

Chamber connects SIUE to community

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Southern Illinois University Edwardsville plays a pivotal role in strengthening the regional economy. Likewise, the Edwardsville/Glen Carbon Chamber of Commerce, as a member-driven organization, stands as the voice of business by supporting its members' success and championing community prosperity.

On this week's episode of Segue, the University's premier radio show on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound, SIUE Chancellor Randy Pembroke, PhD, has a conversation with Desiree Bennyhoff, president and chief executive officer of the Ed/Glen Chamber, about her position and how the organization serves the community.

This episode of Segue will air at 9 a.m. on Sunday, April 1.

An SIUE alum, Bennyhoff earned a bachelor's in liberal arts and a master's in speech communication (now applied communication studies). As president and CEO, she oversees the strategic direction of the 500-member organization. She is credentialed by the Institute for Organization Management, a premier nonprofit development program of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, and is also an Accredited Chamber Executive through the Illinois Association of Chamber of Commerce Executives. She presents frequently at conferences, and as a guest speaker and panelist in several SIUE classes. In her spare time, she volunteers as a mentor in the Illinois Regional Office of Education #41's Give 30 program and the Illinois Metro East Small Business Development Center.

Pembroke starts their conversation by asking Bennyhoff what drew her to civic work.

"It was completely by accident," Bennyhoff explains. "I used to work for a local media establishment, and they had classified ads. I wasn't looking for a change, but a co-worker suggested that I take a look at an ad for a communications director position with the chamber.

"I thought it sounded interesting, so I sent in my resume and other materials. The moment I walked into the interview, I knew it was a perfect fit. Nine years later, here I am."

Bennyhoff joined the organization in 2009 as its communications director. By early fall 2012, she was promoted to the position of interim director. In January 2013, she became the Ed/Glen Chamber's president and CEO.

"For our listeners who might not know, what exactly does a chamber of commerce do and what does an average day look like for you?" Pembroke asks.

"Each chamber of commerce is unique," Bennyhoff says. "Our chamber is known as the voice of local businesses, which leads to a lot of advocacy work. We have networking opportunities for businesses and leaders to gain relationships. There are also a number of marketing and promotional opportunities, as well as professional development and educational offerings.

"My primary role consists of government affairs and advocacy, so I spend a lot of time behind-the-scenes, while our membership director, Katie Haas, is more front and center, dealing one-on-one with our members, running our education programs, and coordinating our ribbon cuttings and Business After Five events. Our administrative assistant, Kathy Hentz, keeps our office going on a day-to-day basis and assists with visitor questions."

The Ed/Glen Chamber is also led by a board of directors, which consists of several business leaders from around the region. Sam Guarino, partner at Bella Milano Restaurants, serves as the board's chairman.

Recently, the organization has adopted a new tagline, "Business Builds: Economies. Leaders. Communities."

"Our old motto used to be 'It's everyone's business.' It sounded a bit nosy, or had a gossipy undercurrent," Bennyhoff says. "When we started to look at the new mantra, we wanted something that encompassed our mission.

"If we don't have jobs for people, we don't have the opportunity to build a community, and that goes for the entire region. SIUE plays into that role, as well. We feel the new mantra conveys the story we are trying to tell."

"Businesses also play the huge role of building our community's leaders," Pembroke continues. "The individuals who start these companies have the opportunity to come forward and engage with their community in ways that might be outside their comfort zone. We try our best at SIUE to encourage our students to get involved in their community and help shape a better world. It sounds like you're really plugging into that!"

The Ed/Glen Chamber not only encourages business leaders to get involved in community activities and philanthropy, but also works directly with connecting them back to the University to provide opportunities to students.

"We get a lot of questions about internships from local businesses," Bennyhoff says. "We direct them to the Career Development Center on campus, which helps them sign up and gather student information to find a good fit for their business.

"There are thousands of students right here that need experience, so when they graduate, they will have already set foot in a business and might not require a lot of soft-skills training. In many cases, if a student performs well during an internship, there may be a job waiting for them at that organization come graduation, which is ideal."

Bennyhoff encourages business owners from throughout the region, who are interested in joining the Ed/Glen Chamber, to visit EdGlenChamber.com or call 618-656-7600 for more information.

By Madelaine Gerard, SIUE Marketing & Communications