cleveland's sports world, there is a name you might not think of, yet it has been a prominent player for more than 85 years. The Geiger family has been selling sporting goods – clothing and equipment – since 1932. Headquartered in Lakewood, there are two additional locations in downtown Cleveland and Chagrin Falls.

Geiger's became a fixture in the Chagrin Valley in 2005 after Dick Bohr, former owner of the Ski & Sport Haus and a friendly competitor, wanted to retire and approached the Geiger family to take over his business. According to Charles Geiger, 66, who goes by the name Chas, it was an easy sell. He and his brother Gordon Geiger, 60, purchased the store on Orange Street and moved it to its current location in the Chagrin Shopping Plaza.

"We had always been a West Side business but appreciated the history of the Ski & Sport



In addition to selling sporting goods, Geiger's in the Chagrin Shopping Plaza has a leasing program for skiing equipment.

Haus and all that Dick had built here. He had no kids to take over the company but didn't want to see it close. He had a strong following so for us, it was a new market to move into and a good opportunity to grow," Chas said.

The primary focus of the old store was skiing in the winter and camping in the summer. The Geiger brothers stayed in those categories but greatly expanded the clothing and footwear options. The family business actually started with men's clothing back in the 1930s and eventually expanded into women's fashion. While some lines such as Patagonia and North Face remain popular, Chas says it's interesting and challenging to stay on top of what is new.

"Today, customers are more into technical clothing that are water repellant or bug resistant and they want items that fit their lifestyle – weekend wear or clothing that can be worn day into night. There is also great interest in socially conscious brands where the manufacturer uses recycled goods or gives back to a specific cause that helps people or the environment," Chas explained.

Geiger's entry into the sporting world started in the late 1930s and early '40s when the city of Lakewood was a center for world softball. The family helped support that endeavor and soon moved into sponsoring teams in other sports including hardball, soccer, basketball and baseball. As a result, their business expanded to include sporting goods.

In the 1960s, just as skiing was starting to get popular, Geiger's started its outfitting business, one of the first in the nation. Both Chas and Gordon ski, and they still see it and winter sports as a core part of their business. They acknowledge those are still the big sale items and have retained the downstairs area of the Chagrin Falls store for equipment repairs and service. What is also growing in popularity is their innovative leasing program.

"It's an opportunity for people to get all the equipment they need like the skis, boots, and poles and try them out for a lot less money than it would cost to rent for the day or to buy. They lease for the season which runs December through April and it has proven really popular for children who can grow out

of equipment year to year. For people who want a short term rental, we still offer that and we also have demo programs so a person can try out equipment before they buy it but the lease program is unique and has given us a niche in the market. It's important to us that we stay ahead of what our customers want and need," Gordon said.

While trend is important to the Geigers, so, too, is tradition. Several employees at the Chagrin Falls store were there before Geiger's took it over and still work there today. Family members other than Chas and Gordon are also actively involved. For 35 years, Gordon's wife Susan determines what outdoor and fitness merchandise should be placed in the stores. Their son John handles social media and marketing. Chas's wife

Patti, who retired just this year, spent 38 years working as the buyer for the ladies style department and their daughter Christine works at the downtown Cleveland store. And another tradition they hope to bring back is the popular skiing trips out West.

Chas explained, "We would take groups of up to 60 people to places like Vail, Aspen and Park City, Utah. They were great trips and people loved them; they would ask 'where are we going next year?' We would love to do that again. You know, there is always competition for business, especially with what's available online, but we have been very fortunate to have a loyal customer base that appreciates what we do, our uniqueness, and the personal service we provide." ■



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The Blix tasting room and outdoor terrace glow at twilight, with the reflecting pool flanked by fire bowls at the Sapphire Creek Winery and Gardens in Bainbridge.



Photos by Peggy Turbett

Over the river and through the woods

**Sapphire Creek is hidden gem
perfect for memorable events**

By LAURI GROSS

Visitors to Sapphire Creek Winery and Gardens in Bainbridge tend to be in awe of the beauty, style and tranquility of the space while becoming smitten with the delightful food and beverages, and feeling spoiled by the attentive staff. But, just when guests decide, “I wouldn’t change a thing,” Sapphire Creek reveals surprises and the experience just keeps getting better.



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The exquisite gardens are ever-evolving, the space is changeable to accommodate large parties or small, the events calendar always contains something new, and the future vision includes unexpected touches such as a retail area offering Sapphire Creek wine, and other merchandise.

Sapphire Creek opened in the spring of 2018 to an eager clientele. "It's going so well," said Kathleen Dangelo, who owns the establishment along with her husband, Andy.

"We are incredibly busy and so happy about it," she added. "The feedback is so gratifying. People are thrilled that (Sapphire Creek) is in the community. We are getting west siders and people from Pennsylvania. It's been really great. It's great for (Geauga) county and for the area."

Everything about Sapphire Creek contributes to a cohesive entity with a natural flow among its parts and yet there are so many different aspects that each visit promises fresh discoveries.

Getting there is part of the fun, as Sapphire Creek is a gem hidden out of sight in

Continued on page 45



Lush from summer rains, the 10 acres of woods offer a serene setting for the Sapphire Creek Winery and Gardens in Bainbridge.



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bustling Bainbridge. Arriving at Sapphire Creek begins with a winding drive through mature oak woodlands and over a meandering stream. Situated on more than 14 acres, the venue is designed to connect people with art and nature as they enjoy fabulous food, amazing wine and craft beer and cocktails. Expansive windows, plenty of natural light and unparalleled, sweeping woodland views enhance the experience.

Featuring a 32-foot white porcelain bar, Italian leather chairs, 28-foot ceilings and panoramic views, the restaurant is open to the public Tuesdays through Saturdays, except when it is booked for private events. Hungry Bee of Bainbridge is Sapphire Creek's exclusive caterer and the menu includes locally sourced products prepared with impeccable technique.

"Hungry Bee is our partner in the whole management of the operation," explained Ms. Dangelo.

"Sapphire Creek is a fabulous venue for a wedding," she added. "The Great Lawn is a perfect spot for the wedding ceremony and before the ceremony, the bridal party can get dressed and enjoy champagne in the Loft while the groom and groomsmen can enjoy the Cellar. After the ceremony, cocktails can be enjoyed on the Main Terrace and dinner can be served in The Oak Room and the Brix Tasting Room," she added, without even mentioning Sapphire Creek's Pavillion, or many gardens, including the Topiary Garden, Cocktail Garden, Kitchen Garden and the Flower Room.


Sapphire Creek includes so many options for using and combining these spaces that events, from birthdays to corporate functions are all at home here. The venue can accommodate private parties as small as 12 people, or as large as 350.

Adjacent to the Great Lawn, the open-air Main Terrace is anchored by a white porcelain floor and features a 28-foot reflecting pool with two architectural fire bowls at each end.

New Sapphire Creek gardens were expected to be unveiled in the fall and spring, including a Wishing Garden where visitors will be invited to write a wish on a band of Mylar tape and affix it to the sculptural "tree," creating a beautiful, moving piece of art that embodies a collective dream.

Public events at Sapphire Creek have so far involved barre classes and Christmas in July, which included movie night on the Great Lawn and a gift collection for items to be donated to local kids in need. In the future, watch the Sapphire Creek online calendar for yoga, live music, wine and cheese pairings and other events that are sure to keep visitors coming back for more. ■






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Photos by Alana Clark

Amber Justice, center, opened her second A Bit of Skirt women's apparel store in downtown Chagrin Falls in July of 2018. Ms. Justice, pictured with Nick Robey, right, who works at the first Willoughby location, plans to open additional locations.

A Bit of Skirt

Fashion-forward California glam drives boutique's style

By LAURI GROSS

On a trip to London at age 22, Amber Justice heard a man in a pub exclaim, "Did you check out that bit of skirt?"

"To be honest," she recalled, "I don't know if he was talking about me." But she still asked the man for clarification on what he meant. "It was cockney slang," Ms. Justice said. "The man in the pub said it was a term for a spicy, fiery woman." she laughed.

Already an entrepreneur at that age, Ms.



Justice trademarked the term A Bit of Skirt for her first company (after she did her due diligence on the historical meaning of the phrase). Today, after building a lengthy resume as a fashion designer and manufacturer, she owns two Northeast Ohio boutiques called A Bit of Skirt.

Her first shop, in Willoughby, has earned a following for its sexy, chic and extravagant apparel that appeals to women from their 20s to their 60s. In July, she opened a second store at 31 N. Main in the Village of Chagrin Falls. The grand opening event at the Chagrin location featured a red carpet, champagne, generous gift bags for every visitor and more. Ms. Justice said everyone was very welcoming. "Someone brought me flowers, and one of the business owners paraded her staff into my store to welcome me," she said, and added, "It was heartwarming and as sweet as can be."



With plans to expand beyond two stores, Ms. Justice believed Chagrin Falls was a natural fit for her second location. "I love the style in Chagrin Falls," she said. "It's very classy and it's beautiful. It's the Beverly Hills of Northeast Ohio."

Both store locations offer fashion-forward women's clothing for every occasion, from a job interview to date night to just running errands. But, "It's completely different inventory in the two stores," said Ms. Justice, who also pointed out that she only carries six of each item so when it's gone, it's gone. Ms. Justice only carries what she finds on the West Coast and the Chagrin store has a California vibe with some serious glam and bling. A Bit of Skirt carries fashion accessories from local designers and Ms. Justice is always on the lookout for local clothing designers whose pieces she can carry.

Shopping at A Bit of Skirt is fun and none of the sales staff is pushy. "If you are nice, they'll come back," she said of her customers.

Continued on page 48

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Continued from page 47

“We get to know them,” she said, “their name, their kids, when they are going off to college. It’s a matter of being personable, and it’s related to their shopping needs. It comes down to styling, and that’s where I jump in. Styling is so much fun,” she said before describing a virtual runway show that spontaneously developed in her shop. “We had a few ladies trying on a bunch of stuff. They were taking pictures. We had such fun.” In fact, Ms. Justice is thinking about holding an actual runway show featuring local women as models. After all, the A Bit of Skirt website promises to make the world “your own personal runway.”

Describing the shoppers at her new store, Ms. Justice said, “Those women in Chagrin Falls are so down to earth and sweet and over-the-top nice, really and truly. And they really have style and they know what’s going on.”

Asked if she entertains customer requests for specific items, Ms. Justice said, “Absolutely. That’s my job. If it’s out there, I find it.”

This fall, Ms. Justice will be adding dresses, blouses, purses and more from luxury labels including Ted Baker and Haute Hippie. “It’s basically only sold at Neiman’s,” she said of the Haute Hippie line but she was quick to add that the rest of her inventory is at a variety of price points, even if shopping at A Bit of Skirt makes every woman feel like a million bucks. ■

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Candles and cushions bring an aura of calm to the SpaOrganic massage room designed and used by owner/therapist Chrissy Orzen, located within Chagrin Yoga in South Russell. Massages are just one way women pamper themselves in the Chagrin Valley.

Photos by Peggy Turbett

Time for pampering



Gravity Hair Salon and Spa owner Cathy Sciranko colors hair at the hidden gem tucked in the parking lot off East Orange Street.

Spas, salons allow women to escape busy lives for a few quiet, precious hours

By KRISTA S. KANO

The women of the Chagrin Valley are doctors and lawyers, entrepreneurs and stay-at-home moms. They drive their kids to music lessons and soccer practice every day, and travel on weekends to show choir competitions and volleyball tournaments around the country. They serve on nonprofit boards and PTAs and volunteer at their church.

They often don't take a moment for themselves once a day, or even once a week. Instead, they take an hour or two once every

Continued on page 50


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Continued from page 49

four to six weeks for a haircut and color or a mani-pedi. The valley has a wide variety of choices when it comes to salons, so however a woman chooses to spend her well-deserved and overdue respite, it has to count.

She may choose Gravity Hair Salon and Spa, a hidden gem in downtown Chagrin Falls tucked in the parking lot off East Orange Street. At 9 a.m. on a Saturday, rows of purses were hung up neatly on hooks below glass shelves each holding a vase containing a single pink rose. Women were telling their stylists about upcoming weddings, restaurant experiences and block parties as the stylists refreshed their hair colors and trimmed tight bobs.

Patricia Setlock of Chagrin Falls, a Saturday morning regular, was sitting in the waiting area wearing a black cape and sipping coffee from an elegant glass mug she grabbed from the breakfast station.

"I was a business owner, single, working full time, trying to take care of a house by myself. To be able to come here and chill out and relax a little before I got back to my hectic 24/7 schedule. I loved it," Ms. Setlock said.

She started coming to the salon about three years ago to have her hair cut by her daughter's friend, April Veilleux.

"I love the atmosphere here, and she's a really good stylist. I have to book four months out because she's so busy. I get a lot of compliments on my hair and I always say 'Go to April at Gravity!'" Ms. Setlock said.

Susan Rockey of Pepper Pike, a University Hospitals physician, said that she followed one of the salon's owners, Cathy Sciranko to Gravity.

"I think that once you find someone you work well with, that's relaxing in and of itself because you feel comfortable with someone and you're not worried. To trust someone to cut your hair is a big thing. I'm a physician so I work most of the time. I don't have a lot of free time, so this is a treat," Dr. Rockey said.

Even as Dr. Rockey was having her hair colored, she was attending to last minute details of a bridal shower for the daughter of her friend that was happening later in the day.

Down East Washington Street at Accents Salon and Spa at the Gallery in South Russell, Sandra Morl of Russell was getting her hair done for her daughter's wedding, held later that day at Mapleside Farms in Brunswick.

"I wouldn't have gone anywhere else to have my hair done today. There's no way," Mrs. Morl said at the cozy salon that featured rich, wood details and serene spaces for massages and pedicures.

Mrs. Morl, who was there with her mother-in-law and "long-distance client" Catherine Morl, explained that she has been coming to the salon for 11 years and has had her



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Dark wood cases used to shelve products enhance the welcoming warmth to the lobby of Accent Salon and Spa at the Gallery, owned by Pam Tanchon, in South Russell.

hair cut by nearly every stylist in the salon.

“When I first started coming, I had two kids who were in middle school and they both did sports. This was my two hours a week of escape, and I’m sure it’s the same for many other mothers. It’s just nice to come here. It’s a friendly atmosphere with skilled stylists, great products. It’s fun and it’s comfortable, and it sounds a bit cliché, but it’s the people that work here,” said Mrs. Morl, accurately describing exactly the feel that salon owner Pam Tanchon was going for when she opened 17 years ago.

“From the very beginning, people will come in and they say it’s so homey,” she said. “Women are not allowed to be home as much as they used to. Even a stay-at-home mom is not at home. When they spend 45 minutes to two-and-a-half hours with us, I want it to feel like an extension of home.”

Or, with SpaOrganic, a woman’s time for self-care could actually be in her home.

Founder and massage therapist Chrissy Orzen considers Chagrin Yoga in South Russell her homebase, but she also works at the Club at Hillbrook, the Inn of Chagrin Falls and in her clients’ homes.


“My clientele is pretty much all from the Chagrin Valley. I have student athletes, young mothers who come to relax, women who are riders or do Pilates and yoga. We add massage into their wellness routine for

preventable measures and to reduce anxiety or stress,” Ms. Orzen said.

In her studio at Chagrin Yoga, she plays soft, ambient music, uses organic lotions and oils, warm compresses and a heated table, all in the name of relaxation and self-care.

“Women do so much for so many people:

their spouse, their boss, their kids, their kids’ teachers,” Ms. Tanchon said. “Self-love is so important because you are pouring out to others from the vessel that is you. It’s so important to make sure you take that time, so you have more to pour out to give to others.” ■



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Girl Scout Savanna Fee, 18, of Auburn shows off her Gold Award project located in Lake Metroparks Farm Park in Kirtland. Ms. Fee turned an old shed into an information and demonstration center for how to create a backyard garden.



Built from scratch

Scout projects by teens enhance parks in valley

By KRISTA S. KANO

Whether they know it or not, people in the Chagrin Valley are benefiting every day from the hard work of dedicated teenagers.

Residents and visitors hike on trails, they use fire pits at local parks, they enjoy gardens and they play bocce, and sometimes they have no idea that a local Boy Scout working toward the Eagle rank or Girl Scout earning Gold built it from scratch.

This is no small feat.

To earn the rank of Eagle Scout, Boy Scouts have to earn 21 merit badges, proving they've mastered skills like camping, cooking, environmental science and aid; as well as complete a service project that has a lasting impact on the community. Only 4 percent of Boy Scouts are granted this rank after a lengthy review process, according to Boy Scouts of America.

Girl Scouts have to complete two Senior or Ambassador Journeys or have earned the Girl Scout Silver Award and completed one Journey to earn their Gold Award, the highest honor for Girl Scouts. They must spend at least 80 hours working on a Gold Award project, and only 5 percent of eligible Scouts go for the Gold nationwide.

Lucky enough, many of those select few live in the valley and have chosen to do projects that benefit their own community.

There's Austin Herpst, who created the Bentleyville Community Park bocce court that launched the area-wide bocce league. Russell Woodsworth who created the ga-ga pit at the Chagrin Falls Park Community Center. Jordan Spehar who created the outdoor classroom at Timmons Elementary School. Elise Markley who improved the welcome area at Santa's Hide-A-Way Hollow in Middlefield. And Nolan Wiley who built the dog park behind Orange Village Hall.

Joey King, a recent Chagrin Falls High School graduate, completed his Eagle project in 2015. Mr. King, who has been scouting for around 12 years, returned to his school to improve and add to the trail that runs behind Gurney Elementary School and the soccer fields. The trail was then used by the Chagrin Falls Middle School cross country team for a meet.

"I think it's every scout's dream to be an Eagle. You just have to be motivated and keep at it," Mr. King said. "It's super easy once you're in scouts and you get to high school to get preoccupied with other stuff.



Chagrin Falls High School recent graduate Joey King improved and added to the trail that runs behind Gurney Elementary School as his Eagle Scout project.

You have to motivate yourself to do it."

Recent Kenston High School graduate Savanna Fee, 18, of Auburn completed her project at Lake Metroparks Farm Park in Kirtland. There, she turned a dilapidated shed near a greenhouse into an information and demonstration center for how to create a backyard or porch garden.

Ms. Fee explained that she grew up on a lane of family members in three homes and that they shared their gardens and orchards

that were filled with fresh fruits and vegetables like apples, cherries, corn and pears.

"I like to think of it as a three-way community garden. A lot of people know they can grow flowers in a pot, but I wanted to teach people who don't live on a huge plot of land like I do that they can still grow fruits and vegetables," Ms. Fee explained.

After \$200, lots of donations and 80 hours of work over three days, Ms. Fee finished her project with the help of friends, including fellow Girl Scout Katie Blazek and her boyfriend Boy Scout Justin Kovach, and family.

Ms. Fee explained that she had to do a lot of research for her project, although much of the information displayed in the shed is engrained in her from her late great-grandfather, Al Stepic, who started their family garden.

For example, the raised beds that are part of her display are filled with tomatoes and marigolds because marigolds deflect insects and release a chemical into the soil that help tomatoes grow.

After completing the project, Ms. Fee had her final exit interview that determined if she earned her Gold Award.

"I went in with Katie and we both got our Golds," Ms. Fee said. "We went to Chik-fil-A and got free milk shakes because we were both wearing our vests. No one was there, and they gave us the milk shakes. That was my big moment of accomplishment, drinking that milkshake." ■

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Joseph Jacobs, owner of Chagrin Home Improvements, works with his crew of Bill Rood and Evan Gilliland on a deck sealing project in Parkman Township. While running his company, Mr. Jacobs, along with Mr. Rood and Mr. Gilliland personally took much-needed aid and supplies South after several hurricanes hit in 2017.

Photo by Peggy Turbett

When hurricanes hit in South, Chagrin business man was there to help people in need

By MARIE ELIUM

Chagrin Home Improvements owner Joe Jacobs was a headline long before he became a small business owner.

While many successful entrepreneurs have deep ties to their communities, Mr. Jacobs' are more complicated than most. Twenty-five years ago, "Joey" was catapulted into both the local and national news after he was mauled by a neighbor's Rottweiler in his Chester Township neighborhood.

After Mr. Jacobs pulled the dog off his two friends, the animal turned on the 9-year-old. Though horribly injured, heavy winter clothing shielded much of Jacob's body. He protected most of his face by burying it in heavy snow that had recently fallen.

Today the once-deep scars on his forehead have mostly faded, though they are still visible. One ear is deformed, the other is gone entirely leaving just a hole where his ear should be. Numerous reconstructive surgeries consumed several years of his life.

Mr. Jacobs, 34, is affable, passionate about his deck restoration business and refreshingly direct about the physical reminders of the mauling. His scars seem to be on the outside only. Jacobs likes dogs, isn't afraid of them and considers the attack an anomaly. Even the teasing he endured from classmates over the years seems to have left him with a determination to work hard for his customers and for strangers alike – but more on that later.

Chagrin Home Improvements started out in 2014 as exactly what the name implies – a general home improvement business. Mr. Jacobs picked up his handyman knowledge during summer breaks from school working with family members who were painters, carpenters, plumbers and other skilled tradesmen.

After graduating from college in Boca

Raton, Florida just as the economic recession was gaining a foothold, he moved back home to Chagrin Falls where his mother was having a difficult time due to declining health. Mr. Jacobs turned to what he knew best – general home improvements – to add money to the family's coffers.

Over the past four years, his business has grown in many ways and narrowed in others. No longer a general home repair business, Chagrin Home Improvements specializes in deck restoration, repairing, restaining, painting, power washing and making minor repairs on decks throughout the area.

In winter, he and his employees and his longtime friends Bill Rood and Evan Gilliland stay busy applying concrete coating on garage and basement floors and interior painting. They've been with Mr. Jacobs since he was hauling a power washer in the back seat of his car to gain a foothold in his burgeoning home improvement business.

"I like to say they're the meat and potatoes, I'm the plate, silverware, napkin and table. We all work together," Mr. Jacobs said.

As the company has grown, so had Mr. Jacobs' enthusiasm for the job and his commitment to provide professional, high-quality work. "I love hands-on work and seeing the fruits of your labor," he said. "I learned early on that if you're a jack-of-all-trades, you're a master of none. By specializing in something, you get better at it and you become known for it.

Mr. Jacobs lives in Chagrin Falls with his mother Kathy Lawrence and his brother Mick Lawrence, who is a senior at Chagrin Falls High School and an accomplished football player. Another brother, John Storaasli, is a Marine.

Now back to the strangers.

Last year when Texas was flooded with rain from Hurricane Harvey, Mr. Jacobs – like thousands of others – was shocked by the destruction and frustrated by his sense of helplessness. When Hurricane Irma, soon after, tore through the Caribbean and set its sights on Florida, Mr. Jacobs talked to Mr. Rood and Mr. Gilliland about how they all could help. Mr. Jacobs had lived in Florida and knew first-hand that the first two or three days after a hurricane are the most devastating as residents wait for government and military aid to arrive.

His friends were on board. The three asked community members for donations of water, tarps, food and other supplies, loaded up the company's box truck with their battery-operated tools and generators, 36 five-gallon cans of gasoline and even a small boat with a motor. They headed South, stopping in Tampa to see how the storm was tracking.

When it looked like the Keys were in Irma's line of fire, they got back on the road and talked their way through several checkpoints, arriving in Key West 12 hours after the hurricane hit.

They dropped off water at the police station, passed out supplies to people who rode out the storm and then got to work cutting fallen trees with chainsaws to clear roads, passing out diapers and helping people secure tarps and doing whatever was needed.

After three days, lumbering C130 military planes and other help started arriving. The crew distributed whatever supplies remained and headed home.

"It was very good to be able to help people," Mr. Jacobs said. "I know after being in a hurricane there's a brief period before aid shows up (and people) are most vulnerable. We had all of these tools and a network of people (who donated)." Packing it all up and heading to Florida just made sense, he added.

From friends being attacked by a dog to strangers hit by a hurricane, Mr. Jacobs is one of those people who seems to find himself in the right place at the right time. These days, it's most often on decks that need TLC.

Mr. Jacobs and Chagrin Home Improvements can be reached at 440-247-6700 or at chagrinhomeimprovements@gmail.com. ■

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Photos by Peggy Turbett

Mary Bury, product coordinator at Bonitas International, left, collaborates with Michael Masello, marketing consultant, in the incubator space at Bonitas International, where Mr. Masello rents work space in Newbury Township. The Bonitas space is women-owned and women-run.

Cultivating bold ideas

The Bonitas offers space for budding businesses to grow

By TIM TEDESCHI

Kimberly Martinez knows what it's like to be an entrepreneur with no official office space. In 2003, she founded Bonitas International with her sister-in-law Lisa Harrington

in spare bedrooms and in her father's garage.

"Being an entrepreneur is the loneliest job in the world," Ms. Martinez said. "Everyone likes to imagine the glamour of working in pajamas and being home all day, but it's about the energy from other people, the opportunity to have



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creative interaction, having coworkers.”

Bonitas International, a women-owned and women-run business which produces ID badge jewelry and accessories, has now generated millions of dollars of revenue and occupies a 15,000-square-foot Kinsman Road headquarters in Newbury. Since May, the company has opened up its facilities as a co-working space, branded as The Bonitas – Be Bold, Be Brave and Be Brilliant, to make the entrepreneurial life less lonely for budding businesses and freelancers.

“We built our beautiful building and decided we wanted to share that with other entrepreneurs,” said Ms. Martinez, who grew up in Newbury and now serves as Bonitas’ CEO from Sarasota, Florida. “We’ve gotten where we are today because of extraordinary help of so many people along the way.”

While Bonitas employees and operations take up one wing of the building, freelancers and entrepreneurs who rent space have access to private offices, a conference room, an open common workspace with tables for collaboration and professional phone and internet services. Ms. Martinez said rent ranges from \$100 to \$600 per month with no long-term contract required so that entrepreneurs can rent month by month to suit their needs.

“It’s a lovely space,” Geauga Growth Partnership President Tracy Jemison said. “It’s a very attractive space; it’s going to be very conducive to creativity by the way that it’s laid out. The Bonitas is a great story in itself of a couple of entrepreneurs who started a business in their garage and kept expanding and expanding.”

Michael Masello is a former Bonitas employee who now commutes to the co-working space from his apartment in downtown Cleveland to work on his internet marketing, consulting and other start-up businesses. He said the collaboration of the space works especially well for him because Bonitas is now his primary marketing client.

“I have a lot of friends who have followed that path,” Mr. Masello said. “You start off as a company’s employee and then decide, ‘Oh



Michael Masello, a former Bonitas International employee, now operates his internet marketing, consulting and other start-up businesses from the Bonitas’ co-working space in Newbury.

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Continued from page 57

I kind of want to break off on my own,' and then you take on your previous employer as your first client. That's how it worked out."

Mr. Masello said while working from home has its benefits, he enjoys having a place where he can focus and work eight straight hours without the distractions and isolation of home.

"I just found that I missed the face-to-face interaction," he said. "There's a lot of friendly people here, the environment's nice and what I've found with myself and talking to other people who work from home is that yeah, you have more control over your schedule, but you still have to put the time in."

In addition to the workspace amenities, The Bonitas features a full kitchen, an exercise studio and full bathrooms with showers. Mr. Masello said he's worked in several co-working spaces both in Cleveland and in New York City, but The Bonitas is the first to offer a full kitchen.

"I follow a mostly paleo diet, so I often try to eat whole foods," Mr. Masello said. "I'll often bring a sweet potato with me and bake it in the oven for an hour and that's just something cool that you don't really get at that many workplaces."

Ms. Martinez said the goal is for the co-working space to become a hub for collaboration and innovation in the area, including holding Geauga Growth Partnership meetings in the conference room from time to time. Mr. Jemison said his organization has been working to bring a co-working space to the area for a long time.

"With collaboration between entrepreneurs, you can see a lot more success and hopefully a lot of successful companies will be born out of this type of space. We're very pleased to be able to have this space in Geauga County," Mr. Jemison said. "We're pleased it finally came to fruition.

"We're going to promote it all we can and for that entrepreneur that right now is sitting in their garage, maybe it's time to make that next step, this is the place for them."

Ms. Martinez said several other entrepreneurs are currently in the on-boarding process of joining the co-working space.

"Our goal is to have it be a real community and for it to be very collaborative and very flexible," Ms. Martinez said. "We want people to be able to come and go and help their businesses. We're really excited to bring innovation to the area." ■



Little tastes of Cleveland

Deby Lexow ships fun boxes filled with Ohio-made goods

By KRISTA S. KANO

Deby Lexow delicately places two sheets of red tissue paper in an open box. Reaching into a large bin, she grabs a handful of recyclable crinkle paper and packs it into the box, only to cover a wooden tray made by Wood Thingamajigs.

Another layer of crinkle paper, and in goes a handmade mug with a red heart encased in the shape of Ohio. More crinkle paper, and in goes a package of Gray Duck coffee, Storehouse Tea, Minus G gluten-free biscotti, and a copy of Gwen Dyer's "Cleveland is the Best" coffee table book.

More crinkle paper still, and Ms. Lexow gently pushes down to ensure every item is tightly and softly packed. On top, she places a Heidi Cookie, a sugar cookie in the shape of Ohio with the iced words "LOCLE Box" delicately inside.

Flanked by two shelving units stacked with local artisan-made products, Ms. Lexow folds the red tissue paper together and seals it with a heart sticker.

"Every box is packed with a purpose," Ms. Lexow said, as her 11-year-old puggle Bella snored softly nearby. "Everything is placed in a very specific place. Everything has its position, so that it's an experience going through a LOCLE Box. It's like a little treasure hunt."

For the past 37 years, Ms. Lexow has been curating local goods made by Northeast Ohio artisans and packaging them into heartfelt gifts for friends and family, but it wasn't until 2014 that she turned her holiday hobby into a full-fledged business called LOCLE Box, and began shipping little tastes of Cleveland all over the country.

Under a patio umbrella in her sprawling, lush Bainbridge backyard, Ms. Lexow explained that she first started creating these gift boxes when she moved from Chicago to the Chagrin Valley 37 years ago.

"I found that the pancake breakfasts in Northeast Ohio are so incredibly popular, and I thought 'How cute!' Then I actually went and tasted real maple syrup and I said 'Oh my gosh is this great,' and I wanted to share it," she said.

Ms. Lexow found pancake flour locally milled by Fowler's Mill in Chester and coupled it with a bottle of maple syrup that was a short walk away on Haskins Road. She packaged them together for Christmas presents



Photo by Peggy Turbett

Deby Lexow runs LOCLE Box, a gift box service offering goods from around Northeast Ohio, out of her Bainbridge basement.



and shipped the boxes ("I wouldn't even call them LOCLE Boxes at that point") around the country to her parents, in-laws, siblings and friends. She did the same thing the next year, and the next, and the next.

"I never even thought about it throughout the year. It was just like 'Oh the holidays are coming, I need Christmas presents.' This is so personal and special. It's like sharing a little bit of where I live and it got to the point where they looked forward to it and they couldn't wait until next year."

Over the years, Ms. Lexow developed more and more relationships with small-batch artisans around Northeast Ohio, attending various farmers markets and visiting Amish communities like Sugar Creek. Still,

her boxes were just a once-a-year hobby, and the rest of her time was spent raising her two children and working her full-time corporate job that sent her all over the country.

Then in 2008, she decided to leave the company and become a Master Gardener through the Ohio State University Extension in Geauga. When her training was complete, she helped people who were starting a backyard garden for the first time and farmer's who needed help understanding what was happening to their crops.

In 2014, she was chatting with her daughter Kimberly about what her next steps may be, and determined her next step should be to turn her annual hobby into a full-time business. They brainstormed names and Ms. Lexow ultimately came up with the name LOCLE Box when she was in an airport and saw that Cleveland Hopkins International Airport's code is CLE. "This was before all the Cle talk," Ms. Lexow boasted.

In the first year of her business, Ms. Lexow received a large order from a single client, as well as small orders from individuals all through her website.

"I had purchased 250 boxes of crinkle paper, tissue products and I said, 'I can do this. I can handle this in this environment. From

Thanksgiving to the end of the year, which is about six weeks, I packaged and shipped 1,000 boxes.”

Ms. Lexow’s entire home was filled with LOCLE Boxes, which were all 8-by-8-by-8 at the time, and shipped boxes to the UPS in Aurora daily. Neighbors and friends came over to help put the boxes together and stamp every box with the LOCLE Box logo, designed by Ms. Lexow.

“My bed had crinkle paper in it. We had crinkle paper in our hair, sticking out of our shoes. But there was something that was so exciting and fun, and I started getting more and more comments that people loved it. I got orders from people I didn’t know and people wanted to support me because it was new and fun.”

Since that first year, LOCLE Box has grown considerably. The website, loclebox.com, features Gluten-Free boxes, made in Chagrin boxes, Pamper Him and Garden Love boxes, though with enough notice, Ms. Lexow loves creating custom boxes. The new website, up since the end of July, also features a corporate gifts tab, for companies to create the best way to offer thanks to their clients and employees. Boxes have been sent to LeBron James, Oscar-winner Lee Unkrich, and the CEOs of Uber and Google.

And every recipient of LOCLE Box gets a taste of many different Northeast Ohio artisans.

“It’s not about promoting one make in the box. It’s about the group,” Ms. Lexow said. “It helps the maker, it helps me and it helps

Ohio. It’s all very, very exciting.”

“I feel very honored that she has my stuff in her boxes,” said Heidi Alesnik of Chester, owner of A Heidi Cookie and baker of LOCLE Box’s signature cookie. “They go all over the place and it excites me when LOCLE Box customers ask specifically for A Heidi Cookie.”

“It’s nice to be represented by a company that truly does represent the local business people and makes people aware of what’s available to them in the area,” said Teresa Csizma, co-owner of Sugar Me Desserterie, a LOCLE Box product. “More than that, to be able to share it across the country. It’s just a really good example of how we all support each other around here. We’re a community that supports one another.” ■

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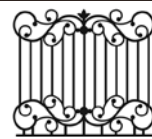
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