

S-W Chamber Celebrates Business Community's Successes

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Sarah Wright

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By Sarah Wright
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SYRACUSE — After a year of separation in light of the pandemic, the Syracuse-Wawasee Chamber of Commerce gathered local businesses together to celebrate their accomplishments despite 2020's adversities during its chamber dinner Thursday, March 25, at Oakwood Resort's Event Center. More than once, speakers highlighted the Syracuse community's perseverance and ability to thrive.

Chamber Executive Director Renea Salyer noted last year's theme had been Vision 20/20. "It turned out a little different than (that vision)," she mused. "But after what happened, everyone pulled together and showed who we really are."

The evening drove home that fact. A highlight reel showcased 2020's Syracuse Strong activities, which had been launched to support local businesses and residents impacted by the pandemic. Salyer spotlighted community members' support of local restaurants and businesses, adding very few buildings are sitting empty in Syracuse at the moment, thanks to that support. "We all know how to live seasonably," she stated.

Dinner sponsors were Miller's Merry Manor, ProWake Watersports and Bowen Center, and the chamber showed Clear Vision Media videos featuring them throughout the night.

The night proved interactive as well, with comedian Rick Reader drawing laughs with his routine, which drew in several audience members. Brad Harris of Miller's Merry Manor also required audience participation during his presentation. He instructed all audience members to close their eyes and fold a piece of paper before tearing specified corners. If any two audience members ended up with identical sheets of paper, they would have been given \$1,000. Despite receiving the same instructions and being faced with the same problem, no one in the audience had papers alike.

Harris continued to speak on how communities can become strong, in particular spotlighting givers and positive thinkers.

"Givers provide and inject energy and enthusiasm," Harris said, noting that positive thinkers will likewise uphold, encourage and support others, leading the charge in 2021.

Individuals, businesses and organizations received honors throughout the night, too. Syracuse-Wawasee Trail's recent completion of the Conklin Bay Boardwalk and focus on health were noted as it was named Organization of the Year, an award sponsored by Miller's

Merry Manor. New Business of Year, an award sponsored by ProWake Watersports, went to Mug Shots Coffeehouse and Eatery for its creative marketing during the pandemic. Volunteer of the Year, sponsored by Bowen Center, was awarded Beth Recktenwall for her work at New Hope Pet Rescue.

Sponsored by Lake City Bank, the Small Business of the Year award went to Coffee Depot, noted for its drive-thru, baked goods and warm beverages. POLYWOOD claimed Large Business of the Year, sponsored by The Regional Chamber of Northeast Indiana; its recent expansion was highlighted in addition to its durable, recycled plastic furniture.

Outgoing board member Erick Leffler was also honored by chamber board President Dennis Pressler, who noted Leffler's commitment to the Syracuse community as part of the Rotary Club, as a coach and as a board member on local boards. Leffler has served on the chamber board from 2015 through 2020.

Salyer was also honored by the Shop Local Network. "The community has an incredible person here with Renea," Nick Bello of Shop Local Network said, noting her efforts brought a \$125,000 grant to the Syracuse-Wawasee Chamber of Commerce. "We've given a lot of (video) vouchers out and are working with some (businesses) currently (on videos)."

Bello gave Salyer a Community Champion award for her efforts.

"I've never gotten anything like this before," Salyer said of the award.

It was noted that more Shop Local Network video vouchers are available to local small businesses, and they can be picked up by contacting Salyer.

Salyer also shared a new program — Local Bucks — that the chamber will be launching soon. "We have 10 businesses participating so far," she said, noting work is underway to secure more participants. Through the program, people will be able to purchase gift certificates, which can be used at participating businesses — supporting them.

"There are really great businesses in this community," Salyer said, echoing the night's sentiments.