Promise fulfilled
Pet retailer Chewy brings 1,000 jobs to Luzerne County
NOTE TO READERS
Welcome to the January 2018 edition of Luzerne County Business News, your source for business information in the county. LCBN will be published quarterly. To submit news tips or information, email jsoprano@timesleader.com. For advertising rates, email kmiscavage@timesleader.com.

ON THE COVER
Chewy.com Vice President of Human Resource Operations Gregg Walsh describes the company’s new 808,000-square-foot fulfillment center in the Hanover Industrial Park in Hanover Township. (Bill Tarutis file photo | For Times Leader)

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1,000 working at Chewy site in Hanover Twp.

Pet-product retailer filled jobs quicker than expected

By Bill O’Boyle
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HANOVER TWP. — When Chewy.com announced last year it was locating a new distribution warehouse in the Hanover Industrial Park, it also said it was planning to “eventually” hire about 1,000 people.

But that “eventually” came much more quickly than expected — those 1,000 jobs have already been filled.

Gregg Walsh, vice president of human resources operations for Chewy.com at its corporate headquarters in Dania Beach, Florida, said once the company decided that Northeastern Pennsylvania was the place to be, it moved into an 800,000 square-foot building — Chewy’s largest fulfillment center.

“First and foremost, when we were looking for a location for our fifth fulfillment center, we looked at where we can deliver the orders for our customers as quickly as possible,” Walsh said. “Because our customer base being so strong in the Northeast, we felt this would be the best location.”

The Chewy building is in an area of the Hanover Industrial Park that was previously coal-scarred.

A worker moves boxes to be filled at the Chewy.com fulfillment center. The business was attracted to Northeastern Pennsylvania partially because of its “strong, stable labor market,” a company official said.
The land was purchased by a Kansas City-based real estate firm, called NorthPoint Development, last year. NorthPoint vice president Brent Miles told the Times Leader the several buildings at the site will total about 2 million square feet and will have the potential to create 1,500 to 2,000 jobs.

As Chewy nears its one-year anniversary in the Hanover Industrial Park, Walsh said its building employs 1,000 — almost all of them hired from the local market.

“We definitely recognized the strong, stable labor market in the area,” Walsh said. “We see the Wilkes-Barre area as a growing labor market that will continue to grow over the next several years.”

Business focus is speed
The online retailer of pet food and other pet-related products states on its website: “Chewy was founded by people with a serious passion for helping pets, offering some 30,000 items for dogs and cats.”

Walsh said Chewy is an ecommerce company that depends on being able to fill customers’ orders as quickly as possible.

“When a customer goes online to place an order, it gets fulfilled by one of our five fulfillment centers,” Walsh said. “We then pick, pack and ship those orders to be received within one to two days.”

Walsh said Chewy encourages employees to be involved with their communities. He said the company partners with several charities focused on pets.

“The company makes donations to local shelters,” Walsh said. “We are very focused on that. And if a customer orders something for their pet, but it’s not the right item for their pet, that item gets donated to a local shelter.”

According to the Chewy.com website, the jobs at the fulfillment center include forklift operator at $14.75 per hour and fulfillment specialists at $13.75 hourly. The site also employs a purchasing specialist and a customer experience program manager.

When Chewy was about to open last year, Sam Guesto, Hanover Township manager, said the development was a major step in the right direction for the township.

“Especially for that tract of land,” Guesto said. “It had been vacant for a while and has been remediated.”

Guesto said the tract sits in a Keystone Opportunity Zone (KOZ), which exempts the owners from paying property and mercantile taxes for 10 years.

“But without those type of tools, we would never be able to attract anybody to those parcels,” Guesto said. “We looked at this from a couple of angles — we will receive realty transfer taxes and with the construction of three buildings, there will be a significant influx of building permit fees.”

Additionally, Guesto said the township will collect right-to-work taxes from all employees.

Guesto said the project could also lead to the additional development of support businesses to serve Chewy and other employees — such as gas stations, mini-markets, and restaurants.

It was recently revealed the other buildings next to Chewy will be home to athletic apparel maker Adidas and Patagonia Inc., an environmentally conscious firm that sells outdoor clothing.

Reach Bill O’Boyle at 570-991-6118 or on Twitter @TLBillOBoyle
A revamping of Luzerne County’s zoning ordinance is in the works and should be presented to county council for its consideration this summer, according to county Planning/Zoning Executive Director James Ferry.

This will be the first full update of the 98-page ordinance since it took effect in the 1960s, Ferry said.

“They made modifications before, but never this comprehensive. We are undergoing a review from page 1 to the end,” said Ferry, who was hired to oversee the office in April 2016.

The zoning ordinance regulates where various types of structures may be located and sets construction parameters for medical marijuana facilities, he said.

Adjustments for signs and outdoor advertisements also may be included, he said.

Ferry declined to elaborate on specifics, saying all proposed changes will be publically unveiled when they are presented to county council.

His office had initially projected the package of proposed amendments would be presented to council in the first quarter of 2017.

Before leaving office in January, prior county councilman Rick Williams had repeatedly pushed for a comprehensive zoning ordinance review conducted by outside planning consultants.

Williams said he appreciates the Planning Commission’s willingness to take on the task, but he worries the board of volunteer citizens won’t have the time, expertise and access to data needed to develop a progressive package of changes guiding development for decades.

The goal, Williams said, should be a uniform zoning ordinance that is attractive for adoption by all of the county’s 76 municipalities, even if some opt to continue handling their own zoning administration.

Prospective developers and design professionals shouldn’t have to keep as many as 55 different zoning ordinances on their computers or bookshelves to research potential economic development projects in the county, he said.

Williams also believes a companion update of the county’s subdivision/land development ordinance should be completed with the zoning update.

“Uniformity would make Luzerne County very attractive to potential developers and individuals who want to move here for good economic development and quality of life issues,” Williams said.

Ferry said the current focus is on zoning, but subdivision/land development changes may be considered later.

County Manager C. David Pedri said a uniform county zoning ordinance would “really be a step in the right direction,” but convincing the 54 remaining municipalities to adopt it would be a challenge. Pedri said he will keep the idea among future county goals.

County council would have to allocate funds for an outside consultant to update the ordinance because that expense was not included in the 2018 budget, Pedri said.

In addition to the director, the planning/zoning office employs a clerk, planner, two planning and zoning analysts and a transportation planner, Pedri’s position budget shows.

Pedri said he’s optimistic the staff and Planning Commission can come up with a comprehensive update.

Council Chairman Tim McGinley said he looks forward to reviewing the proposal and noted council members also may have recommendations.

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Joe Nardone Jr., owner of Gallery of Sound, poses for a picture in his music store in Wilkes-Barre Township.

Gallery of Sound adapts to a new era

By Patrick Kernan | pkernan@timesleader.com

WILKES-BARRE TWP. — In recent years, the way people consume music has been changing, leading to changes in the way people buy it.

And one local record-store and music-school owner has been working to keep music coming to the homes of the people of the Wyoming Valley.

Joe Nardone Jr., 51, calls the Gallery of Sound “the family business,” a term he uses with what sounded like affection. Started in 1972 by his father, Nardone said the business actually got a boost from the flooding caused by Hurricane Agnes that year.

“He made a deal to get into the Wyoming Valley Mall, and concurrently the flood happened,” Nardone said. “He had a store downtown, too, but downtown was wiped out, and suddenly the mall was the only thing.”

Nardone said the flood changed the shopping dynamics of the area, leaving the downtown area to play catch-up with the mall — and, by extension, the new record store.

Over time, the Gallery of Sound grew under the Nardone family’s watch, expanding to 11 stores at its height.

Nardone said he got involved in “the family business” roughly 30 years ago, back when he was 21. He said that he was actually planning on getting involved in a different facet of the music industry.

“I went to Lehigh University; I was involved in the radio station, and I had
some ideas of getting into the other side of the music business,” Nardone said.

With the record industry booming in 1988, Nardone’s plans changed. He instead decided to get involved with the record store.

But that boom didn’t last.

“Back in the 90s, you had acts like Britney Spears, the Backstreet Boys, *NSYNC who would routinely sell 10 million albums,” Nardone said with a hint of wistfulness. “Now, the benchmark of success is one million.”

Nardone said sales began to decline, first with the rise of online music outlets like iTunes and the more questionably legal Napster, then the later advent of subscription-based streaming services like Spotify and Apple Music.

Different purchasing habits eventually led to a downsizing of Gallery of Sound. Instead of the 11 store chain it once was, extending as far away as Matamoras, there are now just two left: in Wilkes-Barre Township and Dickson City.

But that doesn’t mean the record store hasn’t carved out its own unique niche.

“It’s a change in the business,” Nardone said, explaining the stores’ focus has had to change to still attract customers. “It’s harder to be a full-line record store.”

Instead, Gallery of Sound focuses on being a one-stop shop for a music nerd. In addition to vinyl records and CDs, the store now also sells record players, band T-shirts and other music collectibles.

Nardone notes the way people even think about buying music has changed. Since customers now are able to listen to albums online before they buy them, they’re able to treat the vinyl as a collector’s item instead of the only way they listen to music.

“People don’t buy lousy records anymore,” Nardone said. “They buy it because they want to say to people, ‘This is what I collect; this is what I like.’”

Interestingly, Nardone said this has allowed for a system where artists are able to connect more intimately with their fans, crafting more unique record-buying experiences. Then, the Gallery of Sound tries to get artists into the store to bring in customers.

Nardone said nationally famous acts like All Time Low, a member of the Doors and others have appeared in the store to play small sets or do signings. There’s also a focus to get nationally recognized local acts like Breaking Benjamin, Title Fight and Tigers Jaw to attract the fans.

“People will come in for those and will say, ‘Wow, I didn’t think you’d have this,’” Nardone said, explaining the value of these events.

But Nardone made it clear that the Gallery of Sound isn’t the only way he’s trying to bring music to the area.

In late 2016, Nardone opened Rockology Music Academy only a few doors down from the Wilkes-Barre Township Gallery of Sound.

The school takes a different approach to music education, Nardone said. Taking inspiration from the 2003 film “School of Rock,” Rockology features a band program, which teaches students how to make music together.

“And they’re not just playing stuff like the Ramones would play in their garage,” Nardone said. “The kids are trying harder stuff. They’re learning things about music they would’ve never learned.”

With five or six instructors, the approximately 50 kids have knowledgeable instructors who can teach them exactly what they want to learn.

“If they want to learn to sing classically, they can do that; if they want to sing like Arianna Grande, they can do that, too,” Nardone said. “Whatever you want, we’ll direct the program toward you.”

Nardone said he’s “very happy” with the progress of the students, and that they’re improving greatly, saying that bands started at the school have played locally as part of the program to great success.

Nardone chalks up the success to the passion of the kids.

“They have to like it … but very few have left,” he said.
New computer store hosts wealth of experience

Computer Planet opens in 315 Plaza

By Toni Ann Pennello
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WILKES-BARRE — Computer Planet, located at 1120 Highway 315 Blvd., at the 315 Plaza across from The Woodlands, is the new form of the computer business started by owner Arlington Andrews back in 2003. The new store officially opened at the beginning of the new year.

Computer Planet used to be called “Digital Addition,” Andrews, of Hazleton, said, but he decided to change the name of the new location.

“I just didn’t like the name after all those years because it didn’t have the word ‘computer’ in it, and people didn’t know what we did,” he said.

The company offers same-day repair services, sales and even services like building custom gaming computers.

Arlington, who says he received the Great Valley Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award in 2006, started the business in the Fairlane Village Mall in Pottsville while he

You’ll look Professional

In a Suit from Kranson

Computer Planet offers a full line of computer services.
KINGSTON — Employee-benefits consulting company Creative Benefits has a new home in the Wyoming Valley, but the same commitment to local businesses and their workers.

Creative Benefits senior consultant Carolyn McLaughlin-Smith said the firm is “very excited” about its recent move. “We are delighted to be moved before the beginning of the year,” she said.

The business moved to North Gates Avenue from the 900 Rutter building in Forty Fort, where it was housed since opening its Northeastern Pennsylvania office 13 years ago.

Creative Benefits was founded by McLaughlin-Smith’s sister, Ruth Graham, in Newtown Square, outside Philadelphia, in 1983.

“She started working with companies in the Philadelphia area and started knocking on doors, and was able to build a business,” she recalled.

McLaughlin-Smith said Creative Benefits is responsible for brokering all employee benefits — from health care to dental, vision, disability and FMLA administration work. With offices near Philadelphia and in Kingston, she said it’s able to cater to both larger and smaller companies.

She said its service platform and individual care to clients has helped the firm stand out over the last 35 years. “Benefits are very complicated and very expensive,” she said. “And most employees don’t really understand what their benefits are until they go to use them, and we think it’s very important that we support that utilization and be advocates for them with insurance companies.”

On the heels of the Affordable Care Act, commonly known as Obamacare, Creative Benefits launched a Health Care Advisory initiative. “We made it our business to understand this law and how it applies to our client organizations,” said McLaughlin-Smith. “We have created a sys-

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XVERGENT has area’s 1st LTE wireless signal

By Eileen Godin | egodin@timesleader.com

WILKES-BARRE — Slow internet connections and prolonged buffering — these problems plague some internet users at least a few times a day — but XVERGENT Networks is aiming to end these common issues.

XVERGENT Networks, a locally owned and operated business with offices in Scranton and Wilkes-Barre, is
providing area companies and residents in Lackawanna and Luzerne counties with fast, reliable wireless internet.

“We are in a hard wire market,” said Jeff Zaykowski, co-founder of XVERGENT Networks and SWG Inc., a telecommunications and broadband business based in Olyphant. “For years, it’s been fiber, DSL and cable.”

Zaykowski and his team are changing the norm by being the first LTE provider in Lackawanna and Luzerne counties. LTE stands for long-term evolution, which is a “high tech base used to deliver wireless internet service,” he said.

“Verizon and AT&T have deployed LTE internet across the U.S. and in different regions already,” Zaykowski said. “They just haven’t gotten here, but they are on their way.”

LTE is a “much faster” way to deliver internet service, explained Mike Hoprich, vice president at XVERGENT.

Currently, XVERGENT has three residential packages with internet speeds that range from 15 to 40 megabits per second and three business packages that vary from 10 to 40 Mbps.

According to the Federal Communications Commission’s website, a home with three electronic devices or users accessing email, internet, video or radio streaming, along with online gaming, multiparty video conferencing, or high-definition video streaming would require a 12 to 25 Mbps service speed.

**Benefits**

The LTE delivery method has benefits for both consumers and providers. Consumers get quick-responding and reliable internet access with no telephone pole cable connections or satellite dishes to be installed, Hoprich said.

Instead, just a small 9-inch-by–inch signal receiver box is installed on the exterior of a building to connect a home or business to their service. A cable from the outside receiver to a router inside the home is connected and the client is up and running.

“It is super easy,” said Hoprich.

“There are no lines, no major configurations,” Zaykowski added.

As a provider, Zaykowski and his team can upgrade their service to match consistently evolving technology.

“LTE can withstand the gradual progression of technology without having to change equipment out, which means the network will sustain continuous service a lot longer,” Hoprich said. “It is positive from that standpoint because 3G and 2G and all that equipment that people deployed had to be decommissioned and they had to redeploy new equipment.”

As technology advances, Hoprich said XVERGENT Networks can upgrade its LTE software, which eliminates the downtime needed to reconnect new transmission equipment.

XVERGENT has an antenna on Penobscot Mountain, which allows it to reach its Wyoming Valley customers, who range from Pittston to Nanticoke.

For a full list of communities served by XVERGENT Networks, visit xvergentnetworks.com.

Now, Zaykowski is working to reach the more rural, underserved areas such as Mountain Top and the Back Mountain regions.

“We can cover 90 percent of Fairview Township,” Hoprich said. “We are getting a lot of requests (for service) from Wright Township.”

“Our number of residential and business clients is growing daily,” Zaykowski noted.

Reach Eileen Godin at 570-991-6387 or on Twitter @TLNews.
EXETER — For a pair of local siblings, an unexpected career shift and a knack for cooking and entertaining led to a shared business venture.

Nicole and Matt Skesavage, both originally from West Pittston, opened The Kitchen by Nikki in November. The humble Exeter establishment holds only six tables for dining in, but the big flavor of the restaurant’s high quality sandwiches and cafe fare is drawing a growing clientele.

“It’s all been word of mouth,” Nicole Skesavage, now a Dickson City resident, said about the escalating dine-in and take-out traffic The Kitchen has received as she sat at one of her own tables in the dining room.

Formerly a 16-year employee of AT&T, Nicole Skesavage worked her way up the corporate ladder at area locations before becoming a major accounts marketing agent and working out of the Lancaster market where her fiance, Steve Armstrong, was also employed by the company.

“My department was eliminated,” Nicole Skesavage said of her reason for leaving the industry. “I wanted to come back here.”

Growing up, she said, she, her brother and her parents would often cook and entertain for friends and relatives. In Lancaster, she and Armstrong catered for neighbors and co-workers. And Matt, although employed in a different industry, had a solid reputation cooking at the Lithuanian Club in Pittston.

“I was doing concrete, and it wasn’t ever busy in the winter,” Matt Skesavage said, still a resident of West Pittston, chimed in from the kitchen. “Now I can stay busy all year.”

In reaction to their years of hospitality, Nicole Skesavage said, the trio — Armstrong is also a partner in the business — received encouragement from their inner circles to open a restaurant.

“We got a lot of positive feedback from friends and family,” she said. “We said, ‘We just need to open a small place.’”

The place, located at 1303 Wyoming Ave., is quickly becoming known for a few of its specialty...
items — including hoagies, cheesesteaks and boneless chicken bites — but also features fresh salads, craving-satisfying appetizers and hearty grill items.

“Our main focus (in the beginning) was the bites,” Nicole Skesavage said. “Matt makes all of the wing sauces. He created our Kitchen’s Secret Sauce, and you can mix and match the sauces any way you like. We sell a lot of the secret sauce and our hot and mild ranch.”

Refraining from selling pizza in a pizza-heavy market was a no-brainer, Nicole Skesavage said, but it was important to the business partners to offer top-shelf subs.

“All of our lunch meat is Boar’s Head,” she said. “Our bread is phenomenal, and besides the subs on our menu, we also offer hot and mild Grab and Go hoagies for $4 every day.”

In addition to Italian, turkey and roast beef options, The Kitchen offers The Warrior, a combination of ham, turkey and roast beef with pickles, Swiss and provolone cheeses and chipotle sauce.

“We wanted to have something that was geared toward (Wyoming Area High School),” Nicole Skesavage said of the sandwich named after the school’s mascot. “So we asked kids, some of my nephew’s friends, and that’s how we came up with The Warrior.”

The cheesesteaks, the owners said, are big sellers because of the quality of meat and cheese used to build the sandwiches, although they won’t comment further on the proprietary ingredients. And their french fries are bringing people into the establishment as well.

“Our Jersey Shore Fries are a thick-cut fry seasoned with sea salt and pepper,” Nicole Skesavage said. “But our Fresh Cut Fries with Malt Vinegar are our signature fries, because you can’t get those anywhere else.”

Nicole and Matt Skesavage share cooking duties, with Nicole taking on the salad and sandwich preparation and Matt operating the flat-top for the hot subs and other grill items and the fryer for fries and bites.

The siblings work well together, Nicole Skesavage said. “We have our moments,” she added with a laugh.

The Kitchen is open from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Friday. “The only complaint we get is we’re not open on weekends, but weekends are coming,” Nicole Skesavage said.

“Everybody loves the food. That’s the only complaint.”

The Kitchen features daily lunch specials, which are posted on the establishment’s Facebook page, facebook.com/thekitchenbynikki.

“I just try to come up with random (dishes),” Nicole Skesavage said. “I’ll be driving in and come up with something. This week, for example, I featured a ham, apple, cheddar grilled cheese on Texas toast.”

In addition to their dine-in and take-out service, the restaurant also offers catering.

The Skesavage siblings have an appreciation for working in the restaurant industry that is so ingrained in Northeastern Pennsylvania culture, in which they were raised to view entertaining others as an honor and a privilege.

“You take pride in what you make,” Nicole Skesavage said. “When people order something consistently, you know you’re doing something right.”

And Exeter seems as pleased to have The Kitchen as The Kitchen is to be in Exeter.

“When we opened, people from Exeter Proud (a neighborhood advocacy group) came to welcome us,” Armstrong said. “They even posted about it on the Facebook page, because they want to bring business back to the neighborhood.”
By Mary Therese Biebel
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WILKES-BARRE — Even if you’re visiting Bedwick’s Pharmacy & Gifts primarily to have pharmacist George Bedwick fill a prescription, his wife’s part of the store is likely to capture your attention.

While George provides all health care services, co-owner Chris Bedwick handles the business and gifts half of the venture. She has filled several compact aisles with items as diverse as a scarlet piggy bank for Valentine’s Day, Celtic knot pins for St. Patrick’s Day, and owl salt-and-pepper shakers for year-round whimsy.

“Owls are huge right now,” she said, chuckling over how many items she’s managed to display in the Hazle Street store, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year.

“When I first started out, I’d have six or seven items on a shelf. Now it’s more like 25 or 30,” she said, glancing over an array of flamingo and dolphin figurines along with playful mice, birthstone angels, mischievous leprechauns and even a high-kicking scarecrow from “The Wizard of Oz.”

“I want this to be the kind of place where someone can come in and be able to find a little gift for someone’s birthday,” she said. “Or if someone’s not feeling well, maybe a little crystal flower will help them feel better.”

Chris stocks toys, too, from classic games to Barbie dolls and Matchbox cars. And mugs, with messages like “Flirty at 30” or “Fabulous at 40.”

Then there are the religious items, ranging from rosaries, medals and First Communion gift sets to hundreds of saint figurines.

Most people have seen statues of Jesus or the Blessed Mother or St. Francis of Assisi, perhaps holding a bird to show his love for animals. You’ll find those favorites here, along with St. Teresa of Calcutta in her distinctive white habit, St. Peter holding the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and St. Ann interacting with her daughter, the Virgin Mary.

“St. Peregrine is very comforting for people who have cancer,” Chris said, picking up a statue of a 13th-century saint with a sore on his leg. An attached card explained that the night before Peregrine was to have his leg amputated, he prayed for healing and was...
Bedwick’s

miraculously cured.

“St. Joseph home-selling kits are very popular,” she said, explaining some people believe it is helpful to bury a small statue of St. Joseph and invoke his help when trying to sell a home.

“We have ‘sleeping St. Joseph,’ too,” she said, pointing out a reclining figure that honors the biblical account of St. Joseph receiving divine messages during a dream. Pope Francis reportedly mentioned during a 2015 trip to the Philippines that he keeps a similar image on a table.

‘Not just a number’

“I’ve always been a shopper,” Chris admitted. “What’s better for a shopper than to have your own gift shop?”

She enjoys stocking the religious items because they’re the kind of presents she liked to buy for her mom when she was a little girl, growing up across the street from the former Holy Trinity Elementary School.

Chris attended Holy Trinity, while George attended the former St. Boniface Elementary, and they met later as high school students at GAR.

It’s not surprising the couple can count classmates from all of those schools among their customers, because while they live in Plains Township, they opened their business in the Wilkes-Barre neighborhood where George had grown up.

They found their ideal spot on the corner of Hazle and Forrest streets. The site was the former Stanton Pharmacy, a place where George had run errands and bought candy as a youth.

Today, new generations of kids stop in for candy at Bedwick’s Pharmacy & Gifts, while their parents and grandparents, or great-grandparents, come for prescriptions.

“They walk through the door and I know them by name,” George said. “I think they find it reassuring to be recognized as a person and not just a number.”

Some customers might also get a kick out of admiring George’s collection of not-for-sale sports figures that represent his favorite teams.

“The Cardinals, the Celtics and the Colts,” he said. “My brothers and I were raised on those three teams.”

The pharmacist tries to make life easier for some of his older customers, at times calling a doctor’s office or insurance company to resolve a problem on their behalf.

“Then, they don’t have to spend half an hour on hold,” Chris said, “because he does.”

‘Part of the community’

If you visit the pharmacy during one of its semiannual sales, you’ll find many of their customers know the Bedwicks, not just as business owners, but as friends from many different facets of their lives.

Some remember Chris from her work at King’s College, where she arranged internships as director of experiential learning. And some know her because she serves on the boards of Catholic Social Services, Big Brothers Big Sisters, the Child Development Council and Junior Achievement.

They might recognize the Bedwicks as sponsors of a bazaar booth or Little League team, or remember George as a basketball coach whose son, Brian, played in the St. Nick’s League.

That was years before Brian Bedwick, now 27, earned a doctor of pharmacy degree from Wilkes University and accepted a position as a pharmacy specialist at the University of Pennsylvania Hospital. He lives in Philadelphia with his wife, Meagan, who is also a pharmacist.

Other customers may have found the pharmacy when they bowled at nearby Stanton Lanes, ate at Angelo’s Pizza or maybe looked for an engagement ring at Dunay Jewelers, dropped off their tax information at Decker Accounting or left services at one of the many churches in the vicinity.

Whenever one of those churches sponsors a blood drive or spaghetti dinner, an advertising poster for that event is most likely prominently displayed in the pharmacy’s window.

“We enjoy being part of the community,” Chris said.

Reach Mary Therese Biebel at 570-991-6109 or on Twitter @BiebelMT
Schiel’s Family Markets a true family business

WILKES-BARRE — Their signs say it and Gary Schiel lives it.
For almost 20 years, he and his family have been making a name for themselves at their two supermarkets in the city, the ones that advertise “Schiel’s Family Market.”

Along with his aunts, Connie Schiel-Owca and Carleen Schiel, and uncles, Frank and Fred Schiel, Gary is a co-owner of the stores on Hanover Street in South Wilkes-Barre and on George Avenue in the Parsons section. They also have a beer distributor on South Main Street in Wilkes-Barre.

Gary, 42, took a break at the busy Hanover Street store to sit down with Robbie Paul, operations manager, and talk about the business.
“It’s basically all we know,” Gary said.

The family members had experience in the supermarket business and bought an abandoned store on Hanover Street. They opened it as their own in 2000. They added the second store in 2005 that includes a state store selling wine and liquor. In 2015, they opened the beer distributor.

“We all try to take care of daily operations,” Gary said. At any given time you can find him in the storeroom, in the aisles and outside where he was shoveling snow the afternoon of Jan. 17.
The family has been resourceful, introducing online shopping and a drive-through at the Parsons store while still providing a traditional delivery service.
“There’ll be days we get 20 orders,” Paul said. Their drivers cross the Susquehanna to deliver on the West Side to Kingston, Larksville and Plymouth.

It’s a matter of survival in the industry crowded with Goliaths like Walmart and Target, chains like Wegmans, Weis Markets and Price Chopper and local player Gerrity’s. Convenience marts, CVS and Rite Aid pharmacies and dollar stores each take a bite out of the market.

“Competition is everywhere,” Gary said.

“Everyone wants to sell groceries anymore,” Paul added.

He’s speaking from experience too and has been with the Scheils since they started. “I was actually employee number two,” Paul, 53, said.
The Scheils’ stores stand out for their service and perishable goods, fresh cut meats, bakery and deli, Gary said. The family has been a constant contributor to the community, whether it be donating to a local group or organization, participating in the Wilkes-Barre Christmas Parade or hiring area high school students.

“We approach it differently,” Paul said.

It’s paid off with the creation of a loyal customer base and a workforce of approximately 200 full-time and part-time employees.

“We feed our families out of this business,” Paul pointed out.
The stores are profitable, added Gary. “We’re hanging in there,” he said.

In the spring, remodeling of the Hanover Street store will resume. Half of it was done about four years ago. The parking lot also was done. The final phase will concentrate on the interior in the deli and bakery sections.

Given their success, it’s not unreasonable to ask if the family is considering opening a third store in the future.
That’s a fair question and the family is always on the lookout, Gary said.

“The opportunity has to be right,” he said.

Reach Jerry Lynott at 570-991-6120 or on Twitter @TLJerryLynott.
Love of sewing leads to career

By Brigid Edmunds
bedmunds@timesleader.com

WYOMING — The walls of Threads by Voisin are lined with children’s clothes, dresses and shirts.

The shop, located on Wyoming Avenue, is owned and operated by Bernadette Voisin, and the clothes are all made by her.

Voisin, 48, opened the shop, which specializes in alterations and custom dress making, in the fall of 2016 and hasn’t looked back since.

“I love it here,” Voisin said.

She said she has loved sewing her whole life and learned at an early age that it would be a career.

Voisin learned how to sew from her cousin at the age of 14.

She said after school, she would visit her cousin, who lived across the street, and she would sew buttons on clothes.

“I would go crazy,” she said. “I just wanted to get on the machine. I was eager.”

Since then, Voisin said she has never stopped sewing and knew it would eventually lead her to a career.

Before opening her shop, she lived in New York and moved to the Poconos from there, and then eventually settled in the shop in Wyoming, a short walk from her home. Voisin said she tried other jobs in the past, but nothing brought her the joy sewing did.

“I wasn’t happy,” she said. “And I’m happy with this.”

Now, more than a year after opening her store, she says business is blossoming, and she looks forward to another year in the shop.

“I’m looking forward to a great year this year,” she said.

Voisin said her client base has grown, and she continues to offer alterations and custom designs.

“I design, cut and sew,” she said. “Freehand, no patterns.”

Since opening the shop, she said she has blown away people’s expectations of seamstresses.

“A lot of people hear seamstress, they think I’m a really old person,” she laughed. “Because nobody does this. (Customers) come in and they’re like ‘I thought you were older.’”

Finding her home in the Wyoming Valley has strengthened her love for her job.

“I feel like a queen here,” she said.

“I love what I do. I love clothes.”

Reach Brigid Edmunds at 570-991-6113 or on Twitter @brigidedmunds
New headquaters, expanding workforce at Guard

By Geri Gibbons  
For Times Leader

WILKES-BARRE — Berkshire Hathaway Guard Insurance, having moved its headquarters to downtown Wilkes-Barre’s Public Square, is now in the process of filling about 170 jobs it says have been made possible by the move.

The project, which began late last year, is well underway with many departments having moved to the building at 39 Public Square, which Westguard Insurance Co. purchased for just over $5 million in November, according to Guard officials.

Some departments still remain at the company’s old headquarters a short walk away on North River Street, but will be transitioning to the new building in the next few months.

GUARD’s annual sales have grown sixfold to approximately $1.2 billion since 2007, and the insurer had run out of space for its more than 675 employees, most of them working in five different spots in the downtown.

Wilkes-Barre, wanting to retain the company, facilitated a $1 million Local Share Account grant to help the project. The state added another $855,000 grant.

“The financial assistance offered by the commonwealth and the city was key in offsetting the increased costs of locating a major corporate facility in a downtown district as well as being competitive with incentives from other areas,” Sy Foguel, chief executive officer, said in a press release. “We’re very happy to anchor our operations in the downtown.”

Mayor Tony George; state Sen. John Yudichak, D-Plymouth Township; state Rep. Eddie Day Pashinski, D-Wilkes-Barre; and other officials have worked toward anchoring the business in Wilkes-Barre, as a source of economic stimulus and job creation.

City Administrator Ted Wampole has said the retention of the business in the downtown area was a benefit to the city, creating jobs and stimulating the economy.

“We think it’s a part of what going to save our financial situation,” Wampole said in an Times Leader interview in November.

Reach the Times Leader newsroom at 570-829-7242 or on Twitter @TLnews.
Highmark is increasing WB workforce

Since Highmark Health took over Blue Cross of Northeastern Pennsylvania, there has been no shortage of rumors, most often concerning layoffs.

They were rumors Highmark officials downplayed, though in November 2016 a spokesman did admit the workforce had been whittled a bit, to 795 employees in the 13-county area formerly served by BCNEPA.

But now, Senior Vice President Brian Rinker has good news.

“Over the last year or so, we have increased our workforce in our Wilkes-Barre office, and we do expect this trend to continue,” he said. “This job growth is a reflection of both the growing needs of the Highmark organization and the quality of the local workforce to meet some of these needs.”

The truth is, after the acquisition of BCNEPA, Highmark officials participating in teleconferences to update media on company progress often focused on western Pennsylvania, where the company was working to iron out glitches in some programs.

One example of that focus: Gov. Tom Wolf recently announced Highmark reached an agreement with the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center to assure greater access to a wide range of services in western Pennsylvania.

The northeast part of the state, by comparison, got little attention other than to note things were going well.

But company officials have always touted progress, and Rinker, who focuses specifically on this region, did the same.

“The merger with Highmark has also been good for the regional health insurance marketplace as we have been able to introduce new and enhanced products and services to meet the changing health care needs of NEPA consumers.

“Some of the job expansion is associated with Highmark’s national dental insurance company, United Concordia,” he added.

Highmark regularly announces new services, coverage or options available here. Most recently, in November, the company started covering diabetes prevention programs like one offered at the Wilkes-Barre YMCA.

Earlier in 2017, Highmark instituted the “True Performance” program designed to reward physicians for positive patient outcomes.

The program offers reimbursement incentives to primary care doctors to keep patients healthier through things like recommended immunizations, cancer screenings and annual wellness exams.

From the start of the acquisition of BCNEPA, Highmark officials said the goal was to expand services in the region, which in turn would mean expanding the workforce. Rinker noted that means more than just putting additional people on the payroll.

“More employees at Highmark means more people shopping downtown, eating at downtown restaurants and otherwise supporting local businesses and services,” he wrote in an email. “We also support many local vendors that help keep our business running on a day-to-day basis.”

Highmark has also been quick to make its presence felt in the community beyond the business end of things.

Employees are often found helping out with things like the United Way of Wyoming Valley Day of Caring. In January, employees purchased and donated gifts to Children’s Service Center of Wilkes-Barre. And last September, they helped at the Boys & Girls Clubs of Northeastern Pennsylvania Back-to-School Health Fair.

“Highmark has a long history of supporting the communities we serve,” Rinker wrote, “and since the merger, we’ve actually increased our community commitments in north central and northeastern Pennsylvania through grants, sponsorships and other forms of support.”
WEST HAZLETON — Tucked away on a side street off the main drag through town, the 4th Street Pub might not have the most prominent location.

But that hasn’t stopped this popular bar/restaurant from acquiring a prominent reputation that extends well beyond Luzerne County and even Pennsylvania.

If you don’t believe us, just type owner Marty Beccone’s name into Google.

It will spit back results from Newsweek, a Dutch publication and even a newspaper in Scotland. And that’s just a short list of the journalists who have passed through.

Why do national and international media organizations flock to 4th Street like Hazleton-area patrons flock to its wings and burgers?

For that answer, we have to go back to the contentious 2016 presidential election.

We aren’t going to get too partisan here, but to understand where Beccone’s loyalties lie, just know that decades ago he worked at Trump Marina in Atlantic City and had several close encounters with the man who sits in the Oval Office.

“I waited on Donald Trump three times,” beams Beccone, 53, a New Jersey native.

And he’s been very vocal about his support for the billionaire-turned-president whenever the opportunity presents itself, whether on Facebook or in his bar when a customer chooses to engage him on partisan subjects.

Beccone’s views became a matter of interest nationally in the wake of Trump’s victory since Luzerne County proved so crucial in that stunning win. Some would even go as far to say the county turned the whole election for Trump.
HONESDALE — The hustle and bustle and excitement of the Big Apple attracts many, but after spending some time in New York City working in the corporate world, Elizabeth Nagy decided to return to NEPA and offer her expertise to the area’s banks.

Nagy is Honesdale National Bank’s new vice president and chief marketing and digital officer. NHB is the oldest American locally owned community bank. It was founded in 1836.

The main branch is located in Honesdale, but the bank has several branches in Luzerne and Lackawanna counties, including in Kingston, Wilkes-Barre, Archbald and the newest location in Clarks Summit, which opened Jan. 5.

Born and raised in Washington, N.J., Nagy first got a taste of Pennsylvania when she moved to the area in 2006 to attend Susquehanna University, where she also met her husband.

“He exposed me to the NEPA community,” she said. “I quickly fell in love with it.”

After graduating in 2006, Nagy spent nearly three years in New York City working for Taylor Public Relations as an account executive. The clientele that she worked with at the company were mostly lifestyle brands for Diageo, a British company that produces alcoholic beverages. Some of the brands included Johnnie Walker, Smirnoff, Jose Cuervo and Crown Royal.

The job allowed her to “spend time on the creative side.”

Nagy then decided to apply her public relations and marketing skills to the banking world at a time when the banking industry needed creative individuals to assist with marketing projects and brand building. She moved back to NEPA in 2010 and started a position in Scranton at NBT Bank as a marketing and communications manager.

Nagy had no prior experience in the banking industry, but one of her main tasks was to figure out ways to make a financial institution appeal to people.

“It was definitely a career challenge for me and helped me grow,” she said of the experience. After almost eight years at NBT Bank, Nagy joined Honesdale National Bank last November.

Her responsibilities at HNB are similar to things she’s done before, but with more of an emphasis on the digital side, including customer service and online banking.

“Like many other industries, banks are also adjusting to the change to digital operations. However, Nagy believes that this will not hurt banks as it has some other businesses, but help them. “It is such a changing industry. There’s so much opportunity for growth,” she said. “Banks are not going away.”

Nagy feels switching to digital operations, such as online and mobile banking, helps customers and has made banks “more stable than ever.”

“It’s a great opportunity for the industry, because it allows individuals to connect with their finances in a way that has never been done before.”

Reach the Times Leader newsroom at 570-829-7242 or on Twitter @TLnews.
Planet

From page 8

was attending college full
time.

“I would attend my
classes during the
morning and then open
the store in the after-
noon until closing,” he
explained in a press
release.

Andrews said that pas-
sion inspired him to start
the business.

“I always wanted to
work for myself, because
how hard you work is
directly proportionate to
how much money you
make,” he said. “I always
had an interest in com-
puters, and I always
wanted to combine my passion
in life with my job.”

After some good busi-
ness, Andrews opened
the store’s second loca-
tion in the Laurel Mall
in Hazleton, and later its
third location in the Wy-
oming Valley Mall.

Andrews decided to
close the Pottsville
and Wilkes-Barre loca-
tions after a few years
of stress, and directed
his focus on the store’s
Hazleton location,
because of its proximity
to where he lived.

Finally, Computer
Planet was born after
Andrews decided to relo-
cate and rename.

“I always knew I
wanted to open again in
Wilkes-Barre because of
how well we did there
and how centralized
that location is,” said
Andrews. “With 29,000
vehicles per day driving
past our store this (new)
location cannot be beat.”

Andrews acknowled-
ges that his industry is
“challenging” due to the
lowering prices of com-
puters, but reiterated the
value of repairs.

“I would like to remind
everyone that when they
purchase a brand-new
computer from a big
box store they are not
purchasing the newest
technology. We can easily
sell a customer a three-
year-old computer that
is much faster and less
expensive than a brand
new computer they paid
$400 for at a big box
store,” he explained.

He added that the
repairs are cost-effective,
as replacing one or two
components in an older
computer could mean
it runs like new or even
better.

Pub

From page 20

So, once one journalist
who traveled to Luzerne
County encountered
Becone and found him
quotable, a steady stream
followed.

They were all fasci-
nated by the 4th Street,
place where you could
get a great pulled pork
sandwich with a side of
politics, or a tasty tuna
sub while arguing tax
reform.

“I was on TV in the
Netherlands,” Becone
said. “They came here.”

So did the BBC. And
CBS Nightly News,
though “I didn’t make the
cut there,” Becone says,
meaning his segment did
not actually air.

There was another
visiting journalist from
China.

“He said to me, ’This
interview will go out
all over China. ... My
response was ’I don’t
want to start an interna-
tional incident,’” joked
Becone.

A Newsweek writer
directed to the pub loved
its atmosphere and sent
a photographer for pic-
tures to go with his story.

Beccone says the ques-
tions he gets usually
have to do with why he
supports Trump, and his
own personal views on
race relations and issues
important to women.

It’s logical to ask, how-
ever, why a businessman
would risk offending cus-
tomers — and steering
away potential dollars —
by being so political in a
such a divisive era.

“I just think what’s
right is right. I’ll engage
people all the time,” said
Beccone.

And he noted debates
are “not confrontational
in any way.”

The proof no one
minds: His customers
keep coming back.

“We’re busier than
ever,” said Becone, who
boasts 14 beers on tap
and serves up award-
winning grilled steak-
and-cheese sandwiches.

“We get every walk here.
We get a diverse crowd.
There’s every age group.
There’s every ethnicity.”

And while he got to
a point where he had
stopped giving inter-
views, he did grant a
recent request by none
other than Ben Bradlee
Jr.

Bradlee, son of the
famed Washington Post
executive editor, is writ-
ing a book focused on
Luzerne County’s role in
electing Trump.

So, of course, the
writer had to stop by 4th
Street.

Beccone ended up
interviewing the pub
owner for two-and-a-half
hours on the phone.

He might “put a pic-
ture of me in the book,”
said Becone.

Creative

From page 9

tem of client alerts to
keep our clients compli-
ant and keep their busi-
desses financially intact.

“So we take a proac-
tive approach in working
with employees of our
clients.”

Giving back

McLaughlin-Smith
opened a local office in
2005, eventually finding
a home as one of the first
tenants in the 900 Rutter
building.

“We quickly outgrew
the (first) space and we
moved downstairs in that
building,” she said.

McLaughlin-Smith
said the inspiration for
the recent move and new
building was to accom-
modate growth while
showing the public it’s
committed to the area.

“We think it’s impor-
tant to maintain a pres-
ence here,” she said.

And it’s not just about
having a professional
presence. McLaughlin-
Smith said every
employee is involved
with volunteer efforts in
the area and giving back
in some way. She said a
committee helps identify
different organizations
the company can serve.

“We think to be good
citizens you need to do
that,” she said. “You
need to give back to the
community.”
LUZERNE COUNTY BUSINESS NEWS

Commonwealth Health names Employees of the Year

WILKES-BARRE—Commonwealth Health recently announced its 2017 Employee of the Year award winners.

Each hospital names an Employee of the Year, Clinical Manager of the Year and Manager of the Year. The Employee of the Year and a guest are honored at an awards celebration hosted by Community Health Systems in Franklin, Tenn. The trip includes a stay in Nashville and tours of that city’s sights.

Employees of the Year are Jacqueline Turner, Berwick Hospital Center; Trish Redman, Moses Taylor Hospital; Thomas Sochovka, Regional Hospital of Scranton; Michael Koptcho, Tyler Memorial Hospital, and Debbie Rowles, Wilkes-Barre General/First Hospital.

Clinical Managers of the Year are Craig Hiott, Berwick; Beverly Phillips, Moses Taylor; John Veneski, Regional; Kristin Montauredes, Tyler, and Mark Lokuta, General/First Hospital.

Non-Clinical Managers of the Year are Joanne Dietz, Berwick; Brian McAlarney, Moses Taylor; Matthew Kalinchok, Regional; Ronald Coolbaugh, Tyler, and Carrie Raymond, General/First Hospital.

Turner, of Weatherly, is a respiratory therapist lead who has been with Berwick Hospital since 2000. She oversees all operational responsibilities of the respiratory department including the oversight of daily activities and financial accounting. She has worked in the field of respiratory therapy since 1980. She and her husband, Mark, have three sons and six grandchildren.

Redman, critical care nurse educator at Moses Taylor, began working at the hospital in 1989 as a nursing assistant. A registered nurse, she has worked in several capacities at Moses Taylor and at Allied Services Home Health and Rehabilitation Hospital. She lives in Peckville with her husband, Mark. They have three children.

Sochovka, a registered nurse in the Regional Hospital cardiac cath lab, began his career at the hospital in 1982. He earned an associate’s degree from Penn State University and graduated from the Mercy Hospital School of Nursing. He and his wife, Mary, live in Moosic. They have two children, Kevin, of Boston, and Lisa, Philadelphia.

Koptcho, of Swoyersville, has been a staff pharmacist at Tyler for five years. He is a graduate of Wyoming Valley West High School and the Temple University School of Pharmacy and previously worked as a staff pharmacist at Franklin Regional Hospital, Philadelphia.

Rowles is a licensed practical nurse in the clinic office at Academy of Medical, Kingston, a part of Wilkes-Barre General Hospital. She has been with the health care system since 2000.

Hiott is director of surgical services at Berwick Hospital where he has worked since 2010. He and his wife, Angeline, live in Mountain Top with their children, Alex and Emily.

Phillips, of Waverly, is nurse manager of the Moses Taylor emergency department. She earned a bachelor’s degree in political science and economics from American University before obtaining a bachelor’s degree in nursing from the University of Scranton in 1994. She has worked at Moses Taylor since 1998 and has been managing the emergency department since October 2016. She and her husband, David, have three daughters, Martha, Margrette and Clara.

Veneski has been director of the pharmacy at Regional Hospital since October 2016, having started at Moses Taylor in 1987. A resident of Scranton, Veneski is married to Shelley Rosenberg. They have two children — Sarah Veneski, of San Francisco, and Daniel Veneski, Scranton — and a granddaughter, Lennon Rose.

Mondauredes, laboratory manager at Tyler, has been with the hospital since July 2016. She resides in Forest City.

Lokuta, manager of respiratory services at Wilkes-Barre General Hospital, oversees respiratory therapy, neurophysiology and the sleep lab. He joined the staff in April 2016. He is a registered respiratory therapist with certification in health care administration and holds an associate’s degree in respiratory therapy. He is a member of the National Board for Respiratory Care and the American Association for Respiratory Care. He lives in Mountain Top with his wife, Michelle, and daughter, Lauren.

Dietz, controller at Berwick Hospital, joined the staff four years ago and previously worked at Moses Taylor Hospital. She graduated from Indiana University of Pennsylvania with a bachelor of science degree in management information systems and a diploma in accounting from Elizabeth College. She and her husband, Walt, and their children, Derek and Trevor, reside in Fairmount Township.

Coolbaugh, who serves as plant engineering manager at Tyler, joined the hospital staff in 2002. A graduate of Lake-Lehman High School, Coolbaugh earned an associate’s degree from Williamsport Area Community College (now Penn College). He lives in Tunkhannock with his wife, Brenna, and stepchildren, Riley and Maddie.

McAlarney, a resident of Throop, has been director of facilities at Moses Taylor Hospital since 2015, having begun his career at the hospital in 2008.

Kalinchok serves as controller at Regional Hospital, Moses Taylor Hospital, Tyler Memorial Hospital and Commonwealth Health Emergency Medical Services. He earned a bachelor’s degree in accounting from Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania. He and his wife, Melissa, and their daughter, Laini Grace, live in Conyngham.

Raymond, of Dallas, is the customer service supervisor in the laboratory at Wilkes-Barre General Hospital. A graduate of Dallas High School, she earned a bachelor’s degree in biology from College Misericordia and is registered in medical technology. She worked at the General Hospital lab for 30 years, serving in customer service for...
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