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Berkshire County chooses its best, brightest

Annual contest highlights who's tip-tops in commerce and services across the region

By Noah Hoffenberg
Eagle sponsored content editor

PITTSFIELD — What does it take to be the best in the Berkshires?

If you're talking about the Best of the Berkshires contest, it takes more than 20,000 votes of confidence and appreciation, of course!

This year's nomination entries flowed fast and furiously into The Eagle over the past month, with print and digital ballots being cast in 197 categories, says Kate Teutsch, director of advertising services for The Eagle. Lots of ballots were dropped off in person at The Eagle's offices, too.

"People who live and work here really make an effort for this contest," says Teutsch.

Four of this year's winners of the Best of the Berkshires contest — the Animal Inn of the Berkshires, Berkshire Roots, Lee Bank, and Berkshire Bike and Board — are no strangers to the contest, having won Best-of honors in years past.

In addition to their commitment to their employees and customers, these four are also committed to the greater Berkshire community and what makes our region special, one of the reasons why they stepped up to sponsor the 2020 contest.

Here's a little window into who they are and what motivates them to make lives better for the people (and animals) of the Berkshires:



BERKSHIRE ROOTS

Opened in 2018, Berkshire Roots on Dalton Avenue in Pittsfield quickly established a dedicated customer base because of its warm and welcoming employees and atmosphere — and a reputation for exceptional cannabis for medical patients and adult-use customers.

Holly Alberti, senior director of marketing at Berkshire Roots, credits the dedication of her co-workers in how they help their customers in landing a Best of award for the second year in a row.

"It's an absolute honor. We are 100 percent grateful that the community used their voice to say they appreciate us. It's a warm feeling," says Alberti. "It's a nice hug back in the COVID world we're all experiencing, and we appreciate it."

"We pride ourselves on the highest level of customer service, knowledge and education, creating a welcoming and one-of-a-kind experience at our Pittsfield cannabis destination. We are dedicated to elevating all we do, from our product quality, innovative creations, job opportunities and community outreach."

When Alberti talks about Berkshire Roots and community, what she means is the business, at its core, is about bettering the lives of people in the Berkshires, East Boston — the business' second site that opened earlier this year — and beyond.

In Berkshire County, the company has partnered with Berkshire Community College to offer a cooperative work-study program, in which aspiring cannabis students learn directly on the job at Berkshire Roots in Pittsfield. The curriculum also includes classroom and lab-style instruction.

"The hands-on training comes with an opportunity for full-time work with Berkshire Roots," says Alberti, noting that six such students have already been hired and a new cohort is in the middle of the fall semester now.

Berkshire Roots also works with Mass CultivatED, an advocacy group, aligned with Roxbury Community College to employ and train people



PROVIDED PHOTOS

The team at Lee Bank serves a community meal in 2019, before the coronavirus. The bank won the best workplace and mortgage lender categories in the 2020 Best of the Berkshires contest. Each year, about 5 percent of Lee Bank's annual earnings are reinvested directly back into the community in the form of donations and sponsorships. To see the full array of winners, visit bestofberk.berkshireeagle.com.

who have a federal record for cannabis-related crimes. This eight-week paid program allows folks who have been disproportionately affected by the war on drugs an opportunity in the cannabis industry.

"We currently have two fellows in the program. CultivatED provides legal support to assist in expunging the students' records, too," says Alberti.

Berkshire Roots and its staff continue to give every month to local charities, committing itself to the local community. Beneficiaries have included the Thanksgiving Angels, Berkshire Immigrant Center, the local and Boston chapters of the NAACP, Berkshire County Community Action, among others, and Soldier On will be getting some financial help from the business in December.

LEE BANK

Another past winner (a few times over) in the Best of the Berkshires contest, Lee Bank again rose to the top in 2020 in the best workplace and mortgage lender categories.

The formula for success, says bank President Chuck Leach, is that "we empower employees, customers and the community by delivering local banking with the highest level of service sincerity and simplicity. This is what we live by at Lee Bank."

Now in his sixth year as president of the bank, Leach says that everyone at the bank is especially proud of this year's wins. Being named best employer for the fourth year in a row and adding the distinction of best mortgage lender in 2020 is certainly a boost to morale. "It's a huge honor, given how the mortgage market has been unbelievably busy this year," notes Leach.

"Because of the coronavirus, a lot of people are buying and spending in the Berkshires, through relocations here, turning their vacation homes into permanent residences and renovating homes and home offices; the extra commerce helps the community," says Leach.

As a private corporation, Lee Bank doesn't need to worry about its stock price, which leaves plenty of room to be a business that cares about the county and its residents. Each year, about 5 percent of the bank's annual earnings are reinvested directly back into the community in the form of donations and sponsorships.

To be the best, Lee Bank uses a strategy of enhanced customer service that leaves an emotional imprint with customers, such that it's an experience versus a mere transaction; customers are our neighbors, friends and family, he notes.

"It all starts with the employee. If they're not engaged and feeling good about the organization, it's impossible to serve and support our customers and community at the highest level," says Leach.

He says the bank always is looking at innovation, adaptation and change in its products and policies, too, to make sure that Lee Bank offers the



Berkshire Bike and Board co-owner Steffen Root takes the to the roads with his wife and child, using electric-assisted bikes and a trailer; Root says e-bikes are making cycling in the Berkshires accessible to everyone. Berkshire Bike and Board took Best-of honors again in 2020, further establishing itself as place to go for the region's cycling community.



A typical play date is underway at the Animal Inn of the Berkshires; the players, clockwise from lower left, are Millie, a black and tan hound, Sully the golden retriever, Dallas (all black), Tucker the yellow Labrador and Lucy. The Animal Inn of the Berkshires took Best of the Berkshires honors in 2020.



Berkshire Roots employees load food into vehicles while volunteering during the Thanksgiving Angels event. Berkshire Roots is one of the Best of the Berkshires winners and sponsors.

best possible employment and banking experiences.

"We're constantly trying to think of new ways to support our employees and make them feel empowered, so they can pass that empowerment along to our customers and community," says Leach.

In addition to having a work environment that feels good and is safe, the bank also gives employees above-average benefits, including incentive-based compensation

plans, with a generous payout at the end of the year; access to tutoring services for employees' children who are struggling with remote learning; college savings; a student loan debt payoffdown programs; and opportunities to attend and support local events and organizations, just to name a few.

"If our team is concerned about the relationship they have with their employer, I think they're less inclined

tells The Eagle.

These days, it's Petersoli who's smiling, checking off another Best of win in the books.

"I think it's awesome. It makes me feel really good to know that we are doing the best to make Animal Inn the best in the Berkshires, and it's paying off," says Petersoli.

She gives much of the credit to her staff of eight, some of whom are lifelong professionals in animal husbandry and care.

Walk-ins are welcome at the Animal Inn, and pet owners can arrange for curbside drop-off and pick-up.

COVID-19 safety measures are in place at 120 Hubbard Ave. at the Dalton line, so masked visitors can drop in anytime during business hours with questions or for a quick canine hair and nail trim.

BERKSHIRE BIKE AND BOARD

Since 1999, Berkshire natives Dave Clark and Steffen Root have owned Berkshire Bike and Board, first solely in Great Barrington and then expanding into the Pittsfield market in 2013.

What spurred this small business to take Best of the Berkshires honors this year and in a half-dozen others? One word, says Root: "Community."

"Our success, I think, boils down to community. We're doing rides, we're doing group events, clinics, we're intricately involved in the Berkshire Mountain Bike Training Series in Springside Park. We're doing things that our competition is not doing," says Root. "It took a few years to get set up and planted in Pittsfield, and now we've really established ourselves."

Root says as soon as the Pittsfield site opened, that kicked off a run of Best of the Berkshires wins; he credits that location with much of the company's success, as well as great customer service and employees who are passionate about cycling.

These days, the challenge is maintaining inventory: COVID-19, while adversely affecting many businesses, has had the opposite effect on the bike industry, as homebound people across the country have taken up healthy activities alongside work-from-home jobs.

"We're working with small margins. This is the first year we've had a little breathing room," says Root. "We're still apprehensive on what's to come. Yes, it's been good, but we're fighting for what we have. Inventory is thin. The whole supply chain has been strained. We've left a lot of money on the table."

He expects the scarcity of bikes to continue until fall of next year. Along the way, he says "the competition" will be not only with other bike shops, but also with any enterprise that's keyed in on people's free time, from video games to gardening.

"We're fighting over discretionary income," says Root.

In 2021, both Berkshire Bike and Board locations expect to be selling good numbers of electric bikes, or e-bikes. Not mopeds or motorized bikes, these are regular bikes that have a mechanized drive to assist the pedaler.

Root says these e-bikes come in all imaginable styles, from fat bikes to bikes better suited for commuting or rail trails.

"It's a great equalizer for that person who may have ridden when they were younger but gave it up. With e-bikes, barriers are melted away," says Root.

For anyone who might've been hesitant about the energy needed to enjoy the Berkshire hills by bike, "now there's no hill you can't go up," notes Root.

Bike and Board is also equipped to help you stay fit through the winter, not with a traditional stationary bike but rather with an interactive experience that puts you virtually side by side with thousands of fellow riders from across the world, says Root.

"When someone goes by you, you dig a little harder. It tricks the mind into a great workout," says Root.

to put down roots. As a true community bank, it's in our DNA to support and stabilize our community and economy. All community banks, not just Lee Bank, stand behind this philosophy and being a good employer is just one piece of the puzzle as we pursue and support our purpose," says Leach.

ANIMAL INN OF THE BERKSHIRES

With the droppoff in business trips and vacations that came with COVID-19, Shannon Petersoli watched as her business — Animal Inn of the Berkshires — shifted away markedly from overnight care to doggie (and some feline) day care.

Going into a normal Thanksgiving, the business usually has 80 overnight guests, but this year wasn't even close, says Petersoli, down to about 20.

"We're fortunate to have the day care part of the business," she says.

Even with the changes, she's kept her boarding and grooming pet business operating at a level high enough to earn it Best of the Berkshires honors.

The Animal Inn has been a mainstay in the area for 40 years; Petersoli worked there before buying the business five years ago. And like the other Best of winners in this article, Petersoli's Animal Inn also has garnered Best of praises in the past, as well as similar plaudits from a Pittsfield group for a number of years in a row.

A big part of her success is how customers' fur babies are treated while at the Animal Inn, as well as the transparency of their operations, says Petersoli.

"We actually care, and we show that we care," says Petersoli. "We're detailed about what's going with the dogs when they go home with customers."

A difference between other doggy day care sites and the Animal Inn, is that animal guests go outside an average of four to five times a day, playing with staff and other dogs. If you visit the Animal Inn's Facebook page, in photos you can see that the dogs are happy, with many sporting smiles.

"We do birthday parties for the dogs when owners let us know it's their day," Petersoli

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