

Junior Achievement creates 'Speaker Series Virtual,' seeks business and community leaders to inspire next generation with their stories; model being rolled out statewide

By Ken Datzman

With the changing educational environment and the shift to online learning for students because of the coronavirus pandemic, Junior Achievement of the Space Coast has quickly responded with a new virtual venture.

The nonprofit organization has produced a counterpart to its popular in-classroom Speaker Series, where business leaders and community leaders talk about their careers and the paths they took in life, and the challenges they faced along the way.

Junior Achievement of the Space Coast has now developed a "Speaker Series Virtual," and plans to build a YouTube video library across a range of industries in the months ahead.

It is seeking area business leaders to participate in the 20-minute videos, inspiring the next generation workforce with their stories.

"When area schools announced they were extending spring break, Candice Hodge, our education program manager, called me at 4 p.m. on a Thursday and said we need to brainstorm on how we can pivot and deliver Space Coast-specific career content to teachers and students," said Anne Conroy-Baiter, president of Junior Achievement of the Space Coast.

"We came up with a virtual version of our Speaker Series and have started creating videos. I have a background in marketing and did the branding and the 'boiler plates' for the videos. Desiree Kaul is our operations and education coordinator and her son Evan has experience producing videos, and helped us. So within a couple of days we had our first fully produced video. It features attorney Mark Malek talking about his career."

Conroy-Baiter said the businesspeople who are showcased in the videos are asked up to five questions about their careers.

The selection of questions includes: How did you end up in your career? What's your biggest failure? Your biggest success? What is the importance of community at this time? Were you financially prepared for this (the pandemic)? How did you recover from 9/11 or the recession? What do you feel optimistic about right now?

"The idea is not only to provide career advice, but also to reach students with messages of reassurance, hope, guidance, and reality in times of challenge," she said. "We also want to provide teachers with a free online resource — easy to assign and easy to access."

She added, "There is an assessment tool that goes with the video that the teacher can assign. For the younger kids, it might be where did the speaker grow up? For the older students, it might be what are you getting out of this video? What's your biggest takeaway?"

Colorado Springs, Colo.-based Junior Achievement USA has adopted the local JA model for the virtual videos and is rolling it out across the state, "partially based on what we started in Brevard County," said Conroy-Baiter.

The videos will be added to Junior Achievement USA's national library as well, she said.

Junior Achievement of the Space Coast received a \$25,000 grant from the Truist Foundation (merger of SunTrust and BB&T), and \$5,000 from Wells Fargo to support the Speaker Series Virtual initiative.

"We are grateful for the support of the Truist Foundation and Wells Fargo, helping us get this program underway," said Conroy-Baiter.

"A nonprofit like Junior Achievement is not a front-



BBN photo — Adrienne B. Roth

Anne Conroy-Baiter, right, is president of Junior Achievement of the Space Coast. Nitza 'Sisi' Packard is vice president of administration, business development, and controller at Building Management Systems Inc. in Melbourne. Junior Achievement of the Space Coast has launched a 'Speaker Series Virtual' project to provide area students with an overview of various occupations and industries. The initiative features business leaders and community leaders. Packard is one of the featured business leaders in the videos. JA is seeking more speakers and video editors for the project. They are at Building Management Systems.

line responder, so it's important for us to pursue education grants to ensure we can continue meeting the needs of the community with our programs and the work we do."

Junior Achievement of the Space Coast relies on corporate donations and fundraising to support its operation.

One of the businesswomen featured in the Speaker Series Virtual is Nitza "Sisi" Packard, vice president of contract administration, business development, and controller at Building Management Systems Inc.

The longtime Melbourne firm specializes in commercial construction, and is an employee-owned enterprise.

"I was thrilled to take part in the Speaker Series Virtual," said Packard, who is a former businessowner in the construction industry and has 25 years' experience in her field.

"I love this concept Junior Achievement has created and being able to provide career insight to young people in Brevard County."

She added, "I have a 20-year-old daughter who will be starting her third year in college and she is going through this right now trying to decide a career path. The college years speed by, so I believe these videos will be beneficial to students. They will have the opportunity to get a look inside a range of different occupations and industries."

At a time when young people are pressured to make education and career decisions earlier, it's more important than ever to "encourage, inspire, and guide," Packard added.

Packard earned her bachelor's degree from the University of Florida's M.E. Rinker School of Construction Management, under UF's College of Design Construction and Planning.

She was one of only four or five women in the UF program at that time, which was comprised of 60 students. She attended UF from 1990 to 1994.

Please see Junior Achievement, page 19

Junior Achievement of the Space Coast

Continued from page 12

Packard said when she was in high school, she was interested in becoming an architect, “but learned that space planning was not for me.”

At UF, she went on a few field trips visiting businesses which only added to her interest in pursuing a career in construction.

“I recall we went on some really interesting school-sponsored field trips. We visited concrete plants and structural-steel businesses. The trips to these businesses were very interesting, from my perspective,” said Packard, who grew up in Puerto Rico.

She attended UF on a work-study program. Packard worked in the office of the M.E. Rinker School of Construction Management. “It was a great experience.”

Today, at Building Management Systems Packard said the coronavirus pandemic has changed a lot in the way she conducts business.

“In four months, just about everything has changed, including my work schedule. My daily routine is much different today.”

A lot has changed in America in a short period of time. At the beginning of 2020, the U.S. stock market was at an all-time high, the economy was experiencing a historic milestone of growth, and things seemed to be going well for many people.

Then, the coronavirus appeared in the U.S. and in a short time everything changed. Now, the nation is making a comeback. The stock market has made impressive gains, and more small businesses are reopening around the country.

“I love the Junior Achievement mission. It enables young people to own their economic futures. That is exactly what people need in a time like this,” said Conroy-

Baiter, a graduate of Tufts University.

Junior Achievement programs help prepare young people for the real world by showing them how to generate wealth and effectively manage it.

They learn how to create jobs, which make their communities more robust, and how to apply small-business entrepreneurial thinking to the workplace.

Students put these lessons into action and learn the value of contributing to their communities, she said.

Junior Achievement of the Space Coast is engaged in workforce development across industries.

“Construction management is a sector Junior Achievement of the Space Coast has been focusing on because we have a partnership with the Economic Development Commission of Florida’s Space Coast,” said Conroy-Baiter. “We were pleased to have Sisi provide some insight into her career for the Speaker Series Virtual.”

Junior Achievement of the Space Coast’s Speaker Series Virtual currently has 17 profiles “with more in the queue,” said Conroy-Baiter.

In addition to Packard and Malak, many people have either completed or are committed to making a video. They represent many different occupations, including finance, economic development, technology, community service and nonprofits, law, education, marketing and public relations, and accounting. The list includes: Rep. Randy Fine, Courtney Harris Barker, Michelle Reynolds Naberhaus, Laurie Cappelli, Lynda Weatherman, Theresa Grimison, Dr. Cindy McGovern, Bart Gaetjens, Rick Simonian, Robert Rains, Ashley Kosak, Kristen Klein, Kerry Conroy, and Brent Peoples.

The list continues: Joshua Adams, Amanda Smith, David Smith, Tony Taliancich, Ruth Hull, Jennifer

Sugarman, Bradley White, Becky Granger, and JoJo Siciliano McDonald, Corrina Carotti Snigg, Ashley Emshoff, Morgan Frechette, Sandy Sanders, Chelsea Lewis, Romy Reading, Chris Johnston, Emily Gores, Sean McKeel, Ivan Negron, Katie Parson, and Chally Rowjohn.

Email Hodge at CHodge@JASpaceCoast.org to sign up or for more information on participating in the Speaker Series Virtual.

“We are actively seeking more speakers and video editors to build up our library over the summer,” said Conroy-Baiter. “Junior Achievement of the Space Coast is trying to get ready for any scenario as it pertains to school schedules. Junior Achievement USA is rapidly converting programs to virtual delivery, while honoring and respecting the longtime tradition of in-classroom presentations by volunteers.”

Junior Achievement of the Space Coast has been meeting with a team from Brevard Public Schools to talk about virtual and in-person delivery options for the new school year and how best “to meet the district’s needs and capabilities. Candice and Desiree have been on weekly education calls with the schools,” said Conroy-Baiter.

Conroy-Baiter said her organization is “looking to have a good cross-section of some of the best business leaders and community leaders in Brevard County featured in the Speaker Series Virtual. We want to represent a wide range of industries and career possibilities for students. We’re currently ‘auditioning’ a video editor from Nova Scotia who found us online. We’re excited to be doing this project. And we got it off the ground quickly. The more participation we get from the community, the more enriching the Speaker Series Virtual will be.”



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