Cookie capacity rising with new production facility

BY JOHN TOWNES

The cookie economy of Berkshire County is expanding. More specifically, Klara Sotonova and Jefferson Diller, owners of Klara’s Gourmet Cookies, LLC, in Lee, have purchased a 3,300-square-foot commercial building at 195 Water St. to provide a larger space for production and related operations.

Klara’s Gourmet Cookies are sold at retail outlets throughout the Northeast and in some locations further afield, including New Mexico and Virginia. They also sell cookies online at their website (klarasgourmet.com). The business currently generates about $700,000 annually in gross sales.

Since 2009, Klara’s Gourmet Cookies has operated out of a 1,400-square-foot space on the first floor of a commercial building at 18 Railroad St., just off of Main Street in Lee’s downtown. The couple live on the building’s second floor with their young daughter.

The new Water Street facility, which is located near the Lee Premium Outlets retail complex on the town’s east side, was previously a commercial kitchen that was leased for short-term use by individual food producers.

They purchased the building from Rodney Clark for $255,000 on July 31, and have spent the ensuing months remodeling the facilities and installing new equipment to meet their needs.

Vegan eatery opening in Pittsfield

Owner hoping Thrive will do just that in former Adrien’s Diner site

BY BRAD JOHNSON

Those among us adhering to a vegan diet can find dining out to be a dicey venture – with most restaurants in this region offering at best a spattering of options that are free from animal products of any kind.

Given the growing number of people identifying as either vegan or vegetarian, Shari Peltier has seized upon this omission from the local dining scene as an opportunity for her new venture, aptly named Thrive, which is based in Farmington, Mich., near Detroit. Under its brand of Phoenix Theatres (www.phoenixmovies.com), they currently operate four movie theaters in Monroe, Wayne and Livonia, Mich., and Dubuque, Iowa.

They include one six-screen, one four-screen and two 10-screen theaters. The six-screen Beacon Cinema in downtown Pittsfield, said he had his first taste of the movie business as a young teenager popping popcorn in a theater in Racine, Wisconsin.

“Why I was 13 a friend and I went out looking for a job,” he recalled. “We applied at a movie theater. He got a job, but they didn’t hire me because I was too young. But a couple of years later I went back and got a job making popcorn. I’ve been in the movie business ever since.”

Jacobson subsequently advanced through the ranks as an usher, assistant manager and then general manager of a theater, and after that a district manager for a theater chain.

“Finally, in 2000, I decided to go out on my own and started my own theater business,” he said.

Jacobson is now owner and CEO of Insight Management Consulting, a private company which is based in Farmington, Mich., near Detroit. Under its brand of Phoenix Theatres (www.phoenixmovies.com), they currently operate four movie theaters in Monroe, Wayne and Livonia, Mich., and Dubuque, Iowa.

They include one six-screen, one four-screen and two 10-screen theaters. The six-screen Beacon Cinema will become Phoenix’s fifth movie theater.

Jacobson said his company’s specialty has been to acquire and revitalize movie theaters that have experienced difficulties. “Turning around great theaters and achieving their potential is what I enjoy doing most,” he said.

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Donations to library get showcase on Spring Street
BY JOHN TOWNES

Friends of the David and Joyce Milne Public Library Inc. has opened a new chapter to replace the annual two-day book sale the organization had held for three decades.

As a result, Williamstown’s central business district has a new full-time used bookstore, Chapter Two Books, at 37 Spring St. It had a soft opening on Nov. 3, with an official ribbon-cutting and grand opening on Nov. 29 just before the annual Williamstown Holiday Walk.

Friends of the David and Joyce Milne Public Library is a volunteer-based 501c3 organization that raises funds and provides other support for Williamstown’s library, which is located at 1095 Main St.

“The annual book sale has been successful, but we’d been thinking that there must be a better way to sell all of the books that are donated for it,” said Ginny Sheldon, a member of the organization’s board and the management team of Chapter Two Books.

Sheldon explained that the annual sale has been a major undertaking every year, including collecting and organizing an average of 25,000 books donated by the community for the sale. “Each year we’d have to organize and set up all those books at Williamstown Elementary School and then sell as many as we could over two days,” she said.

Sheldon added that they could not keep most of the unsold books because the space allocated for storage inside the library was not large enough. “So, after the sale was over, we’d have to find other places to take the books that were left over,” she said.

That problem found a solution with the new Spring Street bookstore, which has 780 square feet of retail space and about 80 square feet of additional workspace.

Sheldon said they expect to carry an inventory of between 4,000 and 6,000 used books in the store. Among these are softcover and hardcover books on a range of subjects (based on donations), including adult and children’s books, local authors, and some vintage books. It also sells media, including CDs and DVDs.

Chapter Two Books (413-886-6122 or www.chaptertwobooks.org) is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

**History of support**

Friends of the David and Joyce Milne Public Library was formed by a committee of library supporters in 1989 to raise additional private funds to help the library by conducting an annual membership campaign and a weekend book sale. Funds it raises are used to supplement town, state, and trustee budget, and it’s an opportunity to generate community, as are the furnishings,” Sheldon said. “So, it staffed and managed by volunteers. So, it does require a large budget, and it’s an opportunity to generate continuous revenue by selling books on a year-round basis.”

She noted that they receive a steady stream of donations throughout the year. “The bookstore came about through a combination of circumstances,” she said.

The Friends’ overall mission also includes raising public awareness of library resources and needs, and promoting a public commitment to literacy and library engagement.

Sheldon said the organization had been thinking of alternatives to the book sale for several years. “The bookstore came about through a combination of circumstances,” she said.

She noted that the Friends and the Milne Library’s director, staff and trustees collaborated closely to make Chapter Two Books a reality in a very short period.

Sheldon said about 75 volunteers from the community have signed up to operate the store. This includes a management committee, and others who will work in the store as cashiers and do other tasks. The store’s general manager, Susan Pike, is also a volunteer.

A section of the Milne Library is being used to store and sort inventory, which will then be taken to Chapter Two. Donations of books for the store will be accepted primarily at The Friends Book Donation Center in the library.

Because of limited space in the store, we’ll be asking that all donations be made at the library,” said Sheldon.

Sheldon noted that they are also looking at supplementing the revenue from the brick-and-mortar store with online sales. “Since we have established the store and worked everything out, we may add that,” she said.

The Friends (milnelibraryfriends.org) will also continue other fund-raising activities, including its annual membership campaign. They will also likely add other events, such as pop-up sales in the library and other locations, and silent auctions of especially valuable or notable books.
B&B Micro Manufacturing explores expansion options  

**BY JOHN TOWNS**  
For B&B Micro Manufacturing in North Adams, the business of building “tiny houses” is growing rapidly, which also is leading to an expansion of products.

The company, which is based in the Wind- sor Mill complex on Union Street, recently was awarded the winning bid from the city to purchase a three-acre site that was a former city salt shed property on Ashland Street for $75,000. B&B plans to use the property to augment its current operations as a storage site, and perhaps as a facility to manufacture trailers that are used to transport tiny houses. It also is a potential site for a new headquarters.

“We don’t have an exact final plan, but the Ashland Street property will accommodate any need for more space,” said Jason Koperniak, one of the company’s three founding partners and owners. “It could potentially become a new headquarters and primary manufacturing facility, but that is just one of the options we’re considering.”

B&B was established in 2016 by Koperniak, Chris St. Cyr and Mitchell Bresett, who all grew up in Adams. It is named after B&B Precision Builders, a building company that was owned by Bresett’s late father, Michael Bresett, and which the three men had worked for when they were younger.

The company’s specialty is building small structures, especially the category of residence known as tiny houses (October 2017 BT&L). Its original initial business mainstay was a contract to build tiny houses for guest cabins for a company that develops rustic vacation retreats in the Northeast.

It subsequently expanded to build tiny houses for other customers including individual or multi-unit primary or vacation homes, and other purposes. B&B also has expanded its line of products by receiving a state license to become builder of modular homes and business structures. Koperniak explained that this enables them to construct larger pre-assembled modular homes in their manufacturing facility, while maintaining their focus on small structures.

“The ability to become a modular home specialist is a big deal for us,” said Koperniak. “It opens up new markets and many additional classes of buyers.”

He explained that the category of tiny houses are generally considered to be residences of 250 square feet or less. According to their website (bbtinyhouses.com), the price for pre-designed tiny houses ranges between $39,000 and $89,000. Small modular homes, on the other hand, are generally between 400 and 1,200 square feet. The difference in size offers another option for customers, and greater flexibility in location and other factors.

“We’ve had potential buyers who are interested in the concept behind tiny houses,” Koperniak explained. “However, when they see them, they decide they prefer something with somewhat more space. This enables us to serve those people who want to downsize or be more minimalist in their living space but want something larger than a tiny house.”

In addition, tiny houses are often in a category of mobile recreational vehicles, while small modular homes are installed as permanent structures.

“This makes a difference in terms of zoning and other building regulations,” Koperniak said. “Every municipality is different, but in general many have requirements for minimum square footage. They also allow permanent stationary structures but not mobile ones. So, small affixed houses have more flexibility in terms of where they can be located.”

He noted that all of their home products offer a choice of pre-designed structures of varying degrees of personalization, including custom designs.

Koperniak noted that, while they are now offering and marketing modular products, the majority of their business continues to be tiny houses. He said they are in the process of transitioning to more diverse product lines.

“We’re busy with both aspects of the business, but for now with the constraints of our present space, our primary focus is on tiny houses,” he said.

**Weighing options**

In terms of finding their own permanent home, Koperniak said they are weighing a number of alternatives.

He explained that their agreement to lease space in the city-owned Windsor Mill extends until April 2020. However, the city has also been negotiating a contract for the sale of the Windsor Mill to a potential developer. If and when such a sale is completed, B&B may find it necessary to move if the new owner decides the operation is not compatible with their vision for the complex.

“So we have at least 18 months before we would have to move,” Koperniak said. “It’s a decision we’ll have to make in the near future, but we still have time. We’re looking at everything, and not ruling anything out.”

He said several factors are involved, including the amount of space their business will require for their long-term plans, and the most appropriate type of location. “We also have to look at what makes the most sense financially,” he said. “Is it better to build something new, or move into a building that’s ready to go, or adapt a building to our purposes?”

He added that the Ashland Street property has adequate space for a structure large enough for B&B’s needs, but they have to investigate its suitability as a site for a permanent home base.

“**We’re being very careful because we’re looking for the place where we are going to put down roots.**”

He also emphasized that their goal is to remain in North Adams. However, if an existing adaptable structure meets their criteria in another Berkshire community such as Adams or Pittsfield, they might consider relocating.

“It’s also possible that we might not have to move at all, if a new owner of the Windsor Mill decides we can fit into their plans and works with us to expand in our present location,” he said. “There are many possibilities at this point. We’re being very careful because we’re looking for the place where we are going to put down roots.”

**COMMERCIAL SPACE**  
LEE • $2,544/MONTH

**COMMERCIAL SPACE**  
LEE • $3,745/MONTH

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LEE • $5,050/MONTH

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Fiddleheads transplanted to former Route 7 Grill
BY JOHN TOWNE
Fiddleheads Grille has migrated south from its original location in the clubhouse at the Greenoom Country Club in Lee to the former site of the Route 7 Grill in Great Barrington.
David Pullaro and Cindi Joyner had operated Fiddleheads Grille in a leased space at the country club since 2004. The new incarnation of their restaurant opened on Nov. 2 at 999 South Main St. (Route 7), near the Sheffield town line.
“When our contract at the country club expired at the end of last year, we started to look for a new location,” explained Pullaro. “Over time we had been moving away from serving golf course food and more towards the restaurant side. People were coming specifically for lunches and dinner. So we decided to open a restaurant of our own.”
In March, the couple looked at the former site of the Route 7 Grill, which closed in 2014 and had been vacant since then. They purchased it in July for $255,000 from Pittsfield Cooperative Bank (which the previous owner had turned it over to).
They financed the purchase through Adams Community Bank.
Joyner and Pullaro spent the time between the sale and the November opening extensively renovating the 4,450-square-foot site of the Route 7 Grill, which closed in March, 2014.
“We had to do a lot of work on it,” said Pullaro. “The building was big and fairly sound, but it had been vacant for four years—and, as we progressed, we kept finding new things that had to be done.”
They repainted the interior, redecorated the interior and refinished the floors. They also did extensive work on the kitchen, installing new fryers, ovens, steam tables and a walk-in cooler. They also rebuilt an existing smoker.
The interior, which Pullaro described as “casual rustic,” has a seating capacity of 96, and includes a lounge area with a horseshoe-shaped bar. It also has a double-sided fireplace.
In the warmer months, an outdoor deck will provide an additional 25 seats.
“We have plenty of parking,” said Pullaro. “It’s also nice to have a terrace that we can use for outdoor events,” noted Pullaro.
He said that while they expect to attract tourists and second-home owners, their primary market will be local residents. “We want to be a nice, casual place where people can gather with family and friends,” he said.
The menu builds on the fare they served in Lee. “We kept the popular items from there and added a lot to it,” said Pullaro, who is the restaurant’s chef. “When asked to de-
scribe the culinary orientation at Fiddle-
heads, Pullaro noted that a simple answer is elusiv.
“Anybody that comes in, we try to do everything that we can. We have a good selection of beers and wines and a full liquor license.”
Fiddleheads Grille (413-644-2999 or www.
fiddleheadsgrille.com) is currently open seven days a week from 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. for lunch and from 5 p.m. to closing. The restaurant has a full liquor license.
In its menu includes appetizers ranging from $6 to $12, with a selection that includes home-made potato skins, Thai tamales, Rhode Island style calamari, and chicken wings, among others. It also features salads ($7 to $14).
Lunch offerings ($9 to $14) include a selection of burgers, wraps and sandwiches such as Thanksgiving turkey, fried chicken and pulled pork, as well as fish and chips and other items.
Fiddleheads Grille offers an extensive variety of dinner entrees ($12 to $29) in-
cluding linguine and clams, chicken Alfredo, smoky meatloaf, vegetable enchilada, New York strip steak and house-smoked barbecue items, among others.
Both Joyner and Pullaro, who are Berkshire natives, have extensive backgrounds in the hospitality business. Joyner formerly worked at the front desk at the Red Lion Inn and at Oak ‘n’ Spruce resort.
“I’ve been in the restaurant business all my life,” said Pullaro. “My parents owned the old Log Cabin restaurant in Lenox for a while, and I started working there as a kid.”
He later went on to other restaurants including the former Pergine in South Lee and the Roseborough Grill (now Firefly) in Lenox.
Pullaro said they have been very surprised at the initial response to their new location.
“In this region, you never expect to do a lot of business with a new restaurant at this time of year,” he said. “But we’ve been overwhelmed at how many people have been coming. We’re seeing regulars from our former location, and a lot of local people from the Great Barrington area.”
Fiddleheads Grille has an initial staff of 12. “That’s what we’ve started with, but we keep needing to add more people,” Pullaro said. “I expect the staff will be triple that number in the peak seasons.”

Fiddleheads Grille has been drawing a steady stream of customers since opening in early November.
Sporting a fresh coat of paint outside and extensive renovations inside, the new home of Fiddleheads Grille is an inviting place for lunch or dinner.

Fairview Hospital Welcomes Michael Nancollas, MD
Dr. Nancollas, a Board certified and fellowship trained Orthopaedic Surgeon, brings an established reputation of excellence specializing in the procedures of the Hand and Upper Extremity. His office practice is located at 55 Pittsfield Rd., Suite 12B in Lenox, MA. Dr. Nancollas accepts numerous insurances.

Specialty: Orthopaedic Surgery with a Certificate of Added Qualification for Surgery of the Hand
Common diagnoses and treatments include:
• Carpal Tunnel Syndrome
• Thumb Arthritis
• Finger/Wrist/Elbow Fractures
• Sports injuries to the arm, including Tommy John Procedure
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For an appointment, call (413) 344-1770.

Fairview Hospital Berkshire Health Systems
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Lever challenges heating up as winter takes hold
BY BRAD JOHNSON
Following the completion of its inaugural North Adams Arts Enterprise Challenge last August, Lever Inc. is now underway with its second annual competition.
In November, the North Adams-based in-
cubator and entrepreneurial support organi-
sation announced the finalists for its Berkshire Manufacturing Innovation Challenge, in which four regional life sciences startups will compete for $25,000 in seed funding.
Lever has also issued a call for applicants for its upcoming Lever Inc. Berkshire Technology Challenge, in which $25,000 will be awarded to a startup that presents the most scalable business model with health applications.
“We are aware of several entrepreneurs who are working on new solutions to improve health care in our region,” said Brent Filson, Lever’s director of programming and opera-
tions. “We are excited to be able to support these folks with our resources and expertise.”
These competitions are part of a series of challenges being funded by Lever Inc.’s $450,000 package of grants that Lever was awarded in August by an assortment of state and local philanthropists.
Key among them was $225,000 that was awarded by the Massachusetts Life Sciences Council, an economic development program supporting the growth and development of the life sciences in Massachusetts.
Lever’s competitors include the MassTech-
sets Technology Collaborative, a public agency working to enhance economic growth, and the Mass Medical Foundation, which harness the value of research. The MassTech grant was matched by $75,000 grants from Berkshire Bank and Williams College.
From the $450,000 package, $150,000 will go toward $25,000 seed grants to the winners of the challenges, with additional money being conducted over the next three years, with the basic goal of attracting and developing high-growth potential companies.
First among these is the Berkshire Manu-
facturing Innovation Challenge. The four startups being coached by Lever staff and expert mentors in prepara-
tion for the Jan. 24 competition, where a panel of judges will select one venture to receive $25,000 and be incubated at Lever for four months at no cost. The finalists are:
• Surfix, which is developing an innova-
tive new motion-capture system for research-
ers studying the biomechanical process of human and animal systems.
• TransPharm, which seeks to build a vending system to dispense over-the-counter medicines in underserved regions of the world that may not have reliable sources of electricity.
• United Aircraft Technologies Inc., which has developed a robust Interconnecting Clamp (ICC) for aerospace wire harness management with a more ergonomic and lighter design than existing equipment; and
• Alston Posture, which has created a wearable training tool to assist individuals in finding and maintaining a neutral spine position while performing manual labor tasks in the workplace.
According to Filson, these ventures were selected based on their application in the life sciences, high growth potential, ability to attract investment capital, and potential for job creation in the region.
Similar criteria will be used to select finalists for the Berkshire Health Technol-
ogy Challenge, which is now accepting ap-
plications from regional health technology startups. Another requirement for this and other Lever competitions is that the ventures must leverage one or more pre-existing assets within the Berkshires.
Applications will be accepted through Jan.
2, with four finalists to be announced Jan. 16. As with prior challenges, these finalists will be coached on their business models over the coming months. A pitch-day competition before judges is slated for May 9.
Startup ventures interested in participating in either the Berkshire Manufacturing Innovation Challenge or the Berkshire Health Technology Challenge can contact Filson at bfilson@lever.org or visit leverinc.org for more information.
For the ninth year, all Big Y Supermarkets are working to help feed the hungry within their local communities through Care To Share Sack Hunger, a large reusable grocery bag filled with staple nonperishable food items for local food banks. Customers purchase a Sack Hunger bag of groceries for $10, and Big Y distributes the food to that region's local food bank. In turn, the food banks distribute the filled sacks to area soup kitchens, food pantries, senior food programs, daycare centers and other member agencies. All of the donated sacks are distributed within the supermarket's marketing area, so every donation stays within the local community. Since the program's inception nine years ago, over 133,000 bags of food have been donated to area needy.

Salkbury Bank is again holding its “We Believe” toy drive to make this a special time of year for area children who might otherwise not experience the joy of the holiday season. Donations of new, unwrapped gifts can be dropped off at any Salisbury Bank office through Dec. 17. Gift ideas include but are not limited to: sports equipment and balls, books, board games, handheld electronic games, backpacks, building sets, craft kits, purses and cosmetics. Additionally, gift cards to local retailers are welcome. “As we kick off our 31st annual toy drive, we encourage the community to join us in experiencing the joy of giving this holiday season,” said Rick Castele, the bank’s president and CEO. “Making a difference in our community is important to us, and working together we can provide a magical holiday season for some very special children.”

Berkshire Family & Individual Resources Inc. (BFARI) has announced a successful review and continuing licensed by the Office of Quality Enhancement of the Commonwealth’s Department of Developmental Services. Through a self-assessment process and a target review, BFARI earned positive licensing outcomes, resulting in a two-year licensing and certification for BFARI’s residential, individual home support, and day and employment services. “BFARI’s outcomes on reviews and assessments like these are indicative of the work that we do,” said Theresa Gelnas, director of program operations for day services. “Receiving positive accolades and continued licensing speaks to our commitment to continue to be an organization that provides the best and safest care possible.”

The Leapfrog Group, an organization aiming to improve healthcare quality and safety for consumers and purchasers, has announced the Fall 2018 Leapfrog Hospital Safety Grades and awarded Berkshire Medical Center the designation of “A” for its continued achievement in patient safety. BMC is one of only 42 “Straight A” hospitals in the United States which have been awarded this top grade in every cycle since 2012. “Only a very select group of hospitals nationally continue to earn an A Leapfrog Hospital Safety Grade year after year,” said Leah Binder, president and CEO of the Leapfrog Group. “It shows an unbroken commitment to protecting patients from preventable errors and accidents that harm and even kill too many people in our country every day.”

The Leapfrog Hospital Safety Grades use 27 measures of publicly available hospital safety data to assign A, B, C and D grades to approximately 2,500 U.S. hospitals twice per year. It is peer reviewed, fully transparent and free to the public. “This consistent recognition for patient safety is reflective of the dedication of our care team has to providing nothing but the best and safest care possible,” said David Phelps, president and CEO of Berkshire Health Systems. “I congratulate and thank our physicians, nurses and all support staff who have and continue to contribute to this commitment to excellence, which places BMC among an elite group of hospitals nationwide for patient safety.”
QualPrint joining forces with Sampco in merger

QualPrint, a leading commercial printing company in western Massachusetts, has announced its merger with Sampco Companies, a prominent marketing materials group serving the building materials industry. The combined company, known as QualSamp, is expected to bring expanded capabilities to both, allowing each to better serve their current customers as well as the needs of a variety of new customers.

QualPrint is a third-generation family owned and operated printing company. Formerly known as Quality Printing Company, it was founded by the DiSantis family in 1963. Since then it has successfully developed into a successful business serving the unique requirements of its domestic and international customers. The company currently has 45 employees.

Sampco Companies, founded in 1980, has grown to six offices across the country with a combined 350 employees. The company specializes in designing and manufacturing product samples for residential and commercial building materials manufacturers in a variety of industries including flooring, roofing, siding, windows and doors. Brilliant Graphics, a Sampco Company, specializes in large format digital printing including dye sublimated fabric printing.

According to Michael Ryan, founder and CEO of Sampco Companies, all of this work requires printing, much of it exactly the same kind of work that QualPrint offers its clients.

“This merger isn’t about changing QualPrint or how it does business,” said Ryan. “QualPrint is already a leader in commercial offset printing with a loyal, well-served customer base. They are the experts with a family of long-standing loyal employees who are the key to its success.”

He noted that the merger is about protecting and growing QualPrint’s business while at the same time diversifying their portfolio into the building material sector.

John DiSantis, QualPrint’s president and CEO (and the son of QualPrint’s founders), will retain his leadership role at QualPrint. “As a family-run company, one that considers our employees and customers like family, I would only consider a merger that protected the future of our 55-year legacy,” DiSantis said. “QualPrint’s commitment is backed by their recent launch of a $1 million capital investment campaign to highly automate our capabilities. Both of our companies share the same ethics, values and a strong commitment to exceeding our customer’s needs. We’re both long-time residents and supporters of the Pittsfield community, together, our customers will reap the rewards of our combined strengths and technologies.” He noted that his son, Nick DiSantis, will continue to lead at the company.

The administration of Gov. Charlie Baker has announced a $1.2 million capital investment campaign to highly automate our capabilities. Both of our companies share the same ethics, values and a strong commitment to exceeding our customer’s needs. We’re both long-time residents and supporters of the Pittsfield community, together, our customers will reap the rewards of our combined strengths and technologies.” He noted that his son, Nick DiSantis, will continue to lead at the company.
Community Health Programs Great Barrington Health Center has been recognized by Massachusetts Health Quality Partners (MHQP) for excellence in the primary care patient experience, based on patient surveys. The MHQP Patient Experience Awards is a new program introduced in 2018 by MHQP, a nonprofit membership organization that supports the state’s largest health plans with feedback from over 65,000 commercially insured patients across the state. Awards were given to the practices that ranked highest in each of 11 performance categories, as well as an overall performance category determined by the practices with the best-class results across multiple categories. 

Two area banks were recognized among top SBA lending intermediaries throughout Massachusetts in the 2018 Lender Awards held by the Massachusetts District of the U.S. Small Business Administration on Nov. 9. Berkshire Bank was named Western Massachusetts (7a) Lender of the Year in Dollars and Volume, and Massachusetts Lender of the Year in Rural Areas. Lee Bank was named Western Massachusetts 3rd Party Lender of the Year for 2018. MHQP conducts the only statewide survey of patient experience, patient rating reviews with feedback from over 65,000 commercially insured patients across the state. 

Additional information can be found at rootssteencenter.com.

For more information about the GoodNeighborScholarship, visit svc.edu, call 802-447-6300, or email admissions@svc.edu.

Applications and submissions from visual and performing artists are being accepted until Jan. 10. For more information and submissions, visit oposi-festival.org/north-adams.

For the daughter who still wears today the pearl necklace married for 50 years requires something really special…

E xceptional ADA compliant, professional/office space condo now available for sale or long-term lease. Approximately 1,833 sq. ft. of office space comprising five offices, conference room, kitchen, 1/2 bath and rear patio. Great visibility with ample off-street parking. Please call for additional information. $275,000.

The innovative festival is an event that combines art, music, wellness, and community. Participants will experience a variety of activities, including workshops, performances, and community building. The festival is designed to promote collaboration and creativity while fostering a sense of community. 

Principal locations include the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in North Adams and the Berkshire Museum in Pittsfield. The festival is expected to draw thousands of visitors from across the state and the region.

North Adams event is modeled after the original O+ Festival, which was founded in 2010 in Kingston, New York, by a group of artists, musicians, and medical practitioners. The festival is designed to bring together artists, musicians, and medical practitioners to explore the intersection of art and wellness.

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Every Now And Then We Need To Pause And Say “THANK YOU…”

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Parsons

The Berkshire Museum has announced the appointment of Kristin Parsons as education program manager and Rosdali Bhambhani as finance manager. In her new position, Parsons will be responsible for developing and implementing programs and school-directed school programs and at-risk youth. She also has extensive experience working with students and teachers that interpret the museum’s natural science and art collection. Parsons comes to the Berkshire Museum from Head Start, where she was responsible for program administration for 20 preschool classrooms at seven different sites serving at-risk and high-risk families throughout Berkshire County. As activa-

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Northern Berkshire Orthopedics has exceptional providers ready to care for you. Through our team-based approach with Southern Vermont Medical Center and our Dartmouth-Hitchcock affiliation, you have access to board-certified, fellowship-trained specialists when you need them. Whether you need care for a sports injury, a joint replacement, reconstructive shoulder surgery, or fracture care, our goal is to get you back to the activities you love as quickly—and painlessly—as possible.
Plan put in motion

The path that led Peltier to open a vegan restaurant had little to do with her own personal dietary preferences. “I am not a vegan or a vegetarian,” she noted.

She explained, however, that her 21-year-old daughter, Treenna, had been a vegan since the age of 11. “I had to learn to cook meatless meals at home,” she said, adding that her daughter’s preferences also made her more aware of the limited options that vegetarians have when dining out.

By comparison, dining options for vegans are far outnumber those for vegans, who choose not to consume items made with animal products of any kind. That includes not just meat and fish but also eggs, all dairy products, and even honey.

These limitations call for added creativity in the kitchen – whether cooking for oneself at home or for others in a restaurant – to come up with appealing dishes without the use of such staples as butter, eggs, or cheese. Peltier said the seeds for Thrive were planted about two years ago in a social media context. “I was looking for the next thing to do after the kids got out of high school,” she recalled.

“Some friends on Facebook were talking about when someone would open a vegan restaurant in the area.”

That discussion inspired Peltier to become the “someone” who would do just that. “I love creating new ideas and following through with them,” she said.

This same trait had earlier led her to establish her own online clothing sales business back in the late 1990s. “I got involved with that in the early days of e-commerce,” she said, noting that she was assisted in the process by enrolling in the Berkshire Enterprises entrepreneurial training program.

Peltier’s prior work experience had been of a more conventional nature, beginning with her first job as a dishwasher at age 15 and continuing in various positions in restaurants and bars for the next 15 years or so. “Then I go out of that business and decided it was time to go to college at 30 years old,” she said. That path eventually led to an MBA degree. Peltier noted that the online clothing venture was something she could do while at home, raising her kids. But, as they moved through and out of high school, she began thinking about trying something new. “I said a few years ago that I need to come up with a new plan,” she recalled.

In that context, the idea for Thrive took shape. She wrote up a business plan and then worked with Nancy Shulman at the Berkshire Office of the Mt. Desert Island Small Business Development Center. “I wanted to bounce it off an expert and refine it,” she said, noting that Shulman’s guidance led to a more solid plan.

Affordable option

Peltier’s original intent was to open her vegan restaurant in Lenox, a location that she felt would best allow her to tap a receptive customer base.

She soon discovered that the town’s trendiness came at a price – in the form of significantly higher rents than she was willing to pay. “We would have been working just to pay the rent,” she said. “And to me that just didn’t make any sense.”

Her search for other more affordable options eventually led her to the former Adrien’s Diner site just on the outer edge of downtown Pittsfield, which was being offered for sale. “At that time it had been vacant for three- and-a-half years,” she said. “Nobody wanted to deal with all the issues that came with it.”

Among these, she said, were a variety of building code violations, including three illegal egresses, as well as a “whole snowball of other problems that needed to be fixed.”

While the prospects for correcting these problems caused other potential buyers to shy away, Peltier saw them as a challenge that she was ready to take on. She explained that her confidence on this stemmed from extensive hands-on experience she had gained over the years working with her father to buy and renovate apartment buildings.

“When I saw [Adrien’s], I thought, ‘It’s not that bad. I can do a lot myself’,” she said. Peltier also saw the prospect of owning her own restaurant instead of leasing space as a clear advantage. “I’m a smart businesswoman,” she said. “This means I can put money into my own place instead of paying sky-high rents to someone else.”

She made an offer on the diner in March and completed the purchase of the property for $30,000 on April 27. From there she began the process of planning the renovations that she would handle and lining up contractors who were needed for other aspects that she could not legally do herself.

“I sifted through dozens of contractors to find ones who would do this on my budget,” she said. Among those she credited for their willingness to work with her are Mickie Elecler and Weider Mechanical, who respectively upgraded the diner’s electrical and plumbing systems; and Pittsfield Pipers, who installed a new exhaust hood that she had gotten “at a great price.”

Another more complex issue involved the building’s noncompliance with handicap accessibility regulations. Peltier explained that the physical limitations of not just the building itself but the property it sits on meant that was a problem. “I was going to have to put an exterior ramp that would provide access to the restaurant.”

To solve this situation, Peltier applied for a waiver of ADA access through the state’s Architectural Access Board in Pittsfield. “Then I go out of that business and decided it was time to go to college at 30 years old,” she said. That path eventually led to an MBA degree. Peltier noted that the online clothing venture was something she could do while at home, raising her kids. But, as they moved through and out of high school, she began thinking about trying something new. “I said a few years ago that I need to come up with a new plan,” she recalled.

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CANDACE WALL, LMHC
Counselor’s new practice targets needs of people assisting others

BY JOHN TOWNES
Professionals whose jobs involve continually helping others also need to pay attention to themselves to prevent burnout and other personal impacts of excessive stress.

Candace Wall, a Licensed Mental Health Counselor (LMHC), said she learned that lesson firsthand in her own career as a counselor in a very stressful, high-risk environment. She also saw the same issues with other mental health professionals she has worked with.

That prompted her to establish a practice to help individuals, businesses and organizations recognize – and learn solutions to – professional interpersonal overload.

As a counselor and trainer, her emphasis is on providing counseling and workshops to help professionals handle job-related stresses and their effects.

“My main passion is helping people who work with people,” said Wall, whose office is in the Norad Mill at 60 Roberts Dr. in North Adams. “If you are assisting others constantly in your workday, you can become preoccupied with them and forget yourself. Unless you notice it and take care of yourself, it can lead to anxiety, depression and other serious emotional problems. It can also have impacts on your personal life and health.”

Wall said that during her own career she has gone through periods of anxiety and overload, and has had to figure out how to manage stress and be able to work effectively.

“I found it very satisfying to help other professionals who were dealing with their own struggles,” she said. “I realized that was what I wanted to focus on as a professional.”

Wall emphasized that she works with professionals in many different occupations in her practice.

“This can affect counselors, medical doctors, salespeople, lawyers, customer service representatives and anyone else who is continuously interacting with people,” she said.

Wall said she sees the same issues with other mental health professionals she has worked with.

“Professionals who are dealing with mental health issues in their practice, they can try to do too much. When it starts to affect you in a negative way, and you take the pressures and stress home with you, it’s important to ask, ‘Am I neglecting myself?’”

Wall said that people who deal with mental health, social services or other intense situations are especially susceptible to that.

“You can vicariously experience trauma or witness it firsthand, if you spend your days helping people deal with sexual abuse, homelessness and other critical issues,” she said. “You’re taking it all in and you have to put it somewhere.”

She noted that this also presents a dilemma for people who are trained to understand and help others find solutions to emotional and psychological problems such as anxiety and depression.

“They have knowledge of the necessary skills to handle these issues, but it’s difficult to practice what they preach when it comes to themselves,” she said.

However, it is not only people who work in those occupations who experience problems with interpersonal overload. It can occur in other professions and businesses involving customer or client services and other interactions.

For example, someone working in real estate sales is helping people with the process of purchasing or selling a home, which involves major life decisions and situations involving complex negotiations as well as financial and legal matters that do not always proceed smoothly.

It can also affect people who work service positions that may not be critical or life-altering but are important to the customer or client.

“I was talking with a hairdresser who experienced similar stress as a result of working with many customers every day,” Wall said.

Professionals also have to continually shift attention between the needs of multiple clients or customers. A specific situation is of utmost importance to the individual involved, but for the service provider it is one of numerous cases they are working on during a day.

In her practice, Wall said, her role is to provide professionals with an opportunity to discuss these issues, analyze their own situation and behavior in an objective way, develop strategies to help them handle the stress more effectively, and make related changes and decisions.

Sources of support
In a general sense, she said, there are several basic suggestions that anyone can follow.

“The most important thing is finding someone you can talk to about what you’re experiencing on an ongoing basis,” she said.

“It might be a supervisor or other colleague or...
a friend or loved one. It should be someone you can be open with and who is willing to listen and be supportive.”

She added that employers should have people designated to provide this type of support and assistance – whether it is a supervisor, administrator, other staff person or an outside expert such as herself.

People also should prevent taking on too much, both to prevent burnout and to keep it from getting worse. “It’s also important to know when to turn down additional assignments or duties,” she said. “You’re not superman or superwoman. Overextending themselves is one of the reasons that people experience excessive stress.”

Wall also stressed the importance of people giving sufficient attention to their own needs and/or recognizing when ordinary workplace pressures are having a negative impact on their own well-being and overall quality of life. “You have to take care of yourself,” she said. “You can’t do your job well if you’re neglecting your own feelings and needs.”

Related to that is the necessity to balance work with personal life, including involvement and relationships with friends and family. “I also want to engage in community and recreational activities,” she said.

Feeling burnout and its related effects can be the result of many factors. Understanding what is causing it is an important step to finding solutions that are based on a realistic assessment of the situation and reasons.

One crucial step for anyone who is experiencing excessive job-related stress is to understand the specific causes and determine if it is a signal that larger changes are needed. That includes analyzing whether burnout is due to specifics that can be adjusted, or whether it is time to change jobs or professions. “Helping people to figure out that puzzle is one of the aspects of my own work that I find most satisfying,” Wall said. “Burnout can mean many different things, and it’s important to know why it is happening to you.”

She added that engaging in this process is also a way to avoid making rash decisions, as such is hastily quitting a job.

“Do you need to do something else entirely?” she said, “or do you just need a vacation? Are you feeling excessive stress because you’re doing too much? Can you improve it by making adjustments in your workload or learning personal coping skills? Or is your job not right for you?”

Wall said employers also can learn to recognize what factors in the workplace might be contributing to stress and burnout among their employees, and take action to reduce its likelihood.

She noted that, in addition to her professional services, she also is offering free workshops and other events in collaboration with other professionals and organizations on a periodic basis.

“One of the reasons I returned to the Berkshires is that I wanted to serve the community,” she said. “Offering several free programs annually is one of the ways I can do that.”

One such activity she recently sponsored was “Woman’s Night Out – No-Pressure Networking,” a free open gathering held on Nov. 29.

Wall can be contacted at 413-353-2515 or on candacewalltherapy.com or Facebook page candacewalltherapty.com.

“Helping people to figure out that puzzle is one of the reasons that people experience excessive stress,” Wall said. “I realized that was what I wanted to focus on as a professional.”
many residents 8-2 to forgive $2.55 million in loans to the 27, when the Pittsfield City Council voted redevelopment. that had been incurred through the building's (January 2018 BT&C).

Phoenix to that settlement. Stanley will pay the balance assets and the building, which will be applied $750,000 if the building were sold.

To prevent that scenario and the resulting shuttering of an important downtown attrac-

tion, the banks agreed to write off all but $750,000 if the building were sold. Phoenix will pay $644,000 for the Beacon's assets and the building, which will be applied to that settlement. Stanley will pay the balance of the settlement to the banks himself. Phoenix will also separately pay a lease fee to Stanley for the lounge seats that he installed last year and owns (January 2018 BT&C).

The sale was only made possible by allowing Jacobson's company to start with a clean slate, without the burden of the larger debt that had been incurred through the building's redevelopment.

The final hurdle was cleared on Nov. 27, when the Pittsfield City Council voted 8-2 to forgive $2.55 million in loans to the Beacon Cinema by the city, a measure that was controversial and drew opposition from many residents (see related story on page 17).

Jacobson acknowledged that the complexity and controversy surrounding the Beacon's financing and development was a situation his company had not encountered before. He found that his company was walking into a situation with a long and difficult history in which strong emotions were involved.

“It was difficult because we came into this late in the game,” he said. “With our other theaters, it was more a straightforward mat-
ter of acquiring and running a theater. They were not controversial and did not involve a complicated project of that scale.”

At the same time, he added, they consider it worth the effort because the Beacon and the local market have the basic qualities that his company looks for. “So, it’s more chal-

lenging,” he said, “but I love a challenge.”

While some have characterized the problems with the Beacon as representing Pittsfield’s contentious nature and history of backing failed projects, Jacobson dismissed that and said he was not concerned about doing business here.

“I don’t think that’s unique to Pittsfield,” he said. “I can see similar things happening in any city or town in the country.”

He added that he has empathy for the people who have been opposed to the terms of the sale.

“I certainly understand how people might feel that way,” he said. “I’m a taxpaying where I live, too. I’d be frustrated and angry if I felt my local government was doing something this significant that I believed was wrong.”

Jacobson said he hopes those opposed to the debt forgiveness will come to recognize the ultimate benefits to the community.

“Our deal might not be the best possible deal in the world, but the alternative would have been worse,” he said. “If you look at the cards that were dealt, it would have been a disaster if the Beacon went into foreclosure.

The city would not have recovered a penny.”

There also would be no guarantee that a new owner who purchased it in foreclosure would keep the theater, he continued.

“Even if they did, it would be much more difficult to restart a theater if the furnishings and equipment were removed and it went dark for a period,” he said.

Jacobson added that the terms of the sale will allow the Beacon to remain in opera-
tion with a smooth transition of ownership, and will bring improvements to the site and enhance its overall benefits to downtown.

“With this deal, the city is able to retain the theater and guarantee that we will operate it for at least 10 years,” he said (referring to one aspect of the debt forgiveness). “Actually, we are in this for the longer term. We don’t go into a theater unless we are confident that it will be viable for at least 20 years. Our hope is that we can restore faith in the fact that a theater can be successful there.

While noting that he plans to do things differ-
cently at the Beacon, Jacobson said Stanley and the city deserve credit for undertaking the project in the first place.

“It’s a very impressive project that has added a lot to the city,” he said. “From my perspective, I can see that a lot of passion and hard work has gone into it. I respect Mr. Stanley for having the vision and commit-

ment to achieve this. It would likely have never come to fruition without him.”

Close-knit operation

Insight Management/Phoenix Theatres currently has a total of about 230 employ-
ees in its theaters, and a staff of seven in its management office.

“One of the best things about our company is that most of the management team has been together for a long time, including people who came with me when I started it,” Jacobson said. “Some left, but came back when we started making a little money because it’s a nice company to work for. It’s very personal and not corporate. We’re different in that we like each other and are basically best friends.”

In addition to operating its own movie theaters, the company offers management, consulting and auditing services to other theater operators.

It also has an equipment installation service.

“We have been making the conversion from film to digital projection equipment,” Jacobson said. “We are familiar with the needs of employees for special training in the install-
ation of new digital theater technology for our own staff, as well as starting offering services to help other theaters do that and it became a business.”

Another service that helped make the transi-
tion was Images Cinema in Williamstown, he noted.

Jacobson said his company is always looking for growth opportunities, but they are very methodical. They use data-driven decision-making combined with subjective factors and instinct.

He added that they pursue steady growth on a manageable basis that is in keeping with the company’s scale and strategy. “Basically, our corporate goal is to do things we enjoy doing in places where we see interesting opportunities,” he said. “Finding theaters that are good candidates and meet our re-
quirements is difficult, and we have to be very selective.”

When asked if the company has specific growth targets, Jacobson replied: “Well, cur-
rently, I’d like for us to operate around 50 screens. The Beacon is the second theater we will have added this year, so that is a good step towards that.”

Jacobson said they became aware of the Beacon around 2015 when they were contacted by Stanley and the banks to do a management study on ways to revitalize the business.

They conducted a survey of Pittsfield and the local movie market, and examined the operations of the Beacon. They then provided a list of recommendations. Among their sug-
gestions was the installation of lounge seat-
ing and a reduction of ticket prices. Stanley implemented those last year, and attendance did improve.

Jacobson said his company continued to follow the situation. When the foreclosure scenario arose, they agreed to buy the theater business, and the building.

Jacobson said his own confidence is based on his company’s strategy and proven track record, as well as the characteristics of the Beacon, the city and the Berkshires.

Emphasis on enjoyment

He said they have a very specific approach that works for the types of theaters they acquire. They also provide an alternative venue to compete successfully with large mall cinemas and other chain multiplexes.

“Because of our smaller size and our philosophy, we can be more of a boutique operation than a large chain, and we have the ability to focus on the specific needs of a market,” he said.

continued on page 16
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Author Allen Harris – founder and owner of Berkshire Money Management – guides you toward a more profitable, smooth transfer of your business with actionable, sound advice. Get a complimentary copy or begin a confidential conversation about retiring by emailing him at AHarris@BerkshireMM.com.

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pany will not look to significantly expand, often more important than ticket sales to the customers. It may also help to reduce lines of tickets sold and will offer more options for evening. This will both increase the number showings throughout the day and into the evening. Jacobson noted that he is acquainted with the Beacon as a consultant were based on requests are simple basics, like having clear signage and the best possible technology to seating and the best possible technology to present a high-quality image and sound, “I said. “What we also do differently is that we manage to provide that while keeping our prices at an affordable, family-friendly level.”

He said the success of Phoenix Theatres has shown that this works well as a business model. “We don’t want prices to be so high that people see going to the movies as something they can only afford to do as a special occasion,” he said. “We want them to come more often and buy more tickets over time – either as something they do casually on the spur of the moment, or as a family night out, or a special date.”

Jacobson noted that he regularly attends his own theaters – and those of their competitors – to keep a close eye on everything that affects the customer experience. “Price isn’t everything,” he said. “I stand in line like everyone else and pay attention to what it feels like to go to a movie. If it’s not pleasant, and if I don’t feel like I’m getting value for my money, I get upset. We do everything possible to make it a worthwhile experience.”

His company’s original recommendations to the Beacon as a consultant were based on that premise, and they were an important step in that direction, he noted. He said Phoenix will build on that with other improvements, both in the near term and over time.

Among other changes, they will extend the Beacon’s operating hours to include more showings throughout the day and into the evening. This will both increase the number of tickets sold and will offer more options for customers. It may also help to reduce lines at showings during peak hours.

They also will make it more convenient for patrons to buy popcorn, candy and beverages, with a redesign of the concession stand. For movie theaters, concession sales are often more important than ticket sales to the bottom line. Jacobson noted, however, that his company will not look to significantly expand the Beacon’s food and beverage offerings or set up the lobby as a cafe. “We’re not considering becoming restaurant operators,” he said. “We’re there to support other downtown businesses, not compete with them. For example, I was talking to the operators of The Marketplace (a next-door cafe that is another anchor tenant in the building), I told them, ‘You know how to make great coffees and sandwiches and soups. I’m going to stick with what I know, which is showing movies and selling popcorn and candy.’”

(The Beacon also has a license to sell beer and wine. At the city council meeting, Jacobson was asked if they planned to continue that. Jacobson replied that his other theaters don’t rely on alcoholic beverage sales, but since the patrons of the Beacon are used to purchasing them there, he would prefer to keep the license.)

To handle the expanded operations, they are currently hiring additional staff for the Beacon. Jacobson said the goal is to have at least 30 full- and part-time employees in place by the holidays. “I’d tell anyone interested in a job to go to our website and apply now,” he noted.

Jacobson said there will be physical improvements, but the theater will retain its existing basic look and characteristics. Part of the original project included historic preservation requirements that retained the original features of the facade and other elements of the former department store. The theater will also retain its name.

“The Beacon should continue to be the Beacon,” he said. “It is a unique property. I love the fact that it is a theater behind a former department store. We’re going to keep that as its identity, rather than trying to impose our brand, as Phoenix Theatres.”

However, Jacobson said he is making one immediate addition to the lobby that will have a noticeable impact. “I just bought a Yamaha grand piano that will be placed in the lobby,” he said. “It’s an automated player piano that is tied into the Internet and can play many types of music. That makes a big difference in the mood in a lobby.”

One facet of the Beacon that is new to Jacobson’s company is the additional commercial space in the building, including offices above the theater and a corridor of other commercial space in the rear extension to McKay Street. “We’re not commercial developers or landlords,” he said. “But I have been a tenant, so I at least understand it from that standpoint. Some of it is primarily asking tenants what they want, and sometimes their requests are simple basics, like having clear directional signs and making sure elevators are operating.”

He said they will work on some deferred maintenance projects in the building. “I also plan to employ someone who is an expert in commercial rentals and knows the local market to handle that aspect of it,” he said.

Pittsfield perception Since first becoming involved in the Beacon, Jacobson said he and his staff have been visiting and studying Pittsfield and the Berkshires regularly. While aware of the challenges the city and region face, he believes the overall trends are positive. “In addition to demographic studies, you can tell a lot just by looking around and talking to people and businesses,” he said.

“We’ve spent a lot of time having meals in places like District (a restaurant around the corner from the Beacon). The mood seems upbeat, and people and business owners seem happy with what’s happening here, which is always a good sign.”

He added that downtown Pittsfield has also retained positive physical characteristics that have been lost in many communities. “The architecture downtown is really unique and beautiful,” he said. “A lot of millennials look at these glorious buildings and recognize their value compared to what is common today. No one is going to build ornate structures like [the Kinnell-Kresge Building] anymore.”

He added that the region also has the type of diversity that can support a theater like the Beacon. “It’s obvious that the city and Berkshire County have an element of deep creativity. That means there are people who appreciate the benefits of a Beacon, and the types of theaters we operate.”

Jacobson said his company is adept at identifying and booking films that reflect the tastes and desires of their communities.

Since the Beacon first opened, some people have expressed a desire for the theater to include more independent, foreign and other “art house” films along with the mainstream commercial fare.

“We try to present the best of both worlds, with a mix of the big popular movies and smaller independent films,” Jacobson said. “In part, the selection will depend on the time of year. During the summer and holidays a lot of big commercial films are released, and that will be the emphasis then. At other times of year we can also include more specialized films.”

Jacobson chuckled when asked to comment on the frequent observation that movie theaters have become less viable as businesses because of the emergence of streaming services, the popularity of mobile viewing and the increased quality of home entertainment equipment.

“I’ve been hearing that as long as I’ve been in this industry,” he said. “When I started in management in the ’70s, it was said that VCRs and Blockbuster would be the end of movie theaters. Before that it was television. And before that it was probably said about radio.”

In reality, he said, movie theaters have weathered all of these challenges. “If you look at the record of theaters over the last 70 years, the business has been remarkably stable,” he said.

“Like any industry, the movie business has ups and downs,” he added. “Last year there was a downturn, and there were predictions that the sky was falling. But this year there has been a 10-percent increase.”

Jacobson noted that it often depends on the quality of films in any given year. “We’re not selling widgets,” he said. “We’re selling art. Sometimes that is art very good, and sometimes it’s really bad. The fluctuations in business reflect that.”

Nevertheless, he added, theaters must be nimble and offer reasons to go out to see a movie, including the quality of presentation. “There isn’t a theater in the U.S. that is not better than it was five or 10 years ago in those terms,” he said.

This also requires keeping up with advances in presentation technology, he said, adding that part of their plan for Beacon Cinema is to upgrade its projection and audio equipment over time.

“I’m very involved in the technology side and the quality of images and sound,” he said. “Right now the next generation of projectors is about to be released. This will include new chips and file storage that will allow for higher frame rates. That will dramatically increase the visual quality of images on the screen.”

Jacobson noted that he is acquainted with Douglas Trumbull, the special-effects pioneer who lives in Berkshire County and had a large role in bringing film production to the Berkshires in the 1990s. “We visited him at his studio on one of our trips here,” he said. “He is working on some amazing technologies that are far ahead of what is available today. The quality is unbelievable and demonstrates what is still possible, and I’m very feeling very excited, like I was 17 again.”

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One reason the councilors gave for voting for the proposal was that the debt forgiveness was not actually affecting the city's operating budget.

The debt was not involve funds that could have been used to offset taxes or fees for residents or other purposes. Rather, it was in the form of forgivable deferred-payment loans. The funds could be used to offset the overall financing package for tax credits.

In negotiating the recent settlement, Tyler designated the GE funds as the amount to be forgiven over 10 years, to provide the city with a “clawback” provision and some control over the project’s future.

Another bone of contention for critics is a city tax increment financing (TIF) package that was originally granted in the early stage of the project and was extended in 2016 for another five years. Under a TIF, a business owner who upgrades a property is eligible for a partial deferment on taxes related to any increased value due to the improvements. The higher taxes are phased in over a designated period.

Ruffer, however, said the TIF is not a part of the debt-forgiveness package. “The TIF has no bearing on that,” she said. “The debt forgiveness is a totally separate matter. There is no new TIF. The existing agreement will simply remain in place until it expires.”

She pointed out that the Beacon has paid – and will continue to pay – taxes in a larger sense. “Between personal and business property taxes, it has been paying [annually] lots and lots of money that has nothing to do with the city, so this is just the city no longer collecting it. The payment to the city has been reduced,” she explained.

As the anchor tenant of the redeveloped Kinnell-Kresge Building, the Beacon Cinema has been an important component of downtown Pittsfield’s revitalization efforts since its opening in 2009. However, the debt load associated with the historic building’s restoration has weighed the project down over the years, along with difficulty filling other commercial space there. (Photo by Cindy Johnson)

As a public-private initiative, the Beacon was financed by a complex combination of private investment by Phillips and Stanley, including $4.6 million in financing from a consortium of local banks and lenders, and public support through the sale of Federal New Market Tax Credits, state and federal historic preservation tax credits, and other grants and quasi-public financing. During its development and construction, the cost had grown from the originally anticipated $8 million to over $22 million, which subsequently required additional loans and grants and financial adjustments.

Dana Ruffer, the city’s director of community development, said in an interview that the Beacon’s debt load had been avoiding its goals for downtown Pittsfield, in terms of adding a center of activity and stimulating the business on the west side of the city. However, opposition expressed by others has been based both practical and philosophical grounds. In communications to officials, posts in social media and other venues, many residents said the city should not continue to support a failed project at a time when its resources were already being stretched thin, and it was having to take on other projects involving a new water treatment plant.

Critics also see a double standard in the city forgiving the Beacon’s debt, even though other individuals and businesses do not receive such generous treatment when they fall behind in their taxes or other payments to the city. Some contended the city should not be supporting one business, while others that are struggling do not receive such a bailout. Others argued that said the city should let the foreclosure take place and allow the private-sector market determine the property’s future.

As the sun sets on the Nov. 27 meeting, the councilors voted 8-2 to forgive $2.55 million of the project’s debt. The remaining $2.6 million will be forgiven in increments over 10 years, as long as the theater remains in business. If the theater closes, the city will be responsible for repaying the balance.

The council’s vote to approve the plan at its Nov. 27 meeting sought to headline the sale. However, the proposal has been contentious and divisible, being seen as some as a Hobson’s Choice between two problematic options.

During the Nov. 27 meeting, several councilors said they were receiving more comments and strong opinions from their constituents about the debt forgiveness than any other council meeting in the history of this city.

Councilor Kevin Morandi, who voted against the proposal, said it was an extremely difficult vote. Councilor Donna Todd Rivers, who proposed the motion, expressed desires of his constituents.

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‘TAX CUTS & JOBS ACT’ TAKES ITS TOLL

Challenges aplenty with this year’s filing season

BY JAMES R. ROSE, EA CFP

After nearly a full year of projection and conjecture, it is time to calculate and realize the full impact of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA). Together with smaller follow-up pieces of legislation, the ink is drying on new forms and regulations — requiring new tax obligations and allowing new tax opportunities. No one is immune. The road map to a completed tax return has changed for everyone, regardless of outcome. Many will be pleasantly surprised with the end-result. Some will be disappointed, and not a few may be angry. The suggestion to “start early and read carefully” is being taken seriously by taxpayer and tax professional alike.

A review of all changes arising from this sweeping tax-code revision is not possible here, and what is offered is meant to create an awareness of some of those items most likely to be encountered during this year’s tax-filing season. For a more detailed review, the IRS has issued the 14-page Publication 5370 — Tax Reform Basics for Individuals and Families as a preliminary guide, and has been updating charts, worksheets, regulations and forms on a daily basis.

While still in draft form at the time of this writing, Form 1040 is receiving a makeover, allowing a “postcard” summary for those used to filing Forms 1040EZ and 1040A. For those whose tax-reporting situations are more complicated, business, rental and investment schedules — along with their various attachments — will still be required.

Deductions deconstructed

The new legislation seeks to simplify tax reporting for a larger majority of taxpayers by increasing basic standard deductions, while decreasing or eliminating allowances and limiting “stigmatized” deductions. To that end, it may be helpful to know what not to look for any longer — and to understand what has been lost as well as gained.

Personal and dependent exemption deductions in 2018, and those for entertainment expenses, will have been “absorbed” into the new, larger, standard deduction allowances. For instance, in prior years, a married couple with two child dependents would have qualified for a married-filing-joint (MFJ) standard deduction for personal allowance deductions. Each of the four exemption deductions was worth $4,050 — qualifying this family for a total $16,200 in combined standard and exemption deductions. The MFJ standard deduction is now raised to $24,000 ($12,000, and exemption deductions are zeroed out — leaving this particular family with less overall deductions in 2018, and higher potential taxable income. The trade-off is a lower tax rate on that higher income, as well as higher tax credits for those dependent children listed on the return.

What one deduction may allow, another may take away. What one deduction may take away, another may allow. The implication is that the only “wrong” decision from a tax perspective may be the one made before reviewing all the options and permutations available.

The new law further simplifies that process by eliminating and/or limiting what actu-
alizes as an “stigmatized” deduction. Deductions subject to the 2-percent AGI limitation have been suspended — effectively eliminating miscellaneous deductions for employee business, hobby tax and invest-

ment expenses. Casualty and theft losses are now only allowed for those which occur in federal declared disaster areas. New allowances and limits are in place for personal residence mortgage interest deductions, as well as state and local taxes (SALT) on income, sales and real estate.

These aggregate SALT deductions are now capped at $10,000 — a change which orig-
nially drew a chorus of concern, led by the representatives and governments of high-tax states (such as those here in the Northeast). Subsequent exploration of creative ways to redefine these expenses, so as to bypass this limitation, prompted the IRS to issue Notice 2018-54, a two-page review cautioning that “taxpayers should be mindful that federal law controls the proper characterization of payments for federal income tax purposes.”

Preliminary calculations project that many high-income taxpayers will see a net positive effect, with the expected benefits of lower tax rates and credits trumping lost deductions.
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Free workshops on brokerage relationships slated for North Adams, Pittsfield

BY JOHN TOWNES

The options for brokerage relationships are the subject of a series of free workshops being offered in January by the Berkshire Real Estate School.

The programs, to be held in North Adams and Pittsfield, will be led by Paul Harsch, owner and designated broker for Harsch Associates Real Estate in Williamstown. He also operates the Berkshire Real Estate School, which offers professional development courses in real estate.

The upcoming presentations will include two two-hour classes each. Participants can receive four continuing education professional development credits.

The North Adams sessions will be held on Jan. 5 and 12 from 9:30 to 11:30 a.m. at the office of Greylock Federal Credit Union at 131 113th St. in Pittsfield both classes will be held on Jan. 23 at the Country Club of Pittsfield from 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

The Pittsfield session is sponsored by Adams Community Bank and the classes in North Adams are sponsored by Greylock Federal Credit Union.

One class is an overview of brokerage relationships, including the history and background of agency relationships, and the variations of agency relationships, including dual agency, designated and non-agency, plus a category known as Facilitator/Transaction Broker (FTB). It also touches on the legal obligations agents must adhere to under each category.

The other class focuses more closely on the FTB category, to clarify the distinctions between agency and non-agency relationships. Harsch noted that participants can either attend both classes or only one. He said the two upcoming sessions are designed to accommodate differing work schedules. The Pittsfield session includes both classes on a single weekend, with lunch included. The North Adams sessions include one class on two successive Saturday mornings for people who cannot take off time during the week.

Harsch, who is a Real Estate Instructor and a licensed real estate instructor, began his real estate career in 1975 and founded Harsch Associates in 1979.

He said he is offering the courses for several reasons. "I began as a schoolteacher, and I really enjoy teaching and have a natural inclination to that," he said. "I also wanted to offer these free classes as a way to give back to the profession that has treated me so well."

Harsch said that this gives the broker greater flexibility in giving advice to either side of the deal, whether it’s a buyer or seller, depending on the situation.

While the classes are free, preregistration is required. He added that the number of openings is limited in North Adams because of the size of the office, whereas in classes in Pittsfield are in a large facility that can accommodate more people.

To register for the upcoming classes or for more information about Berkshire Real Estate School, go to harschreal estate.com.

He said he also wanted the classes to instruct real estate professionals in the different categories of client relationships, and to explain the role of a transactional broker.

"I had a real role in introducing into law the designation of transactional brokerage in Massachusetts," he said. "I believe that has many advantages, but it’s not been taught, and is not fully understood. The concept of agency is the best known.

Harsch emphasized that, while he personally favors transactional brokerages, the classes are designed to explain and compare all of the options in a objective setting so both sides of a sale to achieve a mutually satisfactory terms and price.

"An FTB is more of a mediator, than an advocate," he said. "This makes it easier to achieve a win-win situation, rather than a competition with a winner and a loser."

He said that this can also simplify the relationships, because agents in each can serve a similar role.

"It’s common practice for real estate practitioners to find themselves working on both sides of the ledger, even though they are only supposed to represent their client," he said. "The category of transactional representation more accurately reflects that fact."

He added that it also frees the client from liability for mistakes or take actions by the broker. "The transactional broker is accountable for their own actions, but a client is not liable," he said.

Harsch previously presented these classes in Great Barrington and Williamstown, and said they were well received.

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Klara’s Gourmet Cookies
continued from page 1

“...and have a little more breathing room,” said Diller. Diller said they are investing about $40,000 for new equipment and about $140,000 for physical work on the Water Street building.

The expansion is being financed by Adams Community Bank, through an SBA 504 loan package in which the bank provides 50 percent, a certified development finance company provides another 40 percent, and the borrower provides 10 percent.

Diller noted that Keith Girouard of the Berkshire County office of the Massachusetts Small Business Development Center provided vital assistance. “He has been a tremendous help,” said Diller. “We started talking with him about this several years ago, and he provided important advice and assistance all the way. Without him, this probably would not have happened.”

Czech roots
The origins of Klara’s Gourmet Cookies extend back to Chrast, a town in the Czech Republic where Sotonova grew up. She developed her baking skills at a young age, learning from her mother and grandmother, using traditional recipes that had been in her family for generations. Sotonova emigrated to the United States about 20 years ago at age 19 in search of opportunities she did not believe existed in the Czech Republic. She initially came to the Berkshires for a job in the kitchen at Eisner Camp in Great Barrington, which is affiliated with the Union for Reform Judaism. She earned a degree in hospitality management from Berkshire Community College and then worked in a restaurant in nearby Hillsdale, N.Y., where she met Diller, who was a chef.

“We started spending more and more time together,” recalled Diller, who grew up in southern Berkshire County. “One day she made some of her cookies for me, and I realized two things: A) she loved me, and B) she really knew how to bake. The cookies were great.”

He suggested they start a business baking and selling her cookies, which led to the formation of Klara’s Gourmet Cookies in 2006. At first it was a very small operation in her apartment in Great Barrington.

“We started out in direct sales in places like the Lenox Farmers’ Market and a market in Boston,” said Diller. “Then we got distributors and gradually started adding wholesale accounts, and the business took off. It became too large for the apartment, and we moved to our present live-work space in Lee in 2009.”

They presently sell a line of about 12 varieties of cookies, including Ginger Shortbread, Double Chocolate Sea Salt and Coconut Macaroons, among others. They also sell gift baskets that include thematic selections of cookies plus a few additional items such as...
as coffee from Barrington Coffee Roasting Company.

“We have a basic specialty of high-quality everyday cookies,” said Sotonova. Diller said the wholesale network accounts for the great majority of their sales. Stores that sell Klara’s Gourmet Cookies in the Berkshires include area Big Y supermarkets, Nejaime’s Wines in Lenox and Stockbridge, the Red Lion Inn in Stockbridge, and Guido’s Fresh Marketplace in Pittsfield and Great Barrington, among others.

He said using distributors has enabled them to get into larger supermarkets. In addition, noted Diller, their largest sources of customers are TJ Maxx, Home Goods and Marshall’s. “That may seem counter-intuitive, because we think of them as clothing, home furnishing and gift stores,” he said. “But they do sell food items.”

They also gain exposure for their products by participating in industry events such as the Fancy Food international trade show in New York City.

**Cookie capacity**

Their success in getting Klara’s Gourmet Cookies on the shelves of these and other retail outlets has pushed the limits of their current cookie-making capacity and driven the expansion project.

The larger oven that has been installed in the new Water Street facility has the capacity to bake 40 trays of cookies at a time, which Diller said is quadruple the output of their present oven.

When operations begin there, the cookie trays will be loaded onto carts which roll into the oven for baking and then roll out to designated areas for cooling and packaging.

Sotonova and Diller estimate that the additional capacity and efficiency enhancements will enable the business to comfortably handle twice its current sales volume.

However, they don’t plan any major push to grow rapidly. Instead they expect to continue their current pace of sales growth.

“We have maintained a steady growth rate over five years, and this year we are up about 10 percent growth next year.” Diller said. “We’re projecting about 10 percent growth next year.”

He said they hope to continue on that trajectory and to keep Klara’s growth on a manageable basis.

They currently have three full-time and one part-time employee. “With the new facility, we plan to add at least one additional full-time person, and then see what the volume dictates in the future,” said Diller.

**Real estate transfers continued from page 21**

**WEST STOCKBRIDGE**

- 66 Lenox Rd. Buyer: Wanda Beckwith; Seller: Arthur Salvadore; Mortgage: $350,000; Price: $575,000; Date: 10/22/18
- 61 furnished Luce Rd. Buyer: John G. Stott; Seller: Richard S. Stott; Mortgage: $233,000; Price: $400,000; Date: 10/17/18
- 346 Lenox Rd. Buyer: Thomas Mahar; Seller: Sandra Steuer; Mortgage: $203,000; Price: $267,500; Date: 10/12/18
- 2 Longview Ter. Buyer: Arthur Salvadore; Seller: Linda Busse; Mortgage: $193,285; Price: $215,000; Date: 10/2/18
- 87 Maple St. Buyer: Thomas Mahar; Seller: Sandra Steuer; Mortgage: $193,285; Price: $215,000; Date: 10/12/18
- 5-37 Knoll Rd. Buyer: Misha Forrester; Seller: Ross D. Flynn; Mortgage: $360,000; Price: $420,000; Date: 10/17/18
- 1020 Simonds Rd. Buyer: Matthew Howard; Seller: William College; Mortgage: $498,000; Price: $610,000; Date: 10/19/18
- 204 Longview Ter. Buyer: David Rice; Seller: Susan Moore; Mortgage: $193,285; Price: $215,000; Date: 10/2/18
- 64 Lenox Rd. Buyer: Arthur Salvadore; Seller: Linda Busse; Mortgage: $193,285; Price: $215,000; Date: 10/2/18
- 287 Luce Rd. Buyer: David Rice; Seller: John Stotberg; Mortgage: $312,000; Price: $350,000; Date: 10/12/18
- 234 Ide Rd. Buyer: Arthur Salvadore; Seller: Linda Busse; Mortgage: $193,285; Price: $215,000; Date: 10/2/18
- 738 Simonds Rd. Buyer: Ashley Benson; Seller: Thomas Mahar; Mortgage: $360,000; Price: $420,000; Date: 10/17/18
- 204 Longview Ter. Buyer: David Rice; Seller: Susan Moore; Mortgage: $193,285; Price: $215,000; Date: 10/2/18
- 87 Maple St. Buyer: Thomas Mahar; Seller: Sandra Steuer; Mortgage: $193,285; Price: $215,000; Date: 10/12/18
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Sotonova noted that she also plans to maintain the company’s current product line, rather than rapidly diversifying it. She said it is important to retain both the quality and consistency of their products.

“Our offerings will be the same for at least a year,” she said. “We have to figure out the new systems. Then I might add some new items gradually, but we’ll keep our basic focus on high-quality cookies.”

When Sotonova was asked how she feels about the success of Klara’s Gourmet Cookies, her answer reflected pride in her adopted country.

“It’s pretty amazing when I remember how we started in a small Great Barrington apartment with an old Kenmore stove,” she said. “It’s taken a lot of hard work and dedication. But it also proves that here in America people have the opportunity to accomplish anything.” ◆
Entrenched in the Berkshires for 129 years, The Pittsfield Cooperative Bank has continuously sought to empower our friends and neighbors to build a better community.

Some come to the area to explore our serene mountainous landscape and never leave. Others grew up here and want to give back to their hometown – perhaps as a dentist. Then there are those who have incredible talents and ideas that can change the region… if only they had a little financial support and the encouragement of a lending team with more experience than any professional unit assembled since Dasher, Dancer and the gang got together.