

Local Brothers Make It Big Learn To 'Create A World-Class Brand'

The Chamber's next virtual breakfast on Dec. 10 will feature Jim DeCicco, a former football star at Kingston High School who teamed up with his two athlete brothers to create a multi-million-dollar beverage company.

Chamber President Ward Todd said the topic for the morning will be "Creating a World-Class Brand."

The breakfast, sponsored by Rondout Savings Bank, will be broadcast live on the Chamber Facebook page and YouTube Channel from The Venue Uptown at Best Western Plus from 9-10 a.m. Radio Kingston will provide technical support.

DeCicco will discuss how he and his younger brothers Jake and Jordan created a world-class brand known as Kitu Life, which is the maker of Super Coffee, Super Creamer and other Positive Energy products. The company, which began in 2015, now has 100 employees nationwide with a valuation of more than \$200 million.

DeCicco, 28, played college football at Colgate University after his days at KHS. Jake, 27, played college football at Georgetown. Jordan, 25, opted for hoops and played college basketball at Philadelphia University.

The brothers say the business started when Jordan needed an energy boost to help him keep up with his rigorous schedule as a student-athlete. He found the mainstream bottled coffees and energy drinks riddled with sugar and chemicals. His solution was to remove the "negative energy" and replace it with the "Positive Energy" of coffee, protein, natural sweetener, MCT oil ... and nothing artificial.

With just a blender, Jordan started whipping up batches of Super Coffee in his dorm room and it wasn't long before his teammates, coaches, professors and classmates became interested in his healthy drinks and started buying the beverages themselves.

The campus buzz was what prompted Jordan to get his older brothers on board and take Kitu Life's Super Coffee to the masses.

"I think building a world-class brand starts with solving a problem for yourself, at least in our case," Jim DeCicco says. "As college athletes, we were tired, and we didn't want to drink

the sugary energy drinks and bottled coffees that we just felt slowed us down. The problem we solved is we came up with a healthy coffee with added protein and healthy fats and zero sugar. It worked so well for us and our teammates and our classmates and our coaches, that we decided to go into business together.

"I think solving a personal problem is the first step to building a world-class brand. Before you bring that solution to market, you really have to understand how many other people face that problem. Is this a local thing or a personal thing or this a global opportunity?"

DeCicco said when the company began, bottled coffee was a \$3-billion market and the Starbucks Frappuccino, which has 40 grams of sugar, was 90 percent of that category.

"We saw a really big opportunity to come in and disrupt a big category," he said. "I think where a lot of entrepreneurs go wrong is they look for businesses where they can have a strong financial outcome. They're like, 'If I make this business, I could make a lot of money someday,' but for us there needs to be more of a purpose and a passion behind it because building a brand is really hard.

"It doesn't take days or weeks or months, it really takes years. There are lots of setbacks, lots of obstacles, lots of resilience required and for that you really need to have a deeper purpose."

DeCicco said the company motto is "Work hard and be nice to people."

"They all work hard and are nice to people every day and not one of them feels like they sell coffee," he said. "We are on a mission to mass produce positive energy. Our customers gravitate toward that. Not only is it a good healthy coffee they enjoy drinking, they enjoy the attitude and the culture and the way the positive energy makes them feel."

Kitu Life has had quite a year. Inc. 5000 named it the fastest growing company in food and beverage. Meanwhile, Ernst & Young named the brothers among its Entrepreneur Of The Year 2020 New York Award winners.

DeCicco said the company also signed a national distribution partnership with Anheuser-Busch.

VIRTUAL BREAKFAST Meeting

Creating a World Class Brand
 Jimmy DeCicco CEO
 Kitu Life - Super Coffee
 Thursday December 10, 2020
 9:00 - 10:00 am
 Livestream on Facebook



"Anywhere you see Super Coffee, it's coming off Anheuser-Busch trucks now, which is awesome," he said.

DeCicco said the company also signed an investment deal with singer and actress Jennifer Lopez and her fiancé, former baseball standout Alex Rodriguez.

"That combination of things really gets our product in every store in America and then the star power with J-Lo and A-Rod is really going to start driving brand awareness," DeCicco said. "Getting Super Coffee on every shelf in the U.S. is step one over the next year or two and then expand globally, market by market, with the support of Anheuser-Busch as well."

DeCicco, who lives in Manhattan together with his two brothers, is looking forward to coming home and speaking before the Chamber. Growing up, he and his brothers admired local business leaders such as Bill and John Stote of Anaconda Sports and the Jordan family, which owns Herzog's and the Kingston Plaza.

"It certainly is quite an honor," DeCicco said of appearing before the Chamber. "We really looked up to business leaders as we were coming up through Kingston.

"None of us studied business. Our parents weren't entrepreneurs. We didn't know what we were doing, but our upbringing in Kingston is what's allowed us to do this today. I think Kingston is a very blue-collar town and people aren't afraid to work hard. Whether it's our time playing football at Kingston High School or all those early morning workouts at the YMCA, we really got ready to run this business by being raised in Kingston, New York."

Rondout Savings Bank Invests in our Community while Navigating in a Virtual World

The investments made in the economic, social, educational, and environmental sectors can be very impactful on the success of a community. So much so that it can be argued that any capable person or business has an obligation to invest in its community. Community investing can come in many forms which include, financial support, volunteerism, and inclusion. Investing in this way can provide the resources and opportunities for positive growth and helps uplift those underserved. Rondout Savings Bank has long been committed to the communities it serves by remaining steadfast in supporting and investing in the needs of the local community. "We're a true relationship bank, people and community will always come first", stated Cheryl Bowers, President and CEO of Rondout Savings Bank.

Rondout Savings Bank has a lengthy history of giving back to the communities it serves. In fact, through its Dividends to the Community, program Rondout donates 10% of its earnings to non-profit causes each year.

In too many cases conversations about nonprofit sustainability have turned into conversations about their survivability. It is more important today than ever that we all work together to help

our area non-profits through these difficult times.

With the holiday season upon us, Rondout Savings Bank has decided to take an engaging virtual approach to giving back to area non-profit organizations. In this light, Rondout has launched a campaign entitled Rondout Cares, where over a hundred non-profit organizations will be eligible to participate, of which three will receive \$1000 each. The program is simple and is open to anyone who wants to vote for their favorite non-profit organizations listed on the RondoutCares.com webpage. The three organizations that have accumulated the most votes at the close of the online event will each receive a \$1000 donation check from Rondout Savings Bank. "We encourage all participating non-profit organizations to visit the Rondout Savings Bank Facebook page and share our Rondout Cares post with members, friends and family to collect the most votes. The more participation the better; We are hoping to bring greater awareness to the community about the good work being done by so many great organizations", said Jennifer Fabiano, AVP, Director of Marketing at Rondout Savings Bank.

Donations are only part of the story. The extraordinary

efforts of the bank's employees are not limited to the financial results of the Bank. "We value our employees' commitment, not only as volunteers, but as leaders in our community. Time and again they have come together to help the community through work in non-profit and civic organizations, schools, churches, and many more organizations too numerous to list. This leadership in our community is our culture and who we are and what we do - it is true to our legacy", explained Bowers.

Established in 1868 Rondout Savings Bank is a state-chartered, mutual banking and financial services provider headquartered in Kingston, New York. The bank has a long history of serving our local communities and maintains a strong tradition of customer service excellence. Give Rondout Savings Bank a call at (845) 331-0073 and let them show you what they can do for you. Visit www.RondoutBank.com for more information.



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December 3 | 9:00 - 10:30 am

Virtual New Member Meet & Greet

Via Zoom Meeting

There is no cost for Members to attend.
Reservations are required.

Sponsor: Hudson Valley Federal Credit Union

December 10 | 9:00 - 10:00 am

**Virtual Chamber Breakfast Meeting
Creating a World Class Brand**

Jimmy DeCicco CEO Kitu Life - Super Coffee

Broadcast live from The Venue Uptown
at BEST WESTERN PLUS Kingston
Technical Support by Radio Kingston
Livestream on Facebook & YouTube

Sponsor: Rondout Savings Bank

January 2021 | 9:00 - 10:00 am

**Virtual Chamber Breakfast Meeting
Congressman Antonio Delgado**

Broadcast live from The Venue Uptown
at BEST WESTERN PLUS Kingston
Technical Support by Radio Kingston
Livestream on Facebook & YouTube

Sponsor: Ulster Savings Bank

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At Bell's Christmas Trees in Kerhonkson, you and your family can find the perfect tree and cut it down yourself, creating a day of memories at a time when COVID-19 has cancelled most fun outings.

"It's as much about the family experience as it is about the tree itself," says Brian Bell, one of the owners of Bell's Christmas Trees. "Bring your family and your friends and make a nice event of it. Our motto has always been, 'Creating warm memories on cold days.' That's what we offer."



The Bells were dairy farmers until they sold the cows in 1990 and planted their first 1,500 Christmas trees in 1991. A drought killed off 80 percent of that first planting, but the Bells refused to give up and planted more. Bell's Christmas Trees opened to the public in 1998 and sold its first 100 trees.

While the public may think of Christmas trees only after Thanksgiving, the Bell family spends all summer trimming the trees, as well as mowing and fertilizing.

It takes roughly eight years for a Christmas tree to reach fruition. The average customer cuts down a tree between 6 and 8 feet tall, but the farm offers trees up to 20 feet for churches and other buildings with cathedral ceilings.

The Bells say as soon as one is cut down, a new one is planted in its place.

Bell said with so many family events cancelled, he anticipates a big year.

"Each year has increased in how busy we've been," he said. "People find our farm through just word-of-mouth. People like their experience here."

"This year, with the pandemic going on, I think people are looking for things going on outdoors and to create some memories and have some lasting family experiences. This year, if anything, I think we'll be even busier."

Bell's Christmas Trees, 647 Mettawahonts Road in Accord, can be reached at (845) 626-7849 or www.bellschristmastrees.com.



Customers can wander the scenic 24 acres and are free to take a bow saw and sled to cut down and haul away their perfect tree for just \$60. Pre-cut trees are also available, along with kissing balls (\$38), wreaths, roping and potted trees.

There also is no shortage of choices.

Bell's offers a variety of fir trees, including Douglas, Canaan, Fralsam, Balsam, Grand, Korean, Fraser and Concolor. The Spruce varieties include Serbian, Colorado Blue and Meyer.

"When you go to any choose-and-cut farm, you know the tree is going to be fresh," Bell said. "As far as needle retention, the needles should last longer. Plus, it's supporting local farmers."

"Every tree that we sell, we grind the stump in the springtime and plant another tree so it's sustainable. Real trees are actually better for the environment than artificial trees. A plastic tree is typically made of plastic in a factory in a foreign country somewhere and not supporting anything local as far as jobs at all. We're a local farm. We have quite a few employees here during the season."

Bell's opened the day after Thanksgiving and will remain open through Dec. 23 except on Tuesdays. The hours will be 9:30 a.m. to dusk on Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday and 8:30 a.m. to dusk on weekends.

The farm is run by third-generation farmer Gordie and his wife, Paula, along with son Brian and his wife, Lori.

Bell said people stop him all the time to tell him about the cherished memories their family enjoyed cutting down a real Christmas tree with the mountains as a picturesque backdrop.

"You just don't get that when you walk into a box store and buy a plastic tree," he said.

Bell's also offers a popular gift shop, but due to COVID-19, the offerings will be limited. Bell said a few items, such as maple syrup, honey and ornaments, will be available this year at a window.

"There are a lot of state guidelines we're following this year just to keep everyone safe," Bell said. "We're grateful to be open, but we have to make some changes this year just to try and space the crowd out a little bit."

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Sound Of Life Radio Marks 35 Years

A 'Voice Of Encouragement' During C-19

This is a milestone year for listener-supported Sound of Life Radio Network, which signed on as 89.7 WFGB-FM on Jan. 9, 1985.

Station personnel had big plans to mark the 35th anniversary throughout the year with family outings, live concerts, tours of the facility on Tuyenbridge Road, barbecues, bus trips to theaters and other public events.

Then, COVID-19 struck, putting the kibosh on all the activities meant to thank supporters over the years.

Station Manager Connie VanKleeck said the last event she and

staff attended was the doubleheader concert by contemporary Christian artists Casting Crowns and Matthew West at the Times Union Center in Albany on March 8.

"It was about that time when we started hearing that this was going to affect everything," VanKleeck said. "There were a number of events we already had on the calendar, and, of course, all of them had to be canceled."

The regional contemporary Christian music network serves eastern New York, northern New Jersey, northeast Pennsylvania and western New England with 12 frequencies stretching from Glens Falls to Port Jervis.

While the noncommercial network did hold its spring telethon in March, it raised only half of what station leaders had anticipated. Then came big changes.

Like the rest of the world, the coronavirus forced changes at the trailer on the hill. Only one full-time employee, announcer Joe Hunter, reported for daily duty to do his "Cup A' Joe Morning Show," while the others worked remotely. There were no more impromptu tours or visits from listeners, who had often dropped by with an unexpected financial gift or to share a word of encouragement.

"Regretfully, we did have to lay off one person," VanKleeck said. "Her job was very oriented toward visiting our partners and attending events, and suddenly, there were none."

In late spring, the Sound of Life's board of directors encouraged VanKleeck to apply for the Paycheck Protection Program loan, part of the federal stimulus package meant to help small businesses stay afloat.

"As a result, we've been able to function and pay the remaining staff that we have here as well as the bills," she said.

Though the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted anniversary plans and financial contributions in the spring, VanKleeck said donations stabilized over the summer.

More than anything, she said she is grateful that the Sound of Life team pressed on and managed to stay close to its audience by communicating the hope of the Gospel during the rough spring period.

"The main thing that we've noticed is an uptick in personal, handwritten notes that people would send us, thanking us for



Joe Hunter



Connie VanKleeck

being there in this time," she said. "One lady wrote that while everything else was being closed or canceled, our radio station had not been canceled and had been there to provide hope.

"God allows us to be a voice of encouragement and hope for the Hudson Valley and beyond, thanks to the dedication of that original group of people in the 1980s that had a vision for a listener-supported Christian radio station and to all those who have contributed over the years and continue to," she said.

"This has been a time for us to take a step back and evaluate

what are the most important things to maintain for people. We did increase inspirational thoughts related to COVID and how we're going to support each other in these times," VanKleeck said.

"I'm not one to necessarily say 'We're all going to get through this together,' because we don't know when it will end or what's on the other side, but we can certainly maintain hope and encouragement no matter how tough it might get."

That doesn't mean VanKleeck has stopped planning. The station featured a series of concerts called "Virtual Summer Big Nights" in August that included artists such as Jason Gray, Jamie Kimmett and Josh Wilson. Sound of Life also held its fall on-air fundraiser in late September.

Long-term goals include hiring an afternoon announcer and buying new control boards for the studios. Further on down the line, VanKleeck hopes to replace the mobile home that the station has been operating out of for 35 years.

"Some of those things had to be put on hold for now. They will come in time. God provides, and people come through with their donations."

As far as all the anniversary plans, VanKleeck said she is leaning toward doing them next year, though they may look slightly different.

"I have hesitated to put anything on the calendar just yet," she said. "We're really just taking a wait-and-see approach right now. It may be that we have to wait until next year to do some of the things, but instead of calling them anniversary events, we may label them 'Let's celebrate what God has done events.'"

The Sound of Life Radio Network, located at 199 Tuyenbridge Road in Lake Katrine, can be reached at (845) 336-6199 or www.soundoflife.org.

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