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Middle Bucks Students Give Back, Celebrate Ten Years of Philanthropy Today

By Pamela Swoyer and Mark Covelle

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Jamison, PA - Middle Bucks Institute of Technology (MBIT) recently celebrated the 10-year anniversary of the Philanthropy Today Club (PTC), a student-run philanthropic club where students learn the process of evaluating grant applications and culminate their work with \$20,000 of grant awards annually. The only known organization with exclusively student-managed philanthropic giving, the club started with the help of a \$5,000 grant from the Raab Foundation in 2014. Growing in popularity and interest each year, the club now manages two distinct \$10,000 grants, one from the Raab Foundation and one from the Heenan Foundation, each with specific guidelines to which the students must adhere.

Each year, a new group of students at MBIT is taught the language and meaning of Philanthropy. Stephen F. Raab, Board Chair Emeritus, Norman Raab Foundation said; "I was inspired to initiate the Philanthropy Today club in Bucks County high schools after meeting another foundation that operated a similar program in their home community. It seemed like an ideal program for high school students to learn about their community and work collaboratively to make decisions to create impact. Our goal has always been for the clubs to be student led, so that student voices are heard. Over ten years at MBIT, with the thoughtful advising of Pamela Swoyer and her team, the Philanthropy Today club has grown and evolved to lift up student voices and connect students to organizations working on issues important to them in their community."

With the Raab grant, students identify needs in the community, narrow down their focus, and develop a unique mission statement to guide their evaluations and giving. They conduct thorough research, develop a questionnaire, and conduct site visits to identify local organizations that align with the Philanthropy Today Club mission. Through a democratic process, the students exclusively determine who will receive a grant and who will be declined. The students must complete a proposal, interim report, and a final report for the Raab Foundation's approval.

In 2024, the mission statement reads, "The MBIT Philanthropy Today Club believes all youth in our community should have equity and access to the resources they need; for educational and extracurricular activities for disadvantaged and special populations, and a safe and accepting environments for all students to meet and address their mental health needs." The student-created vision encompasses not only facilitating access but also providing a safe, accepting environment where youth can address mental health needs. Central to the club's mission is learning and sharing the values of charity, altruism, and benevolence by engaging in meaningful community service and grant-funding

activities. The Raab Grant, approval facilitated their ongoing commitment to ensuring all youth in their community have the resources they need for educational and extracurricular activities, particularly those who are disadvantaged or from special populations.

Under the Raab Grant, the students voted to fund 6 organizations based on specific criteria they developed. These organizations included the following:

- The Comprehensive Learning Center: \$1,500 to support the inclusion of a new student with tailored educational resources.
- Big Brothers Big Sisters of Bucks County: \$1,500 to aid in their mentoring programs, providing vital enrichment activities.
- Bucks for Kids: \$1,000 to support extracurricular activities for children in foster care or being assisted by Children and Youth.
- Sunshine Foundation: \$1,000 to support a Bucks County resident's wish meeting the Sunshine Foundation criteria.
- NAMI National Alliance on Mental Illness: \$2,500 to be used for the Small Talk program to push early intervention for mental health for children before they transition to middle school.
- Lenape Valley Foundation: \$2,500 to use toward the new crisis building for comfortable furnishings for the rooms, furniture, toiletries for clients, and bedding for inside the crisis facility.

The second grant managed by the students is the Heenan grant with different and unique requirements the students must follow. For this grant, students face a specific and unique challenge posed by the Heenan Foundation. The challenge changes annually and often require students to utilize the career and technical skills learned in their programs at MBIT. In 2023-2024, the Heenan challenge was to redesign and refinish two waiting areas in the Bucks County Justice Center used by the Bucks County Family Court and the Office of Children and Youth. Collaborating across disciplines, students from various career and technical programs worked together to create welcoming spaces designed to be comfortable and comforting for families.

Student Addie Lautz said, “Mrs. Heenan provided the challenge and we had to work through the levels and channels to make it happen. Before visiting the courthouse, Mrs. Swoyer, our advisor, met with Bucks County Solicitor Amy Fitzpatrick. She gave us permission to work with the team and proceed. She referred Mrs. Swoyer to Mr. Ted Rice, a Deputy Court Administrator and Mr. Robert Yocum, Director of Children and Youth. Mr. Yocum shared an analytical report completed on the courthouse's environment and climate for individuals with sensory challenges, including many suggestions.”

The dedication of the newly redesigned spaces in May 2024 was attended by many influential members of the Bucks County administration and Justice departments who recognized the students for their work. Student Barry Cleaver said, “This event was attended by our MBIT team, Bucks County Commissioner Harvie and representatives from the other county commissioners, Judges, and Board of Directors of Children and Youth. Our Bucks County District Attorney, Jennifer Schorn, Amy Fitzpatrick our Bucks County solicitor, representatives from Congressman Fitzpatrick's office and Representative Kristin Marcell's office. We received a Proclamation in honor of our work and certificates. As students we do not usually get to see our government and representatives at work. It was great to see them, and they made us feel really like we matter because they took time out to attend the dedication and review our work.”

The work of the Philanthropy Today Club culminated with a breakfast to award each grant recipient and report on the research and findings of the group. Dr. Mark Covelle, Administrative Director of MBIT, said, “It is hard to put into words the amazing work these students have done to support the community; what is just as amazing is the experiential learning provided by this opportunity. Students learn all sides of the

philanthropic process including the joy of giving and the agony of having to decline an applicant. The growth and maturity they show throughout the process is a true joy to witness. We are profoundly grateful to the Raabs and the Heenans for helping our students learn these lifelong lessons.”

The MBIT Philanthropy Today Club remains committed to their mission of giving back and making a difference in the world, aiming for a more inclusive and supportive future for all young people. In honor of the ten-year anniversary of the club, the Raab Foundation made a generous donation to MBIT to be used toward the purchase of a new vehicle to transport students. The club advisor, Pamela Swoyer, stated; “The Philanthropy Today Club means so much to our students. They start out reticent, shy, and quiet, and those who put in time and work make many friends and find it life changing. They learn about their community, how to effect change and learn how to find their voice. The club has fed my soul for the past ten years and together we have created a small army of budding philanthropists. It is our duty to make the world a better place and this club has enabled our Middle Bucks Family to work toward this goal. The gratitude I have for our grantors, the Raabs and the Heenans is immeasurable.”

About Middle Bucks

Middle Bucks Institute of Technology (MBIT) is located in Warwick Township on York Road (Route 263) in Jamison, Pennsylvania. The picturesque high school campus sits on 58 acres and is supported by Centennial, Central Bucks, Council Rock, and New Hope-Solebury School Districts. MBIT operates as a school of choice designed for students who are seeking to enhance their educational program with a highly relevant career and technical experience connected directly to the real world of business and industry. Over 400 business and industry advisors review and update the school’s educational program annually. The MBIT experience provides students with a blend of classroom theory, technical applications in state-of-the-art laboratories, and off-campus work-based experiences. Students learn and apply reading, writing, mathematics, science, communications, and technology in a way that has personal meaning and career relevance.

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