

# Centre County's entrepreneurial spirit is as dynamic as its landscape

By Lesley Kistner

Being somewhat new to the area, Leadership Centre County has provided me – and my fellow class members – with a more well-rounded appreciation of the area, its opportunities and its challenges.

The objective of Economy Day was to gain a better understanding of the local economy and ongoing economic development initiatives.

At first glance, an agenda that included discussions about **global and national economic trends**, and innovation and entrepreneurial activity taking place in and around Penn State University seemed in stark contrast to an afternoon spent visiting a working farm and a quaint small town on the verge of revitalization. In retrospect, the day reinforced the notion that what it means to be an entrepreneur in Centre County is as dynamic as its landscape.

In downtown State College, we toured Happy Valley LaunchBox, the university's new pre-accelerator/co-working space created to help develop concepts into business start-ups. We learned more about the five initial teams currently working to transform their ideas into successful business ventures.

From there, we visited the New Leaf Initiative, a co-working space/ideation hub located in the State College Borough Building.

LaunchBox and New Leaf are not the only entrepreneurial development initiatives in a county known for its rich business incubation history and its strong entrepreneurial ecosystem. However, they are excellent examples of the collective community's commitment to nurturing home-grown companies.

After leaving the populous Center Region, it was then on to bucolic Penns Valley, with a population of less than 10,000 within a 100-square mile area, and where agriculture's economic importance is evident.

What we were reminded of here is that not every business gets its start in an incubator, co-space, or collaboration hub. Some new business ventures are launched out of necessity to maintain one's own economic livelihood and preserve a way of life.

This is what we discovered at Stone Meadow Farm in Woodward, where owner/operator Brian Futhey is a purveyor of raw milk artisanal cheeses and grass fed beef. Futhey grew up with farming, inheriting his current farmstead. Looking for ways to make a better return on his investment in the difficult, seemingly endless work of farming, Futhey choose to take up the craft of artisan cheese-making. He attended seminars and later brought in an expert from Wisconsin to learn how to make different varieties. Today, Futhey sells his artisanal cheese at three farmers markets each week, and provides cheese to local businesses, such as the popular Elk Creek Café in nearby Millheim.

Still other businesses spring up when professional expertise and passion for community merge. That is the case in the charming town of Millheim for the McCrackens: Erin – a musician – and her husband, John, a builder. Together, they are proprietors of the Bremen Town Ballroom, an event space that bring hundreds of visitors into town. The same owners also remodeled the nearby UpTexas Chapel, which complements events at the Bremen Town Ballroom.

“You can do anything you want, anywhere you want” is how Erin assessed the spirit of entrepreneurship that is occurring throughout Centre County.

The takeaway for current and future leaders is that the community must work together to ensure that new business ventures, as well as established business, have the proper tools to succeed. In part, this means filling the gaps within the economic development continuum, so that businesses emerging from accelerators and incubators can continue to grow. It means creating a climate that allows businesses across all industry sectors to efficiently operate. It means focusing on keeping young talent here.

The good news is that many in the collective community are working collaboratively on these and related issues. It is exciting to think what future LCC Economy Day programs days might entail!

*Submitted by Lesley Kistner, vice president of communications/marketing for the Chamber of Business & Industry of Centre County, and a member of Leadership Centre County Class of 2016. For more information about Leadership Centre County, go to [www.leadershipcentrecounty.org](http://www.leadershipcentrecounty.org).*