

Northern New York community podcasts. Stories from the heart of our community.

Max Delsignore: Hi folks, and welcome to the northern New York community podcast, I'm your host Max Delsignore. We have a great episode in store for you. In this edition of the podcast we had to Lewis County to talk about philanthropies overall impact in the region, influential figures that have promoted and demonstrated charitable giving, and why this specific area boasts genuine spirit for community betterment. We are fortunate to have to Lewis County residents with us to touch on these topics and more, Don Hunt and Joe Widrick each have unique stories behind their participation in community philanthropy but they will also change how grasshopper baseball helped forge their lifelong friendship. Don and Joe thanks for being on the podcast with us.

Donald Hunt: Thank you for having us.

Max Delsignore: To start, very excited to hear your stories about philanthropy in Lewis County and philanthropy I think sometimes can be a scary word to the public I think it has a meaning that may not necessarily be clear to most. Obviously philanthropy is not just what you give financially but your time, your talent, your resources, strengths you put into a community. What do you see as the culture of philanthropy in Lewis County given the time that you resided in that area?

Joseph Widrick: My experience has been any projects I would have been involved in, it's usually pretty easy, there's a number of people I can call on that usually get some responses. And one of the things that I find is most of them are in my age bracket which is something we'll probably be talking about later.

Donald Hunt: Which is old.

Joseph Widrick: Which is old.

Max Delsignore: You guys aren't that old.

Joseph Widrick: To get younger people involved.

Donald Hunt: I echo that. There is some good organizations that – you can't say getting along in the tooth but they use are having trouble keeping up the numbers. It falls to viewer and. Members to try to maintain the activity and the funding for it and it's a little bit scary in some things. How do you get younger people involved, and if you can get them excited they'll come along. But there is that out there that is a trend that needs addressing, needs to be worked on.

Max Delsignore: Is there a local organization in Lewis County or even a community group that has sent a pretty good job or is doing a good job of capturing that younger generation or at least trying to instill some more of that volunteerism into them?

Donald Hunt: Oh yeah. Off the top of our head, the Lewis County fair, they are in their 196th year and they have an amazing cadre of volunteers that comes into town, just one week a year but there's a lot of work that goes on before and after. And the funding and that of it. They get us all involved in one way or another and they've had some really good leaders. Doctor Hare O'Connor was one that just passed away but his successor Doug Hanno. There is a long list of ones before that, but they've kept the agricultural flair as a flair's affair. You talk if you go around the grounds during that weekend you see people from away and they say I'm from this county or from up north but we bring our kids to Lewis County fair, this is still a fair, it's family-oriented and we can enjoy it here.

Joseph Widrick: There is quite a few younger generation involved in that. That's one of the areas, I think probably one of the areas there's more younger generation involved in a lot of the others.

Donald Hunt: Part of it is because they are tied to the school, they share the ballfields and that kind of thing so there is a younger element that's tied to the fair than maybe some others. It's a lot of work for one week with the continuities there and they are able to excite the community. Down the other end of the county there's the Boonville Black River Museum. Museums usually think of as old and haven't been around well, but they are in there if I'm right just about 10 years. They started that on the edge of the canal they are in Boonville, a dedicated group. They wanted to build a canal boat and build the buildings to go along with it and every year you go down through there, they are adding something to it and it's a great thing for the kid or youth element is good to it, you can go in there and play with the canal boat and learn how a lock works. It's a great place. Ed Finamore and his crew down there, they just keep going. You'd have to tell him but I don't know how many kids involved in that. You can go by I think it's Tuesday morning and see all the cars in the lot there and they are having their board meeting to get ready for what they're going to do next. It's worth a visit every other year, every year as far as that goes.

Max Delsignore: Don, you mentioned ballfields I think that's a good segue. You and Joe met on a baseball field playing grasshopper when you were younger. Tell us the story about how you guys first became friends or teammates I guess in this respect.

Donald Hunt: Well it's about 19...

Joseph Widrick: You don't want to tell them that date.

Donald Hunt: Anyway, it's Lowville in the 1946 to 50 area. Kiwanis is sponsoring grasshopper baseball. Which was predated Little League and we didn't have any fancy uniforms or anything else but we played during the summer. That's where we met and then I went on to Glenn field, left Glenn field, graduated from General Martin, played ball there. I didn't hook up again with Joe until after we were both grown, I came back here to practice as a CPA and Joe was working on his family business and we reacquainted after quite a long period of time, after 15 years. It didn't take us long to get back together and we've been working similar organizations from then until now.

Max Delsignore: Was Don a good baseball player? I'd have to put him on the spot.

Joseph Widrick: He was a left-handed pitcher, a very good pitcher and through a lot of curveballs.

Max Delsignore: I promise there won't be any more curveballs the rest of the interview. Joe, tell me a little bit about where you grew up, too. As Don stated you met when you were younger, when your separate paths, graduated school, started in family business. For the listener share a little bit about your back story.

Joseph Widrick: Grew up in the big city of Croghan, New York. From there we moved to Lowville, graduated from Lowville school, my dad started the John Deere business in 1938 and I got involved in that with my brother in 1964, 1962 actually and he and I bought my father out about 1968 and it's been passed on to a third generation in 1983 and now it's recently been sold in 2000... About four years ago, it's recently sold. I have four children, two boys, two girls, two of them in this area, one of them's in Texas and one is in Pennsylvania. I have a lovely wife, Shirley who we've been married for 57 years.

Max Delsignore: I will ask how you met Shirley but if you want to share you can.

Joseph Widrick: She was a blind date. She was blind... Now, she had never met me but a friend of hers asked me to go out with her or asked her to go out with me and she agreed. The rest is history.

Max Delsignore: That's right. Now Don, you said you were born in Watertown, correct?

Donald Hunt: Yeah, I was born here in Watertown. I was a good Samaritan when it looked a lot different than it does now. But we moved to Lewis County when I was eight, so I can't be a native of Lewis County but I'm fairly

close. My dad built the IGA store in Glenn field, we ran that for a while and then he had a better project at Brantingham, where he bought an old boathouse and it really worked because we complained about it but it was a great experience. Probably the best part about that is that's how I met Donna. My wife, she was working as a waitress at Brantingham Inn, now been torn down for some time. July 25, 1957 we met and as Joe says the rest was history. We've been together 55 years so he's got a couple year head start on us, but the couples have been friends for all that time.

Max Delsignore: For your career, too, Don, you were CPA for many years correct?

Donald Hunt: I was, yeah. Joe mentioned the date when he came back into the business and it wasn't soon after that that I started doing that type of work for Widrick and sons and did it for a lot of years and then I retired to be an investment advisor with all the same clients. They all grew up and I could help in that respect.

Max Delsignore: You mentioned, too, the connections. Not just baseball but obviously professions brought you back together and really forged these relationships and in a lot of ways friendships, too. In Lewis County, and much of northern New York a lot of these community causes and efforts are really made possible because everybody does come together for a concerted effort. Are there a couple of good examples that stick out in your minds of projects or efforts or causes that happened in Lewis County that really made a difference or an impact with everybody coming together?

Donald Hunt: Probably I guess the one that shows the most from the road is the Maple Ridge project Lowville. Pratt Northam became aware that the horse farm there was in bankruptcy and was going to be sold. And we said if we could acquire this piece of property and keep it in strong hands until the community could figure out what to do with it what were the highest and best uses of it, so the board came together, it wasn't an easy decision but came together, acquired the property and set out first to the community to say how can this property be used and the buildings were there but there was other acreages that many things could happen with. We set out on that and one of the first people that showed some interest and had some plans for it was then it was beaver camp for boys it was called, but there Maple Ridge name was attached to it. Joe was there if not out front then just behind the scenes as he very often is saying maybe we can do something here. I'll let him pick it up from there.

Joseph Widrick: What happened is that beaver camp I guess I wouldn't say acquire the property, I guess is the word to use but there wasn't really any money involved.

Donald Hunt: The price was right.

Max Delsignore: They've done quite a few things there, community events that they have done over the years and I worked along with Pratt Northam on a number of the things. It's been something that's got a lot of community use from young people, from children and a lot of adult programs that they've done over the years.

Donald Hunt: Tiptoe is the latest for the youngest, Joe has been instrumental in getting that done. And it's still a work in progress because there's acreage that wasn't going to be used and the Pratt Northam group was mindful, we took property off the tax roll so we had some obligation to try to put something back. We did, we thought first of all developing it ourselves but we had some board members who said that isn't where we ought to go and we all agreed to that. Then we did find somebody, a very unusual fellow and now there's 18 to 20 affordable homes on the project that has attracted many from Fort Drum. Even though we only had to move the line a little bit in order to make it qualify so that they could be close enough to Fort Drum for some of the personnel to be able to live there. That's going on, the fellow has acquired some of the acreage so that's going to grow. That put many times the assessed value back on the roles and it brought 18 to 20 new families into the school district, so it's certainly a multiplier effect. And just the fact that when we set out, in strong hands for ideas to develop that maybe if it had just been left to go to bankruptcy that couldn't have developed. And there's other acreage left, we had hopes for some of it to be a park, not unlike Watertown's Thompson Park, that was the original goal. That may not happen but they are talking a possibility of community college extension there, extension of Jefferson County community College being on-site in Lewis County for things related to employment occupations in the county. It's not a given, but it's something that's out there and it's not precluded because we haven't got to do anything – I shouldn't, they, I'm retired from Pratt Northam now but the boys behind are still working on it.

Max Delsignore: You mention, it's a good segue Don, you had quite a long tenure of participation in the Pratt Northam foundation. For the listeners that aren't aware of what the foundations background is, could you share a snapshot of its founding and what the foundation has done for Lewis County?

Donald Hunt: I can tell you a little bit about it. I think the easiest way into it is part of my tenure on the board along with the others, we published a book in 1997 called Pratt Northam foundation history. It was written by Robert Rich editor and publisher of the Carthage Republican Tribune. It traces the Pratt family history, Pratt Northam foundation and Hazel Northam who was instrumental in it. For history buffs you should be able to get that book in any local library. As soon as we published it we went around the counties

from Boonville to Carthage and populated all the libraries with that book. We did get a surprise that one day one showed up on the Internet and we couldn't figure quite how that would be, they weren't for sale anywhere. Anyway we are sure they are in all the libraries but anyway if folks want to go out there and look for the book and if it isn't there let us know and we'll make sure they get a copy again or contact me or somebody. It tells the whole story which is very very interesting. But its roots were after Walter Pratt died and the money came to his niece.

At one point she said she didn't want this, it was too much responsibility and what could they do with it? Her lawyer at that time said what about a foundation and she said let's do it. When she passed there was about \$1 million came to the Pratt Northam foundation and a board was appointed and their focus was scholarships at first and that proceeded for about 10 to 12 years. That group got older and thought well, what should we do with this or how long was this supposed to last and at one point there was a plan to give half to Syracuse University and have to St. Lawrence and let them run the scholarships, but a local fellow, Dick Cummings said I think I got a better idea, give me a little time and he rounded up some additional board members, some younger board members with some new ideas and expanded the coverage of it. That's when I happened to come aboard and was probably the luckiest thing that could ever happen to me.

This expansion, we went from scholarship to worker ships. If you put into your computer if you put worker ship in, it will say either there is no such word or it isn't spelled right but it shows that the rest of the world is behind Lewis County because we have worker ships. It worker ship is, um, a not-for-profit organization is encouraged to create a job that a college-bound student could work at. The paid minimum wage, it was 400 hours, it varies some, now I believe. They got paid and in turn the organization get the services of the student. In the best of situations, the work that they are doing is somehow related to their hoped-for career.

If we do that, we figure that's really exceptional. Without examples where not only did they work in their field but they came back to Lewis County to practice that and we call that a home run among the evaluating the worker ships. There are all kinds of gradations of that in between what the worker ship could do. Great examples, but the book tells you if you go to the book that will also tell you some of these things. Since 1979 when we took this track, they've ordered something over \$2.3 million in worker ships and they've covered a great panoply of things. That's about decided about half of the expenditures go to worker ships and the other half go to what we call youth and small c culture. I say small c, capital C would be Malay and Symphony, we didn't do a lot of that but we did musical groups in the community, summer stage was a favorite one. Libraries, you name it. The book will give you some details, the website is a good place

to go there to give you examples of that, that's Pratt Northam.org. There's updates on some of the things there and it's just – I don't think there are many organizations of any substance that haven't been touched, figured out how to get some help for the summer and work that through.

Max Delsignore: The foundation also does some general grantmaking as well, correct? Or historically has it done?

Donald Hunt: That's what these all are, they encourage all the not for profits I would say, encourage them to make a grant request. Different methods, sometimes it's a matching grant, they can ask for all money but sometimes we'll match what you're going to do in cash or some other stipulation. Each grant stands on its merit whether it's the first time or repeat one. But there is a board there of 12 or so members all on the website.

Max Delsignore: We'll send you a folks there. We can put the link on the page.

Donald Hunt: It's not unlike the community foundation in that sense, you've got a pool of money, a reliable source or stream of income and you've got an engaged board trying to figure out how to allocate that and it works.

Max Delsignore: Through all the things that have happened in Lewis County, all the great projects you both have been a part of, participation as a result of having some of those values within. For each of you you've demonstrated philanthropy in your different ways but there's got to be that willingness. Joe, for you what really inspired you to be willing to give back in your community? Where did some of those values come from?

Joseph Widrick: I can't really put my finger on anything special I guess just observing other people, different people that I saw, different projects. I know a number of people that just get really involved in volunteer work with different organizations or if there is a need someplace, there's different people that I know of and that I've been friends with that are the first ones to step out and get involved. I think that's what probably I think by observing some of the people of what they do in that respect really has helped me. They are again there's a lot of different names I hesitate to say because you always forget somebody but there's a number of them that if I had a project, some project I was going to get involved in that I could in 10 minutes no half a dozen or better people I could call and they would be there.

Max Delsignore: A question for both of you, are there folks – I know you don't want to single anybody out, are there a handful of names, folks who have been instrumental in moving some projects along in Lewis County or seem to fruition that you think have stood out or have been really the integral pieces to make some things happen? Who would some of those names be?

Donald Hunt: Funny you should ask, each year there is a Donald Exford community service award. They have to be nominated for consideration by a Pratt Northam member, they don't do one every year, they just put out there 11th in 20 some years but I would urge you to go, if you just type in Donald Exford community service award you'll find some background of that type of thing and they go from Boonville to Harrisville to Copenhagen and Carthage where it includes the whole range that Pratt Northam covered. That's where Walter made his money so the decision was to give back in that area. That service award has some outstanding individuals and there's quite a range of it.

Joseph Widrick: And what he's mentioning would be Don Exford I can say that, I've been involved in a number of different projects with the, great example. A great example of getting involved in things. With him he was involved in Maple Ridge, he was involved in Brookside retirement community, very much involved in Brookside retirement community and I was involved in that with him.

Donald Hunt: We lost him way too young. He was vital in all this type of thing, he was the first executive director of Pratt Northam. So he was in that role and out in the community.

Max Delsignore: If you could Joe just for a second talk about the Brookside project, I know it was something that was always on the forefront of your mind, something that was important to you. With Don being someone who could help you see that to the finish line, what was that project like for you and for the others that helped you?

Joseph Widrick: It started out with Don got involved right after it got started pretty much and then there was a period of time that it just was not going anyplace. I offered to give him six months of my time, volunteered to get the project off the ground. Six months turned into two years, two years turned into 20 years. We are still working on it. It's been a good project, we have an awful lot of people from out of the area that live there now.

Max Delsignore: Senior housing, correct?

Joseph Widrick: Senior housing. And there's about 114 residents. My wife and I had worked on four other different projects along with Purcell Construction company on a volunteer basis. Get them up and running, one was in Watertown and Plattsburgh, Auburn, where was the other one? Buffalo. Same type of branch. And Don Exford was involved in a number of those, too.

Max Delsignore: With all these projects and things you have participated in together, what's the biggest take away, the biggest thing you learned from being part of a project, the impetus and seeing it to the end? What are the key takeaways, things you learned from that?

Donald Hunt: Keep digging.

Joseph Widrick: Keep going, yeah.

Max Delsignore: When you say keep digging just be persistent?

Donald Hunt: Don't get discouraged. We had a number of setbacks especially on the Brookside project, a number of setbacks that we had to overcome. The first one was we bought some land and spent quite a bit of money on it, it didn't turn out at all, that had to be scrapped. Had to restart again and had a good board of directors and they just kept plugging away and finally got off the ground.

Max Delsignore: There are many organizations, in particular nonprofits that really help serve as the engine for good things happening in Lewis County, are there a couple in particular that stand out in your mind that are providing great services, have a strong mission that you think are continuing to make a really important difference in the area?

Donald Hunt: One thing they have in the county that's a little different, it's a food pantry that gets a lot of people donate to that, to money and food and I think it does help a lot of needy families in the area. That's one I can think of offhand.

Donald Hunt: Hospice is another. I was having breakfast with another – two other Pratt Northam directors and they were diving right into that, I had forgotten I did that list and that's one that it's been developed in our lifetime and has grown and matured and does a very professional job now. It's a need that you can't service any other way. The model is volunteers but there are also professionals involved. They found a way to work that through.

Joseph Widrick: There's a number of different projects that I think of, a number of different things that could be happening in a project Don and I have been involved in which is Maple Ridge, there's a lot of opportunities out there, a lot of things that could be done, we have one big problem, do you have any idea what that would be?

Max Delsignore: Not offhand.

Joseph Widrick: We don't have the money. There's a number of different community things, some you things that could be developed but we are just lacking...

- Donald Hunt:* We kid each other and Joe will say if we only had \$1 million we could do this but I told him he's got to update that for inflation I think it's probably \$3 million now.
- Joseph Widrick:* That's the problem with every nonprofit.
- Max Delsignore:* In looking back, too, it's good that Pratt Northam took the concerted or the proactive step rather to just preserve that asset, to at least for see a vision for that property to be able to have it as an asset for not just Lowville but for Lewis County so at the very least it's protected. How important is sharing some of these philanthropic values that you've reached mentioned with the next generation of leaders who are living in Lewis County and just in northern New York, too.
- Donald Hunt:* We touched early about it, it's hard to get youth involved, parents are very involved and do sports and they need that on their kids resumes and that type of thing so that's kind of detracted from somewhat. Pratt we kind of recognize that and we kind of skip to the parents and went down to the kids and went down to the high schools and created YACs. Youth activity councils. Essentially we're setting up a mini foundation in each of the high schools. So they got four or \$5000 to issue grants in their school, solicit, ask for grants among the school themselves for projects and their own board would decide which ones to fund. So here's your hands-on with eight or 10 kids and the kids that they touch so we're hoping that will plant the seed that they will always remember that experience, here's what it's like to give and to work on projects with others and we are pleased to note that community foundation now is doing something quite similar.
- Joseph Widrick:* Something we started in our business is when my sons got involved, one thing I had done over the years, told them it's a good idea to start is we would take not another total employee but money if we would be hiring another employee and put it into a foundation every year, so then that money kept building up. Then it was in a nonprofit so we could just give at the end of the year anytime through the year we could distribute that money to any nonprofit, it had to be to a nonprofit. But that way it gets them in the idea of getting involved like that. The money is already there so if you pay for it just like you are paying for another employee, you don't miss it. And that's one thing we talked about before is getting younger people involved, if they could get involved in something like that...
- Donald Hunt:* Hopefully it will carry over, it will carry on.
- Max Delsignore:* How important was it to have those conversations or to get your own, your children or families engaged in giving back? It's something that's very

important to both of you but to impart that to your kids and to members of your family, how important was it to make them aware that this is a really important thing to do for your community?

Joseph Widrick: I think it's very important. It's just kind of a way of life now. And I've got to give a lot of that credit to my wife, because she's very much that way, doing things for other people.

Donald Hunt: You asked how we got started in that and at first I couldn't figure it out. Observing is how it came to you I think through what family were doing, it wasn't my family directly but seeing what other people were doing. But I think the one and I hadn't thought about it in years, thank you for getting me to think about it, one was college. Back in our day I graduated in 1956 and there were regional scholarships back then and if you had a Regents diploma, you qualified for a region scholarship and in my case I went to Syracuse and it was good for half the tuition. Syracuse University matched it with the other half so you had full tuition for four years. The catch was an increase in tuition it didn't cover that, but that was really minor compared to... So you go through four years of college and got no debt for the tuition side of it if you could figure out how to pay your room and board you were debt-free at the end of that cycle so that put at least in my mind I owe them a debt for that.

When the contribution request came out it was not hard at all to get started. First it was pretty small and now it's bigger, it's more than a year's tuition was back then, I haven't been able to match it so it was anything close to Syracuse is \$60,000 or whatever it is now. That's something that's just kind of grew. Nobody told me that or didn't have another example but it just kind of grew out of what was there. For the ones in the campaign there, there was a think about free college for everybody. I don't know if that's in the cards and this wouldn't have done it for everybody but there was something that was done 60 years ago that was a pretty good thing. Anybody could earn the scholarship if your grades were good you could get a scholarship and if you applied it to a New York State school that was offering it, it was quite a multiplier effect and it was pretty self-administered.

Max Delsignore: If you were sitting in a room of high schoolers right now and you had to impart a message to the group of why it's important to give back to the community, what would you say to them?

Donald Hunt: It's the right thing to do to start with and if you don't do it, it might not get done. You might not be something that starts the ball rolling for something that your contribution especially of effort I mean in the beginning as a young person you don't have many dollars but you have your time and

talent. If you don't do it there's something that might not get rolling that would be worthwhile.

Joseph Widrick: I agree with everything Don said and to add to that, especially the younger generation, it isn't just the money you get back, it's your time and effort and your involvement. That's probably in a lot of cases as a partner more important than the dollars that are getting there. Some of these projects are not going to get done unless it's by volunteer help and people getting involved. Local people that get involved.

Max Delsignore: Last question, where can philanthropy it already has done this, but where can philanthropy play a role in the county's development and growth in the future?

Donald Hunt: I struggled with that. That's kind of the cart before the horse and I have not thought about it, there usually it's the other way around, there is some kind of commercial development and it has some land or something left over that can be the incubator for some not-for-profit. It's hard to see it the other way around but it worked at Maple Ridge, it happened to work, that whole idea that made housing development profitable probably wouldn't have been otherwise. It wasn't conscious that we were doing development, but it turned out that we were.

Joseph Widrick: And most nonprofits most all of them are operating on limited funds. The only way they can really from the financial and the only way they can really expand where dollars are needed, is if there's money donated.

Max Delsignore: I think it's safe to say Lewis County is in a better place not just because of the collective but also because of the two of you being able to participate in these projects, too. I know you probably wouldn't say that but I'll take the opportunity to mention it here. Many others have contributed along the way with you but we appreciate you sharing some back story and context about philanthropy's presence and the difference it's made in Lewis County. It's been a pleasure having you here on the podcast.

Joseph Widrick: Thank you.

Donald Hunt: Thank you. Go to that website.

Max Delsignore: That's right go to the website Pratt Northam.org. Thanks again all of you for tuning into this edition of the northern New York community podcast. We are grateful to have the support of W PBS TV and the northern New York community foundation so we can continue to share the stories about community philanthropy on this platform. Remember you can subscribe to the podcast by going to iTunes or sound cloud either online or on your smart phone or you can check out our podcast website and listen to all the

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