

THE STAR-HERALD

Pellet plant founder named county's top young entrepreneur

By Mark Putnam

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PRESQUE ISLE — Aroostook County's entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well. This message came through loud and clear during the June 12 annual meeting of northern Maine's two economic development organizations - Aroostook Partnership for Progress and Leaders Encouraging Aroostook Development.

The highlight of the breakfast meeting, attended by more than 100 at the Northern Maine Community College Edmunds Conference Center, was the announcement of Aroostook County's Young Entrepreneur of the Year.

Matthew Bell of Presque Isle, founder and co-owner of Northeast Pellets, LLC of Ashland, was selected for the honor from a pool of 14 nominees.



SUCCESS STORY — Matthew Bell of Presque Isle was selected June 12 as Aroostook County's Young Entrepreneur of the Year during the annual meeting of Aroostook Partnership for Progress and the competition sponsor, Leaders Encouraging Aroostook Development. Bell's company, Northeast Pellets LLC, is currently being rebuilt in Ashland after a devastating fire leveled the manufacturing plant in late March. (Staff photo/Mark Putnam)

"We found a garden growing in northern Maine, rich with young, talented folks," said Ginny Joles of Mapleton, incoming LEAD president and one of four organizers of the Young Entrepreneur competition. "We asked hard questions - who really is running your business, how do you make money, where do you see yourself in five years, what's your exit strategy. Interviews blew our socks off."

During his 5-minute presentation, Bell reviewed highlights of his 4-year-old pellet manufacturing operation which originated from a college business plan assignment and was the first wood pellet facility in Maine. The 29-year-old said his young age and the scale of his project were obstacles to getting his idea off the ground. Nonetheless, at its peak, the company employed 17 workers and produced 400 tons of "renewable energy" in a single week of round-the-clock operation.

Bell traced the timeline of Northeast Pellets, from its formation in 2005, to initial production in 2006, to expansions in 2007 and 2008. In fact, his plant had set a record for output in March, 2009, only days before a devastating fire completely destroyed the business.

Cleanup of the site is now complete and Bell plans to restart the mill in September with "a more sophisticated operation and 25 percent higher production." Through it all, the young businessman has remained focused on his original plan - to make NEP more efficient and profitable than his competitors.

Quoting a Greek philosopher Epictetus, Bell said, "It's not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters."

Finalist Melanie Stewart, owner of MOJO in Presque Isle, credited support from her family and community, in addition to store location, collaboration with Maine Winter Sports Center and other recreation-based organizations, solid product lines and a "fantastic and knowledgeable staff" for helping her business turn a profit in its third year. Her passion, she said, is "getting people moving."

“I was once told that a new business is like a baby ... it requires care 24/7 for many years. This is so true. My dream is that MOJO will still be around in 20-30 years ... with the next generation of Stewarts in charge of course,” she said.

The third finalist, Emily Smith of Presque Isle, described how destiny had placed her in position to take her family business, Smith Farms Inc., into the future. A graduate of NMCC and California Polytechnic State University, Smith has worked her way up since 1997 to general manager of her family’s multi-million dollar fresh produce operation which markets broccoli and other vegetables to grocery store chains throughout the Eastern United States.

Describing a fiercely competitive and ever-changing global marketplace, Smith said destiny had placed her where she is today and she takes the challenge head on with a goal to “grow the company.”

“I used to think farming was the hard part,” Smith said.

Also recognized during the event, were student finalists in the Young Entrepreneur of the Year competition. Jeremiah Sjoberg, a Washburn District High School student who has developed a Web-based photography business, took top honors while Abby Small, a Caribou High School student who operates Small Steps Dance Studio with her younger sister, Paige, was runner-up.

APP President and CEO Walt Elish said while there were no projects to showcase this year, he credited Aroostook County for its record of collaboration and cooperative spirit. “It takes leadership to bring people together,” he said.

Recent national honors for the Maine School of Science and Mathematics in Limestone and interest from a Chinese company in building wind energy components at Loring Commerce Centre were “bright spots,” Elish added.

LEAD President Nathan Berry of Mapleton called the Young Entrepreneur of the Year process, his organization’s proudest moment. In addition to Joles, LEAD officers approved for the 2009-10 term include vice president Jon McLaughlin of Houlton, secretary Linda Smith of Presque Isle, and treasurer Jim Davis of Caribou.

Incoming APP Chairman Chris Anderson of Houlton offered optimism for the year ahead in his closing remarks. Three avenues of opportunity, he said, include networks of knowledge, innovation and access to capital.

“Aroostook County’s strength lies in our foundation of good work ethic, business done by handshake and folks who enjoy a moderate, not extravagant, living standard. Therefore I am confident that in the new economy we can find hope. We have the tools, experience, confidence and know-how to make Aroostook County the best place on earth to live, work and play,” he said.



RECOGNIZED as promising young businesspeople during the June 12 annual meeting of Aroostook Partnership for Progress and Leaders Encouraging Aroostook Development at the NMCC campus were Abby Small of Small Steps Dance Studio in Caribou and Washburn’s Jeremiah Sjoberg, who runs a Web-based photography studio. Making the presentations were Nathan Berry, left, and Ginny Joles, officers with the LEAD organization, which sponsored the competition. (Staff photo/Mark Putnam)