

Butler Eagle

Chamber of commerce lauds efforts, notes achievements

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SLIPPERY ROCK — The Butler County Chamber of Commerce on Wednesday evening honored an individual and an organization for their efforts to transform the county for the better through development and opportunity.

Butler businessman Joe Gray accepted this year's William A. Morgan Entrepreneur of the Year Award, while **Butler County Community College** received the 2013 Chamber Champion Award.



From left, Joe Gray, recipient of the Entrepreneur of the Year Award, chamber board chairman Tammy Schuey and BC3 President Nicholas Neupauer, with the 2013 Chamber Champion Award, gather Wednesday at the chamber's Celebrate Business Dinner at Slippery Rock University.

About 260 people gathered in the Robert M. Smith Student Center at Slippery Rock University for the chamber's annual Celebrate Business dinner.

Gray, a 1982 Butler High School graduate, earned the entrepreneur award for his extensive involvement in the revitalization of downtown Butler. He also has volunteered for a number of community and municipal groups.

"I would like to take all the credit, but I owe it all to the bank," he said. "No, seriously, the person who should get an award is my wife: my partner, my best friend. ... She's been with me all the way."

Gray also thanked his sons, Evan and Conner, and the award's namesake, late Butler businessman Bill Morgan, who was one of his many mentors.

"I've been lucky in business," he said, explaining it takes a good team to be successful.

"Over the years, I've been fortunate to have more than my fair share of good people around me."

A civil and structural engineer, Gray built an engineering firm before getting involved in real estate during the early 2000s.

He continues to do engineering work through Gray Consulting, but through J&J Properties, which he owns with his wife Jacquelyn, and Evolution Properties, which he owns with partners Jim Taylor and John Ankney, he has renovated several buildings.

His first foray into downtown came in 2004 when he and Jacquelyn bought and began extensive renovations on the former Independent Order of Odd Fellows lodge at the corner of Main and East Cunningham streets. Now called Cornerstone Commons, the building houses the Butler County Bar Association, the Butler Transit Authority, Gateway Engineers, The Grand Ballroom banquet facility and Gray's office.

Through his partnership with Taylor and Ankney, Gray has revamped the Farmers National Bank and Lichty buildings at 232 to 240 S. Main St. Businesses supported in those buildings include Anderson's Common Court Restaurant, as well as new businesses, Element Cafe, Southeast Land Services and a barber shop.

Gray's current project is the Heritage Building at 119-123 W. New Castle St.

Earlier this year, clothing retailer Benjamin Beetle relocated to that site. The building also houses Bauman Photography and Renovo Design, a soon-to-open reupholstering business.

Gray said his next project will be renovating the recently bought three-story building at 113 to 115 W. Jefferson St.

In accepting the Chamber Champion Award on behalf of BC3, college President Nicholas Neupauer played video presentations featuring students and successful alumni.

Next, he cited some of the college's economic impacts.

“Our very existence correlates to reduced welfare, unemployment and crime. It saves the public over \$1.3 million annually,” he said. “Our county of Butler receives about \$16.2 million in net added income each year due to BC3's payroll and operations spending. And our students over the past 30 years have translated into \$180 million in added regional income.”

Overall, and across five locations, BC3 serves more than 5,000 credit students and more than 22,000 people from the community through work force training and personal development.

Tammy Schuey, chairman of the chamber's board of directors, noted some of the organization's highlights this year.

She said the first Technology Symposium held in conjunction with BC3 and the Tri-County Technology Consortium in June paved the way for upcoming educational events for members on subjects such as international trade, emergency preparedness and shale gas drilling.

Another one of the organizations biggest successes was connecting military veterans with prospective employers through the coordination of the Hiring Our Heroes job fair.

She also was proud of chamber affiliates such as Leadership Butler County, which raised nearly \$40,000 for Big Brothers Big Sisters of Butler County.