

ETHIE Awards go to four Rochester-area organizations

An advocacy agency for kids, a membrane-switch manufacturer, an architecture/engineering firm and a wealth advisory practice each received a 2022 ETHIE Award at a ceremony held at St. John Fisher University on Wednesday, Dec. 7. Presented by Elevate Rochester, the ETHIE Awards recognize high ethical standards and behavior in area organizations.

The Children's Agenda drives policies to make kids successful Leaders at The Children's Agenda — an agency that advocates for effective policies and drives evidence-based solutions for the health, education and success of children — want to empower Rochester's parents. Outcomes for children, they say, depend on parent engagement: to be at the table when decisions are made, to influence decision-makers and to assume part of the leadership role that the organization strives to maintain in the community.

Inside the organization, making these goals a reality is down to Carmen Torres, parent advocacy manager at The Children's Agenda. Torres is the heart of the work, building Very Invested Parents, a group of about 40 who are consistently active in The Children's Agenda initiatives. "Carmen is so authentic in these relationships, and that truly embodies the values and ethics we have established for our organization," said Stephanie Townsend, communications director for The Children's Agenda. "She holds the rest of us accountable as we are working on policy initiatives or strategies, to remain consistent with what parents are saying they need for their children."

One example of the impact and influence The Children's Agenda has in the Rochester community is the organization's advocacy for investments in youth mental health in the Rochester City School District budget. The investments the coalition asked for prioritized equity by seeking to ensure that mental health initiatives met the shared needs of students in every school building and were tailored to the unique needs of multilingual learners and students with special education needs. As the budget process unfolded, The Children's Agenda persistently called for more transparency and accountability, pointing out information that was not provided in the district's budget book.

The five pillars of The Children's Agenda's strategic plan — advocacy for accountability; systemic change and alignment;

racial equity and inclusion; communicating our brand; and organizational capacity — inform the annual goals the organization sets each year for policy initiatives and organizational development.

Just as The Children's Agenda holds government to high standards of transparency and accountability, they keep themselves to the same strict measure. They stay on track through monthly reviews of performance dashboards that track key performance indicators including indicators for racial equity. The dashboards serve as objective checks on how they are doing, revealing areas where the agency is achieving its goals, as well as where they are falling short of expectations.

To help put this vision into action, employees such as Torres are living those values. "Carmen has fostered an environment where many different parents have a voice, they all are part of the solution, and no one person is given priority over another," said Townsend. "That attitude embodies the empowerment ethos that we are really trying to foster."

A newer initiative at The Children's Agenda is to poll Rochester and Monroe County parents twice each year for three years to determine the needs of children and families, and the solutions that they support. Not every parent can join an advisory group, so this method will help discover how families believe that government can be helpful to them. "Budgets are value statements," Townsend asserts, and The Children's Agenda is watching, learning and advocating for the community's families.

"In the end," Townsend concluded, "everything we do is based on values and ethics. We are working with each other, with parents, and in various coalitions, and it doesn't just come down to agreeing on a set of tactics, say legislative meetings versus public protests, but it always must be how we stay true to our deep ethical obligation to children, and making values-based decisions."

JN WHITE HONORS ETHICAL WORK, SMALL-TOWN VALUES

James Neel White, the founder of his namesake company, admired bees. He was fond of saying that those insects can carry twice their own weight, and that they are impressive, hard workers. White's fondness for bees extended to his company where, shortly after founding it in 1960, he created the Bee Award, an honor that recognizes employees who strongly ex-



Pam Carmichael, screen printer at JN White, inspects print quality after applying a selective texture to a graphic overlay.

hibit one or more of the organization's values. Any employee may nominate any other one for the honor.

In the manufacture of membrane switches and related products, the processes used at JN White call for high precision and relentless quality. There's pressure to execute flawlessly at each step, so the company's ethical standards are meant in part to smooth out the conflict between superior quality and timely production. The Bee Award often recognizes employees who successfully juggle those goals.

When two JNW employees — assemblers Lynn Davis and Amanda Kantrowski — volunteered to work on a Saturday to fulfill a customer order on time, they inspired others to respond in kind. Sheldon Omans, maintenance specialist, and Casey Golde, manufacturing technician, showed up as well to complete the laser printing required for the order. The group was Bee Award-nominated by Jerry DellaPietra, vice president of operations.

Two years ago, JNW acquired ECI Technologies, a Connecticut-based company that added 30 employees to JNW's existing 100. "One of the major factors that attracted us to ECI was their culture," said Britani Glover, marketing coordinator at JN White. "Their owner fostered a strong company culture that was a close match to ours — including both internal policies and their approach to community service. Even so, we respected their corporate identity, so the result of the acquisition wasn't to make them a clone of JN White. They still maintain the culture that built them into a strong company on their own," Glover stated.

Ask someone on the JNW production floor about the company's specific values, and they will know, Glover asserts. The company's Mission, Vision and Values statement — established by the founder's son, Randy White, in 1989 — have taken full root and provided helpful guidelines for decades. More than the other tenets, JNW leaders have emphasized the stated value of Working with Integrity to be central to the company's successful operations.

During the pandemic, JNW leaders expanded their manufacturing capabilities to produce face shields, a critical component in the health care industry's need for personal protective equipment. What's more, the company donated a portion of its face shield income to the United Way Crisis Fund.

Perhaps nothing illustrates JNW's nurturing culture more than its community garden. With ample land adjacent to its Perry, Wyoming County, headquarters building, team members tend to a vegetable garden each summer while on break or after work. The company provides all needed tools and other materials, and the bounty of the garden is available to all. "Anybody can take food from it," Glover explained. "People literally take bags of tomatoes home for their families. It contributes to that small-town attitude where everyone has your back, and JN White is just a reflection of that."

LABELLA ASSOCIATES HAS DESIGNS ON IMPROVING COMMUNITIES

At LaBella Associates, a multi-discipline architecture and engineering firm with key service offerings in buildings, energy, infrastructure and environmental, the firm's core values of honesty and integrity, stewardship of resources, employee leadership, and growth, are inherent in all of its operations.

"Our core values are very much embedded in everything we do; it's as routine as brushing your teeth every day," said Susan Wylie, director of government affairs and community relations for LaBella. "It's not so much about what our leaders proactively do, but in many cases what they don't do. Transparency is high, and there are no hidden agendas, so that makes for a very sincere, candid organization," she said.

It's a commonly held notion at LaBella that what gets celebrated, gets repeated. To live that mantra, the company has established a set of recognition programs that encourage managers to recognize when people are demonstrating the company's core values. In addition, LaBella maintains a continual focus on strong leadership in all aspects of the company — internally and externally. This plays out in a number of critical ways that encourage the personal growth of employees and provide benefits to the community.

LaBella in the Community (LINC) is a firm-wide, employee-run initiative that fosters corporate citizenship. LINC leaders identify volunteer opportunities, involving a combination of person-hours and monetary donations, and they coordinate employee involvement in those activities to benefit a wide range of charitable organizations. Through LINC, LaBella employees have made meaningful contributions of time and resources on efforts such as food drives, holiday gift-giving, clean-up and improvement of parks and highways, and many other initiatives for the betterment of communities.

Recognizing the importance of issues of diversity and inclusion, LaBella's employee-run Inclusion Council has wide-ranging authority to assess, plan and cultivate initiatives within the firm and the communities in which LaBella works. This effort has already garnered tangible results, particularly through employee education and information-sharing, and support of community initiatives with a focus on inclusion. Similarly, recognizing that diverse populations are significantly underrepresented in the design industry, the firm has applied its expertise on a volunteer basis to lead a design-industry introductory program for students at the Eugenio Maria de Hostos Charter School in Rochester.

In recent years, LaBella has undertaken a growth path that involves acquiring other companies, which in each instance inevitably raises the question of how well two corporate cultures might match. "We actually have difficulty trying to convince people that we are as transparent as we are, because they almost can't believe it," said Beth Curran, director of marketing for LaBella. "Acquisitions are often filled with trepidation for those new employees, but we focus on our shared values and are able to set a very positive tone right from the beginning," she stated.

Now with more than 1,400 employees, LaBella is able to make a greater positive impact on communities than ever before. As an employee-owned company, employees are empowered and incentivized to pursue, and excel in, initiatives that optimize its expertise and promote growth of the firm. In addition, with committed principles on philanthropic giving, LaBella strives to foster creativity and innovation in building a better tomorrow.

AT NOCON AND ASSOCIATES, WEALTH ISN'T JUST ABOUT MONEY

After 38 years as a professional investment advisor, Nannette Nocon, leader of Nocon and Associates, operates a highly successful private wealth practice based in part on one key tactic: More client connections lead to greater satisfaction and better business results. In other words, it's far less about the dollars than it is about the people.

Nocon is consistent in her approach, having assembled a small business of about 15 like-minded professionals who adhere to a set of values that drive the company's actions. One of her core values stands out in this age of working from home. "The culture of our team creates a boundary between work and home life, because the team does not have to bring work home," said No-



Chrissy Miller is a member of The Children's Agenda's Very Invested Parents advocacy group.

con. "This boundary allows us to be fully engaged for our clients when we are at work and be present with our loved ones to rest and play when we are at home."

Behind the ethical structure are Nocon's top values — integrity, health, happiness, friendship, ethics and meaningful work. The application of those tenets play out in a variety of ways, even beyond the many rules, regulations and ethics of the financial industry.

To accommodate a time of rapid growth, Nocon contemplated purchasing an adjacent office condominium. Unfortunately, the then-owners were not interested in a sale, but they eventually would soften. Armed with a set of pricing and

trend data provided by a Realtor, who was not involved with the sale transaction, Nocon again approached the neighbor with an offer, and this time they accepted. "Once this happened, I felt as if I really should pay the Realtor," Nocon recalled. "Because he had done the analysis work, it turned out to be very cost effective for us, because we didn't have to move to expand. I compensated the Realtor for his work, and everyone was happy," she said.

Like any business, Nocon is not immune to employee challenges. When one employee was struggling with his stock-trading responsibilities — placing incorrect orders on multiple client accounts — Nocon stepped in to try to understand how it happened. "I don't feel as if someone's home life is my responsibility, but I felt bad for him, so I wrote him a severance check and found him a non-trading position at another brokerage.

"The culture I try to maintain is that everybody helps and teaches everybody," Nocon said. "We have established processes that help people learn and move to the next level, that help people thrive. No one stays where they are. If people aren't progressing, they are likely regressing, and we can't have that. When we know people well, we can help them flourish."

Financial advisors have many training and certifying opportunities, and Nannette Nocon is very willing to assist with those efforts. "I've paid for a lot of designations for people over the years," Nocon recalled, "including master's degrees and certified financial planning training, with no expectations, no golden handcuffs. If in time you don't want to be here and give your best to this team and our clients, then it's time to make a change. I just hope that if they are starting their own brokerage that they are inspired to go out and help other people in the same way. I've sent at least a dozen colleagues into the world better educated and ready for greater leadership. It's OK. There's room for everyone out there."