



The Rambler

Worcester & Central Massachusetts

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Expo'ing

By ROD LEE

"Are you from Maine?" John Tarbox asked. "No," I said. "I get that a lot. We like Maine, though, the Ogunquit and Wells area, Portland too." He had noticed the name of the state in blue block

letters on my lime-green coat. "I'm from Maine," John said. "My first year here, for Leaf Filter." "What do you think of the event?" I said. I had passed people carrying Koopman buckets on their way out of the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce's Home & Community Expo, handed my admission ticket to a volunteer working the entrance booth, stopped at Country Bank's table to enter a drawing for Worcester Red Sox seats that Cameron Morin was pushing and then chatted briefly with David Carlson and Tara Corcoran who were representing Open Sky Community Services. Now John was saying "it's a good show, friendly people." Jeannie Hebert's voice could be heard over the loudspeaker, calling for someone to report somewhere. The noon-hour was approaching. The floor of the gymnasium at Northbridge High School was filled with exhibitors and happy patrons. Activity was in full swing with the Chowder Festival and judging and voting about to occur and a mascot dance-off contest to follow. Kids were invited to catch a leprechaun if they could, for a prize. "If you write a story, please mention the Better Business Bureau folks, they're terrific," John said. "Have you seen the robot dog? You should!" I could tell that John Tarbox was enjoying himself and probably thinking "this was worth the trip."



The Feature Story

The USPS Blues

By ROD LEE



After his printer stopped working like it should and while he thought about replacing it Duane began visiting the local postal center to have copies of documents made. He was agitated because the arrangement with the maker of the printer still sitting on the desk in his office called for money to be deducted from his checking account periodically to pay for ink cartridges that would arrive by mail and now there was no reason to even need ink.

One morning upon arriving at the postal center to pick up income-tax forms he had sent over to be printed, Duane noticed a familiar face at the counter. He had known Andrea—who likes to be called “Andi”—from her days at the high school when she was the same cordial and outgoing person she is today. Andi had retired years ago and had taken a job as a greeter at Walmart and then a position in the deli and when he was in the store he would go out of his way to see if she was there and wave to her and she would return the gesture with a big smile.

Sometimes they would talk, briefly, and she would ask about his two youngest children. They had loved her, as did other students who had her for English.

Civilization progress was much on Duane’s mind at this particular moment but also that life in his senior years had become more complicated and more difficult. He didn’t understand why this should be the case when it should be simpler and easier.

He took some solace in knowing that the postal center with its array of services was a convenient alternative to the neighbor-



hood post office. He had noticed too that the postal center enjoyed a constant stream of customers for boxes, packing, shipping, receiving, copying and printing, mailbox rentals, mailing and UPS services, shredding, scanning and Fax’ing.

He had even suggested to his wife that a bagful of old paperwork she was contemplating getting rid of could be shredded at the postal center at a cost of just \$1.50 a pound.

“Maybe, but I worry about my identity being stolen,” she said.

Now Duane was saying to Andi “are you coming here as often as me? It seems like it’s once or twice a week.”

“Yes, I stop by pretty frequently. I just sent a package to my sister in Florida,” Andi said.

“What puzzles me is that my neighborhood postmaster is twiddling his thumbs for hours on end while half or more of his business is coming to the postal center,” Duane said. “He doesn’t know what to do with himself. It’s a good thing that he’s friendly and able to engage in long conversations with his customers. If it wasn’t for that, he would be completely bored and he is anyway.”

Andy nodded in agreement.

Duane could see that she was in no hurry to leave.

“Why would an agency like the post office which is losing money cede so much of what it could be handling to a postal center?” Duane said.

“It makes no sense. The post office could be doing all of these very things.”

“Just a matter of time before it goes away, I guess,” Andi said with a shrug. “It’s doing itself no favors by letting the other guy cash in at its expense.”

The previous week Duane had used just such a postal center, on Park Avenue in Worcester, to bail him out of a predicament. He had chauffeured a daughter to the DTA office on Southwest Cutoff so

that she could submit paperwork proving her eligibility for benefits she was reapplying for. It was supposed to be a quick in-and-out but then she was told that DTA’s internet was down. She couldn’t email the form over to DTA.

Duane was waiting for her in the car.

“I have to go to the Social Security office, have it printed there and come back,” the daughter said. She sensed her father’s aggravation.

Duane found a parking spot on Myrtle Street, musing about how hard the most ordinary tasks seemed to have become.

He was surprised to see her walking back immediately.

“The office closed at noon today!” she said.

Duane who knows the city’s business districts well said “we’ll try Minuteman printing on Green Street, that’s the closest.”

They maneuvered their way past snowbanks to the door of the store.

“No walk-ins,” a sign on the door read.

Duane could feel his exasperation increasing.

“The UPS Store on Park Avenue,” he said. “Remember you used that when you lived on Germain Street and June Street.”

At the UPS Store she was directed to a self-serve computer as a way to save time.

Three minutes later she had the printed form in hand.

“We should have come here first,, dad!” she said.

“You’re right,” her father said.■



A son of Rockdale, in the town of Northbridge, Harry Berkowitz recently received the Whitin Community Center's George Marston Whitin award for meritorious support of the non-profit organization.

Including "the Whitinsville crossroads" in the historic district, "I got that pushed through," he said. He has also been a strong champion of the Community Center's acquisition of the nearby Aldrich School, "the town's first high school. The town sold it cheap. What would the town have done with it?" he says, of a building that after undergoing restoration will become a linchpin in the WCC's ever-expanding footprint benefiting Northbridge's young people.

Mr. Berkowitz rallied behind efforts to establish a youth center in Rockdale "from Day One. When the youth center's computers were damaged in a flood "I brought (then-Congressman) Peter Blute in and he got new ones from Dell."

He has regularly featured the Community Center and its executive director, Heather Elster, on TV and radio, promoted Cars in the Park and other activities.

He encouraged the American Legion to make a contribution to the Rockdale Youth Center.

He has made monetary donations to The Gym.

On a night when Shania Ashton, Victoria Waterman, the Fernandes Family, Ryan Parker, Arianna Jordan and Tom Kuik were feted with their respective High Five Employee of the Year, Heather S. Elster Leadership, Denis and Pam LaTour Volunteer of the Year, Charles E. Thompson Youth Volunteer of the Year, Dottie and Danny Salmon Outreach and James M. Knott Sr. Innovation awards, Mr. Berkowitz's own celebratory moment served as the culminating highlight.

As Ms. Elster pointed out in a message to friends and supporters, 2025 was a watershed year from the WCC.

"Thanks to the collective efforts of all individuals, we have been able to reach a milestone of 4215 members, receive awards for the Aquatics, Summer Camp, Fitness and Childcare programs, support the needs of children in our four childcare locations, engage 350 volunteers in our mission, address community needs through collection drives, wellness programs, and community events, raise 85% of our Legacy Capital Campaign goal, renovated the men's and women's locker rooms, completed the new playground in Whitin Park, purchased the Aldrich School building from the town of Northbridge, and selected the general contractor for the major expansion of our award-winning Blackstone Valley Children's Place program into the Aldrich School, all while maintaining a strong financial performance with no deficits during the audit process."

Whatever future successes lie ahead for the Whitin Community Center, Harry Berkowitz is certain to be part of it. ■

The Notebook

Hometown hero

The run of recognition Harry Berkowitz has received in recent months rivals any that a celebrated athlete earns upon hearing chants of "MVP" mount to a crescendo from adoring fans in the bleachers.

The latest such honor occurred on the evening of March 2nd at the annual meeting of the Whitin Community Center, when Mr. Berkowitz—"Berky"—was presented with the George Marston Whitin award for community service.

"Oh, yeah, absolutely," Mr. Berkowitz said on March 11th, when asked if he was surprised by the salute. He was joined at the ceremony by his wife, Linda, their friend Fran Lessard and Joe Mangiacotti from WCRN Radio.

At an event MC'd by George Marston Whitin Memorial Community Association Inc. Chair Bruce Lynskey in "The Gym"—which is also how the WCC is known locally—the full breadth of Mr. Berkowitz's contributions to the facility, to life in his hometown and to the enrichment of the Blackstone Valley was enunciated.

His affiliation and support of the WCC started early and has continued unabated in a number of ways.

"A lot of kids in Rockdale went to St. Peter's and were bused to the Community Center" to swim and for calisthenics. For ten cents you got a towel and a bar of soap," he said. "Both of my kids went to preschool there."

Mr. Berkowitz's appreciation for The Gym has manifested itself in favorable backing offered on its behalf during his years on the Planning Board and the Community Preservation Board in the town of Northbridge, and publicity provided through his "About the Valley" shows on 830 AM and NCTV.

Rambles & Rumbles

O'Connor's; The Menkiti Group;
Janice Mitchell; Tim Wickstrom;
Electric school buses

In those days before Brendan and Claire O'Connor sold O'Connor's there was the feeling of "I will never get closer to a good Irish pub with its welcoming warmth than this." There was Brendan hard at work in his shirt and tie and the lavish lunches he put out for the North Worcester Business Association and the bar jumping with music and the annual birthday toast with a friend over a pint of Guinness and finally the evening of a retirement party from the Telegram & Gazette and Brendan saying "let me show to the room you want to be in, Mr. Lee" and escorting my wife and I there. What's left now that the new owners have closed O'Connor's is an understanding that the secret ingredient of Brendan O'Connor's success was his awareness of the city and the politicians and lawyers and doctors and other movers and shakers who made it tick and yes the way he took care of regular folk who thronged into the place day and night.

On a night that included the admonition "put potholes before bike lanes!" and testimony that construction of a new police station is "a no brainer" there was also a call to "stop treating the WPD as a sacred cow" and with that complaints about systemic racism and a confusing trash removal system and then there was Mauro DePasquale hat in hand (figuratively) pleading for money for WCCA—"a civic asset" facing "critical funding issues" if City Council doesn't act. Nothing however could top the sight of Kate Toomey in brilliant pink and green saying "I come from a union family, my dad was a glazer" while asserting that concerns about The Menkiti Group's labor issues involved with rehabilitation of the former Shack's building should not stop the project from moving forward.



Janice Mitchell (sixth from left) and fellow wonder women.

Peter Dunn defending the vetting process and Gary Rosen saying that creation of forty-eight new apartments, five of which will be deemed affordable, probably amounts to "a tiny dent" but a necessary one to help ease Worcester's housing plight.

"I was surprised for sure," Janice Mitchell said in a text message, in announcing that she will be recognized at the Wachusett Area Chamber of Commerce's Salute Breakfast at the West Boylston Senior Center on April 1. Ms. Mitchell attributes the honor to "seven presentations since 2022 for the veterans, donating my poppy (painting) and the poem In Flanders Fields." Janice's texts come unexpectedly and often and bring a comment from the other person in the room "why is she always pestering you" but I think "if only she could know Janice, know her pride of accomplishment as a realtor in Holden, know the effort she puts into everything she does including being seen as a fashion plate and an upstanding businesswoman with a strong sense of community. If only she could appreciate how esteemed Janice is. Then should too would cheer as Ms. Mitchell is celebrated along with Desiree Norquist of Rutland, the Keep Holden Beautiful Committee and Public Safety Person of the Year Officer Justin Lawlor and K-9 Storm of the Rutland Police Department."

"I won't shake hands, I've got a cold," Tim Wickstrom said. The greeting came at 60 Church Street in downtown Whitinsville in preparation for a meeting with Anya Wilczynski and Donna Williams to discuss how the Wickstrom Morse lawyering family and the Arthur R. Taft Memorial Trust with which the Wickstroms are involved might be able to support the Blackstone Heritage Corridor's Legacy Campaign. "I have not set foot in this building since the early 1990s," I said. "I cannot believe what you have done with the place." Mr. Wickstrom smiled as I marveled aloud about space that bore no resemblance to the one I had occupied as editor of the *Blackstone Valley Tribune*. We adjourned to a table in the conference room, which was previously the sales department and Tim waited while I admired the dark wood paneling and the book cases enclosed in glass and the Norman Rockwell paintings on the wall. "If only the people I worked with could see this now," I thought.

News from Dan O'Brien that the Worcester Public Schools would begin rolling out twenty full-size electric school buses the week of March 2nd came about the same time that granddaughter Caitlin bemoaned a stiff electric bill she and her husband Nathan received for the older home in Putnam they purchased a few years ago. In Worcester's case electric carries good vibes as a step toward reducing the district's carbon emissions, in alignment with the city's Green Worcester Plan. WPS is now in its fourth year of operating buses without third-party companies, "which has greatly increased on-time performance and cost efficiency." Superintendent Brian E. Allen says "WPS remains a statewide leader in school bus transportation and adding electric buses is a natural extension of that." ■