

Hello and welcome to the Valley. Today I am your host, Jana miko. It is Laurel Ridge Community College Day, so I am on the zoom today with Brandi Hawkins Boyce. She is the Director of Public Relations and special events for the college. I am excited to see your face today, Randy. Yes, it's great to be here. Happy July. And you got another one of my favorite people on this screen with us today that I have seen more probably in the last 2 or 3 weeks, and I've seen in the last 2 or 3 years. There's nothing that's a positive, Janet. That's a good thing. Yes. Andy Ayers, it is. Joining us. He is the director at the Laurel Ridge Small Business Development Center. We're going to talk today, Andy, about what you guys do at the Small Business Development Center, but tying it in to the college, because I think sometimes people think you're just located there, but you're not really affiliated or partnering with them in any way, and that's just not the case. Yeah. We are housed here at the community college. The Small Business Development Center has been in this community for over 25 years. It's been a staple supporting our small

businesses in this area for a very long time, thanks to both federal funding as well as from local dollars from our local municipalities, and just recently received funding from the state of Virginia, which is great to see. But we are so lucky to be here at the community college because we not only have the resources of the community college available in terms of computer access and phones and that sort of thing, but also people as well. And I have to tell you that this community college is open for small business and is excited about small business in this area. And often I work with our community as an overall and our business leaders on ways that they can work more with the community college to strengthen their business, to find new ways to enhance their business, and also to connect with students.

Brandi, what's the biggest new statistic is that it's 80 to 85% of our graduates stay in this community. And so that's an enormous boost for our small business owners looking for talent, looking for people. The community college has a job board. I tell folks if they're not on that, that's a

great way to make sure that you're up to date on things that are going on. And so our role here is to make sure that small businesses aren't in a silo. They're not working alone, but they have the resources of the community. And the community college is a great resource for that. In your services there at the Small Business Development Center, Andy, are free. They don't cost me anything. As a small business owner to come and ask you to help me to update my business plan or review my financials, or talk to you about expanding or closing my business 100%, always free our services because of those dollars that we get from our local area. Remain free and confidential. I think that's also key as well. So we will talk about cash flow. We'll talk about expansion or closing, but it stays within these walls, which is the great sort of part. You can be open and honest about what you need. The key though, Janet, I will always say, is that we don't do it for you because God forbid I get run over by a pack of ducks one day or something along those lines, and I can't be there to support that small business. I don't want

them to be left in the lurch in any way, shape or form. I want my knowledge to be expanded on to them in every way, shape or form. And it's really been exciting to support our small business in that way. And our small businesses are growing in this area. Funding is available, entrepreneurship is on the rise. A lot of people seeing opportunities in our local communities, and they're working with other small businesses in our area to grow and to foster even stronger. So I'm really seeing a really amazing, dramatic and powerful shift in our small business community. There really is a lot more collaboration, I think, now than even pre-pandemic. I think maybe that's one of the good things to come out of the pandemic, is people realize that they couldn't do it all alone, that they needed help and they needed support and that they were better together. So I think that's a perk that they're looking for other partners in the area to do business with or to go alongside of nonprofits, things along those lines. Absolutely. And I think the ones you least expect to partner with can be your strongest allies out

there. We've always talked about what competition looks like and competition is out there. Yes, but when I used to own the Winchester Book Gallery in downtown Winchester, people would come in and say, what would happen if another bookstore open next year? And I'd say, that's great. There's more people shopping for books. And I think that's really the mentality a lot of our small businesses have. Sure, you may be offering the same thing, but that's figure out ways we can collaborate and come together and work to bring those customers in unison to our stores versus fighting against each other, which is really strong. And it's the opportunity of working with the community college here with Laurel Ridge and saying, you have a business program, you have workforce solutions, you have students. What are ways that my small business can benefit from working with the community college as a whole? And so they come to me and then we connect with Chris Lambert over our student at. Side with brandy, with PR and marketing. You just never know where there could be an opportunity to connect stronger. And I know

that we're working with a lot with IBA and Swim, which is a resource for our small businesses to do business with the Virginia government system and that sort of thing as well. And I think that's another great resource to look into. I think that is something that a lot of small businesses disqualify themselves for because they think they're not big enough, or they think the process is so cumbersome that it's not worth it in the end to have a client that isn't sold his coffee shop. But we went through that process several years ago, and it wasn't nearly as complicated. And he was able to get catering gigs and do all sorts of things at the college that he had never gotten before. And I think Brandy will agree, the more options we have here at the college, the stronger our college is, and we don't know what those options are unless they fill out these opportunities and go into our system. It's not right. Brandy 100%. Yeah. When we have these opportunities arise, events and the first thing we want to do is find someone local to partner with, whether it's catering, our events or supplies we

need to buy. We want to serve local first. So the more people we can get in that system, the better. It's fantastic. I love hearing that local first option. And Andy, if somebody is listening right now, they're like, I don't even know what Evers-williams is. All they have to do is call you and make your appointment and come to the office. And you're welcome through the whole thing. Right? And I'm here at the college. I think that's where a lot of people think, oh, I have to go into Northern Virginia. I have to do something along those lines. No, we're right here in your backyard, and we're going to provide that service and support to anyone that comes in through the front doors. And we've had that from existing entrepreneurs to students who are thinking about ideas, to people who have been in business for 20 plus years and are looking to change, there's no need to outsource. We have resources that are right here. And I'll go back to what you said earlier, Janet, which is a fantastic word that you used. I'll make sure if I get this right, free is what the word great service. So no cost except for

your time. And then when you're here at the community college, you'll run into celebrities like Brandy, who's here and hangs out and gets to meet other people and that sort of thing as well. So the networking opportunity is galore. And if you ever wanted to say, I'd love to have our president join for something, a speaking engagement or something along those lines I don't want to speak for, but I'm sure she would love to be out in the community doing more and more to engage with our small businesses or our nonprofits in the area. She is an incredible president that we have here, and someone who is just eager to be involved in the entire Laurel Ridge footprint. And so I love when folks are like, can I meet the president? Can I talk to her? Can I figure out ways to collaborate? And I think that's a really strong, very rarely at a college or community college setting. Is that an open door for our communities? And so I think that's really a resource to be able to use. And she's from this area, which is so fantastic. Brandi, the other cool thing about having the small Business

Development center there on the Middletown campus is that you have a ton of adults, a ton of kids out of high school that are coming through, taking these classes that maybe decide that working for someone isn't necessarily what they want to do, that they want to take this experience and learning how to be a plumber or Hvac, or they want to open their own transcription business things along those lines. You have Andy right there to be able to say, you don't have to work for somebody. You can start something on your own, and then he can take that process from there. Absolutely. I think the Small Business Development Center is such an amazing resource for everyone that comes to our campus. We have individuals that graduate and like you said, they can, after graduation, go over and talk to Andy and figure out how to take that next step in starting that business. I've worked at the college for 20 years and I always say, it doesn't matter. Your background doesn't matter your goals, your education experience, or what you think you need to do. You will find your answer at Laurel Ridge like you will find your

answer. We have a path, literally for everyone.

Literally. You could tell me anything and I can tell you how to get there by speaking to someone at the college. The Small Business Development Center is just part of that whole bucket of options we have, and it's a great resource. And it's not just you, Andy, it's you've got a team of people that have their own areas of expertise as well. Yeah, we are one of 25 centers across the state of Virginia. If I don't have an answer to something, we will find an answer. There is not a business that our Virginia Small Business Development Center hasn't worked with and that I can pull the resources from. But I'll go back to this idea of we have so many like we think about the programs, we think about the things going on here at the campus, but it's really the people that I like to draw from. Brandy has a fantastic background in PR and marketing, and I like to be able to connect her with some of our small business owners just to talk about ideas and that sort of thing. Rachael Dodson is our head of professional programs. She has a strong business

background and is from the Warren County area.

Scott Vander Kooi over at our. Professional side of things. He's done so much with connecting the Blue Ridge Hospice in our local area. I mean, the people here are really the key, and I love that we have such a diverse group of individuals from a variety of different backgrounds that if a business comes to me, I can look through our directory and say, let me make some connections and let me start having conversations with people, and you'll find the people here at the community college are just excited to work with individuals and businesses within our footprint. Let's take a break. When we come back, let's expand a little bit on that education component, because while someone can come to Laurel Ridge Community College and further their education, you also we're doing educational things across our community. Andy, from the ah, seminar that you just did at the Royal Warren County Chamber of Commerce. Can we get in the weeds a little bit on that in the next segment? I love that. Now don't go get do an R while we're on the break. That's all you've had,

by the way, Janet, is I Andy here?

We're going to take a quick break. When we come back, we're going to continue our conversation with Brandy Hawkins. Boyce. She is director of public relations and special events for Laurel Ridge Community College. They are the home base for the Laurel Ridge Small Business Development Center. Andy Garrison is joining us. He is their director. We're going to come back and talk more about that in just a couple of minutes. Got a few hours to give. You could make a local nonprofits day. On September 19th, United Way NSV invites you to join over 900 volunteers for Day of Caring, the region's biggest single day volunteer event. You'll help nonprofits across the valley by painting, landscaping, organizing donations or doing light repairs. Whatever's needed. No special skills, just a willingness to help. Whether you're solo or part of a team, your time will make a real difference. Sign up today at [United Way nsv.org/day of caring](http://UnitedWaynsv.org/dayofcaring). Be part of something bigger. Help us care for the valley together. Welcome back to the Valley today. I am your host,

Janet Michael. It is Laurel Ridge Community College Day, so we are on the zooms with Brandi Hawkins voice. She is director of Public relations and special events for the college and her son is joining her today. He is the director of the Laurel Ridge Small Business Development Center. And Andy, when we went to break, we were joking about the a seminar that you did for the front row Warren County Chamber of Commerce a few weeks ago. As people are listening, it was really interesting. You were so entertaining, first of all. So that makes it a whole lot easier to be able to sit through something that might be complicated or scary for most people. But you have a ton of topics, and you're doing those kinds of things across our region for businesses to be able to come and learn something. Yeah, our key is our one on one counseling. That's our bread and butter. That's what we do 90% of our time. But then we have relationships with our local chambers throughout our footprint. And the chamber's really direct and help us decide what they want to hear. So they listen to their membership and then they

say, Andy, could you do a class on this or this or something along these lines? I happen to be the one that Nikki was looking for over at Warren County Chamber. And of course, we have a great new partnership with Warren County. Their EDA has funded us for this 2025, 2026 year. And so we are really excited about doing more and more to support our small businesses. We had some funding from Warren County in the past, but it just wasn't enough to do everything we wanted to do, and now we have that funding to do it. It's been fantastic to be down there and working more direct with Nikki and with her membership, and then with anyone who's not a member of the chamber. They can still come and participate with any of these sessions as well and keep your eyes peeled. But I love doing those. Education is the key element to all of this is just making sure people are aware they're not afraid, and they're doing things that are going to enhance and grow their business in a positive way. I think they're a great tool for you in particular, because people will come to one of those because they have an interest in that

particular topic, but then they get to talk to you in a low key, laid back setting, and they can say, you know, I had this question about and the next thing you know, they found out that you've got all these other resources to help them with an issue that wasn't really what they came to, that particular educational opportunity for. So that connection that you were talking about earlier really does happen much more easily. Yeah, I think we've all come out of the pandemic and it's been five years, I realize, but we were stuck in unable to connect and network with the right folks. And now that we are, we're realizing, hey, there are resources out there more than just the educational piece, but a way to connect and engage. We are a handshake community in a lot of ways still. And so how does that work? How does someone new into this community, how does a younger generation understand how that older generation works? And so I really like the opportunity of reminding people how our networking works. And the coming to these events is more than just listening to me, but saying a few things afterwards, or meeting the

person that you're sitting next to and learning about how the possibility of collaboration could occur. And that's what I encourage folks to do here. That's how many times have I been out in the community and someone has said to me, I don't know.

The last time I was on the campus of the community college, and I just love to tell them, come out and visit, do a tour. I think you'll be surprised by the way that our community college looks like now, compared to even what it look like in 2019, it is outstandingly different. And it's funny that you say that because I hadn't been on the campus.

I live less than a mile from the campus and haven't been on campus. Michael, I know I hadn't been on campus for years, and then I came to meet Brandi for something and I'm walking around. It's been redone. It's bright, it's open. There's so many places for students to work for business owners that maybe you're taking class to be able to sneak off to the side to return some phone calls. It is not what people think. That campus was 20 years ago, much less five years ago. I see it as a community hub, and obviously I can let

Brandi talk a little bit more about this, but for me, it's a really great resource for the community to come and meet and use and to feel like they're being supported. From our students to our families to our business owners, to our leaders can come here and really feel the pulse of what's going on in our community, which I think is really key.

Brenda, you encourage that engagement. You have a curriculum advisory committee at the college that encourages small business owners and local people to be involved with the college in some way. Yeah.

So the Curriculum Advisory Committee is made up of individuals throughout the community that maybe own their own business or are experts in their occupation, and they serve in an advisory capacity for various instructional programs that we have, and in technical areas and specific occupations.

They might need to come and meet with the advisory committee once a year. But what they do is they provide that oversight. Maybe take a look at the curriculum that's being offered in question, like, is this still relevant? Or what could be improved.

They might sit in on observations of classes. So

it really is integral in bringing in those experts into our classes. And it's a great way just to get the community more involved. Like Andy said, he may be meeting with someone that owns a business and has expertise in a specific area. Then he can talk to the dean of that area and say, hey, I have someone that I could recommend for an advisory council and go from there, Andy. And that ties in, too, because the person that you could be talking to could be struggling to find workers to, to staff their facility because they need a certain skill set that they're not coming out of high school necessarily with, or they hire a lot of retirees that don't know how to do a particular thing. This also gives Lori a leg up to look at what those classes are, and realize that maybe they need to tweak their curriculum a little bit, too. So it's a win win on both sides. Yeah, one of the greatest things about the community college to me, is its ability to pivot and to adjust for what the community needs and is looking for, to have our community leaders sit down with our different programs and say, this is still relevant. This is.

And then we being able to adjust based on that just shows that we are at the cutting edge. We are right at the forefront of what this community is asking for and what they're desiring in this area. And that really to me, to be able to like, use my voice and say, this is what our industry needs and then to see it happen. That's a powerful tool right there in our area. And I'm really excited that the community college has that option for our leaders to be involved and to make those changes and to have a voice within the education of our students. The other unique thing about you at the Small Business Development Center is I can come in and say, look, I have this specific problem that I need some help solving, or I can come to you and say, I got this business idea. It can be as short or as long of a relationship as it has to be. It doesn't mean I have to sign up. And now I'm stuck with you for three years to get through a process, though. That would be fun. And I'm here. It's all here. Look on your face. Let me just say this real quick. If you were stuck with me for three years, that would be the three most incredible years of

your life. By the way, let me just say that we would have adventures galore. There'd be no question about it. But yes, I know what you're getting at there. We are here for your resources, whether as big or small as that may be. We're not going anywhere. We're going to be here to show our support, however much you would need. Our hope is that you do return to us again and again. Like I am a believer that small businesses need to have relationships with their bankers, their attorneys, with their insurance providers, and then also with an accountant not necessarily on retainer, but someone that they can just send letters to on a regular basis to make sure that they're being updated on what their business is doing. So that should something happen, they're not stuck with just whoever's available, but someone who is aware and fully cognizant of what's happening with their business. We are the same way. Check in with us. Make sure that you're doing things correctly. I have people that send me social media posts and are just like, do these make sense? And I help provide some feedback? So something as small as

that too. As big as I can't figure out why my budget won't balance or I can't figure out how to market this correctly. We can sit down and make it work. We have a small intake form. It's really painless. Then I have you sign the next three years of your life away with me for an adventure you'll never forget. A picture you will never forget. Where can they go? Get more information and details about the Small Business Development Center at Lower Ridge. You can find us through Laurel Ridge sbdc.org. Or you can always give us a call at (540) 868-7094. The greatest tool I have is my email address at Laurel Ridge. I don't know how I got this, but if anyone needs to ever reach me, it's simply Andy at Laurel Ridge. Dot. Edu. So, Andy, why? And then you will get me for anything that you need. And I encourage fellow Andy's out there to just connect with me. The more Andy's we have connecting with us, the better, I would say out there. So except those at Laura Ridge that are annoyed because you got that Andy at and they didn't. I'm learning about this Andy at email for the first time, and I'm really mad I didn't learn

it before because your last name is really hard to remember how to spell. I know genius move, a genius move. You must know what you're doing. All small businesses listen to this guy. He is efficient. Yes. Good job. I think we maybe we can work on a brandy at Laurel Ridge. I'm sending the email right now for the good at the market dollars right there. But. Yeah. Anyway, that. They can reach us. Phone is easier. They can also just pop by as well. If we're not here. All of our information is on our door. They can find us and that sort of thing as well. But we do encourage scheduling an appointment just because we could be with other clients and that sort of thing. Brandy, you have some virtual information sessions for registration is just around the corner. There's a lot happening. Education was at the college, even though it's July. Yeah, we have been registering students for fall classes since March, so we have been in the thick of it. There's people coming through our doors every day or calling. So it's really exciting. The fall semester is going to be a busy one and it's not too late. Classes do not

start until August 25th, and you can register up until the day they start. But don't wait till the last minute and you can find out more at Laurel Ridge. That edu slash pathways. Thanks for mentioning the information sessions. They are virtual and will be online July 17th and August 12th. It's just a great opportunity to log on. Learn more about the college in general. It is a general information session, so find out about our programs, our transfer degrees, our career ready skills and just ask any questions you have. Cost. How much is this going to cost me? What tuition assistance is out there? What financial aid opportunities are out there? You can ask anything you want. It's a great way just to get started. If you have not started the process already, and if you attend, you have the chance to win a \$50 visa gift card. Oh, nice. That's a little perk. Yeah, it's really good for someone who thinks they already know what the college does and what the opportunities for them are at the college to find out if they're right or if they're wrong. It's a great way to go to one of those and just learn. Oh,

I thought I had to have a certain GPA or oh, I've been I graduated high school 20 years ago. I can't start from scratch again. It answers all of those questions that have been the barrier for you to start that new opportunity. Absolutely. And the resources are endless. The student support opportunities are endless. So don't let anything hold you back. Don't let money hold you back. Busy life. Don't let that hold you back. There's a way we can work around busy schedules and fit it in. Or the end of the day will just let you have a conversation with Andy and Joe to share some really great ideas with you and get you going. There's something for everyone here. We have some individuals stopped by the campus last week. My colleague was sharing this with me and they were looking for the food pantry, and so she showed them where it was and she asked them, are you students here? And they're like, no, we've never even been here. And then one person mentioned, I've always thought about starting college, but it's too intimidating. And the other guys, yeah, I wouldn't even know where to start. And she took

their hand and led them up to the front door and to our information services specialists. And the next thing she looks over and they're on the computer. And so just swing by the campus and start walking around, and someone will grab your hand and take you somewhere. This is really I don't know what this place is. Tell me what you do here, and someone will grab you by the hand and show you where to go. And if it's a hyper guy with white glasses, although they could be any number of colors on any given day. Yeah, that's a handy right there. That is handy. And but I do have to say though, Janet, I think one of the greatest assets of the community college is the people who work here. And I think for me as an employee, but also working with a small business development center, there's not one person that I couldn't say kind of get help from you or can you help me with something? And they wouldn't, like, just do anything to make sure we were taken care of. And it's not only from the side of employee to employee, but employee to community, employee to student. The way that our staff is and our

employees are is just one of the most notch I've ever seen. And so I concur with Brandi. Just come and visit our campus and be impressed not only with the facilities, but the people who are here as well. Andy, thank you for taking some time to chat with Brandi and today. Yeah, absolutely. And if anyone needs anything, don't hesitate to reach out. Andy at Laurel Ridge. Dot. Edu. Brandi, you're never going to leave this email address down. No go. But if I get one, people will confuse it. Be like, is it Brandi or Andy? Yeah. You marketed with just remember it's a B and. B are we have to put an R in number two? Yeah, we'll figure it out. We'll figure we go. We'll have a catchy. Next time we're on. Janet Michaels will have a jingle for you. Andy's assuming he's going to be invited back. Listen, I know I made an incorrect assumption, but, Brandi, thank you for putting this whole thing together. It's been a fun conversation today. Thank you so much. Thank you so much for always giving us space. I will be back tomorrow with a brand new episode of The Valley today a few minutes after noon another and is

joining me on the show. Andy Gayle is coming on for United Way Day. He is bringing with him the woman who runs the Virginia United Way. So we're going to learn about United Way on a little bit larger scale than what we do as the northern Shenandoah Valley. So meet me back here for. At just a few minutes after afternoon.