

BERKSHIRE INNOVATION CENTER

The promise of the network

BY BEN SOSNE

A few weeks ago, Massachusetts Secretary of Housing and Economic Development Mike Kennealy was at the Berkshire Innovation Center (BIC) for a panel discussion as part of the premiere of the first episode of "Project Frontline," a multi-part docuseries produced by BIC members Boyd Technologies and Digital Eyes Film that chronicles the state's response to the evolving COVID-19 pandemic.

Kennealy and his fellow panelists discussed the critical shortages of PPE, the collapse of supply chains, and the remarkably coordinated effort to encourage a statewide manufacturing response to the PPE crisis. With incredible speed, the commonwealth's Manufacturing Emergency Response Team (MERT) was able to activate and connect Massachusetts' world class health systems, research and academic institutions, and private manufacturing expertise so that all were working systematically toward a common goal. The result has been tremendous, with over 11 million pieces of PPE produced to date.

The experience in Massachusetts could and should serve as a model for other states. That said, Kennealy was quick to point out that the impressive collaboration between industry, academia, healthcare professionals and government did not just appear overnight. The seeds had been sown over a decade earlier, with the creation of the Massachusetts Life Science Center (MLSC), the quasi-public agency which encourages innovation and economic development, and serves as the hub of the Massachusetts life science ecosystem. MLSC and its partner organizations had built a broad network over the years, a network that the state was able to instantly activate and mobilize.

The Berkshire Innovation Center is proud to be part of this broad network – and proud of the role we played in helping to coordinate the response efforts with manufacturing partners in our region. The BIC was built to be the hub for innovation and advanced manufacturing in the Berkshires and a gateway linking our regional network into the larger web that crosses the state.

It was good to have Secretary Kennealy back at the BIC. He was last there on Feb. 28, when we welcomed Governor Charlie Baker, Lt. Governor Karyn Polito, and close to 400 other government officials, educators, business and community leaders, and area students to the grand opening of our brand-new facility. It was a great day at the Innovation Center, and an exciting opportunity for our members and partners to introduce themselves and their work to people from across the county and across the commonwealth.

As we celebrated the opening of our new home, we did not envision our first few months of operation playing out as they did.

Indeed, the irony of the situation is difficult to miss – we spent years planning and designing a world-class facility that would be a physical gathering place for innovation, shared resources and collective learning, and less than a month after we opened our doors a global pandemic put a hold on any live "gatherings" indefinitely.

On the other hand – as we stressed long before the grand opening – the strength and promise of the Innovation Center is about far more than a shiny new building. Rather, like our partners in the MLSC ecosystem, our belief has always been that we can do more together, and that collaborating and sharing our collective wisdom will benefit us all.

COVID-19 put this core tenet to the test just days after we opened our doors. Instead of dissolving, our network grew – and the connections between members and the organization strengthened. BIC members used the network to share best practices for navigating the storm, and came together eager to find ways to support the recovery of our community and promote business opportunities that could stimulate the local economy. The energy, enthusiasm and optimism that the members shared was infectious and inspiring.

A group led by Justin McKennon of Electro Magnetic Applications came forward, passionate about developing an experiential learning program for high school juniors and seniors interested in pursuing careers in technology and advanced manufacturing. Other BIC members recognized the impact such a program could have on young people in our community and were quick to volunteer their time and energy.



Ben Sosne is executive director of the Berkshire Innovation Center in Pittsfield.

Thanks to their efforts, and the support of organizations like Berkshire Bank and Berkshire Money Management, the BIC launched Berkshire E-Talent Accelerator (BETA) program this summer and will soon be welcoming our inaugural cohort.

A similarly energetic group from the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) at Berkshire Community College, who had been planning a major conference on transformative technologies, came forward eager to pivot this vision into a virtual format. Thanks to their persistence, the BIC, OLLI and 1Berkshire, as well as our academic partners, are now in the middle of an eight-week course we are offering called "The

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Impact of Transformative Technologies on Work and Society," which features thought leaders from our region and from around the globe.

This course, which can be watched live or on demand, is sparking a community conversation on how new technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data, machine learning and robotics are impacting the nature of work and education, and how we can best harness these technologies for the development of our region.

Picking up on these same themes, we've been inspired by the newest member of the BIC, an ed-tech startup called Edgi Learning. Edgi's goal is to prepare high school students for a rapidly changing world with engaging and relevant courses offered on a dynamic virtual platform.

This fall, the BIC has partnered with Edgi to offer "Technology and the Future of Work," which is based on a successful New York University seminar, to high school students across Berkshire County. Thanks to the support of our community banking partners – Lee Bank, Adams Community Bank, MountainOne and Pittsfield Cooperative Bank – over 100 students are currently taking the course for little or no charge.

While many of our educational programs have shifted to a virtual format, there is plenty of activity inside our facility. Electro Magnetic Applications, our resident rocket scientists, are completing the installation of their aerospace testing chamber and are planning to be fully operational in early 2021. In response to member needs and industry trends, the capabilities of our training center and rapid prototyping room are continuing to expand and more is on the horizon.

Thanks to a partnership with Digital Eyes Film, we have converted, at least temporarily, our downstairs event room

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This fall the BIC is partnering with Edgi Learning to offer "Technology and the Future of Work" to area high school students. The course is among several educational initiatives the BIC has launched recently.

to "Studio BIC," a state-of-the-art digital recording and broadcasting studio that can host and produce compelling virtual and hybrid events. Indeed, from Oct. 19-23 we will be hosting Berkshire County STEM Week "live from the BIC."

COVID-19 has presented enormous challenges for our region – for our families, our educators, our students and many sectors of our economy. Our work at the BIC supports the technology and advanced manufacturing sector, a sector that is well positioned to grow, and one that is so critical to our county's economic recovery.

To help them realize this potential, we are expanding our R&D capabilities, offering access to industry experts, strengthening our ties to our academic partners, and laying the groundwork for a robust talent pipeline. We are also engaging our community partners in meaningful conversations about the future of our region.

With an activated network that supports each other and seeks ways to collaborate, the possibilities are endless. Get involved, join our network, let's see what we can do together. ♦

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