Reuse plan for former church hits right note

Site to become home of Berkshires’ Academy for Advanced Musical Studies

BY JOHN TOWNES

An ambitious new music school in Adams is tuning up for its anticipated debut later this year. The Berkshires’ Academy for Advanced Musical Studies (BAAMS) will be located in the new Olga C. Sommer Center for Music and Art in the former St. Mark’s Episcopal Church at 39 Commercial St., just a few blocks south of the town center.

“We think this will be a great addition to Adams and will give a boost to the town,” said co-founder Don Sommer.

In addition to its benefits for young people, Sommer also sees the nonprofit academy as contributing to the town’s cultural community and creative economy. The project is the result of a confluence of circumstances that brought together separate organizers who had similar goals.

“The word that comes to mind is serendipity,” said Richard Boulger, a North Adams native who is a co-founder of the school and its artistic director and musical co-director.

“The events that led to this came together almost as if it was destined to happen.”

BAAMS (www.adamsomaticcenter.com/BAAMS) will offer comprehensive music education to students age 10 to 18. Drawing from different forms of music, students will learn to develop as performers, composers and improvisors.

Emphasis on attracting young talent to become part of local workforce

BY BRAD JOHNSON

After two successful years of operation of its Berkshire Business Interns program, Lever is revamping it to broaden its scope and impact.

“We’re expanding the program to include more non-business internships,” said Jeffrey Thomas, executive director of Lever, a North Adams-based nonprofit organization that works to foster an ecosystem of entrepreneurship and innovation in the Berkshire region.

While facilitating the placement of college students or recent graduates in meaningful internship experiences with area businesses will remain the primary emphasis, Thomas explained that the program will also look to place interns in the nonprofit and municipal sectors. “In these cases, we’d be looking for situations where the interns would be working on mission-central projects, just as we’ve done in the past two years with area businesses,” he said.

With this expansion comes a new, shorter name: Berkshire Interns. This change, while subtle on its surface, is intended to promote interest in the program among college students who may feel that a “business” internship doesn’t lineup well with their future professional or personal goals.

That was the perception of at least one participant in the inaugural internship program in summer 2018.

“I was looking for a summer job or internship going into my junior year,” recalled Jade Schnauber, a former intern at Lever, who has been named director of workforce placement and innovation in the Berkshire region.

“I was looking for a summer job or internship going into my junior year,” recalled Jade Schnauber, a former intern at Lever, who has been named director of workforce placement and innovation in the Berkshire region.

“We named it after Katie, because it would not be here without her.”

The residential units in the Katie Doherty Veterans Village are primarily oriented to formerly homeless female veterans who have gone through Soldier On’s transitional program. They are ready to live independently but also want to remain in a supportive community of other veterans, with access to services and programs.

However, the facility is also open to other female veterans who meet the financial eligibility requirements.

Jade Schnauber, a former intern at Lever, has been named director of workforce placement and innovation in the Berkshire region.

Residential units address female veterans’ needs

Soldier On fills gap with new Katie Doherty Veterans Village

BY JOHN TOWNES

With women now the fastest growing segment of the homeless veteran population, a new project addressing that situation on a local level is nearing completion.

The new Katie Doherty Veterans Village at 364 W. Housatonic St. in Pittsfield will provide 14 one-bedroom units of affordable, permanent housing for women who are veterans.

Slated to open in late February, it is the first such project for women sponsored by Soldier On, a private nonprofit organization committed to ending veteran homelessness.

“The female veterans we work with have different needs than male veterans,” said the project’s namesake, Katie Dougherty, a consultant with Soldier On and director of the Soldier On Training Institute. “This new community will offer a safe, secure environment designed to meet those needs.”

The Berkshires’ Academy for Advanced Musical Studies, which plans to begin programs there this summer.

continued on page 16

continued on page 22
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TOP pages
 TLS ON THE MOVE
Programs continue as Tyler Street Lab seeks new location

By John Townes
The Tyler Street Lab in Pittsfield no longer has a physical home base, but the community-based group continues to be active by holding events at various locations.

"Someone referred to us now as TLS on the Move, and the name has stuck," said Kate Lauzon, one of the organization's three co-directors.

Tyler Street Lab was formed by a collaboration of community members and groups, with the goal of establishing an activity and educational center in the Morningside neighborhood. The organization's fiscal agent was the nonprofit Goodwill Industries of the Berkshires and Southern Vermont, which has headquarters and a training and donation center at 158 Tyler St.

 Its startup was supported by the recent Transformational Development Initiative (TDI), a state program sponsored by MassDevelopment that provides support to revitalize efforts in targeted neighborhoods. The Pittsfield TDI, which ended last year, was focused on the Tyler Street corridor and surrounding Morningside neighborhood.

 The TDI arranged for a six-month lease for the Tyler Street Lab in the former Sheed Plumbing and Heating building at 230 Tyler St., which contains a large open room and several offices. Tyler Street Lab was launched as a "pop-up" pilot project in March 2019 to determine the feasibility of the project (April 2019 T&AC).

 Several organizations and community-based enterprises moved in. The space was also used for a variety of educational, social and community events.

However, the facility was closed in October, when the lease ran out. Some members left the project, and Goodwill withdrew as the fiscal agent.

 A core of organizers – including Lauzon, Shirley Edgerton and Stephanie Hockett – restructured the organization and began looking for a new space. They launched an offering to the public to make reusable bags at all five of the bank's locations during the week of Feb. 18-22.

 Lauzon said the response to Tyler Street Lab's remote events has been positive.

 "Attendance has been really good," she said. "We've even had to turn away people from registering at some events because we ran out of slots." And I've been overwhelmed by the level of response to the upcoming sewing classes."

"I can guide you with integrity, patience and compassion through the potentially complex federal and state tax filing responsibilities."

 "We're still committed to providing a place in this neighborhood where members of the community can gather and gain new experiences and learn new things," she said.

 Tyler Street Lab seeks new location

The Tyler Street Lab was launched in March 2019 as a space to support community initiatives in the Morningside neighborhood of Pittsfield. The lab's goal was to provide a space for community members to come together and learn new skills.

However, the facility was closed in October, when the lease ran out. Some members left the project, and Goodwill withdrew as the fiscal agent.

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Cigar lounge coming to Crawford Square space

BY JOHN TOWNS

Cigars, haircuts and socializing. Those are the elements of a new venture coming to downtown Pittsfield.
The Country Club Barbershop and Cigar Lounge is slated to open later this year at 123 North St., part of the Crawford Square commercial complex.
The 1,400-square-foot storefront was previously the site of The Studiosi Baker, which closed recently.
“It will also have a state-of-the-art ventilation system that takes out the smoke and the smell,” he said.

Dews is the general manager of two newspapers in Ravena and Greeneville, N.Y., and is a real estate broker at The Kinderhook Group’s Pittsfield office (which is in another section of Crawford Square). He previously worked at the Berkshire Eagle in its business departments. He is also a minister at Price Memorial AME Zion Church in Pittsfield.

Dews said he began smoking cigars several years ago and became an aficionado.

“Cigar lounge is slated to open later this year at 123 North St., part of the Crawford Square commercial complex.”

While a cigar lounge is a novelty in the Berkshires, Dews said they are common in other cities. There is also a culture of people who enjoy experiencing different cigar lounges.

“Anyone who enjoys cigars is welcome,” he said. “In one cigar lounge I saw a businesswoman in a suit and a guy in work clothes. The businessman told the other guy that he looked familiar. ‘I’m your landscaper,’ he replied. They got into a conversation and became acquainted in ways that they probably would not have had an opportunity to do otherwise.”

Dews, who is currently remodeling the space in preparation for its opening, said the lounge will be oriented to men and women from all walks of life.

“Anyone who enjoys cigars is welcome.”

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“Anyone who enjoys cigars is welcome.”

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While cigars are the common denominator, “Cigar lounges are good people,” he said. “For example, I ran across some fellows where members can store their cigars in optimal conditions.

“We also plan to have special events for members, such as music, spoken word performances, and conversations,” said Dews.

Dews noted that these establishments offer a space to relax and share the enjoyment of cigars with others.

“One frustration for cigar smokers is the difficulty of finding places they can smoke,” he said. “For example, I ran across some fellows who take trips to other places specifically to go to cigar lounges.”

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“One frustration for cigar smokers is the difficulty of finding places they can smoke,” he said. “For example, I ran across some fellows where members can store their cigars in optimal conditions.

As indicated by its name, the Country Club Barbershop and Cigar Lounge will have a barber chair on site, with professional barbers on contract. Members can contact one of the barbers and have their hair cut by appointment at the lounge.

“The Country Club Barbershop and Cigar Lounge is slated to open later this year at 123 North St., part of the Crawford Square commercial complex.”

“Anyone who enjoys cigars is welcome.”

“I got the idea in St. Louis, where I saw a barber shop next to a cigar lounge,” said Dews. “It struck me that the two have similar clienteles, so I decided to combine them.”

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BHS, Williams team up on Williamstown Apothecary

BY JOHN TOWNES

In an era in which small, independent pharmacies have been replaced by big chains, Berkshire Health Systems (BHS) and Williams College have partnered to open a contemporary version of the traditional corner drugstore.

The Williamstown Apothecary, a new pharmacy at 72 Spring St., is scheduled to open in late March or April, pending local permits and renovations to the property.

“Williams has been excited to work with BHS to bring pharmacy and related services to the heart of Williamstown,” said Matt Sheehy, Williams College’s associate vice president for finance and administration. “This should be a major convenience for the community, including Williams students, faculty and staff.”

The Williamstown Apothecary will fill a void that has existed in central Williamstown since 2010, when the medical operations of Hart’s Pharmacy—which had been in business on Spring Street for about 85 years—were sold to the Rite Aid chain.

The pharmacy was transferred to Rite Aid’s store in the Colonial Shopping Plaza about two miles east on Route 2. That store is now part of the Walgreens chain.

Since then, students and staff at the college and other residents have not had access to a pharmacy in the town center within a reasonable walking distance.

“We’ve had an ongoing working relationship with the college on student health programs and other matters for many years,” said Michael Leary, director of media relations at BHS. “Meeting the need for a pharmacy in the town center grew out of discussions between us.”

The pharmacy is being set up in a commercial building the college owns. BHS will operate there as a tenant through Berkshire Community Pharmacy subsidiary. BHS is covering the cost of construction and renovation of the space.

Open to the public, the Williamstown Apothecary will be a full-service retail pharmacy with access to prescription and over-the-counter medications. It will include coverage of various insurance plans.

It will also feature a selection of other non-prescription health and personal care products. These include vitamins and nutritional supplements, herbal remedies and teas, flower essence tinctures, quality skin care products, local organic handmade soaps, and essential oils and diffusers.

However, it will operate under the name of BHS as a pharmacy, with access to a registered pharmacist on-staff. The pharmacy will open a Scrip Center, which is a kiosk similar to an ATM that enables customers to pick up prescriptions and other selected items at their convenience any time of day or night. “We wanted to combine an on-campus presence with a service for BHS customers in Williamstown,” said Leary.

For BHS this is the third outlet in its Community Pharmacy subsidiary, which was launched in 2015.

The original one is in Berkshire Medical Center (BMC), the Pittsfield hospital operated by BHS. Located in the Warner Building on the BMC campus, it also includes a wellness and nutrition selection and sale of non-prescription items and a Scrip Center.

“We have had an internal pharmacy department at BMC for years to provide medications directly related to our clinical services at the hospital,” said Leary.

However, he emphasized, it was the contemporary in the technology of its pharmacy operations.

“This includes a Scrip Center, which is a kiosk similar to an ATM that enables customers to pick up prescriptions and other selected items at their convenience any time of day or night,” said Leary.

February 27: FFUSA in New York and Vermont, topic of part 2 of MCLA’s Green Living Seminar Series. 5:30 p.m. in Room 121 of the Feigenbaum Center for Science and Innovation on the MCLA campus. Free and open to the public.

March 4: Winter/New Year Breakfast Meeting of the distinguished lecture series. 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. at Berkshire Hills Country Club in Pittsfield. For more information, visit www.mcla.edu/greenliving or contact Elena Trainer at 413-662-5305.

March 7: Downtown Pittsfield Restaurant Week, promotion of locally-sourced items at participating restaurants in downtown Pittsfield. For a list of Restaurants participating and menus, visit www.stoneberrylibrary.org.

March 7: The Williamstown (Downtown) Community Pharmacy will feature clashed topics of presentation by Matt Reardon, environmental analyst at the New England Interstate Water Commission, and open up the pharmacy to the public.

March 9: Community Pharmacy subsidiary, which was launched in 2015.

March 19: 5th annual Berkshire Earth Expo and Cooler Community Challenge held by the Southern Berkshire Chamber of Commerce. Forms and information available at npcberkshires.org.

March 22: 1st Annual Berkshire County Community Service Award. Tickets are $50, available at a whimsical Seamstress or locally.

March 26: Nominations deadline for 3rd annual Berkshire Nonprofit Awards. Co-hosted by the Nonprofit Center of the Berkshires and Behind the Scenes, a non-profit professional development organization. For more information, contact Elena Trainer at 413-662-5305.

March 30: 10th Annual Boos-Prescod St. Patrick’s Reception held by the Lee Chamber of Commerce. Proceeds benefit the women and men in the Lee Veterans Community. For more information, call 413-243-1705 or email LeeChamberOffice@LeeBank.com

April 1: 1st annual Berkshire Earth Day Green Living Seminar. 5:30 p.m. in Room 121 of the Feigenbaum Center for Science and Innovation on the MCLA campus. Free and open to the public. For more information, visit www.mcla.edu/greenliving or contact Elena Trainer at 413-662-5305.

April 1: 11th Annual Boos-Prescod St. Patrick’s Reception held by the Lee Chamber of Commerce. Proceeds benefit the women and men in the Lee Veterans Community. For more information, call 413-243-1705 or email LeeChamberOffice@LeeBank.com

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North Adams Regional Hospital building, which now operates as the North County Campus of BMC. “There was a need for a Community Pharmacy there because of the number of practices and services and patients we have in North Adams,” said Leary.

Factors contributing to the demise of independent pharmacies have included the increasingly difficult requirements of the healthcare system and the inability of smaller businesses to compete with the pricing advantage of high-volume chains. However, BHS is well positioned to operate in this environment, said Leary. “We have long experience in the pharmaceutical market with our clinical operations,” he said. “We also are affiliated with national programs. So we’re able to achieve discounts for volume bulk ordering and offer our customers competitive pricing.”

While noting that BHS does not have any specific plans to open another outlet imminently, Leary said that possibility is being considered. “Once the Williamstown Apothecary has been operating, we’ll evaluate its success, and look at opportunities for additional ones in other locations,” he said.

Pine Brook Pub puts food first at former Chick’s Bar
BY JOHN TOWNES
Following a change in ownership, a long-time neighborhood bar in Adams has been converted into a new restaurant operating as Pine Brook Pub.

Located at 128 Columbia St. (Route 8) just north of the town center, Chick’s Bar and Grill had been operating since the 1940s. Tamnie and Trent Shafer of Adams purchased the property and building in 2019 from Dennis Knap, who had operated it for about two decades. They have renovated the building and rebranded the business, which reopened in December as Pine Brook Pub, a name based on the brook that runs along the property.

While Pine Brook Pub will continue to feature changing specials and rotating items, Shafer said they have a basic menu that will also feature changing specials and rotating items. Shafer said they have a range of items and prices. “We want to offer variety, and be an affordable place to take the family,” she said. In addition to familiar American staples, they have options based on cuisine such as British, Irish, south-of-the-border, Polish, and other countries and regions. They also feature unusual variations of standards. There is a selection of appetizers for $4. Other fare includes panini sandwiches averaging $11, and nachos with varied sauces for $11. Burgers range from $10 to $13. There is also an “International loaded baked potato” for $11. Charcuterie plates are also available.

Most entrées and full meals are about $16 or less. Menu items or specials they offer have included steak tips, chicken and broccoli, alfredo, chili, goulash, buffalo-bacon-mac-and-cheese, creamy beef pasta, and kielbasa, among others. There are also specials such as discounted beverage and meal combinations. The bar includes alcoholic beverages and a selection of craft and international beers. Shafer said they did extensive work on the interior which includes a pub and dining area of 1,300 square feet. It has seating for 34 in the pub and 40 in the dining area. They also plan to have outdoor seating in the backyard.

“We basically gutted the kitchen and pub area, and installed new equipment and remodeled the dining area and pub,” she said. Among the features are four high-top whiskey-barrel pub tables. “We also created more bathrooms,” said Shafer with a chuckle. “For some reason, those are getting a lot of high praise. People love to use the best public bathrooms around.”

The pub features large-screen TV’s for sporting events. They also have low-key live music, and plan on other activities, including recently started Thursday-Trivia game night. Shafer said business has been gradually increasing. “A lot of people don’t know we’re here yet,” she said. “But more people are gradually discovering us, and it’s picking up.”

If your plan is to invest in IT, when it breaks, you don’t have a plan.

Pine Brook Pub (413-749-7244 or Facebook page Pine Brook Pub or pinebrookpub.com) is open from 5 to 9 p.m. Monday, Wednesday and Thursday; from 3 to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and from 1 to 6 p.m. Sunday. It is closed Tuesdays.

“During the week we’ll be open for dinner,” said Shafer. “On weekends, we’ll be open earlier and also offer lunch.” They have a basic menu that will also feature changing specials and rotating items. Shafer said they have a range of items and prices. “We want to offer variety, and be an affordable place to take the family,” she said. In addition to familiar American staples, they have options based on cuisine such as British, Irish, south-of-the-border, Polish, and other countries and regions. They also feature unusual variations of standards. There is a selection of appetizers for $4. Other fare includes panini sandwiches averaging $11, and nachos with varied sauces for $11. Burgers range from $10 to $13. There is also an “International loaded baked potato” for $11. Charcuterie plates are also available.

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If your plan is to invest in IT, when it breaks, you don’t have a plan.
Following more than a year of mediated nego-
tiations, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and seven parties have agreed to a faster and more comprehensive clean up plan for the Housatonic River, and we are looking forward to more com-
municative and faster developments with the “rev-
er” said EPA New England Regional Administrator Denice Decel in a press release announcing the settlement. In addition to EPA, the settling parties to the agreement are General Electric, the Rest of River Municipal Committee (the towns of Lenox, Lee, Stockbridge, Great Bar-
rington, and Sheffield), Kelly of Pittsfield of Connecticut, C. Jeffrey Cook, Environmental Action Team, and Massachusetts Audubon Society. Under the agreement, highly contaminated sediment will be removed from the river and floodplains and will be transported into a new disposal site to transform our communities into inclusive and thriving entrepreneurial ecosys-
tems. (Photo by Ben Lamb)

The Berkshire Life Charitable Foundation is now accepting applications from nonprofit 501(c)3 organizations that specifically offer programs and services to benefit Berkshire County residents with disabilities. The foundation was chartered in 2001 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the founding of Berkshire Life Insurance Company and its merger with the Guardian Life Insurance Company of America. Since inception, the foundation has awarded more than 400 grants with a cumulative financial contribution to the community in excess of $2.05 million. In its 2019 funding cycle, the foundation awarded 19 grants totaling more than $124,000 in support of a broad variety of initiatives throughout the Berkshires. The organization is seeking to expand its public information opportunities to explain the settlement agreement and answer questions from citizens. Public infor-
mation meetings are scheduled for Feb. 5 at Lee High School in Lee, Feb. 20 at Monument Mountain High School at Great Barrington, and March 12 at the Berkshire headquarters in Pittsfield. All meetings are at 6 p.m. For more information on the settlement agreement and EPA efforts to address contamination in the Housatonic River, go to www.epa.gov/pe-housatonic.

Berkshire County Aces has received a dona-
tion of a box of Adam’s in 2013 at $13.50. The hand-capped-accessible home was received without any restrictions from an out-of-town donor, who selected the “Aces” – 301 South Street in Pittsfield – of qualified nonprofit organizations in Berkshire County. “We are grateful for the donor’s generosity, and for selecting BCAce over the many other worthwhile nonprofit institutions in the region,” said BCAce President and CEO Janice Loyd. “It is this kind of generosity that allows us to provide high-quality programs and services to our clients with developmental disabilities and brain injuries throughout Berkshire and Hampden counties.”

Greylock Federal Credit Union is accept-
ing applications for its Student Loan Repayment Pro-
gram. This program may be available to Berkshire County high school seniors or college students who are accepted to a college or university within the county. Students enrolled in full-time studies at any public or private college can apply. The program will provide up to $3,000 annually to students who are selected to participate. To obtain an application, contact Travis Crouse at 413-395-4089 or travis_crouse@glcu.com.

BNT Bank has launched a Student Loan Re-
payment Program to help reduce the outstanding balance on qualifying student loans for full-time employees who are also parents of at least two dependents. “Student loan debt is an issue impacting so many of today’s professionals, yet about 8 percent of employees are students,” said Robert Migliore, president and CEO. “The program offers contributions in the amount of $1,500 per year toward the qualifying loans of full-time employees for up to 60 months. The company has also reevaluated and updated several other employee benefits, including a new paid family leave policy that will provide mothers and fathers paid time off at 100 percent of pay following a birth, adoption or foster placement. This benefit is on and above other paid time off. The Norwich, N.Y.-based bank has local offices in Great Barrington, Lee, North Adams and Pittsfield.

WINNERS ALL – Williams College students Zach Schreier (second from right) and Vincent Gudenus (right) were awarded the first-place prize of $1,000 for Lifestick Supplements, a series of functional, healthy coffee drinks. The students were chosen by the audience to pitch as the “table favorite” from among the 14 startup businesses particip-
ating in the showcase preceding the competition. Judges for the contest were Amber Besaw of Northern Berkshire Community Coalition, Ben Lamb of Berkshire Community Foundation, Kelli Kozak of Mountain One, Nate Girard of Bloom Brothers, and Tonio Palmer from Wil-
lams College. EforAll Berkshire County (October 2019 BTA&C) is a sustainable public-private partnership that seeks to give all people the opportunity to turn a promising idea into a successful business and to transform our communities into inclusive and thriving entrepreneurial ecosys-
tems. (Photo by Ben Lamb)
The Nonprofit Center of the Berkshires, in partnership with Berkshire Eagle, will present the 3rd Annual Berkshire Nonprofit Awards breakfast on May 19, from 8 to 10 a.m. at Berkshire Hills Country Club in Pittsfield. “The nonprofit sector employs a quarter of our work force,” said Laura Trascini, founder of the Nonprofit Center. “It’s important to honor their commitment and accomplishments, especially in our community, which has one of the highest numbers of nonprofits per capita in the commonwealth.” Nominees are being solicited in eight categories: Executive Leadership, Board Member, Superb Staffer, Unsung Hero, Volunteer, Rising Star and Lifetime Achievement. A new category, the Samya Rose Stumo Youth Leader, will be added this year, honoring a young and community active who lost her life on Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 in March 2019. The 24-year-old was en route to Kenya for nonprofit work in global health development. NPC board member and community activist Samya Stumo was deeply affected by the tragedy and her commitment to nonprofit work, and suggested naming the award in her honor. The nomination form is available online at ncberkshires.org. The deadline for submissions is March 26. The NPC is currently seeking sponsors for this celebratory event. To date, major support comes from the Berkshire Eagle with additional support from Berkshire Bank Foundation, Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation, Gaskin Bank, Success Credit Union, Lee Bank and the Trigides Co. For more information, visit ncberkshires.org.

The City of Pittsfield’s Department of Community Development is seeking input for a public survey to inform the Consolidated Plan document. City projects supported by CDBG funds are included in the Annual Action Plan and are funded through the Consolidated Plan document. Pittsfield, like many other communities, relies on CDBG funding to address blight. CDBG regulations require public hearings during the plan development. In addition to the public survey, Community Development is sponsoring two public hearings during the Plan Development to gather public input. The program will continue through April 15.

Southwestern Vermont Medical Center (SVMC), part of Southwestern Vermont Health Connections, announced that Tara Barboza, an enrolled agent with the U.S. Department of the Treasury and a Certified Public Accountant, the students who participate in this program undergo a rigorous training, become IRS certified, and will work under her supervision and community input meetings during the plan preparation process. The data gathered from the survey and the hearings will be used to inform the processes and the amount of funding needed. “As part of the public input process, the city is utilizing a public survey to allow residents to have a voice in how the CDBG funds are spent in our community,” said City Manager Will Hurley. “We are constantly seeking feedback from our residents to ensure we are funding programs that meet their needs. The survey can be directly accessed on the link “CDBG Public Survey” on the city’s website, www.cityofpittsfield.org. The survey will be available through March 1. The city is also distributing 250 copies of the survey in public places during the five-year previous years, the city found that distributing a paper copy provided residents without access to a computer the ability to participate. In addition to the public survey, Community Development is sponsoring two public hearings and community input sessions. The first was held Feb. 10, with a second meeting scheduled for Feb. 26, inside MCLA’s Mass MoCA gallery as part of Pittsfield Community College, 200 West Union St. For more information, call 413-499-9386 or email jdodds@cityofpittsfield.org.

Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA) and its Department of Business Administration announce that it will once again partner with Habitat for Humanity to offer free tax preparation services to residents interested in using the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program. Habitat for Humanity administers VITA, a program of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), to assist taxpayers with disabilities or limited English speaking skills, those 60 years of age or older, or households with income below $50,000 a year. MCLA Advisors will be available to complete both basic and advanced returns, including those with itemized deductions. Accepting tax returns is MCLA Professor of Accounting Tara Barboza, an enrolled agent with the U.S. Department of the Treasury and a Certified Public Accountant, the students who participate in this program undergo a rigorous training, become IRS certified, and will work under her supervision and community input meetings during the plan preparation process. The data gathered from the survey and the hearings will be used to inform the processes and the amount of funding needed. “As part of the public input process, the city is utilizing a public survey to allow residents to have a voice in how the CDBG funds are spent in our community,” said City Manager Will Hurley. “We are constantly seeking feedback from our residents to ensure we are funding programs that meet their needs. The survey can be directly accessed on the link “CDBG Public Survey” on the city’s website, www.cityofpittsfield.org. The survey will be available through March 1. The city is also distributing 250 copies of the survey in public places during the five-year previous years, the city found that distributing a paper copy provided residents without access to a computer the ability to participate. In addition to the public survey, Community Development is sponsoring two public hearings and community input sessions. The first was held Feb. 10, with a second meeting scheduled for Feb. 26, inside MCLA’s Mass MoCA gallery as part of Pittsfield Community College, 200 West Union St. For more information, call 413-499-9386 or email jdodds@cityofpittsfield.org.

The Federal Communications Commission has granted WRTH-FM, a nonprofit educational radio station licensed to the Pittsfield Public Schools and managed and operated by Pittsfield Community Television, a full-power broadcast license to operate in Pittsfield. The administrative stamp of approval from the FCC occurred on April 1, 2014, the last day of the pendency period that began in 2018, when the station went silent for six months awaiting the demolition of Taconic High School, where the station was previously located. WRTH-FM, now known as Pittsfield Community Radio, began broadcasting from a low-power facility at new studios at the PCTV facility at 4 Federsick Dr. in January 2019. The FCC grants “Special Temporary Authority” for stations to continue to broadcast at the lower power while they relocate facilities such as transmitters and antennas. While this authority was in effect, radio professionals worked with the PCTV staff to rebuild those facilities, which are now located atop the original Eagle Building on Eagle Street in downtown Pittsfield. “This has been a very long road, with many twists and turns, but I feel that it is in great satisfaction in seeing this process come to a close,” said Shawn Sitter, executive director of Pittsfield Community Television. “I know I speak for everyone involved in bringing this station back to life, that we are all incredibly proud of this accomplishment. We will now continue to work on the growth of the station in the coming months and years.” The full-power license allows the station to broadcast to a greater coverage area in central Berkshire County, and improves the signal quality inside buildings in the downtown Pittsfield area. The signal footprint now includes reception in Lenox, Lee, Stockbridge, Hancock, Lanesboro, Cheshire, Dalton, Hinsdale, and into parts of eastern New York. Since opening the new studios, the station has regularly run weekly radio programs have gone into rotation on the station, all created and produced by community members. These programs include news and talk, music programming, Community members interested in creating radio programming on WRTH-FM are encouraged to contact the station at 413-445-4234 for information on how to submit a programming proposal.

Dog owners who are Berkshire residents and account for over $100 in sales for their pet this year can take advantage of the New York, with the intent of filling a gap for customers located on the first floor of the Panhandle Building. Pittsfield Community Television. “I know I speak for everyone involved in bringing this station back to life, that we are all incredibly proud of this accomplishment. We will now continue to work on the growth of the station in the coming months and years.” The full-power license allows the station to broadcast to a greater coverage area in central Berkshire County, and improves the signal quality inside buildings in the downtown Pittsfield area. The signal footprint now includes reception in Lenox, Lee, Stockbridge, Hancock, Lanesboro, Cheshire, Dalton, Hinsdale, and into parts of eastern New York. Since opening the new studios, the station has regularly run weekly radio programs have gone into rotation on the station, all created and produced by community members. These programs include news and talk, music programming, Community members interested in creating radio programming on WRTH-FM are encouraged to contact the station at 413-445-4234 for information on how to submit a programming proposal.

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Results shed light on attitudes about living, working in our region

Laura Brennan is senior planner for community and economic development with the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission. Benjamin Lamb is director of economic development at 1Berkshire.

An increasing percentage of respondents return if their current job and current respondents, whether they still live here to 10 years than did in 2015. Many of satisfaction. People consistently enjoy living in the Berkshires for a variety of reasons. In both surveys responses indicated that satisfaction communication about opportunities seek to recruit and retain. How organizations heading into an accelerator phase. As organizations come up to scale and see an increased need to recruit and retain, resources like the Berkshire Recruiters have become more heavily utilized. New and innovative programs have also begun to take root: the Employer Resource Network has injected a whole new wave of energy and focus on the support of startups and busi-nesses heading into an accelerator phase. These types of ventures, and the energy behind them, not only impact the busi-nesses directly, but have begun to inspire a more entrepreneurial vibe in the Berkshires that is becoming increasingly attractive to potential transplant to the area.

If we take anything from the survey results in 2019, it is that job-related concerns can make or break plans to create a life here in the Berkshires. Wage levels, benefits packages, and out-of-the-box perks, taken individually or collectively, are enough to sway someone’s decision.

If we take anything from the survey results in 2019, it is that job-related concerns can make or break plans to create a life here in the Berkshires. Wage levels, benefits packages, and out-of-the-box perks (such as dog friendly workplaces, remote work policies, etc.), taken individually or collectively, are enough to sway someone’s decision. This set of employer offerings is an area where “we” collectively can have an impact. Employers in the Berkshires can use these aggregate results and take a close look at how they’re meeting the perceived and real wants and needs of the workforce they seek to recruit and retain. How organiza- tions communicate about opportunities for advancement, the types of non-salary benefits packages, and agile paid time off in the regional workforce, while also dis-covering all of the amenities and quality of life aspects that make living and playing in the Berkshires such a fulfilling experience. Unfortunately, survey responses and anecdotal evidence also tell us that the lure of employment elsewhere remains a con-trIBUTING factor to out-migration from the Berkshires. Higher pay in other areas, even if that move is likely to come with a higher cost of living, serves as a strong draw to opportunities elsewhere.

To be clear, there are already many well-paying positions available in the Berkshires – in fact, hundreds that are currently going unfilled. To tackle this work-force gap, Berkshire’s “the jobs thing,” (which did not exist at the time of the earlier survey) now posts only full-time, year-round, benefit-ed positions paying at least $40,000 per year. Current posted jobs include positions in finance, education, hospitality, healthcare, engineering and archi- tecture, to name a few. Since this particular job board is fee-based, each listed position is representative of tens, if not hundreds, of other openings in the same industries that are seeking qualified talent. This is no exaggeration. MassHire’s Jobquest site lists over 1,000 opportunities regularly, and MassHire Berkshire Work-force Board consistently reports more open positions than known job-seekers in the county.

Employment is a key reason people move to the Berkshires already. Indeed, both of us writing this are now proud Berkshireites because we were brought into the region over a decade ago. This speaks to a new narrative. The Berkshires are ripe for new transplants to come in and fill key roles in the regional workforce, while also dis-covering all of the amenities and quality of life aspects that make living and playing in the Berkshires such a fulfilling experience. Unfortunately, survey responses and anecdotal evidence also tell us that the lure of employment elsewhere remains a con-trIBUTING factor to out-migration from the Berkshires. Higher pay in other areas, even if that move is likely to come with a higher cost of living, serves as a strong draw to opportunities elsewhere.

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Training and recruitment have become paramount issues, with a number of regional partners coming to the table to begin existing programs and create new ones. Both technical schools in the region, Taconic High School and McCann Techni-cal School, have seen high demand for their programs and even higher demand for their graduates. Additionally, higher education institutions and non-profits have created agile programs to support work-force demand, such as the MCLA Electri-cal Engineering program. These programs provided a workforce pipeline to General Dynamics Mission Systems, and the Berkshire Community College, Fast Track and Cannabis Industry concen-trations focused on supporting emerging workforce gaps.

Startups and speed-ups have become an integral component to our shifting eco-nomies. New trends in the Berkshires that regional economic prosperity relies on growth, and the diverse array of entrepre-neurial ventures and businesses bubbling up in the Berkshires are proving to be a major key to current and future development. Through the dynamic efforts of incubator programs at Lever and Mill Town Capital, dozens of businesses have been given the runway needed to develop, launch and grow across the region. Even more recently, the launch of EforAll Berkshire County has injected a whole new wave of energy and focus on the support of startups and busi-nesses heading into an accelerator phase. These types of ventures, and the energy behind them, not only impact the busi-nesses directly, but have begun to inspire a more entrepreneurial vibe in the Berkshires that is becoming increasingly attractive to potential transplant to the area.

As organizations come up to scale and see an increased need to recruit and retain, resources like the Berkshire Recruiters have become more heavily utilized. New and innovative programs have also begun to take root: the Employer Resource Network program being piloted through Working Cities will provide high-touch support to help employers retain employees with non-traditional support needs.

It is no secret that the Berkshires have seen a decrease in population, beginning in the 1970s. This reality has the potential to unite us in our collective desire to improve the region and make it an even better place to live and work. Those of us who live and work here see and feel the potential that the region offers, but it is on all of us to showcase that spirit and energy to the next generation of residents, both those raised here, and those recruited from outside the Berkshires. Done comprehensively, through aligning lifestyle marketing with improved employer offerings, the increas- ing number of vibrant economic and filled workforce capacity we all hope for will become a reality.

For a full report on the 2019 Berkshire County Survey, please visit: http://berkshireplanning.org/
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Berkshire Interns continued from page 1

the Berkshire Business Interns program, and I said, “Why would I want to do that when I’m an ed major?”

Despite her reservations, Schnauber connected with organizers of the program at Lever, who ended up recruiting her for one of the internships the organization itself was hosting to help run the new program.

“We sat down and talked about the program, and they thought my skills were a good fit for [being] a Lever intern,” she said. Her skills turned out to be more than a good fit, as Schnauber spent the 10-week program “basically assisting with anything and everything BBI.” That included creating aspects of the curriculum through which interns were assessed as part of their workplace experience. It also included coordinating some of the social programming and events that the program offered to enhance the interns’ overall experience outside of the workplace.

Following her senior year at MCLA, Schnauber stayed on as a part-time staff member at Lever during the next school year. With the second iteration of Berkshire Business Interns approaching in 2019, she was then given an opportunity to take on a much larger role in coordinating the program, especially in the social programming aspect.

“It was great,” she said regarding the second year of the program, in which the number of interns placed with area employers rose to 45 (from 35 the first year). “The program was begun by creating the logistical framework of the program. I’ve worked part-time now, and will go to full time in May,” she said. That’s when she will be graduating from MCLA, as well as when the ramp-up begins for this summer’s Berkshire Interns program.

Berkshire Entry debut

It is also this summer that Lever will be launching a related program, Berkshire Entry, that Schnauber will oversee in her new position.

“With Berkshire Entry, we’ll be marketing entry-level job opportunities in the Berkshires to seniors graduating from college this year,” said Thomas. He noted that, with the success of the internship program, it was a logical next step to create a program for “seniors graduating from college this spring. “We’re piloting it this year, so we’re offering internship positions. This will also overlap with outreach for Berkshire Entry, in which they will coordinate with area employers on postings for entry-level jobs they are looking to fill.” The postings for Berkshire Interns and Berkshire Entry will be marketed to potential candidates through two new websites that are being developed for Lever by Stockbridge-based web designers.

Those sites – berkshireinterns.org and berkshireentry.org – went live in early February. (Information about the programs can be found here.)

Schnauber said that graduating seniors selected for positions with area employers would be given the opportunity to attend an event this summer when they will learn about the social programming that interns will be expected to participate in throughout the 10-week program. These programs could range from group outings to cultural events, river trips, and trips to the White Mountains to get involved in the social programming aspect of the internship program.

As noted earlier, that framework includes an emphasis on non-work social activities throughout the 10-week program. These range from group outings to cultural events, river trips, and trips to the White Mountains to get involved in the social programming aspect of the internship program.

“Being an education major, I kind of decided I wanted to end up in a classroom,” she said. But, based on her organizational and administrative work experience with Lever, she added, “I’ve found a lot of opportunities in the social programming and events that Lever does give her unique insights into the work in Berkshire County,” said Thomas.

That also touches on the underlying goal of Berkshire Entry and Berkshire Interns: “A big part of what we’re trying to do is to get more young people to choose to live and work in Berkshire County,” said Thomas. “It’s a big challenge, and a big priority for those involved in workforce development.”

Schnauber said that managing Berkshire Entry and Berkshire Interns reflects both the high level of talent that the internship program has produced and the benefits of absorbing that talent into the local workforce through meaningful job opportunities.

“Jade is one of the most organized and diligent young people I’ve worked with,” said Thomas. “I have complete confidence in her in this role.”

From Schnauber’s perspective, her involvement in the internship program and subsequent transition into a staff position at Lever does give her unique insights into the programs she now manages.

“I’ve definitely been the poster child for all our programs,” she said. That noted her own internship and work with Lever, aside from leading to her current position, also influenced her thinking on the direction of her future career path in education.

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From Schnauber’s perspective, her involvement in the internship program and subsequent transition into a staff position at Lever does give her unique insights into the programs she now manages.
Erin Shea has been promoted to vice president of quality compliance at BFARID, becoming a new member of the agency’s senior management team. Shea is a licensed social worker with over 15 years of progressive experience supporting elders and individuals with disabilities and their families. She began her career at United Cerebral Palsy of Western Massachusetts and as a social worker with Berkshire Health Care Systems. Over the past 10 years, Shea has assumed a variety of roles at BFARID, including assistant director of the Day Habilitation Center. Prior to her most recent promotion, Shea served as the director of quality compliance, ensuring BFARID meets internal quality standards, requirements of external funding and regulatory sources, as well as consulting on human rights and community inclusion for the agency.

Auric is a Berkshire-based entrepreneur and her primary responsibility is to ensure Auric’s environment of care provides students with what they need to thrive. Kirchner has spent 11 years with HEC prior to moving into the role of director of quality assurance, where her primary responsibility is to ensure Hillcrest’s environment of care thrives. Kirchner has spent 11 years with HEC prior to moving into the role of director of quality assurance, where her primary responsibility is to ensure Hillcrest’s environment of care thrives. Kirchner has spent 11 years with HEC prior to moving into the role of director of quality assurance, where her primary responsibility is to ensure Hillcrest’s environment of care thrives. Kirchner has spent 11 years with HEC prior to moving into the role of director of quality assurance, where her primary responsibility is to ensure Hillcrest’s environment of care thrives. Kirchner has spent 11 years with HEC prior to moving into the role of director of quality assurance, where her primary responsibility is to ensure Hillcrest’s environment of care thrives. Kirchner has spent 11 years with HEC prior to moving into the role of director of quality assurance, where her primary responsibility is to ensure Hillcrest’s environment of care thrives. Kirchner has spent 11 years with HEC prior to moving into the role of director of quality assurance, where her primary responsibility is to ensure Hillcrest’s environment of care thrives. Kirchner has spent 11 years with HEC prior to moving into the role of director of quality assurance, where her primary responsibility is to ensure Hillcrest’s environment of care thrives. Kirchner has spent 11 years with HEC prior to moving into the role of director of quality assurance, where her primary responsibility is to ensure Hillcrest’s environment of care thrives. Kirchner has spent 11 years with HEC prior to moving into the role of director of quality assurance, where her primary responsibility is to ensure Hillcrest’s environment of care thrives. Kirchner has spent 11 years with HEC prior to moving into the role of director of quality assurance, where her primary responsibility is to ensure Hillcrest’s environment of care thrives. Kirchner has spent 11 years with HEC prior to moving into the role of director of quality assurance, where her primary responsibility is to ensure Hillcrest’s environment of care thrives. Kirchner has spent 11 years with HEC prior to moving into the role of director of quality assurance, where her primary responsibility is to ensure Hillcrest’s environment of care thrives. Kirchner has spent 11 years with HEC prior to moving into the role of director of quality assurance, where her primary responsibility is to ensure Hillcrest’s environment of care thrives. Kirchner has spent 11 years with HEC prior to moving into the role of director of quality assurance, where her primary responsibility is to ensure Hillcrest’s environment of care thrives. Kirchner has spent 11 years with HEC prior to moving into the role of director of quality assurance, where her primary responsibility is to ensure Hillcrest’s environment of care thrives.
Major upgrade for Pittsfield’s Price Rite store

Local project part of chain-wide rebranding

BY JOHN TOWNE

In another sign of ongoing flux in the grocery marketplace, the Price Rite supermarket chain has completed a major makeover of its lone Berkshire County store at 457 Dalton Ave., in Pittsfield.

The company has been doing an extensive phase-in upgrade of all its 59 Price Rite stores, including a change of its corporate name to Price Rite Marketplace.

In addition to a Jan. 24 grand-reopening ribbon-cutting ceremony for the Pittsfield store, the chain held similar ceremonies at its stores in Chicopee, Springfield, Westfield and West Springfield on the same day.

“We’ve redesigned the stores and placed an emphasis on improving what we do best,” said Jim Dorey, president of Price Rite Marketplace.

The Price Rite chain was launched in West Springfield in 1995, and its Pittsfield supermarket originally opened in 2006.

Price Rite is a wholly owned subsidiary of Wakefern Food Corp., the largest retailer-owned cooperative in the United States. Founded in 1946 and based in New Jersey, the cooperative has 51 members who today independently own and operate 353 supermarkets under the Price Rite, ShopRite, The Fresh Grocer, Dearborn Market and Gourmet Garage banners in New England, New York, New Jersey, Maryland and Delaware.

Price Rite has always been oriented to a combination of low prices and convenience, with a focus on the basics.

“We keep our overhead and prices low, and concentrate on offering the most meaningful items people want and need,” Dorey said in a Jan. 31 interview.

The emphasis on keeping costs and prices low has extended to smaller details. To reduce the cost of corralling its shopping carts, for example, the carts are placed in holders that require the deposit of a quarter to release one, which is returned when the customer returns it.

The makeover adheres to its basic philosophy, but in an updated form.

It includes a brighter decor and a more open appearance. It also includes efficiencies such as energy-saving LED fixtures for lighting.

A wall that separated the store’s fresh produce department has been removed as part of a redesign of that section to create more of a marketplace style of display.

Overall, the aisles in the store have been widened, and merchandise placement has been organized to make it easier to find specific sections and related items.

A new “Drop Zone” section has been added, with special deals, mostly for items under $5. It has also placed clearly marked bargain offers throughout the store.

While the store will continue to have traditional check-out lanes with clerks, it has also added self-checkout lanes for those who prefer that option.

The company is also modifying its merchandise selection.

It has also placed more emphasis on natural and organic products, including a wider selection of Wholesome Pantry private-label products, with organic, and gluten-free options. It also carries quality affordable meats, with brands such as Certified Angus Beef, Perdue’s No Antibiotics Ever Chicken, Wholesome Pantry organic chicken, and Oasis Halal.

The food industry, which has always been a low-margin and highly competitive business, has been undergoing many changes in recent years, both locally and nationally.

Many changes

The food industry, which has always been a low-margin and highly competitive business, has been undergoing many changes in recent years, both locally and nationally.

As an example, in Berkshire County, two of the most prominent chains, Price Chopper and Big Y, have been placing greater emphasis on its largest stores, offering a wide and diverse range of staple and specialty items, including deli sections and prepared foods.

Price Chopper is rebranding and enlarging its stores as Market 32. The companies have also shuttered and/or sold their smaller stores, including the Big Y in Adams and the Price Chopper in Lee.

However, smaller and mid-size grocery stores have also been holding their own and undergoing changes to remain competitive.

This includes independent local grocers, such as Harry’s Supermarket in Pittsfield; Loeb’s Foodtown in Lenox, which had a recent change of ownership (August 2019 BT&C); and the Berkshire Co-op Market in Great Barrington, which last summer moved to new, larger quarters (June 2019 BT&C). In addition, a regional chain of smaller supermarkets, Adams hometown Markets, took over the former Big Y in Adams shortly after it closed last spring (May 2019 BT&C).

Discount food stores have also gained new prominence. ALDI, a German-based corporation, has been extensively adding new stores in the U.S. including one in Pittsfield that opened in 2015. ALDI emphasizes private-label brands, and low overhead and prices. At the other end of that spectrum, large warehouse-style membership clubs such as BJ’s in Pittsfield have also merged with an emphasis on volume purchases to save further.

Meanwhile, the demands of customers have changed in numerous and sometimes paradoxical ways.

While many shoppers have become more cost-conscious and look for low-priced basics, there is also a greater desire for upscale and specialty items, as well as healthy and organic food, and local products.

There are also contradictory desires for the advantages of large-scale utilitarian stores, at the same time as preferences for personal service, an appealing, human-scale physical shopping environment and a sense of supporting local businesses.

Balancing these and other factors has made the business of meeting consumer preferences more complex. In some instances it has led to bumbling of lines or attempts to combine differing characteristics. ALDI, for example, has been moving towards a focus on healthy, fresh products while retaining its discount orientation.

“Project Sweet Spot”

Price Rite’s rebranding is the result of a strategic soul-searching project within the chain.

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“We’ve been successful, but after 25 years in business it was time to take a new look at things,” said Dorey. “We started having conversations about this 18 months ago.” This led to an initiative called Project Sweet Spot.

“We evaluated where our success has come from, and what our customers appreciate about our stores,” Dorey said. “The basic question was: ‘What is our advantage?’ At the same time we looked at how we can improve our stores and the customer experience, and attract other shoppers.”

In addition to internal studies and analysis, he said, this also involved extensive gathering of the opinions of their customers.

“We appeal to the person who doesn’t want to waste money,” Dorey said. “Because we have the volume buying power of all of the Wakefern stores, we can get items for very good wholesale prices and special deals, and pass that along to the customer.”

In addition to recognized brand names, they also offer savings by carrying Wakefern’s private labels Bowl & Basket and Paperbird, and its Wholesome Pantry line of natural and organic food.

Another goal of the store has been to balance a sufficient variety to offer what customers need while offering a simplified experience.

“We provide a wide selection so people don’t have to go to several different stores to find what they are looking for,” Dorey said. “At the same time, we concentrate on the things that are most meaningful to shoppers, without a lot of extraneous merchandise. For example, we don’t have in-store pharmacies.”

Dorey noted that Price Rite generally moves into vacant existing locations that were previously occupied by other stores. “Because of that we have variations of size and format,” he said. “In general, though, we offer the convenience of a smaller supermarket.”

(The Pittsfield Price Rite store, which is 35,000 square feet, is in a commercial complex originally built in the 1960s that contained a Zayre Department Store and an Adams Supermarket, connected by an escalator.)

Dorey said they also carefully monitor savings, to determine and control what items to stock based on customer preferences.

“For example, a certain brand of cookie might come in five or six different sizes and variations of the product,” he said. “Rather than carrying them all, we’ll select the specific one that is the top seller.”

Dorey said the corporate rebranding project incorporated the company’s existing qualities, with modifications to update the look and operations of its stores.

“We phased it in,” he said. “We started by testing the new model at three stores, and trying out our ideas. We asked for feedback from customers to determine what worked and what needed to be improved. Once we were satisfied with the basic model, we remodeled other stores in groups of four or five.”

As the project moved from phase to phase, each group of stores remained open during interior construction work. “We worked very carefully to minimize disruptions to shoppers,” he said. “As we went along we got better at it with each store.”

Dorey said they expect to complete the overall transition by March. He added that the interim results have been encouraging.

“Within six months, the first stores (that were upgraded) were drawing new customers,” he said. “And we’ve been getting great feedback. One person told me that they were worried that the changes might result in higher prices, but they were relieved to find that they were as low, or lower, than before.”
Friends team up to ensure store remains part of town’s retail mix

BY BRAD JOHNSON

When a phone call was placed for a sched-uled 9 a.m. interview with Beth McLean, the new co-owner of Nature’s Closet in Williamstown, it was answered with a busy signal, which continued on occasional redials over the next half-hour.

An attempt to reach McLean a while later on that mid-winter morning was successful, however, and revealed the cause of the steady busy signal. “We were taking an order for 50 smoothies,” she explained, laughing.

That sizable order, placed by a student at Williams College, illustrates the unconventional yet successful symbiotic relationship between Nature’s Closet, a retailer of recreational and outdoor apparel, and its side business, the Smoothie Spot, which operates in a space adjacent to the main store at 61 Spring St.

It also illustrates why McLean, the long-time manager of Nature’s Closet under its original owner Steve Hinchcliffe, had considered last late last year taking over the Smoothie Spot on its own when Hinchcliffe was looking to either sell or close Nature’s Closet.

“Steve and I had always talked about me taking over the store,” said McLean, whose on-and-off tenure with Nature’s Closet dates back to its original location in Bennington, Vt., where it operated from 2003 to 2010. “When Hinchcliffe reached a point last year due to the opening of a new bypass route led out-of-town by mid-February. The expanded Smoothie Spot should be completed by late Feb.

McLean said the renovations for the ex- panded Smoothie Spot should be completed by mid-February. Stafﬁng for Nature’s Closet and the Smoothie Spot will remain about the same.

The store will have two full-time and two part-time employees (including McLean), while the Smoothie Spot will have from eight to 10 part-time employees depending on season. “We have a lot of high school and college students who want to work there,” said McLean.

Amy Jeschawitz (left) and longtime store manager Beth McLean are the new owners of Nature’s Closet, a specialty retailer on Spring Street in Williamstown. The business also includes the Smoothie Spot, which for the past few years has served a selection of smoothies, acai bowls and related fare. Jeschawitz and McLean have renovated a section of the store to provide indoor seating for customers, and have expanded the menu to include salads, avocado toast and other items.

“What’s it cost to take on the store by myself? I didn’t have the capital for that. So I decided I would take the Smoothie Spot on my own and move it to a new location.”

Before that happened, fate – and a friend named Amy Jeschawitz – intervened. “At the last hour my friend Amy told me she didn’t want to see the store close,” said McLean. “I didn’t want to take it on and operate it as a franchise.”

Jeschawitz, a Williamstown resident who served for five years on the town’s Planning Board and has been active in a wide range of community initiatives, “I’ve followed what she has been doing [at Nature’s Closet] and felt the store was an important part of the town’s business community.”

The two friends talked things over and, then talked with Hinchcliffe, resulting in the purchase of the entire business by McLean and Jeschawitz as equal partners.

“This took shape from late November through December,” said McLean. “Steve gave us a great price, and it all worked out beautifully.”

So, following the New Year’s Day holiday, Nature’s Closet opened under new ownership, with McLean continuing in her day-to-day management of the business, and Jeschawitz taking a behind-the-scenes role handling administrative and financial tasks.

Ongoing evolution

Under its new ownership, Nature’s Closet will continue a process of evolution that has made the store a popular destination for a wide range of customers over the past two decades.

Opened by Hinchcliffe at a downtown location in Bennington in 2003, the store focused on a mix of outdoor clothing and accessories for casual wear as well as for performance purposes. It also featured some limited equipment for hiking, camping and related activities.

A combination of post-recession economic conditions and a decrease in downtown traffic due to the opening of a new bypass route led Hinchcliffe to leave Bennington and reopen Nature’s Closet in Williamstown.

McLean, who lives in North Bennington, worked at the store at that time and helped with the transition to Williamstown before leaving for an office position at Southern Vermont College.

“I discovered pretty quickly that I am just not an office person,” she said, noting that she left the college and returned to work at Nature’s Closet in 2012.

In Williamstown, the store’s product mix shifted away from outdoor equipment and more solidly toward recreational and casual clothing, with lines such as The North Face, Patagonia, Ibex and Prana. There was also an expansion of its footwear selection.

A few years after McLean’s return to the store, an opportunity for a different kind of expansion took shape when an adjacent space in the commercial building at 61-65 Spring St. became available after the closing of a short-lived candy and ice cream shop.

McLean noted that Hinchcliffe was from California, where shops selling smoothies, acai bowls and other healthy fruit-based fare had long been popular. “He thought we could do this here in the space that had opened up,” she said. “I had worked in food service earlier and knew what it was like to be involved with that. I thought he was absolutely out of his mind. But Steve got his way, and we expanded into that space.”

The expansion actually served two purposes – to provide a separate space for the store’s footwear, socks and related accessories, and for a service counter for the Smoothie Spot (with the prep area hidden from view).

“The two sides of the business comple-mented one another, each bringing in its own customers who also were exposed to the other side of the store. “It all worked really well together,” said McLean.

Along the way, Nature’s Closet got in- volved in consignment sales of used clothing and equipment, which operated under the Gear Den name. That also became a success-ful part of the overall business. “It’s a popular feature,” said McLean, noting that the store sells more items through consignment than from its new inventory.

This, in part, led Hinchcliffe to reduce the number of brands carried at the store. “Last year we went to a single-brand store, with Patagonia,” said McLean, noting that this was a company that Hinchcliffe had long ties with before opening Nature’s Closet.

Under its new ownership, single-brand focus will be changing. “We are bringing back other lines, such as The North Face, Smartwool and Prana,” McLean said.

Spontaneous Salads & More

A number of other subtle but significant tweaks are also taking shape. “It’s good to change things up a little now and then,” said Jeschawitz.

Key among them is the return of the footwear section back into the main store, where select lines for hiking and running such as Salomon, Oboz, Chaco and Brooks will be carried. This has freed up space in the adjacent space for an expanded food service and dining area. Under its modified name, the Smoothie Spot Salads & More will offer a wider menu of healthful fare on top of the smoothies and acai bowls.

“We’re adding a selection of fresh, simple salads, which is something not many places offer,” said McLean. Also on the expanded menu will be varieties of toast, including avocado toast, an item that has mushroomed in popularity in recent years.

The space is set up with seating for about 20 customers. Previously, the only seating available was in an outside courtyard during the warmer seasons.

McLean said the renovations for the ex- panded Smoothie Spot should be completed by mid-February.

Stafﬁng for Nature’s Closet and the Smoothie Spot will remain about the same.

The store will have two full-time and two part-time employees (including McLean), while the Smoothie Spot will have from eight to 10 part-time employees depending on season. “We have a lot of high school and college students who want to work there,” said McLean.
Overall, McLean said she and Jeschawitz plan to make Nature’s Closet an even more integral part of the town and business community. “We just want to continue the vibe that Steve had started with this,” she said. “We want to grow the base that was set for us.”

McLean noted that one of the things that attracted Hinchcliffe to Williamstown back in 2010 was the diverse and ever-changing demographic mix, which he saw as a potential asset for Nature’s Closet. She said his hunch about that was on the mark, which has helped the store to become a mainstay on Spring Street.

“We have such a range of different populations,” she said. “There’s the [Williams] students, the parents, faculty and staff,” she said. “Then there’s the locals and the surrounding locals. And then, in the summer we’re a boutique-y tourist destination.”

Although she heads back to North Bennington at the end of the day, McLean said the past eight years of working on Spring Street have had an impression on her. “Williamstown is a tight-knit, cool community,” she said. “It’s my home. And it’s a really cool place to have a store.”

Beth McLean visits with her five-year-old Labrador Retriever, Willie, who has been a fixture at the Nature’s Closet since a puppy, and Willie’s new sidekick, Basil, a rescue dog McLean recently added to the family.

“Williamstown is a tight-knit, cool community. And it’s a really cool place to have a store.”

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Music academy continued from page 22

The academy will be open to students throughout Berkshire County. “The school will have an all-star lineup of musicians and educators, who have strong backgrounds,” said Sommer. “It will create a pipeline for kids to have access to instruction by world-class musicians.”

BAAMS is scheduled to open late this summer. In the meantime, the sponsors are organizing the administrative details, raising funds, developing the specific curriculum, and handling other preparation. The former church building itself is also being converted to its new role.

The project is co-sponsored by the Adams Anthony Center, a nonprofit institution based in Adams formed to promote and disseminate the free flow and exchange of ideas and civil discourse throughout events and other initiatives. The academy’s operation will be supported by a combination of scholarships including tuition, donations and grants. They also hope to develop collaborative programs with schools and other organizations.

While BAAMS will be tuition-based, Boulger and Sommer emphasized that it is intended to be accessible to students of all income levels. “We don’t want money to be a barrier,” said Sommer. “We’ll be raising funds to create scholarships and other tuition assistance for students whose families are not able to pay the full tuition.”

Sommer owns the former church building, which he purchased for $50,000. He has also committed to fund physical renovations and conversion of the facility, which are expected to cost between $100,000 and $150,000.

Sommer said that, although he is not wealthy, he has saved some money over his lifetime and decided to allocate it to the project. “The money was going to be an inheritance to pass along to my children,” he said. “I should use it to do this.”

BAAMS is being overseen and managed by an advisory board that includes Sommer, Liam Kolis, president of the Adams Anthony Center; and Michael Mach, who is active in the community and an advocate for music.

Coincidental convergence Two previously separate initiatives came together to create the BAAMS project.

Sommer, an Adams native, noted that for a number of years he had been thinking about organizing a center for music in the town. Sommer is a retired educator who had been a teacher in the Pittsfield and the Adams-Cheshire school districts, and later was regional director of special education with the Massachusetts Dept. of Education. He also owns the Greynock Apartments in Adams and is co-owner of the Halfinger Hausrestaurant and inn 17 Commercial St.

Long active in civic affairs in his hometown, Sommer has at various times served as chair of the Adams Board of Selectmen, the School Committee, and the Adams Redevelopment Committee, among other roles.

Sommer said the Berkshires’ Academy for Advanced Musical Studies is an outgrowth of his desire to help revitalize Adams and his lifelong passions for music and education. “Music has always been important to me, although I’m not a musician,” he said.

Growing up, he listened to opera and classical music extensively, and recalled saving up paper-route money to buy records by legendary opera singer Enrico Caruso when he was a child. He credits his mother and sister, both named Olga, for inspiring his appreciation of music, and he has named the new music center after them.

Sommer said he also recognized the importance of music as an educator. “I saw the effect of music education on kids, and also how it positively influenced their lives and other studies,” he said. “Unfortunately, music and art and libraries are the first things schools cut back on when they have to make cuts.”

For at least the past six years, he had been wanting to establish a music school in Adams that would augment the music education available in the public schools.

Several years ago he learned of a potential venue. The site of the former St. Mark’s Church, which had closed in 2011, had been purchased by Henshor Engineering, where his grandson works. The firm was using an adjacent building for its offices, and the church itself was available for purchase. They came to an agreement to sell the church to Sommer.

However, filling the church with new activity was a challenge. “I approached a number of organizations to operate programs there, but no one came forward,” Sommer said.

Meanwhile, unknown to Sommer, another northern Berkshire native, Boulger, had a similar dream. “I grew up in North Adams and then moved away to pursue my career as a musician,” said Boulger, a professional trumpeter, flugelhorn player and music educator who lives in Brooklyn. “For a long time I wanted to bring my musical experience back to where I’m from, and use it to benefit the community somehow.”

His late father, Richard Boulger Sr., was a history teacher at Hoosac Valley High School for many years. He was also a trumpet. “My father passed that musical legacy on to me,” said Boulger.

He has a BFA from The Hart School of Music at the University of Hartford, and master’s degree from Rutgers University. As a musician, he was a protege of jazz greats Freddie Hubbard and Donald Byrd, and studied music composition with Ludmila Uhlela (former chair of Contemporary Music at the Manhattan School of Music).

Boulger has performed and recorded with many other prominent players, including the Allman Brothers’ Band, Little Lexie Vega, Randy Brecker, Joshua Thompson, and John Hicks, among others.

As an educator, he has worked with over 30 New York City public schools and has also led band clinics at colleges and private schools. He also teaches private students in New York City and internationally, via Skype.

One day in 2017 he was riding a train to North Adams and “I was introducing myself to another passenger,” he recalled. “Then I heard a voice behind me. ‘Richard Boulger? Your father was my history teacher!’”

The voice belonged to William Kolis, a 1973 graduate of Hoosac Valley Regional High School. A native of Adams, he now lives in the Cleveland area and is an attorney there. Kolis visits Adams frequently and is active in local revitalization efforts, including founding and serving as president of Adams Anthony Foundation.

“We got into a conversation on the train and really hit it off,” said Boulger. “I mentioned my dream to do a music education program in northern Berkshire, and he was very enthusiastic.”

They decided to conduct a summer music camp, which was hosted by the Adams Anthony Center at Hoosac Valley High School in 2018 and 2019.

“A second supporter of the program, Michael Mach, mentioned to us that he knew a guy who had a church building available and was looking for a music program there,” said Boulger. “That was Don Sommer. So we met, and the academy came together.”

Renaovation, organization Boulger said they plan to launch the academy with another jazz camp in August and begin its regular programs this fall.

Before then, however, the former church must be transformed into the Olga C. Sommer Center for Music and Art.
The church building was constructed about 150 years ago. “It’s structurally sound but needs some work,” said Sommer, adding that the renovations will include new plaster and dehumidifier, among other upgrades.

The main chapel will be converted into a multimedia space and will also be used for workshops and classes. An existing still-functioning pipe organ will remain in place. Other smaller rooms will become classrooms. Future plans include installing a recording studio.

As suggested by the name, Sommer said the Olga C. Sommer Center for Music and Art may also include additional activities related to the arts.

“One of the things we have to do is clean up the basement,” he said. “It’s possible that some of that space can eventually be used for art studios.”

Boulger said he will be dividing his time between Brooklyn and the Berkshires as the new music academy begins operations. “I’ll be here several days a week when the academy is open, and at other times as needed,” he said.

In addition to Boulger, a six-member core faculty has been assembled. “When we were organizing the summer camps, I recruited musicians I knew from New York and others I have worked with over my career,” said Boulger. “A number of them have agreed to help teach and assist other students.”

Boulger said he will be dividing his time among several activities, including organizing the summer camps, recruiting faculty, and helping to assemble a core faculty. “When we were putting together the academy, we wanted to have a core faculty that would be able to help teach and assist other students,” he said.

The instructors, who are busy working to become teachers at the academy, will lead classes on a regular basis. On weeks they are not able to be there in person, they will use Skype video.

“The children will be teaching and interacting with the students on a regular basis. On weeks they are not able to be there in person, they will use Skype video. “They will be teaching and interacting with the students on a regular basis,” said Boulger. “The lineup includes Alex Foster, who is the school’s musical co-director and woodwinds director. A tenor and alto saxophonist, he has been a long-time member of television’s Saturday Night Live House Band, and is also a musical director of the Mingus Big Band.

Charles Blegen, director of percussion and director, is an influential American jazz pianist, composer, arranger, producer, and educator. Blegen is a former member of the SUNY Purchase Conservatory Jazz Department faculty.

Victor Jones, drums and percussion director, is well-known for his innovative style. Alex Blake, acoustic and electric bass director, is a double bassist and electric bass guitarist, who was one of the major proponents of the jazz fusion movement in the late 1970s. David Gilmore, guitar director, is a widely recognized jazz guitarist who has worked with many prominent musicians. He has taught guitar studies at the prestigious Berklee College of Music in Boston.

Boulger said the school initially plans to teach the fundamentals of music, including music theory, composition, world music styles and genres, it is designed to provide a regular part of your marketing plan

express such qualities as rhythm, tones, and musical structures and interactions.

“One of the most exciting aspects of music education is helping young people discover their talent,” he said.

The program is based heavily on the philosophy that one’s musical instrument is an amplifier for what one is hearing, thinking and ultimately feeling.

Boulger noted that the skills and disciplines of music also benefit students in other areas of life, such as teamwork, innovative thinking, creativity and problem-solving. “Musical education benefits young people, whether they go on to become professional musicians or accountants,” he said.

He added that he has worked with disadvantaged and at-risk children who have been transformed through involvement in music. “Music is powerful,” he said. “I’ve seen it make a difference with kids who were in gangs. It can channel their energy from negative activities into more positive directions.”

Boulger said the curriculum is designed to teach the fundamentals of music, including its history and traditions, and the technical aspects.

Planned courses include instrumental lessons, ensemble playing, rhythm training, ear training, transcription, improvisation, music theory, composition, world music appreciation, recording/studio lab, music technology and production, and aspects of the music business.

While it will also incorporate specific styles and genres, it is designed to provide the foundations for those who choose to pursue different genres.

“What style of music, there are core fundamental principles that are required,” he said. “Once a student has the basic tools, they can pursue many types of music.”

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Next Issue: April 2020 • Ad Deadline: March 6 • Print Date: March 12
Moresi focuses on upscale residential stock in city center

Trio of projects in pipeline would add 35 rental units

BY JOHN TOWNES

With his Norad Mill mixed-use commercial project in North Adams basically completed (November 2019 BT&C), developer David Moresi has turned his attention to housing in the city center, with three current and upcoming projects.

“Once the Excelsior Mill [conversion] was done, my plan was always to move on to creating more housing options downtown,” said Moresi, “so you might say I’m on a mission.”

Moresi, a lifelong resident of North Adams, began his career buying, renovating and selling houses. He founded Moresi & Associates in 2000. The firm provides commercial and residential development, construction and property management services throughout western Massachusetts, southern Vermont and eastern New York. He also owns investment properties.

Moresi sees economic revitalization in North Adams is part of his company’s core goals. “Adding more quality housing downtown can be transformative by bringing in more people, activity and business,” he said. “All three of these projects are within walking distance of downtown and will make a difference.”

Overall, the three projects will add about 35 units within the city center.

Moresi said each project has differing characteristics but are oriented toward market rate prices and higher quality, with appeal to professionals, empty-nesters and retirees.

“We’re basing that on the need for quality rental housing in the city center,” he said. “We get a lot of inquiries for that. A growing number of professionals are here or coming in, as well as older residents who are ready to sell their homes.”

The first project involves the conversion of the three-story, 20,000-square-foot Wall Streetter Mill building at 28 Union St. into a mix of street-level commercial space and two upper floors with 10 residential rental units.

That is currently under construction and is slated to be ready for occupancy in August.

Moresi’s company has owned the Wall Streetter building (named after a shoe company that originally occupied it for eight years, “It has always been our intention to eventually convert it into housing,” he said.

The building has been most recently been the site of offices of financial services firms including the North Adams Municipal Employees Credit Union, which has relocated into the Norad Mill; and MountainOne Insurance, which last year moved to 85 Main St., adjacent to MountainOne headquarters.

The first floor will include the offices of the Northern Berkshire School Union.

The loft-style residential units, with high ceilings and hardwood floors, are slated to rent for $1,500 a month for a one-bedroom apartment and around $1,600 for two bedrooms.

“We’ve taken design elements from cities like Boston and New York and included features and high-end technology that appeals to younger tenants and is on a par with what people expect in 2020,” said Moresi.

One of the more notable aspects of that project, said Moresi, is an agreement with Williams College in neighboring Williamstown to lease five of those units, and sublease them for faculty and staff housing.

“That is very significant,” he said. “Traditionally, North Adams and Williamstown have been very separate. At one time it would have been hard to believe if you said Williams would be housing its faculty in North Adams. The fact that Williams College is now looking to North Adams for quality housing says a lot about how the relationship between those communities is changing.”

Another project is the planned conversion of the former Johnson Elementary School building by Williams and School streets into 20 units of residential rental housing. Moresi’s goal is to complete that by the spring of 2022.

The Johnson School is on a 2.5-acre site above River Street on the north side of School Street in the Amity Square neighborhood.

The city last year put the c.1896 Romanesque Revival two-story brick building up for bids. “To my surprise, we were the only bidder,” said Moresi. “We’ve reached an agreement on a sale and are working out the final details to close.”

The school building has been occupied by the Head Start program, which is relocating to another site in the city when its lease is up.

The redesigned building will include 20 apartments of a similar quality and price range as the Wall Streetter units, Moresi said.

He noted that, while they will initially be rentals, the units will have the potential to be converted to condominiums at some point.

“The site is especially appealing,” he said. “It’s a beautiful location.”

The third project is the conversion of the Church Street Professional Building at 98-100 Church St. from mixed-use to residential use, which will increase the number of rental apartments from two to five units.

The Church Street building is a 1960s-era commercial structure that originally housed the dental practice of Dr. Felix A. Puccio DDS. Located next to the North Adams Public Library, it currently has two existing rental units. Moresi noted that those units and tenants will remain.

“That will be oriented primarily to empty-nesters and other seniors who are selling their homes to live in an apartment,” he said. “It’s a very convenient location.”

Moresi sees these projects cumulatively as signs of progress for the city.

“I was born and raised in North Adams, and I’ve seen the city at its low point,” he said. “We’re finally starting to see new investment and renewed pride. Things are happening. It will be necessary to see investments to stimulate that. I believe that by bringing quality new housing downtown, these projects will help to move that forward.”

In a related development, Moresi has also recently branched out with a new brokerage, Moresi Real Estate Partners, as a division of Moresi Associates. The full-service real estate agency has eight agents, headed by broker/partner Peter Scerbo. It is based in a section of Moresi Associates’ second-floor headquarters at the Norad Mill.

“It’s a logical extension of what we have already been doing over the years,” Moresi said. “As an agency, it also gives clients all of the resources that are part of the company, including construction, property management and maintenance.”

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Female veterans’ housing continued from page 1

“Any woman who is a vet and might prefer to live in a community like this can apply, regardless of whether they have been in Soldier On’s program or not,” said Doherty.

Bruce Buckley, chief executive officer of Soldier On, said the decision was made to name the facility for Doherty because she was instrumental in leading the organization’s initiatives for women.

“We named it after Katie, because it would not be here without her,” Buckley said. “It’s her vision. We simply had the vision to hire her and support her work.”

The village is located on Soldier On’s Pittsfield property, which also has a transitional housing facility and the Gordon H. Mansfield Veterans Community of permanent housing for male veterans.

A majority of funding for the $3.9 million project came through the state Department of Housing and Community Development and a mortgage through Berkshire Bank.

Since 1994, Soldier On has been providing shelter and support services to veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Originally oriented to men, it expanded into serving female veterans in 2005. It is based in Pittsfield and Lees, and serves veterans from this area and other regions.

One of the core roles of Soldier On is to complement the services of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and other programs by concentrating on homeless veterans and those whose situations may cause them to become homeless.

It offers a variety of services, including living quarters, counseling, peer-to-peer support, and connections with the VA and other agencies and programs.

In addition to its 71-bed transitional living facility in Pittsfield, Soldier On operates a 165-bed transitional shelter leased from the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Lees.

In 2010, Soldier On expanded its scope into providing permanent housing for male veterans with the 39-unit Gordon H. Mansfield Veterans Community in Pittsfield.

“The success of our transitional program led us to create permanent housing for veterans who are ready to live independently in a supportive community with other veterans,” said Buckley.

It has subsequently opened three other permanent housing sites for male veterans, including 44 permanent ownership units on the campus of the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Lees, 43 units in the former Chapin School in Chicopee, and 51 units in the renovated former Western Massachusetts Regional Police Academy in Feeding Hills.

The Katie Doherty Veterans Village is Soldier On’s first permanent residential facility for women. Based on a similar model as the Gordon H. Mansfield community, it provides rental units within a “resident cooperative ownership organizational structure” that offers an opportunity to become homeowners by purchasing an equity stake in their homes.

The facility adheres to HUD guidelines for affordable housing eligibility based on income guidelines, with a mix that includes five units for those at or below 30 percent of the area median income (AMI), five units at or below 50 percent AMI, and four units at or below 80 percent AMI.

Monthly rents are $817, with all utilities, internet and basic cable included. Rental subsidies are available to eligible residents based on income.

All residents pay a $2,500 buy-in fee. Depending on their financial situation, they can pay this themselves, or arrange a “forgivable” loan. The value of residents’ shares is held in trust and is available to them through distributions or if they choose to move out.

The residents also jointly manage and make decisions regarding the facility.

“The Katie Doherty Veterans Village was developed through Soldier On Development and Management Company, a subsidiary that develops veterans’ housing, as well as providing consulting and management services. Its projects are funded from partnerships, grants from the Department of Veterans Affairs, HUD, and other financing sources.”

Buckley said the organization is also pursuing opportunities for additional veterans’ housing projects.

Specific population

Soldier On works with a specific subset of the overall population of veterans, which includes those who are either homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Often, any impacts of their military experience are compounded by deeper factors.

A common public perception about troubled veterans is the image of soldiers who have been psychologically and/or physically damaged by combat, and struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse and other problems as a result.

“People often have one profile of battle-scared combat vets who have been traumatized by war,” said Buckley. “The people who come to Soldier On may or may not have combat-related PTSD or other issues related to that. However, that’s not what we primarily focus on.”

Buckley and Doherty explained that most returning veterans return to civilian life without facing the prospect of homelessness, even if they are dealing with PTSD or other personal impacts of their service.

“The great majority of returning veterans are still able to successfully connect with their families and communities, and hold jobs and led normal lives while they deal with those issues,” said Buckley.

On the other hand, he continued, the homeless veterans that Soldier On serves usually also have problems that are deeper than the impact of their military experience.

“The veterans who come to us almost always had previous traumas in life and had difficult childhoods before they entered the military,” Buckley said. “Many grew up in intergenerational poverty and may have also had problems like mental illness or substance abuse previously. In fact, they may have joined the military as a way to get out of those situations.”

When they complete their military service, he noted, those issues often remain.

“The military is not always great at teaching basic life skills,” he said. “So, these veterans may not have a real foundation for handling the demands of civilian life, and they become homeless.”

Soldier On provides this segment of veterans with a transitional residential program intended both to provide immediate shelter and to help them with a full range of support.

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The new Katie Doherty Veterans Village, shown during construction last fall at a site off West Housatonic Street in Pittsfield, will provide 14 units of permanent housing for female veterans. It is Soldier On’s first residential project to address the needs of women who have served in the military. (Photo courtesy of Soldier On)
services to address and overcome the basic causes of their problems. “The culture behind everything we do is to look at the whole person,” said Doherty. “By the time they come to us, they’ve burned all their bridges. Our treatment is based on their entire story. What brought them to that point?”

Soldier On’s core transitional program is based on a two-year, four-phase format designed to foster dignity, integrity and hope, while providing access to addiction services, mental health treatment, medical care and life skills counseling. The goal is to prepare residents to reintegrate into the larger community as independently as possible.

Each veteran is assigned a case manager to assist in attaining necessary services and developing an individualized service plan that addresses the veteran’s needs and goals based on “Six Dimensions of Wellness” (physical, emotional, spiritual, occupational, intellectual, and social).

There is a full-time psychologist who focuses on the chronically mentally ill and veterans with dual diagnosis. The organization helps them address practical needs as well. Its treatment groups range from Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous to computer technology and current events. It also offers career preparation services.

Soldier On also has a Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program, a door-to-door outreach campaign assisting veterans and their families who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The outreach program aims to assist them before they become homeless.

**Emphasizing services for women**

Doherty has over 45 years of experience in the field of education and nonprofit organizations. She was formerly the director of the Brien Center, a leading provider of behavioral health and addiction services in Berkshire County.

“I was hired by Soldier On in 2012 to add up the pieces that the VA was not providing to the population we serve,” she explained. “I evaluated Soldier On’s services to find ways to improve what we offer to veterans.”

Doherty said two funding opportunities had an important role in this process. “The Paul Newman Foundation was requesting proposals for grants, and we applied and received one to implement a Six Dimensions of Wellness program,” she said. They also received a grant from the National Center on Family Homelessness to implement an approach of Trauma-Informed Care in its policies and clinical work.

In addition to improvements to its services for men, Doherty also placed an emphasis on expanding and upgrading the organization’s programs for women, including its transitional housing in Leeds.

According to studies, female veterans are about three times as likely to live in poverty and to become homeless compared to non-veteran women. “Our women’s program didn’t have much traction before Katie came along,” noted Buckley. “She made immense improvements and created a vital community of female vets.”

Improving health and medical care was one of her priorities. “One of the main needs I identified was the lack of a continuum of care for women,” said Doherty. “So, we made sure that preventive care and medical coverage and wellness programs were available.”

She noted that emotional and psychological trauma also contributes to women’s housing instability, so the Trauma-Informed Care approach is especially important for the population of homeless female veterans.

“The women who come to us have almost always experienced domestic violence, sexual abuse, assault and other traumatic experiences in their youth, adolescence, relationships and marriage, in addition to during their military service,” Doherty said. A women’s permanent residential community has been on the planning board since the opening of the Gordon H. Mansfield Veterans Community. The project was also prompted by the needs of the growing number of women in the transitional housing program.

Residents of the permanent housing will have access to a variety of services and activities on an ongoing basis.

Buckley said the goal of creating an actual ongoing community for veterans has been successful at the Gordon H. Mansfield Veterans Community.

“We opened with 39 men, and almost all of them stayed,” he said. “Three moved out for positive reasons, such as getting married. The rest are either still living here, or were here until they passed away. There is also a section of the property where the ashes of those who passed away while living here remain.”
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