

COMMUNITY VIEWPOINT



Zachary Meseck,
Town of Preston Supervisor

My unsolicited advice: volunteer and run for office

I was elected as the youngest supervisor in my town's history, and with that honor came the responsibility to represent young adults well and bring forward ideas that will help push this area towards a brighter future.

Oftentimes these roles are generally the responsibility of people several times my age. Which leads me to ask, why don't we see more young adults getting involved in politics?

I often wonder if it's simply because people think they can't do it, or that they're not really sure how it can be done. Hopefully this editorial helps show people my thought process behind running for office, and why I believe most people can and should volunteer.

I've had the pleasure of working with many great nonprofit organizations over the past several years, and I still volunteer even though I'm working several jobs. I'm Town of Preston Supervisor, an administrative assistant for the Norwich Police Department, and I have my own business writing press releases and doing photography.

I'm on nine committees, I have a family including two young children, and if I can make it work there's a good chance you can too.

Volunteering

A wise man once told me that all people have the capability to do incredible good, and all they lack is a spark to set them into action. Once you find that motivation, hold on tight, and start looking into what nonprofits are tackling the problem you're interested in. Reach out to them and see how you can get involved.

It may not be easy, but it's worth the effort. Start small and you may be surprised by how much you can accomplish. In the time it takes you to watch a movie, you could change someone's life forever.

Many of the friends I have that are my age feel like they have little if any connection to their community, and in a way that breaks my heart. There is so much beauty in the Southern Tier, and so many people worth striving for.

With that being said I feel comfortable saying if you don't have an interest in volunteering, you probably shouldn't be in local government. I have always felt that if you invest in the community, the community will invest in you, and it's best not to put the cart before the horse.

One example of this type of leadership that I've seen firsthand happened during a roof replacement with The Impact Project; Sherburne Mayor Bill Acee appeared

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Digital or in person, NBT touts innovative ways to stay competitive

By Shawn Magrath
Sun Contributor

NORWICH - If anything, NBT Bank execs say the pandemic has made NBT a stronger organization, building on the bank's already existing framework of competitive financial services and technology.

Today, with inflation on the rise and federal interest rates in question, NBT's level of capacity is more important than ever as customers seek resources to best manage their money. As inevitable nationwide financial challenges loom, the bank has sights set on continuing its investments to remain a leader in personal banking, business banking and wealth management services.

"We're a significant financial services company and one of the largest in Upstate New York," said NBT President and CEO John Watt, citing NBT's current rank of 97th largest of the 4,000 banks in the U.S. That scale, he explained, is what



A team of NBT bankers volunteer for construction at the Greenway Park playground in Norwich. (Submitted photo)

allows NBT to provide superior financial products and services to stay competitive. The company earned a top spot on Forbes' list of America's Best-In-State Banks in 2021 and its footprint continued to expand across the New

England territory, making way for new branches to open in New Hampshire and Connecticut.

But business as usual hasn't been easy during the pandemic. The onslaught of COVID two years ago forced

NBT to lean heavily on technology for its customers and employees while people learned to do more from home. In the face of new challenges, NBT rose to the occasion. The bank had been

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Deja Brew, Teaser's Hair & Nail Studio: Discovering opportunity in a time of challenge



Sisters, Business Manager Jamie Beers and Owner Missy Beers, at Deja Brew coffee shop at 12 South Broad St. in Norwich. (Photo by Sarah Genter.)

By Tyler Murphy
Sun Managing Editor

Business owner Missy Beers has not only found a way to survive the recent business challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic she also found opportunity.

She owns and operates two main street businesses

in Norwich, including owning one of the buildings that is part residential, also making her a landlord. She is also a board member of the Commerce Chenango.

She bought one of the business in 2021, as the previous owners struggled with the pandemic, restrictions and staffing shortages.

Business owners like Missy still have not yet returned to normal and though she has discovered some silver linings, the business she runs have many of their own challenges.

Missy bought Teaser's Hair & Nail Studio in 2015 after working there as a stylist for about 10 years.

The business was first established in 2006 and Missy took over in 2015.

In 2018 she became a downtown property owner and landlord when she bought the building.

Asked about her experiences as a landlord. She said the pandemic had made being

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Deja Brew, Teaser's Hair & Nail Studio: Discovering opportunity in a time of challenge

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a landlord more difficult.

"I had my first renters, and they never paid. I did get the funding through renters' assistance program though, so that came through for me, which was nice," she said.

Missy has made significant investments in the building since buying it, renovating the commercial first floor where Teaser's operates, and by further developing the apartments on the upper floors to help attract renting professionals.

"Everything just kind of fell into place. The business was going up for sale, and I was already a stylist there, so I took the opportunity.

"And then the building was going up for sale and I was already a tenant in the building, so again, it was the perfect opportunity.

"Then when Deja Brew was going out of business and the owner was looking for someone to buy it."

Missy bought Deja Brew coffee shop at 12 South Broad Street in the middle of the pandemic in February of 2021. Missy said she called her sister Jamie Beers.

"I reached out to my sister and wanted to know if she was up for leaving her job for a new opportunity.

Jamie has about twenty years of experience in the food service industry and was working for a local pizzeria when she decided to join her sister.

"So the restaurant business was always her forte. And this business is right on the other side of the street, so it was perfect," said Missy.

Jamie said it was opportunity knocking on her door. "I knew that if I had my sister behind me, we could make it. For a long time, I'd say I worked 14 days a week, 48 hours a day. It was all about finding the right help and learning the business. This was all new to me," Jamie said.

The sisters were not regular coffee drinkers and had to learn how to run a coffee business, like learning what a latte is, and then how to make it. They asked those they knew for help, did research and watched a lot of online



Beers bought Deja Brew coffee shop at 12 South Broad Street in the middle of the pandemic in February of 2021.

instructional videos.

Missy said, "But now that we know it, it's really not that hard. All of the coffee drinks are either coffee or coffee with some kind of milk like steamed or foamed milk, half and half, etc., but you have to know all of that. We knew nothing about a cup of coffee when we first started."

"I had been cutting hair in the community for twenty years and have a good following, so I knew that my customers would support me here as well - which I've seen. We've probably tripled the business from when we started a year ago," said Missy.

She attributes her success to being from the local area and well networked into the community.

Asked what she learned over the last year Missy responded, "Everything."

Doing business changes under COVID

Deja Brew and Missy were recognized as entrepreneur of the year in 2021 by Commerce Chenango. She compared her previous years in business to what it is like during COVID.

"There were huge changes. We got shutdown for 10 weeks, and then trying to get all of those people to come

back was a struggle. People are still nervous to come back in," she said.

"There's definitely a change in foot traffic. You don't see a lot of people out now. I don't think that it's all a result of just COVID though. We don't have Pumpkinfest anymore, Relay for Life is done - there's a lot of volunteering work that people just don't do anymore, so you don't get the crowds that come with those types of downtown events."

In addition to closures the business had to deal with staff illness.

"There was about three weeks where the CDC said we didn't have to wear masks, and so we didn't during that time. But then COVID went through the salon - all but two of the girls got it. And so we put the masks back on, and we have ever since. We've done what the CDC tells us to do," said Missy.

At the start of the pandemic the business saw a large decline in customers.

"There was a huge difference in the amount of customers. We did get relief funds. We were eligible for the PPP loan, twice. We all got unemployment when we were

"Honestly the coffee shop - We haven't seen much difference for this business from COVID, because we took it over right in the middle of the pandemic. Our sales are going up more, but I think that's just because I have a lot of following in the community, and we put ourselves out there. Because we're so family-oriented we build a lot of good relationships with these people to get them to keep coming back," - Deja Brew Owner Missy Beers.

forced to shutdown, so that was a huge help," she said.

Like many businesses and consumers the stores went online and increased their web and social media presence.

"It's definitely a social media world. That's where everyone wants to go to know what's going on. We advertise every day our soups of the day and what's on our menu on Facebook because everybody's on there all the time looking for that kind of stuff," she said.

Another issue facing businesses has been supply issues. Until recently Deja Brew struggled to get Philadelphia Cream Cheese.

"One of the weird shortages is Philadelphia Cream Cheese, which was the base of all of our cream cheese. My sister makes all of our cream cheese here in-house, that's not something that we buy," she said.

"It's because it's for our bagels, and that's a huge staple of our business. We get

our bagels from Long Island, so we travel four hours to get bagels, and then there's no cream cheese," said Missy.

The shortage has lasted for about three or four months. Even if items can be found, it may likely cost more.

There are also a number of issues related to the lockdowns and politics that have hit businesses during the pandemic.

"It's hard right now to even find plastic cups, plates or anything plastic, really. That's been going on since about the summer. Plastic straws were hard to get for a while. New York State just banned styrofoam. We were replacing the plastic with styrofoam for a while, but now we can't even do that. We had to pull all our styrofoam products."

She said paper replacement products for items, like straws, do not work as well, and many people complain.

"Our coffee comes from Puerto Rico, so shipping can even be an issue, when things

get held up for whatever. It still has to come through customs because it's going over seas," said Missy.

The store had one shipment recently held up for a check she said.

Jamie added, "We just take it one day at a time. If you can't find it we just try to find a substitute. Right now we have a partial case of two sizes of cups - if it comes down to it then we'll only have one size drink. It is what it is."

The coffee shop's one-year anniversary was February 1.

"Honestly the coffee shop - We haven't seen much difference for this business from COVID, because we took it over right in the middle of the pandemic. Our sales are going up more, but I think that's just because I have a lot of following in the community, and we put ourselves out there. Because we're so family-oriented we build a lot of good relationships with these people to get them to keep coming back," said Missy.

She plans to stay in the area and thinks better times are ahead.

Missy said, "I never get myself into something that I'm not ever going to complete. I'm not sure when the completion is - it's never going to be really complete. Right? Just do your best everyday, that feels complete to me. We just added breakfast sandwiches. We're always adding new things. That's a good start."

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SUCCESS STORY

Norwich Rehabilitation & Nursing Center: Ready to meet the challenge

Ask anyone working in healthcare right now, and they'll tell you the last two years have been the worst in their careers.

Between ever-changing guidelines, wave after wave of pandemic variations and the sheer volume of healthcare worker leaving the field, "challenging" doesn't even begin to describe what it's like to deliver quality care right now.

Our own local Norwich Rehabilitation & Nursing Center is ready to meet that challenge. "Five years ago, we recognized that we offer an outstanding rehabilitation program, with patient outcomes far outpacing the national average," says administrator Edith Revoir, "so we've grown that program so we can help more people in our community remain in their homes."

In that time, Norwich Rehab has converted almost 50% of their beds to short-term rehab with continued success in helping their patients return home, often in cases that may have resulted in permanent nursing home residency. "We have an outstanding team here," Revoir went on.

"The last two years in particular have been extremely difficult, but our focus in delivering our promise to our residents: we will exhaust every option we can to help you spend your final years the way you want."

In fact, as the COVID-19 pandemic was reaching a crescendo in 2020, Norwich Rehab was awarded the American Health Care Association's Silver Award for Quality of Care, one of only five skilled nursing facilities that year to receive such recognition. "We're on the road to Gold," says Revoir.

"We're rolling out programs for our staff and residents that will help us continue to thrive in these unprecedented times." Norwich Rehab has already substantially raised rates for all their employees and plans to implement a Wellness Program this year that supports their employees in all facets.

In addition to investing in their staff, a major building renovation will begin this March, with an eye to programs and facility expansion in 2023. There are plans in the works for an outpatient therapy clinic to offer patients transitional therapy on discharge home. "Most of all, our goal is to be a partner in this community that we all love," concludes Revoir.

My unsolicited advice: volunteer and run for office

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with his own carpentry equipment, climbed up a ladder, and worked on a roof for hours with the rest of the volunteers.

I was a reporter at the time, and Bill didn't seek out the camera or try to make the event into a political stage - he worked, and then he left.

Serving the community before you try to lead it helps keep you grounded, and it's a good way to stay that way after you get into office. I think Bill is a good example of that.

Running for office

Just as a disclaimer, for anyone who isn't a "people person" it may be difficult for you to run for office the same way I did. I have always enjoyed talking with people and hearing their stories, so most of my strategy was based around that concept.

I also created what I felt were realistic goals that I believed would benefit the town, and I kept them focused on what I observed first-hand instead of any specific party-line rhetoric.

Politics can be a very disturbing subject, and I believe the current state of our government, along with the non-stop bickering between parties is what causes most people to avoid the government field in general. For that I certainly can't blame them, and I believe for the good of the country we must move in a direction that encourages rational debate and respect for opposing viewpoints.

So if I didn't rely on political grandstanding, what did I promise the people of Preston for my first term?

I promised three things:

I will get Preston a website and social media presence to help improve communication and cohesion with upcoming events. I am happy to say I have already been able to build a website thanks to the approval of our town board - townofprestonny.com and Town of Preston NY on facebook.

I will work to improve the town's park, which was partially motivated by my love of taking my family there in the summertime.

I will do my best to represent the people of Preston and their viewpoints to the board of supervisors.

With those promises in mind, I put the time in, spending hours prioritizing face-to-face interaction, going door-to-door, and hearing from residents all throughout my town.

I funded the campaign entirely on my own, and with strategic sign placement the cost remained well below \$1,000. I was also fortunate enough to receive support from other leaders throughout the greater Chenango County community including Assembly Joseph Angelino, Senator Fred Akshar, and New Berlin Mayor Peter Lennon.

Running for office doesn't have to cost a fortune, and I believe if you are running with the right intentions people can sense it when they talk to you. For some, just having a passion for the community might be enough, but others will want to make sure you have a plan.

Do your homework before you toss your hat into the ring, and figure out how you can make an impact.

Keep in mind that if things don't work out the first time that doesn't mean that you aren't a good choice for office, it just means it wasn't the right time.

A note to those who have been in office long before me

As much as I enjoy being a younger person in office, I do see the value in the years worth of experience that many of my counterparts have. I have learned so much just by sitting down and listening to what some of our leaders have to say.

Learning history is important for context, and I have nothing but respect for many of the individuals who are currently serving in our local offices. My experience thus far with my more seasoned colleagues has been nothing but positive, and I'm appreciative of the warm welcome.

It's my hope that I can spend the next several years learning how to better my town, and take that experience and passion to the next level of government. In the meantime, I hope this has inspired some of you to take the first step into volunteering or running for office. We need more of our community leaders to stand up, make a difference, and ensure that their voices are heard.

If you have any additional questions, feel free to reach out to me on facebook or at my email preston@co.chenango.ny.us for more information.



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Coaches, athletic directors and officials discuss COVID's impact on school sports

By Patrick Newell
Sun Sports Contributor

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all aspects of life: From daily routines, work, and sports, to school, and athletics.

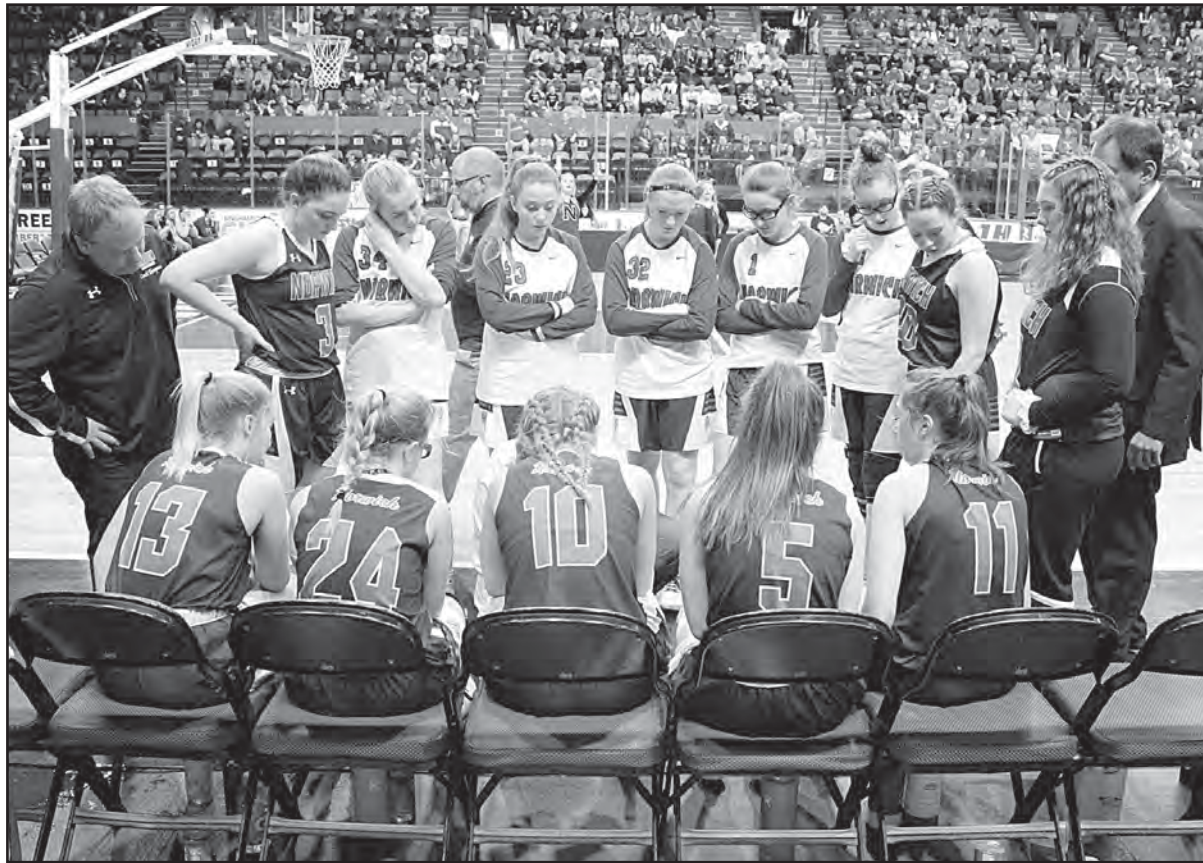
We talked to five area residents with local sports connections as a coach, sports administrator or media member, and asked them to share the sports/COVID-19 experiences over the past two years.

Norwich Athletics Coordinator Rich Turnbull

Well into his second decade as a teacher, coach, and now athletics coordinator at Norwich High School, Rich Turnbull will mark 2020 as perhaps the most significant time of his life - personally and professionally.

Just a few months into a new position overseeing the Norwich athletics program, Turnbull oversaw a shut-down of scholastic sports, the uncertainty of when sports would return, and later, he would experience first-hand the effects of the COVID-19 virus.

For the casual news follower, but avid sports fan, the Coronavirus seemed



Norwich Girls 2020 Basketball team on the sidelines. (File photo)

like more of a distant idea, far-reaching from one's personal lives.

But reality hit home quickly after Utah Jazz center, Rudy Gobert, announced that he tested positive for the virus in March, 2020 before a regular season game. That game was cancelled, and soon after, the dominos fell quickly across the sports world.

Major sports leagues suspended their seasons, the NCAA cancelled its postseason tournaments - including the wildly popular NCAA basketball tournaments - and

high school sports followed suit.

Days before the start of the high school state basketball tournament, the New York State Public High School Athletic Association shut down all postseason tournament.

"We were having a lot of success with our sports programs at that time, and I really wasn't paying that much attention (to the COVID-19 news)," Turnbull said.

The Norwich boys' basketball team had reached the Section IV finals, the girls'

team won a Section IV title, and wrestler Dante Geislinger had just won his second state title.

Turnbull remembers the day when the girls' basketball team was conducting practice in preparation for a state playoff game, and he told head coach Josh Bennett the playoff game had been postponed.

"We were told they were doing a two-week pause, and I kept telling people it was two weeks, two weeks," Turnbull said. "Eventually, it was cancelled, and it we knew

it was over (the season). We really thought (this girls' team) would make a run."

High school sports were suspended the rest of that school year, and through the 2020-2021 fall season. Active plans were in the works to restart high school sports in a modified format where winter, fall, and spring sports were conducted in six-week stretches.

Before the tweaked sports seasons started, Turnbull became one of the first teachers or students at Norwich High School to test positive for the virus.

Shortly after Thanksgiving of 2020, Turnbull was feeling ill after teaching a class. He was sent home from school, and after a few failed attempts, found an out-of-town site to test for the virus.

After returning home from testing, Turnbull isolated from his family while he awaited the call for the results from the testing facility. Turnbull remembers the moment he received the results, and it was life-changing.

"I called out to my wife Stephanie to tell her I had tested positive," Turnbull said. "My son heard me, and I heard him ask Stephanie, 'is

dad going to die?' That was really hard on me."

After feeling like he was "hit by a truck" during his recovery from the virus, Turnbull's return to work was also a return to the non-stop hustle of his job position. One day, he remembered, he came home absolutely exhausted.

He asked his family what they wanted to do as he needed to do something totally outside sports and school. Turnbull's family suggested a trip to Yellowstone Park

The family planned the trip after graduation in 2020, Turnbull said, and it's probably the inflection point of his life.

"We did the cross-country drive to Yellowstone; I didn't open my computer and I didn't do any work," Turnbull said. "It's one of the coolest things we've done. It has given me more perspective on life. I know a lot of athletes want to hear that sports is important to me, and it is, but it's not the number one thing anymore."

Oxford Academy Coach Craig Tefft

High school sports returned in early 2021, but with strict guidelines and

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Coaches, athletic directors and officials discuss COVID's impact on school sports —

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protocols. Some sports were categorized as close-contact sports, and had the strictest of guidelines, while other sports where athletes were not usually in close contact had slightly looser guidelines.

Among all sports, perhaps wrestling is the closest of close-contact sports. The interaction between athletes could not be any closer, as grappling by nature is close, body-to-body contact.

Craig Tefft, and teacher and coach at Oxford Academy has only known close-contact sports during his career as an athlete, teacher, and coach.

He starred on Oxford's football and wrestling teams, and later wrestling for Binghamton University before returning to his alma mater as a prodigal son of sorts.

He has led the Oxford wrestling team as head coach for many years, and is now serving as a co-head coach, along with Jesse Fendryk, for the Oxford-Greene combined rosters.

With nearly a life-long affiliation with Oxford and Oxford sports, Tefft is well aware of Oxford's marquee sports event: The Clyde Cole Wrestling Tournament.

It's the second-longest continuously running high school wrestling tournament



2021 Norwich Football Team practices. (File photo)

in New York, and it easily draws the most sports fans to Oxford events year after year.

"It's the first big wrestling tournament (to start the school year)," Tefft said.

The Clyde Cole Tournament sets the tone for the rest of the wrestling season, and it wasn't held in 2020 due to the sports shut-down.

One year later, the tournament did return, but with one major caveat: No fans.

"It was definitely differ-

ent without the fan aspect there," Tefft said. "You miss the fans as they add to the overall nostalgia and lure of the tournament. Being a former wrestler at Oxford, I miss the old days of the single mat for the finals under the spotlight, and (the attendance) is standing-room-only."

The expectation, with the return of the school sports, was a heavily attended event that mirrored Clyde Cole Tournament crowds of the past. Given the difficulty to

monitor and oversee fan protocols, in accordance with New York State Department of Health protocols, the Oxford school administration elected to forego fan attendance for at least one year.

As a result, the pacing of the tournament led to a much earlier finish than usual, Tefft said.

"Not having the tournament, we're happy to just happy to be back at it," Tefft said. "For some (wrestlers), this year is their last chance.

They're definitely more driven, and hoping to get to where they want to go."

Alderman Robert Jeffrey

Robert Jeffrey wears many hats.

A Norwich High School and LeMoyne College graduate, Jeffrey currently works full-time at NBT Bank, is a twice-elected Norwich city alderman, works part-time as an Internet radio broadcaster, and is a freelance sports writer.

Plus, he is unabashedly one of Norwich's most dedicated high school sports fans.

"The Norwich community, we really like to support our student-athletes," Jeffrey said.

The Tornado faithful are well known in the Southern Tier for how its fan base travels to away venues, and Jeffrey counts himself among that dedicated fan base.

He's also gained the perspective of professional media, in particular, how media covers sporting events during the pandemic.

"As a whole, everyone is looking out for each other, that's the biggest thing I've seen," Jeffrey said, counting fans, athletes, and media amongst that collective. "Everyone is trying to be very respectful and responsible, because sports in its simplest form is entertainment. We

lost that at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, and now we're not taking that for granted."

As a fan of local sports, Jeffrey is well aware that at any time, the state could pull the plug on sports - just as it did in early 2020. No one wants that to happen, and Jeffrey pointed to the heartbreak of the Norwich's girls' basketball team that had recently won a Section IV title.

"Talk about a punch to the gut," Jeffrey said of the disappointment that Norwich team experienced. "There will always be those what ifs and what would've happened with that team.

"I'll never forget when I played my last baseball game (for Norwich). We lost in the sectional quarterfinals, and you have the closure of that loss. You won't forget the loss, but you have the closure that you weren't the best team that day. (Because of the sports shut down), that Norwich girls' team will never have that closure."

Norwich Varsity Coach Mike Chrystie

When you're a Norwich varsity coach of football or basketball, the tradition of excellence puts the spotlight squarely on that team, and the coach that leads those

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programs. Mike Chrystie is no stranger to sports scrutiny. He's a Section IV Athletics Hall of Fame athlete from his years as a multi-sport athlete at Oxford Academy. Post high school and college graduation, most of teaching career, he has served as either a junior varsity or varsity coach.

For nearly a decade, he has operated as the Norwich varsity football coach, and the past two seasons have been unlike any other in his long playing and coaching life.

"The way I described our spring 2 season (in March, 2021) was it was the shortest and most stressful season I've ever had to coach," Chrystie said. "Most coaches are control freaks. We like to set the schedule, control who we play (on the field) and the scouting preparation. COVID threw that upside-down."

Whether it's quarantines, state mandates, county mandates, and not really knowing, for sure, who will be at practice on a given day, it's been a challenge for Chrystie and his fellow coaches.

"It's been difficult getting back to normal, whatever normal is going forward," Chrystie said. "As challenging as it's been for me, you feel bad for the kids. I can't imagine, as an athlete, everything

they are going through." **Greene Athletics Coordinator Dave Gorton**

Like Norwich's Rich Turnbull Greene teacher and coach, Dave Gorton, also works as the school's athletics coordinator. Moreover, Gorton is still coaching two varsity sports: Football and girls' basketball.

Gorton kept abreast of the developing pandemic, but its significance and long-term impact exceeded anything he could have predicted.

"I believed it would impact us, but I had no idea it would hit us like it did," he said. "And I didn't in my wildest dreams think we would still be suffering from its effects today."

Much like the lesser impactful outbreaks, such as SARS and MERS, Gorton anticipated COVID-19 would necessitate a short-term pause, but he fully expected by the ensuing fall school year, things would be back normal.

Of course, we know that didn't happen.

Kids did return to school in the fall, but with heavy protocols in place. Those included mandated mask wearing and social distancing where appropriate.

From a teaching perspective, Gorton said the communication and interaction with students has suffered greatly.

Used to breaking out into small groups for meaning-

ful class discussions, that option is no longer available. Additionally, facial expressions and body language contribute to the overall class experience, and those, too, have been stifled.

"Those things (the observable communication) are important, and they've been taken away," Gorton said.

What Gorton has learned during the pandemic is the lengths people will go to give kids a chance at playing scholastic sports. The buy-in may have come grudgingly, especially for those not particularly fond of 100 percent mask-wearing compliance, but to reach the desired outcome of continuing the sports program, Gorton has seen a great willingness to put personal feelings aside.

"Some were thrilled (with the protocols), and some of them weren't," Gorton said of the requirements to play sports. "But they have been willing to do it to give the kids an opportunity to play. I've been pleased that so many people are willing to do so much to let the kids play. They realize the importance of social interaction, playing sports together, and doing extracurricular activities. Some people took that for grant, and now they certainly don't."

Hospice and Palliative Care grants veteran wishes



In 2021, Hospice and Palliative Care of Chenango County launched a pilot of our new program called Wish Makers.

This program grants a wish, valued up to five hundred dollars, to each veteran patient receiving Hospice services.

This began as a special thank you to our veteran patients, however in 2022, the program will be opened to all of those receiving hospice care through our organization.

The Wish Makers Program is operated by a committee of staff, board members and volunteers and would not be possible without the donations we receive from our community members.

Since its start, the Wish Makers Program has granted seven wishes to veterans.

Staff favorites include, PlayStation racing games for one of our patients who used to be a race car driver and could no longer drive, and a cable package upgrade for a patient who loved old, classic movies, so they could watch these movies at home.

All of the wishes granted bring peace, comfort, quality of life and help reduce anxiety for our patients. If you are interested in supporting a patient's wish with a donation or volunteering, please check us out at hospicechenango.org or call us at 607-334-3556.

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Digital or in person, NBT touts innovative ways to stay competitive —



Aerial photo of NBT Bank Summer Concert Series with the Chenango Blues Association. (Submitted photo)



NBT Bank locations in New York and New England. (Submitted photo)

Continued from Page 55

investing in new technologies for years which gave it the ability to partner old-fashioned community banking with modern-day resources. The pandemic accelerated the opportunity for that years-long investment to pay off. The result was a 21st century banking model that benefitted both customers and NBT employees.

"We've adapted quickly to the needs of both our clients and our employees to make sure that we continue to deliver advice to our clients, whether it's in person or virtual," said Ruth Mahoney, NBT's executive vice president and president of wealth management. "We learned a lot during COVID about what is possible when we're virtual."

With the growing need for virtual services, NBT beefed up its online banking tools, making it easier for customers to manage their money with a few clicks of a mouse, or get feedback from NBT's team of wealth management professionals.

What's more, NBT's substantial investments in technology gave its employees more flexibility than would have been imagined pre-pandemic. Most employees have freedom to work from home, or work a hybrid schedule that splits their time between home and the office. Management says flexibility has allowed for greater employee satisfaction and retention which in turn underlines the strength of the company.

"I think we are stronger together; there's no doubt about it. It's a tagline we use all the time," said Watt. "We now have the ability to consider alternative work modes because we tested the idea of being hybrid and we recognized that that's what employees demand."

Now entering the third year of the pandemic, NBT acknowledges the changing face of the COVID era. As restrictions begin to loosen at the state and local levels, Mahoney said many NBT customers are anxious to return to face-to-face banking. That's exactly what the

company has started to get back to - albeit safely. But the lessons of the pandemic won't soon be forgotten as NBT continues offering services through multiple channels, in person and online. It's all about maintaining a personal touch and convenience, explained Mahoney.

"During COVID, people adapted to virtual, digital, more automated types of delivery. Now that we're hopefully coming out of COVID, we are seeing them go back to their old ways where they do want to see their team of professionals," she said. "It's a very complex service that we provide, and customers would like to meet in person."

"One thing we have confirmed is that customers not only want access to us through a digital channel, but they want to access us through multiple channels, including in person," added Watt. "They don't want to just apply for a loan online; they want to come in and discuss it because it's part of their financial plan. It's our responsibility to help them understand what their options are."

In spite of the pandemic, NBT continues to grow. Today the bank touts 140 locations in seven states, including New York, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine, and Connecticut. With assets of \$12 billion and more than 1,900 employees, NBT has become a formidable competitor in the banking industry. The company is eyeing "substantial" investments in technology this year, with big investments proposed in the field of commercial lending. It's all part of the bank's strategic plan to stay competitive.

"We think that there's an opportunity to continue to take share in key markets we're in," said Watt, noting NBT's strategy to enhance the customer experience with new technology in commercial and business banking. Plans are also underway to continue the company's expansion in New England.

Nevertheless, NBT faces some big hurdles, perhaps the biggest being the speculation that Federal Reserve interest

rates could rise several times over the course of the coming year. That's putting pressure on NBT to ensure safe and reliable advice to its customers.

"The Interest rate environment for customers' banks is going to be very interesting and important to understand," said Watt, noting historically low interest rates that have existed for years. "Based on recent announcements by the federal reserve, by the secretary of treasury, and based on monetary costs and fiscal policy that is being instituted, we believe rates will rise in 2022."

"We need to position ourselves to ensure that our products and services in those rating markets are relevant and priced properly," he added. "We need to make sure that our customers understand what it means to do business in a rising rate market."

Whatever financial challenges lay ahead, NBT says it will remain an asset to the Chenango County community - something it's always done through support of local programs such as Hospice, Chenango County Arts Council, Blues Fest, the Chenango United Way, and Thursdays in the Park, to name just a few. Sponsoring local events and organizations is at the core of a community bank, said Mahoney.

"We love to give our treasures in many ways, whether it's through our time or through our financial support," she said. "Part of the fabric of our culture is to be true community bankers, and there's only one way to do that. We have to take care of our clients, our employees, and our community by giving back whatever way we can."

With all the ups and downs predicted for 2022, Watt said NBT is forging a "path toward normal business" in what remains of the COVID era.

"That path has not been a straight line, but we know we're going to have to adapt to a world in which COVID exists," he said, "and we're going to have to be flexible to continue to grow our company."

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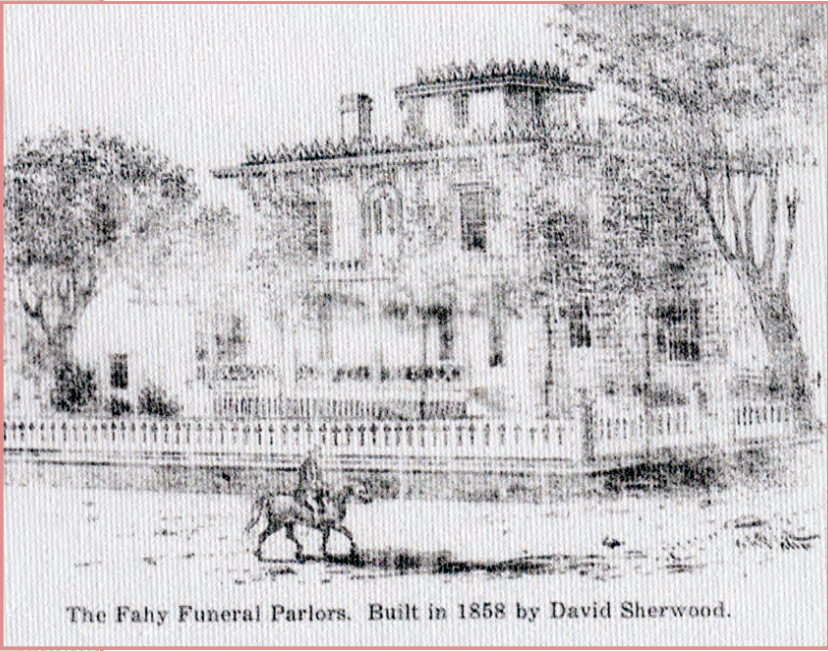
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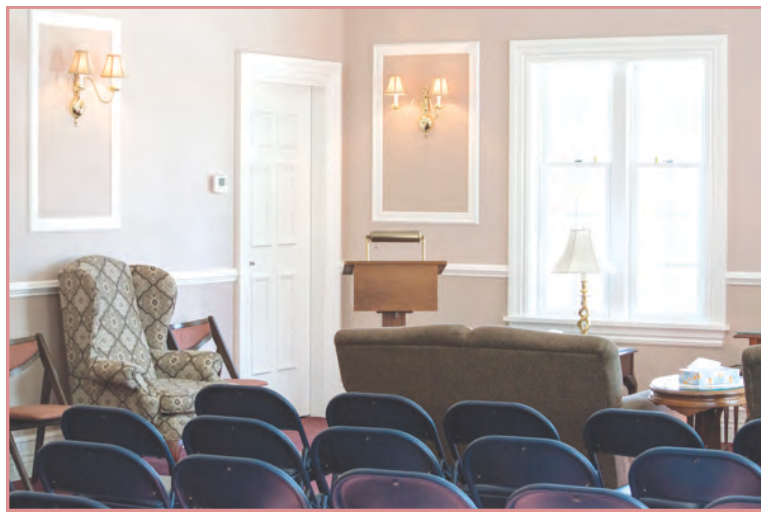
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