

Shenango Valley Chamber honors the area's standout businesses

By MICHAEL ROKNICK Herald Business Editor
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Local businesses honored by the Shenango Valley Chamber of Commerce at its annual Phoenix Awards banquet on Thursday were from left, Robert Hites, vice president for Dean Natural Vending, Bretton Walberg, owner of Walberg Family Pharmacies, Sandi Carangi, CEO of Mercer County Community Federal Credit Union, John Sarandrea, owner of Rita's Italian Ice, and Brad McGonigle, president of J. Bradley McGonigle Funeral Home and Crematory.

The Shenango Valley Chamber of Commerce's Phoenix Awards banquet this year was about more than just honoring its members.

Last year's event was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This year nearly 200 attended the soiree Thursday evening, said Olivia "Libbi" Brown, the chamber's executive director.

"The morale this year is so much better," Brown said after the event. "There's a sense in the community that things are starting to come back — that people are going out and coming back together again."

And the award winners showed a tremendous commitment at a time when the pandemic socked the business community, she added.

This year's winners:

Brown spoke about each winner, which she described as standouts.



Bretton Walberg smiles while talking with his wife, Stacey Walberg during the Shenango Valley Chamber of Commerce Phoenix Awards banquet. Their company, Walberg Family Pharmacies, received the Innovation Award for running clinics that vaccinated thousands in Mercer County against COVID-19.

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- **Innovation Award: Walberg Family Pharmacies**

Walberg Pharmacies quickly established COVID-19 vaccine clinics at a time when there was a crushing demand early in the year, she said. The pharmacy has 11 stores — including Sharon, Mercer, Greenville and Jamestown — in the region.

“They learned how to quickly create these vaccine pop-up sites,” Brown said. “They really stuck out among all the nominees.” Also, the business found ways to deliver prescriptions in underserved areas, she added.



John Sarandrea, owner of Rita's in Hermitage, talks with his wife, Bella Sarandrea, during the Shenango Valley Chamber of Commerce dinner at Tiffany's Banquet Center in Brookfield.

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- **New Business Startup: Rita's Italian Ice**

John Sarandrea opened Rita's Italian Ice in Hermitage last summer and worked through the rough spots in the pandemic, Brown said. In addition to Italian ice, the business offers frozen custard, smoothies and other creations.

“They’re really involved in the Shenango Valley and take pride in what they do,” she said.



Robert Hites, vice president for Dean Natural Vending, stands among the shelves at its Hermitage office and warehouse. The vending machine company won the Shenango Valley Chamber of Commerce’s Growth Business award.

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• Growth Business: Dean Natural Vending

Located in Hermitage, Dean Natural Vending is a new company that offers a variety of edible goods in vending machines. They provide healthy foods such as nuts, fruits, energy bars and sports drinks.

“They’ve really expanded their building and are very customer oriented,” Brown said. “And they’ve been great community advocates.”



Sandi Carangi, CEO of Mercer County Community Federal Credit Union, seated in the credit union's Hermitage office, is surrounded by staff members, from left, Cheri Rosa, assistant branch manager; Elaine Patton, human resource and operations manager; Colleen Alfredo, member service representative; and Heather Crevar, branch manager.

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• Growth Service: Mercer County Community Federal Credit Union

With an office in Hermitage, Mercer County Community Federal Credit Union expanded its Sharon branch over the past year to handle increasing customer demand, Brown said. and the institution has made a commitment to expand its Hermitage office in the upcoming year, she said.

“They exemplify why we have the awards,” she said.



The landscaping around McGonigle Funeral Home in Sharon earned the business the Shenango Valley Chamber of Commerce Beautification Award at its annual Phoenix Award event Thursday.

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• *Beautification: McGonigle Funeral Home*

McGonigle Funeral Home created green space in front of its East State Street building in Sharon that includes flowers, shrubs and trees.



Shenango Valley Chamber of Commerce dinner guests at their tables at Tiffany's Banquet Center in Brookfield.

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“They always keep their grounds so beautiful and well kept,” Brown said.