

Transcript

Janet Michael

Hello and welcome to the Valley. Today I am your host, Janet Michael. It is a bonus episode of Laurel Ridge Community College today with a Luray spin on it. Dr. Kim Blosser is back on the Zooms with me. She, of course, is the president for the college. And Kim, I understand that the Luray Page County Center is celebrating 20 years.

Kim Blosser

We are really excited. We try to celebrate all year long when we have any of these anniversaries at any of our campuses. And so very excited to be celebrating 20 years offering classes in Page County. We offered them a little bit before at the high school, but to actually have a center, a campus there that students could come to, we're happy to have been there for 20 years.

Janet Michael

How did that come about? I know it was pre your presidency, but was it just public outcry saying we need a campus here.

Kim Blosser

When you think about our service area, so we serve 8 localities, but Page is our further South and for the students in Page, they drove to Middletown. It's a 45 to 50 minute drive. If they were going to go to Warrenton, it could be an hour, hour and a half depending on where you live in Page. Students in that county had to go the furthest from any other of our localities. And so the individuals in Page, there were members of the boards of supervisors in the town. It was at a time when the Wrangler Annex plant had been closed down. The town of Luray ended up acquiring that building. And in those conversations, John Sygielski was the president at the time at what at that point we were Lord Fairfax, but they had started a conversation about could they have a place, not only for the retraining for those individuals who had been displaced, but could they have an actual center? And so they offered for almost no rent for a little while. Part of that Wrangler Annex and the county and the town of Luray came together and put money in to support renovating part of that space that could be used as classrooms and offices. And that's how it got started. We had quite a few students that took advantage when that plant shut down, there was Trade Act funding from the federal government available. I think about one in particular right now, I'll tell you just two quick little stories, but one who's been in my thoughts because one of those

employees at the Wrangler Annex ended up coming to college, coming and earning her associate's degree and came to work for us. And Cindy has worked for us at our Luray Center since then. She's retiring next month, which is why she's been in my thoughts a lot lately, because we're not going to see her as much. But she had a whole different opportunity. And one of her friends that she worked with there also, one of my sons had in 2nd grade at Stanley Elementary, she went on to become a teacher. And so that college being there just opened doors that people really had no idea, really didn't even know they could pursue higher education. And so Yeah, we're excited for anybody that gets a chance to retire, that's ready to retire, but always miss them when they're leaving.

Janet Michael

The goal of community colleges in general is in a lot of cases to serve a rural community, rural populations. And I think Laurel Ridge does such an excellent job of that just with us in Middletown at the Fauquier campus. I think the addition of the Luray Page Center really did strengthen all of the different points that you guys try to reach when you're offering different classes and certifications and things like that. The Wrangler plant closing is a perfect example of how you were able to take advantage of that. Turn it into a positive for a lot of people.

Kim Blosser

When you think about our rural communities, Page is really fortunate. You think about others that are that similar size. We get requests a lot. I think every one of our counties would love to have the college located right in their county. Obviously, resources will not allow us to do that, but it was just the geography for Page, the fact that Page is located in sort of another little valley, they're in between a lot of mountains. It made the commute harder for a lot of students. And when I was in school, I graduated from Page County High School, so I know this area well. A lot of folks just ended up going to Blue Ridge Community College because it was a little easier commute sometimes to go towards Harrisonburg. They didn't have a mountain to crossover and they ended up getting some of their education and going through some of their programs. So being able to have a college and a lot of programs right here is just really open doors that, as I said, a lot of students just didn't have before.

Janet Michael

And you offer online options there as well. So you didn't necessarily need a campus like you have in Fauquier or Middletown because you have that online option now, which probably didn't exist to this degree 20 years ago.

Kim Blosser

When Paige first opened at their previous location in the Annex Building, we partnered with Old Dominion University. And that was in the days where you would come and sit in a smaller room with a computer and you would have synchronous. They would distance a class from Old Dominion to that location. And so students could earn, and we did. We had students that earned their bachelor's degrees sitting in that room. After they finished their associate with us, then they went and they completed a degree with Old Dominion. That was pre-internet and everything just being like, we're on Zoom right now, where you can join from anywhere that you want to join. And so since we've been able to do that, we do have a lot of students who come to Luray. They may be working on a degree because they want to transfer to a four-year university. So they may take two or three classes at the center in Luray. and then they may pick up one more or two more online that we offer. We offer a large number of courses online, and we were doing that before the pandemic, but honestly, since the pandemic. It's even more probably right now because many of the adults, I think, that didn't know they could do online classes have realized, I think I can do that. And I honestly think we're better at offering online classes now than we've ever been. For some, it just allows them a little more flexibility in their schedule to maybe just come two days and take classes in person and then pick up an extra one or two that they need taking those online.

Janet Michael

Are you still in that old Wrangler Annex building or have you vacated that completely when Jenkins Hall opened?

Kim Blosser

Yes, thank goodness, thank goodness. Now, I want to just say we were grateful to have that space, but it was limiting. It was great to get started. It had just general classroom space. So when you think of your English classes or your history classes where you just have desks, it was great for that. We had a computer lab, but it wasn't conducive to being able to add, let's say, a science lab or somewhere to teach an electrical class or an HVAC class. And so we were limited there. And for the pandemic, we were having some issues with that building. It was having a little bit of disrepair. And we were working with the person that we had the lease with to try to get some repairs. And it was getting more and more challenging at that point. The town no longer owned it. It was a private company. And so we just said, you know, our students, they deserve better. We want to see if we could find space to really have a true college campus experience. for students. And so we looked at a lot of different facilities that already exist in the county, and they were similar. They were existing

buildings that had been something else, and we're going to take a lot of work to try to figure out if you could even renovate them. And thankfully, the Jenkins family came forward. They had land. We talked to them. We had been working with Racey Engineering, and they connected us, and they said, We want to donate some land. And it just happened to be right behind Walmart. I will say for anyone that ever goes by there now, it's really funny when you look back at the pictures. When we were back there, it was just by itself. When we were looking at whether we could build, there were no townhomes. There was nothing. It was just in a field behind Walmart. But it was a great location, really a central, easy location for people to get to. And so we embarked on a campaign to raise money in Page County to build our own. And so our foundation is who raised the money and built that building. The college now leases it from the foundation. So it's all -- we're all each other's landlords, and we're paying each other. So that's all good. And we were just blessed. We raised over \$4 million to be able to help support building that building. And it was from generous people in the county who were just desperate not to lose the college. They wanted to support it. They wanted to see a college stay there. They know it's the heart of economic development to have those types of programs. And so, yes, we are at our new location on College Drive behind Walmart and Luray. It is a beautiful, beautiful building.

Janet Michael

The amount of time from this is what we're going to do until you had that ribbon cutting and open those doors. It is outstanding that you were able to create something that is so amazing in such a, frankly, short period of time.

Kim Blosser

It was. And honestly, had it not been for all the shortages, everybody was so sick of supply chain issues during the pandemic. We stopped saying those words because they were just triggering for people. But if it wouldn't have been for that, I mean, there were issues with the brick we'd selected. We had to pick a different one because we couldn't get them. We would have finished even earlier, but it was. When you think of how long it takes for the state process to go through, us being able to build, it went very quickly. And so, yeah, we were able to have that ribbon cutting and open right after the pandemic with new programs, new instructional space, and it's been really exciting.

Janet Michael

Let's take a break. When we come back, let's talk about some of the programs, the instructional space and just the changes that have happened over the last 20 years. Can we talk a little bit about that in the next segment?

Kim Blosser

Sure.

Janet Michael

We are on the Zooms today with Dr. Kim Blosser. She is the president at Laurel Ridge Community College. We are talking today about 20 years of the Luray Page County Center. We're going to do more of that when we come back in just a couple of minutes.

Speaker 3 – Ad Segment

This Saturday, Henry Mueller will change the world. He has no idea that's what he's going to do. He only knows that he went to justserve.org and signed up to spend time at a senior center Saturday morning. As he browsed through service opportunities in his own community, he remembered the words of Paul to the Galatians, by love serve one another. Little does Henry know that Saturday morning he'll end up speaking to one senior in particular who hasn't seen his family in several weeks and is feeling especially lonely. Henry doesn't know the short time he'll spend with this man, will lift his spirits, cheer his heart, and make his life just a little better. Through love and service this Saturday, Henry Mueller will change the world. See the difference you can make. Sign up for service opportunities in your community. Visit justserve.org.

Janet Michael

Welcome back to the Valley today. I am your host, Janet Michael. We are on the Zooms today for a bonus episode of Laurel Ridge Community College. Dr. Kim Blosser is joining me. She is president of the college. We're talking today about the Lurie Page County Center celebrating 20 years when we went to break Kim, we were talking about Jenkins Hall, which is just such a phenomenal building. So for someone who maybe hasn't seen it yet or hasn't walked through the front doors, paint me a picture. Tell me what they can expect.

Kim Blosser

This building is unique when you walk in. It doesn't look like maybe your traditional. Most people have obviously been in a high school, and so they think about what that looks like. This one's not. There's a lot of wood. There's open ceilings with big wood beams. We want it to fit in. It sits with views of the mountains all around it. And so the architect, when he designed it, wanted it to have a little different feel. But when you walk in, you look straight ahead and you look out and you're looking at the Massanutten Mountains. The airplanes that are taking off at the airport, it faces that direction. And we have labs, mostly labs on that first floor, in addition to the office space, in addition to our student center, where if

students are trying to apply or use a computer or they need to take a test, they can use that. Those are all on the first floor. In addition to, which we were so excited to be able to have in this building, a trades lab. So we've been able to offer electrical classes and HVAC classes. We've offered our heavy equipment operator program down there once we've done our commercial drivers class. there for folks that want to get their CDL. You go across from right there and you have a beautiful science lab. A lot of the students are interested in getting into one of the health professions. And so one of the core classes that everyone needs if you want to be in health professions is anatomy and physiology. And that was one thing we were not able to have at the other building. And so we have a beautiful science lab where we can do biology, anatomy and physiology. And so a lot of our students are taking that class. We also wanted a signature program when we opened it that maybe would draw students from not just our service area, but around our service area. And so we partnered At the time with Germanna Community College, we partnered with Page Memorial Hospital and we opened the Physical Therapy Assisting Program. And so we're the only one in the region. Germanna has one, but it's over in the Stafford area. There's one in Richmond, there's one in Roanoke. But we have been able to draw students from an hour, hour and a half radius of us to be able to come to that program. And so their lab is located there and you'll see students out all the time doing PT things, working on the steps or outside working on curbs and that kind of thing. And then it has a second floor and upstairs is where, again, you have this beautiful view. We have a lovely conference room. We have general purpose classrooms up there. And one of the things we wanted to do when we did that building was we thought about the other uses that we have that were lacking, things we weren't able to do at the old building. And one of them was if we wanted to have a group together, there was no space large enough to be able to have 100 people gathered somewhere. We also knew that in the county, we don't have a lot of spaces in Page where if a company wants to have a meeting and bring 50 of their employees or 80 of their employees, there's not a lot of options for them. And so the three classrooms that are upstairs were designed with really good soundproofing, but they have movable walls that they can collapse back and those three then open up. So we've been able to have our dual enrollment graduation ceremony for those students with their families. The Chamber of Commerce has used it for job fairs. We've used it for a number of different things. We thought about this building from the standpoint of what type of instructional space do we want, but how can we make it the most flexible to also serve some of the community needs that we might have as well as some of the college needs. It is designed to be light and to be able to see the views. It's beautiful. It really is. I will say that most everyone agrees in terms of just the views when you're there, it is our prettiest location.

Janet Michael

And I want to go back to something you said a second ago about the physical therapy classes that you offer, that program. That's the other thing that you always have to be looking at 10, 20 years ahead to make sure that programs that you're implementing now are going to be of benefit for people in the future. I mean, we all hear the statistics that the Shenandoah Valley is an aging population, that people, this is where people come to retire. Typically, physical therapy is one of those things that comes along with that because we're not as mobile as we used to be. So you really do have to be very careful and cognizant of what programs you're going to offer, particularly in a place like that, where your space is limited.

Kim Blosser

Yeah, and we pride ourselves on being able to get programs going as quickly as possible. We have many short-term programs we can stand up and get going in a couple of months. But there are others, particularly those healthcare programs, that they have their own set of accrediting standards. The nursing one, you have to go through the Board of Nursing of Virginia and get your program approved. You have to go through another accreditation, a national accreditation to be able to offer that one. We're getting ready to offer for the first time in Luray this summer, our certified nurse aide program, the CNA program, and that required a whole application. It required a site visit by a board of nursing for them to actually make sure we had everything in place that we could officially start offering it. So some of those programs, we have to start planning a couple years in advance because the application process to get approved to offer it takes a while to get through. Others, like I said, that we offer, we can do very quickly, but some do take a little while to start planning for.

Janet Michael

It's also interesting that you originated because of the Wrangler plant closing, and yet workforce development is still 20 years later, a huge piece of what you do, training people, upskilling people, retraining people. That's at the core of what the college does overall, but in particular what you do there in Loray and Page County.

Kim Blosser

It's amazing if you think back what jobs existed 20 years ago that just don't even exist anymore. I mean, we're all trying to figure out how to ensure we're training people for whatever that next career is. And we all know the stats that people just don't stay. They have multiple careers now. They're not going to stay in the exact same jobs that they had when they were 18 or 19. But that is at the heart of what we do, is figuring out, first of all, now with economic development, with all of our economic development partners, whether

it be in Frederick or Fauquier or in Page, in order to attract or have businesses that you currently we have expand, their number one criteria they're looking for, in addition to some funding, of course, is the talent there. We can't locate places if we don't know that there's going to be a workforce that can support our business. And so on almost any type of economic development visit that any of our folks have, the first thing they do is call the college to say, can you come with us and talk about, can you all help produce the talent that they're going to need? And that's true in page two. That's what we're trying to figure out is how can we get more and more of those citizens, as you said, upskilled? Can we get them into another particular field that maybe this one's going away and they're going to need to transfer those skills and do something different, very much like those folks did, as you said, with Wrangler. And that's why we try at Luray, as we do at all of ours, but we really have offered an array of of you can come to us and transfer. So if you want to take, and I'm going to say this, I'm going to stop just for a second because I use that word all the time. And I had a student not long ago ask me, what does it mean to be in a transfer program? We use that term a lot, but what it means is you're taking your freshman and sophomore years of a bachelor's degree with us. And then you're going to take those classes and you're going to go and be a junior when you get to your four-year school. So I just had that memory pop in about someone asking me. So in case anyone's listening to us and they're wondering, what in the world does that mean to transfer? It just means you take those first two years and then you move on to your bachelor's degree. But we offer all those. And then we offer a lot of those short-term training programs that let individuals in the community come, get a skill that they need, and go right to work.

Janet Michael

And you even do GE classes, you have ESL classes, you do all of those things as well at Luray Page Center.

Kim Blosser

I always explain to people when people ask for the little spill about a community college, I said the first thing you need to understand is we are a comprehensive community college. When they were established in Virginia 60 years ago, over 60 years ago, we are a comprehensive, which means we provide students from adult basic ed in many cases, English language instruction, We provide dual enrollment so students can get college credit while they're still in high school. We do short-term training, which is non-credit type instruction. We do the first two years of a bachelor's degree. You just want to take a class in Microsoft Excel. You want to take one class that you need to upskill, we offer those classes. So we do corporate training for businesses that contract with us. We do a lot more

than I think people realize. We can serve as many as 20,000 individuals in a year between all of those things that allow us to be able to just serve our region.

Janet Michael

And the thing that I appreciate about that as a resident is that I could do any number of those things and never leave my house. When you talked earlier about online, I can fit that in to my schedule at night after I've worked my day job and put the kids to bed. It's so flexible that I think that's another huge bonus to a community college in particular. Taylor, our Community College.

Kim Blosser

We always say we can't offer every variety of a course at every location. So Middletown, we might have a class that meets in person and then we have one of those same classes that meets online and then we have another one that meets at night. But some of our smaller locations like Luray, we don't always have all three options for everyone for every class, but you can get it through the college. So if the time we're offering in the class at Luray maybe doesn't work in your schedule, you can get that class online. We don't offer every class. Obviously, classes like welding, you have to come in person to do those. Our phlebotomy class, you got to come in person and learn how to do the sticks. But 50 some percent of our classes in our transfer programs has an online option.

Janet Michael

Can they register today for classes? When is registration? How do people get started?

Kim Blosser

Yeah, so we are getting ready to start registration for next spring. I mean, for next fall, not spring. We're in in spring right now. You can still enroll in classes for spring. You can certainly get ready to enroll for summer or for next fall. Those will open in March. But right now, folks are reaching out. They can talk to our outreach folks. They can go to our website. The easiest thing to do is go to laurelridge.edu/getstarted. That will give you some quick links if you're interested. Maybe you don't know what you want to do. We have people that will meet with you and talk to you and show you all the different options that are available to help you get started. If you know exactly what you want to do, there's some real simple links there that will lead you through how you can get it registered or how you can go ahead and apply. We have folks that are dedicated just to being able to help students, walk them through that process.

Janet Michael

So where do you see Luray Page Center in another 20 years? Are you going to have a second building? Is there going to be a bigger campus? Are you going to have more labs? What do you think that place is going to look like in another 20?

Kim Blosser

It's funny because the Luray Page County Chamber hosted a business after hours, and we were grateful to be their partner in that. And we had a really good turnout. And I was just giving a few remarks. I said, 10 years ago, we didn't see this huge development of townhomes and people moving in and the villas they're building now. But we were prepared when we did the site plan there. So the building, you ask me what it looks like when you walk in, when you walk into that main floor of the building and you're going into the labs and there's a beautiful wooden stairway to go upstairs, there are two bathrooms to the left. And at the end of the little hall to the bathrooms, there's a door that goes nowhere. And I tell people all the time, that door doesn't go nowhere. On the plans, when you look at it, there is a building right outside where that door will have a breezeway that'll connect to the next building that we're going to eventually add here when we outgrow what we've had here. That's a dream, but we put that on the plan for a reason because we do hope that at some point there's some company that locates that's going to need a specialized program and we're going to have to gear up for that program. Or There's going to be more students that are demanding some additional training that we don't have. And that's going to be the impetus for how we're going to have to expand and add another facility.

Janet Michael

It is literally the door to the future of the Luray Page Center.

Kim Blosser

Yep, every tour I've ever given, I point that out because I think that is what we always need to be thinking about. There is something beyond that building. We just have to wait and when that moment arrives, be ready to move. But that's why we put it on the plan so we would be ready. But we will see. I do think I think 20 years from now, I don't think I will still be president. I think probably retirement will be in my future before 20 years from now. But I do think that there will be continued growth at that center. It'll be really interesting to look back and see what all changed because so much has changed in the last 20 years that I can only imagine how much more is going to change in the next 20.

Janet Michael

Congratulations and thank you for taking the time to give me a peek inside of it today. I do appreciate it.

Kim Blosser

Happy to be on here. Happy to be talking to you.

Janet Michael

I will be back tomorrow with a brand new episode of The Valley today. Just a few minutes after noon. So meet me here then.