

SUCCESS STORY



**NBT Bank:
Focused On What
Matters**

NORWICH – As one of the largest employers with more than 500 employees based in Chenango County, NBT Bank is committed to making an impact on the community it calls “home.”

Community involvement is one of the NBT’s core values and a key component of the employee experience. Norwich-based employees volunteered nearly 1,500 hours this past year to help give back through actions such as helping to build the playground at Greenway Park, volunteering to deliver meals through Meals on Wheels, packing and sorting donations for Helping Hands, and hanging holiday lights in East and West parks.

In recognition of Cybersecurity Awareness Month in October, NBT Bank partnered with ConfiDATA to host a free document shredding event to help community members to dispose of 2,260 pounds of personal paperwork. The bank also provided a presence and support for the return of multiple beloved community events, including the NBT Bank Summer Concert Series produced by the Chenango Blues Association and Colorscape Chenango. During the holiday season, NBT was honored to take first place for the Float Award and Overall Best in Show at the 2021 Holiday Parade of Lights.

NBT Bank continued its commitment to supporting local nonprofit organizations, including local school districts, Chenango Arts Council, Norwich Family YMCA, Norwich Dollars for Scholars, Chenango Greenway Conservancy, Hospice & Palliative Care of Chenango County and more. In addition, NBT employees raised over \$110,000 through direct contributions and another nearly \$4,000 from special events, such as raffles, the annual cornhole tournament and a coin wars competition, for a total of \$114,055 to benefit the Chenango United Way.

“NBT Bank and its employees have continually shown again and again how much community means,” said Chenango United Way Executive Director Elizabeth Monaco. “We are better when we are all stronger.”

In addition to community support, NBT Bank re-committed to providing employees the resources they needed to make better decisions for themselves regarding physical, mental, emotional and financial

Continued on Page 22

The Impact Project has record-breaking year in 2021

**By Zachary Meseck
Sun Contributor**

CHENANGO COUNTY - The Impact Project has had another record-breaking year for projects in Chenango County, with projects already scheduled for the beginning of 2022.

According to The Impact Project Executive Director Jim Willard III, The Impact Project is an independent, non-profit, Christian organization that does major home repairs for elderly, handicapped, and low income families. The service is currently limited based on the number of donations they receive, as they make repairs to homes at no cost to the homeowner.

Willard said his organization had a record-breaking year of projects completed in Chenango County, as the need for housing based rehabilitation programs increased throughout the pandemic.

“We hit the ball out of the park,” he said. “While 2020 was a record year with



Vietnam Veteran and Oxford Homeowner Norman “Bill” Wilbur and his family receives a salute from Marine Corp Sergeant Greg Cobb as part of a special Impact Project ceremony following its 134th project. (Photo by Zachary Meseck)

10 projects, we doubled that in 2021 and completed 20 projects.”

“In years past we averaged a humanitarian project every six weeks or so. In 2021 we averaged a project every two to three weeks.”

Willard said The Impact

Project has helped homeowners from Northern Sherburne to Nineveh and everywhere in between. He said the organization has now completed 141 humanitarian projects since its inception in 2004 - with the assistance of 4,139 volunteers.

**The Demand For
Housing Rehabilitation Assistance Grows**

As people struggle to make it through the pandemic, the demand for a service that provides home rehabili-

Continued on Page 25

The Rogers Center continues to grow despite two years of COVID-19 restrictions

**By Zachary Meseck
Sun Contributor**

SHERBURNE - With two years of the pandemic forcing The Rogers Center to keep its visitor center closed, organization leaders used the time to grow and look optimistically towards a time where it can fully reopen.

According to Friends of Rogers Executive Director Simon Solomon, the mission of the Friends of Rogers is to provide outstanding educational opportunities that excite, inspire, and motivate people of all ages to enjoy, understand, and to appreciate and protect our natural environment.

“Rogers Center has such a storied history and holds such a special place in the hearts of so many,” said Solomon. “Rogers Center intends to continue to act as a vital educational resource for schools and families and a welcoming and accessible environment for all ages, backgrounds, and abilities.”

“Our events and activities serve to build a community wide respect for and under-



Friends of Rogers Director of Development Heather Tehan received a \$5,000 as a donation to Friends of Rogers from the Thode Family Fund after Sherburne native Keith Thode won this year’s Tesla raffle. (Submitted photo)

standing of the natural environment in our own backyards.”

**Rogers Center’s History
of Prevailing Against
the Odds**

Solomon said Friends of Rogers is a non-profit orga-

nization supporting Rogers Environmental Education Center. In 1909, the Rogers State Game Farm was established as the first in NY State. He said when the Department of Environmental conservation (DEC) decided to phase

it out in 1963, the local Rotary Club funded a National Audubon Society feasibility study.

“Based on their recommendations, the first state-operated nature center, now known as Rogers Environmental Education Center, was opened in 1968,” he said. “A pro-active group of volunteers established Friends of Rogers to assist Rogers Center with programs and community relations, and the group also raised funds for projects not covered by state funding.”

“Faced with unprecedented budget cuts, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) officially closed Rogers Center on December 31st, 2010 after nearly 45 years of continuous operation as an environmental education center.”

Under a renewed agreement with the DEC, Friends of Rogers continues managing all public programs, educational activities, and maintenance of more than six miles of trails across 600-

Continued on Page 22

NBT Bank: Focused On What Matters —

Continued from Page 21

wellness. For a second year in a row, NBT Bank was named one of the Central New York Business Journal's Best Places to Work. This listing is based on the results from a survey of NBT employees.

"Our employees remain our most precious and greatest competitive advantage," said Chief Ethics Officer and Corporate Secretary Catherine Scarlett. "In 2021, we knew it was critical that we continue to provide resources to help our teams be successful both at work and at home."

Some 2021 employee initiatives included hosting a virtual health and wellness fair with live seminars, free access to Care.com and offering financial wellness seminars on topics such as credit, savings, budgeting and retirement planning.

In January of 2020, NBT Bank launched its Student Loan Repayment Program, designed to help reduce the outstanding balance on qualifying student loans for full-time employees as part of its financial wellness initiatives. Since then, the company has helped more than 255 employees pay down their student loan debt, with 13 employees completely paying off their loans to-date. This is in addition to supporting employees enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs through tuition payments and flexible schedules.

Scarlett said, "As we look forward to 2022, we will remain focused on the shared success of our employees, customers and our community."

NBT Bank offers personal banking, business banking and wealth management services from locations in seven states, including New York, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine and Connecticut. The bank and its parent company, NBT Bancorp, are headquartered in Norwich, NY. NBT Bancorp had assets of \$12 billion as of September 30, 2021, and is traded on the Nasdaq Global Select Market under the symbol NBTB. More information about NBT is available online at www.nbtbank.com. Member FDIC.

— From NBT Bank

The Rogers Center continues to grow despite two years of COVID-19 restrictions —

Continued from Page 21

acres of property at Rogers Center.

"As an organization we know we can do this, even while up against covid," said Solomon when asked about what the future holds. "The Rogers Center had been faced with obstacles in the past and it's always been an uphill battle getting the Center and property back off the ground and funded ever since the NYS DEC closure in 2010; we as an organization are not new to adversity."

"The Rogers Center and our local community stepped up and supported Rogers Center during a tumultuous time during the transition from a DEC operated nature center to a nonprofit nature center."

What Has Changed Since the Start of the Pandemic?

According to Solomon, so much has changed for the organization since March 2020. Solomon said one example is that the Rogers Visitor Center has been closed since early on during the pandemic and has yet to open back up to the public.

"During the early months of Covid-19 the Rogers Visitor Center was forced to close much like many other employers were while able to keep open the trails, pavilions and property the entire time," he said.

Even with the restric-



The Electric Vehicle Show held in October of 2021 drew in participants from all over New York State, and Rogers Center representatives said they look forward to hosting the event in the future. (Submitted photo)

tions, staying active and making improvements has been a priority for the Rogers Center.

"As we transitioned into 2021 this past winter and spring the Rogers Visitor Center embarked upon a NYS DEC funded ADA/ Handicapped Accessibility project which included an update to the restrooms in the center, a newly paved and graded parking lot, along with the installation of an elevator to allow better access into the facility for those in need," said Solomon. "We look forward to opening back up the Visitor Center to the public this coming January, 22nd 2022 with an official ribbon cutting to kick things off."

"In addition to the Center closing we have now gone two years without school

field trips being scheduled at Rogers Center."

Solomon said the lack of school engagement not only hurts the quality of environmental education the school can provide, but also has a large impact on the center's annual budget.

"Friends of Rogers not only leans on the schools for funding when hosting environmental field trips, the schools lean on Rogers to provide that in-person environmental interpretation to their students, something missed by both," he added. "It's unfortunate the schools have yet to come back, but in time they surely will as we are hopeful this spring the Rogers Center is able to play building and property host to this region's local Envirothon competition."

So although 2021 really wasn't that much better than 2020 for the center, Solomon said the Rogers Center was still able to host various events and programs on property, raffle off another 2020 Tesla Model 3 to a lucky winner, and still maintain and provide opportunities for the public to enjoy the property.

He said Rogers Center continued to see an uptick in the number of people on property this year again nearing the 19,000 to 20,000 realm.

Moving Beyond the Pandemic

Solomon noted that some things have changed since the start of the pandemic, and much of that can be seen when comparing how people

Continued on Page 23

Focused on what matters — no matter what

NBT is committed to being there for our customers and communities when they need us most. Together, we overcame another difficult year with the dedication of our employees and the resilience of our customers and communities. As we prepare for the future, know that our commitment continues to be stronger than ever because **we know we're Stronger Together.**



Member FDIC



2021's Wild Goose Chase 5K was another success for the Rogers Center despite ongoing COVID-19 restrictions. (Submitted photo)

Continued from Page 22
 are now living with COVID-19 out in the community.

"Businesses are open and schools are functioning, albeit with strict COVID protocols in place," Solomon said. "The Rogers Center, like so many of us, had to adapt to figuring out how best to navigate life without being shut-in."

"Heading into 2021 there was a lot of enthusiasm and optimism that things would get better, but unfortunately the virus isn't a scripted movie or an app or game that has an end followed by credits; we are experiencing this now, unless Omicron is the crescendo followed by a decrescendo."

A challenge for the Rogers Center in 2022 will be opening back up the Center to visitors in a safe and meaningful

way. Diversifying the organization's funding streams is also an important endeavor they will continue to pursue.

"You can see clearly now in the face of the virus why diversified funding streams are so important," said Solomon. "Businesses that rely too heavily in one area have been faced with strategizing new ways to operate and fund themselves."

"The Rogers Center is not immune to any of this, therefore we continue to be mindful and watchful of opportunities while being strategic in the way we operate day to day, the Tesla raffle being a good example."

The Rogers Center is nearing completion of a nine-month building project and looks to reopen the Center to the public on Saturday, January 22.

It will also be unveiling new interpretative exhibits inside the Visitor Center funded in part by NYS Parks and Trails; something the Rogers Center exhibit committee had been working on since 2019 and just recently installed at the end of 2021.

"Staff wise we are always on the lookout for qualified, enthusiastic individuals to join the team. NYS DEC allows the Friends of Rogers the ability to hire seasonal interns to help out with weekend programs, school field trips and trail maintenance," he added. "This is considered a reimbursable NYS DEC intern grant therefore it is quite strict and specific to what it funds, but over the years we have been able to work with many aspiring students pursuing environmental work."

"Some interns in the past

simply were good at operating trail maintenance vehicles and hand tools while others worked well with children or by creating lesson plans. The students that tend to intern at Rogers Center seem to all have an environmental niche they want to pursue yet when it comes down to it they all love the outdoors and mother nature just like the rest of us."

What to Expect in 2022

"We certainly do have plans for 2022 - seasonally, March will be here before we know it and one goal is to continue to develop and grow the Rogers Center Selleck Sugaring operation," said Solomon. "Rogers Center has developed and maintained over the years an 11-acre, 700 tap sugarbush on property."

He said people in the community may be familiar with Rogers Center Maple Syrup,

thanks to a partnership with Heartwood Maple out of Sherburne, Rogers Center has been producing and bottling syrup for the past 4 years with all proceeds from the sales of syrup go directly back to supporting Rogers Center operations. Investing in infrastructure - securing running water and power onsite is a necessity at the sugarbush.

Getting the schools back this spring and hosting summer camp again in 2022 is also at the top of the organization's priority list.

"We had such a fantastic fun-filled summer last July and August hosting summer camp for children ages 3 to 11," said Solomon. "Everyone was masked and we kept outside the entire time beneath either a tent, pavilion or shade tree and heard so many encouraging comments."

"Back during 2020 we did not host summer camp so being able to do this in 2021 with the hope of again in 2022 is a real likelihood. As we transition into the fall of 2022 we are also hopeful to have hired a full-time environmental educator to support the ongoing mission and efforts of Rogers Center."

The Friends of Rogers organization recently made an application to a two-year funded "New Hire" professional development grant, essentially as seed money for the first two years of this position with the intent to keep this position funded during subsequent years after the grant expires. This is a big step for a small organization, but they are hopeful and know logistically it's a very import-

Continued on Page 24

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More than 100 bricks were purchased and placed as part of the Rogers Center's Donor Brick Campaign last year, and the campaign continues into 2022. (Submitted photo)



DEC Ranger Burkholder informing attendees about proper water and ice safety, and how to rescue others and themselves in the event that they fall through the ice. Once out of the water, they said it's important to stay low and close to the ice, and distribute body weight as much as possible. (Submitted photo)

Continued from Page 23
 ant mission related position, so we are all in.

"Look for this official position announcement to be advertised by around Memorial Day weekend 2022. The main challenge continues to be centered around the Covid-19 Pandemic," said Solomon. "Planning has become terribly difficult long-term, basically planning anything much further out than 4 weeks has its challenges."

"Just look at where things were prior to Thanksgiving this year and what we are now up against with Omicron, what's next?"

Community Support

Friends of Rogers Director of Development Heather Tehan looked back on the support the groups has received over the past two years. "It has been remarkable to see the response to our fundraising appeals continue to grow, all

while we were not able to continue events such as Spring Frolic."

Tehan mentioned that going forward, educational programs will also be available on Zoom, to allow anyone interested in them to join in.

"We have a strong base of followers and supporters that are familiar with Rogers Center and no longer live in the area," said Tehan. "They still offer us support and want to engage with our educators and programs, and a notable example of this is the winner of the 2021 Electric Car Raffle, Keith Thode."

"Keith is a Sherburne High School Graduate that now lives in Texas, and he still supports many nonprofit efforts in Sherburne, which is how he came to win the Tesla."

She said Thode purchased his tickets after reading an article in the Sherburne News, which he has mailed to him in Texas. She added that when

Keith came to pick up his prize, he surprised representatives with a check for \$5,000 as a donation to Friends of Rogers from the Thode Family Fund.

"This sort of generosity comes from his ties to Rogers Center and wanting to help the Friends group continue to provide environmental education in his hometown," said Tehan. "Another fundraiser that was new in 2021, and will continue in 2022, is the Donor Brick Campaign."

"We wanted a fundraiser that tied into the construction planned for the center and that donors could participate online or by mail."

The Donor Brick

Campaign was a success in 2021 with over 100 bricks sold and placed into a patio area at the front of the visitor center for all to see for decades to come.

The campaign continues in 2022 and anyone interested in buying a brick to personalize with your message, commemorate an event or in memory of a loved one can go to the website FriendsOfRogers.org.

According to Solomon, the Rogers Center continues to receive widespread support from its community, and even while its visitor center remains closed there are a number of different ways businesses, community members, and

local leaders can utilize the space.

"To this day it's apparent our local community continues to believe in the mission of Rogers Center and all that we do," said Solomon. "From the governmental or business entity side, we ask that everyone continue to think of Rogers Center and how we both might mutually benefit."

He said partnerships including employee wellness initiatives, or acting as a host site for business luncheons remain an option. Additionally, Solomon notes that if community members want to get involved to help they can always facilitate a

conversation with one of our local politicians and explain to them the importance behind Rogers Center and the benefits to their community.

The Rogers Center is located at 2721 State Hwy. 80, Sherburne, NY 13460, and anyone interested in learning more about the organization may visit FriendsOfRogers.org for additional information.

"Please, keep Rogers Center in the back of your mind, forever and always and promote this hidden Chenango County treasure to anyone and everyone," said Solomon.

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The Impact Project has record-breaking year in 2021 —

Continued from Page 21

tation at little to no cost continues to increase.

“We’re already booked out a couple of months for 2022 throughout Chenango County,” said Willard. “If things continue at the current pace that we’re currently at, we will surpass what we did in 2021.”

“The housing crisis in Chenango County continues to worsen, and we continue to see an increase in both the number of homeowners submitting applications and the severity of home repairs needed.”

Willard said the rise in demand is caused by issues including that Chenango County has seen very little new home construction over the last several years. He said in addition to that, 70 percent of existing homes in the county are 50 years and older, and 40 percent of homes are 80 years and older.

He added that the United States has experienced an increase in building material costs of 30 to 50 percent in the last two years.

“Add to this the fact that half to two-thirds of our county’s population is living in poverty or Asset Limited Income Constrained Employed (ALICE) and the end result is that two to three homeowners per week pack up and leave their homes,” said Willard. “While there are other factors that contribute to this, what we see is that the



Impact Project volunteers from cvFree Church stand with Norwich homeowner Patricia Scott after building a new handicap accessible ramp as part of the organization’s 127th project. (Submitted photo)

safety of the home is the final element that forces a move.”
 “The good news is that we can fix this. One of the reasons we live in Chenango County is because of our amazing people.”

One Example of a Project

In the fall of 2021, The Impact Project completed its 134th project which involved a Vietnam veteran living in Oxford. The project included a 50 foot ramp, and according to Willard it could have cost the veteran approximately \$7,000 or \$8,000 if handled by a private contractor.

“Every project and homeowner is special to us, but a great example of what we do is the Wilbur project we did in Oxford,” said Willard. “Peggy

and Norman “Bill” Wilbur live at 176 Halfway House Road in the Town of Oxford, and they needed some help with a ramp.”

“I have family that served, so when a veteran needs help the project becomes really personal for me.”

Willard said others on The Impact Project board share those sentiments, and when they heard about the project proposal they were immediately on board. He said Wilbur served 14 years which included time throughout the Vietnam war.

“We wanted to let Bill and his family know how valued and important he is to us and to this country,” he said. “So we brought in another veteran to the ribbon cutting ceremony

to salute him.”

“That was a first for us, we had never done that before, but it was an honor and a privilege to let Bill, Peggy, and their family know the value of his service to this country.”

Developing New Methods to Promote Volunteerism

Willard said The Impact Project wouldn’t be able to help homeowners without the hard work and dedication of its many volunteers from Chenango County and the surrounding areas. He said the pandemic has forced the organization to get creative and adopt several new methods to help people.

“Our original model has been to use a large number of volunteers, but we have now

added a second model of partnering with local businesses to contract their services and a third model in hiring a project manager who can do smaller projects single-handedly,” said Willard. “These changes have also meant that

situations, which offers a valuable service for the homeowner, and can assist applicants in the ALICE category who would not have otherwise qualified for a home repair.

He said that additionally The Impact Project continues to partner with a number of great local businesses to help more people during the pandemic.

“We can come together to make a difference in our neighbors’ lives,” he added. “Our volunteers have ranged in age from 3 to 87. You can help. You can share your talents – making lunch for volunteers, planting a flower bed or shingling a roof.”

“You can share your time by volunteering on a project, or you can share your treasure by donating money or supplies.”

Those who are interested in learning more about The Impact Project may visit www.theimpactprojectgreene.org, follow the organization on Facebook/Twitter, or call (607) 656-9499 from Monday to Friday 9 a.m to 2 p.m.

“Our goal from this article is to bring attention to the housing crisis that is eroding this great county of ours,” said Willard. “We at The Impact Project will do everything we can to help as many people as possible in 2022 - with the hope that someday we will no longer be needed because every homeowner in our county will have a safe and affordable home.”



Impact Project Executive Director Jim Willard III holds a donation from sfcu. The partnership between the two organizations continues into 2022 with a new loan program focused on trying to help people make vital repairs on their home. (Submitted photo)

we were able to expand the type of home repairs we could complete for homeowners.”

“Another significant development this past year was a collaborative partnership with Sidney Federal Credit Union in which we can offer a half percent home repair loan for up to five years and \$10,000.”

Willard added that The Impact Project acts as the general contractor in those

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