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Chamber’s 27th Buy Local Expo A Hit
Sold-Out Event Draws Big Crowd

The Chamber’s annual Buy Local Expo, Ulster County’s largest networking event, hit another milestone in 2023. “Not only did we sell out this year, but we sold out sooner than any year prior,” Crystal Jacob, the President of the Chamber’s Board of Directors, said in opening the event at Diamond Mills Hotel on Sept. 13. “We want to thank all of our exhibitors and our sponsors who are here today who made that happen.”

Jesse Uttendorfer, an associate wealth manager at Marshall & Sterling, was at the Expo to talk about the Chamber’s Young Ulster Professionals. “This is a great opportunity for us to see what other local businesses have going on and share what your business is doing,” Uttendorfer said. “It’s a great opportunity to network and not only support other businesses but to show other businesses what you’ve been up to into trying to recruit and to get the word out about recruitment and the volunteer events we put together for the community.”

Jim McCann Photography was at the Expo for the second time and said he was “looking to get my name out there” while gathering feedback about what people want. “I picked up a few customers and it went really well last year,” he said. “I’m looking to see how viable this is going to be as a part-time business and then see if I can transition to full-time work in this field.”

The Chamber also gave out awards for the top booths. “This is a great opportunity for us to let everybody know what we actually do,” she said. The Chamber also gave out awards for the top booths. “This is a perfect opportunity to see what other local businesses have going on and share what your business is doing,” Uttendorfer said. “It’s a great opportunity to network and not only support other businesses but to show other businesses what you’ve been up to into trying to recruit and to get the word out about recruitment and the volunteer events we put together for the community.”

Gina Carbonari of the Ulster County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) dressed as a dog and was one of several non-profits at the Expo. “Your dedication and commitment to elevating understanding of how important it is to support local,” she said. “Your dedication and commitment to elevating understanding of how important it is to support local,” she said. “You have really elevated every person’s understanding of local businesses, and that’s why it’s so important to support local.”

Kevin Corrado, Publisher • Michele Sisco-Martin, Graphic Designer
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The YUP Spotlight highlights Young Ulster Professionals (YUP) events, their participants, and the local talent that inspires us. Every few months, young professionals in their 20s and 30s making a difference and showing their support for Ulster Chamber will be spotlighted for their achievements and dedication.

This month’s spotlight belongs to Alejandro Duran Sanchez, founder of marketing firm Volna Unalign and recipient of the Ulster County Business Recognition Awards’ 2023 Emerging Young Leader Award.

“We specialize in helping small businesses grow and expand, whether that’s through social media content, videography, or building a website,” he said. “We have fun getting to meet the customer and seeing how much their business can grow.”

With a team of young professionals and close friends, Duran Sanchez helps local businesses curate content from videos to social media posts. His firm opened in 2022, inspired by the word Volna, meaning water in his parent’s native language, and the importance of adaptation in marketing strategy.

He was inspired by Bruce Lee’s famous concept about water. “Be formless, shapeless, like water,” he said. “In my mind, marketing is all about adapting” As for ‘unalign,’ he thought it was a real word initially and when he realized it wasn’t, his friend and co-worker Keegan Howland, [Volna Unalign’s director of operations] decided to make it a part of the name and work hard to give it meaning.

Alejandro is fulfilling his life’s dream of being an entrepreneur, inspiring others in his native Ulster County to achieve their business goals in turn.

“Each day keeps getting better,” he said. “From the time I was a marketing student at SUNY Ulster, I knew I wanted to do something on my own, and I’ve made great connections thus far.”

YUP has been a gateway for him in making connections with local business owners. His first entry into the YUP community was January’s PechaKucha night, which marked a chance encounter with a prominent client.

During the event, he captured the attention of Bernadette Rexford, executive director of Children’s Benedictine Hospital in Kingston, New York.

“Growing up, I understood early the value of business cards, so when I was sitting next to her, I wanted to use it as an opportunity to exchange information with her as a collaborator,” he said. “Because I went to that meeting, I was able to build connections that changed the direction of the work we were doing.”

Through his affiliation with YUP and the Ulster Chamber of Commerce, Duran Sanchez continues to be a “sponge” in immersing himself in the business community.

“There’s a lot to learn here,” he said. “Being in Ulster allows me to live the life of a young entrepreneur, soaking in all the knowledge of people I’ve met through the Chamber. Without the people I’ve met, I don’t know where I’d be right now.”

Want to get involved? Follow YUP on Instagram @youngulsterpros and on Facebook @Young Ulster Professionals - YUP to learn about upcoming events and other opportunities within the group.
One of the staples of the Ulster County economy will soon unveil an expansion at its New Paltz facility, just as the company marks a half-century in business.

Viking Industries President Richard Croce said a 46,000-square-foot addition of production/warehouse space will be open in the next few months. The company, which manufactures corrugated cardboard and other packaging products, currently boasts a facility of 80,000 square feet on Ohioville Road in New Paltz.

“We’re adding some automated conveyor lines and some higher-speed production equipment to allow us to expand our offerings and respond better to the market growth that’s out there,” Croce said.

The Croce family has been in the packaging business for five generations and got its start when Ferdinand Dominick Croce began F.D. Croce Co. in New York City way back in 1892. The business evolved and in the 1970s was providing produce crates with corrugated partitions to the many apple farmers in the Hudson Valley. When the partitions became difficult to source reliably and cost-effectively, Croce’s grandfather, Leo “Russell” Croce, started Viking Industries in 1973 to provide those partitions for F.D. Croce Co.

Viking Industries continued to grow over the years under Croce’s father, Rich Croce Sr., with additions in 1978, 1988, 1998, and 2006. The 47-year-old Croce, who worked at Viking Industries as a summer and after-school job, joined his dad in the family business in 1998 after returning home from Union College in Schenectady. He studied engineering, but “couldn’t escape the packaging in my blood.”

“It was like Cinderella slipping into the glass slipper,” he said. “It was a perfect fit from the moment I got back, and just made sense. This is where I’m meant to be. It’s my calling.”

When asked how the family business has lasted a half-century, Croce repeated a mantra he learned from his grandfather and father: “Find the need, fill the need, and make it fun.”

“We have an obsession with meeting our customers’ needs and making ourselves more reliable than if we were a machine sitting on our customers’ floor,” he said.

The expansion will result in 10 additional employees and allow Viking Industries to go from one order to another in less than 15 minutes, Croce said.

“Everything we do is custom for our customers, so that’s very important so they can get even small runs produced very quickly,” he said.

Viking Industries also looks at how it can improve a customer’s business through packaging, Croce said.

“Sometimes that is redesigning a box to make it more efficient for packing or to take up less space on a pallet,” he said. “We also look at our customers’ packaging as both advertising and a first impression they are making with their customers.”

Croce said the Chamber has been a huge part in the company’s success over the years.

“They’ve been a great resource for the firm from an educational perspective,” he said. “Leadership Ulster does a great job of providing some opportunities for the future. From a networking perspective, they help us find customers, suppliers, and resources in our area as well."

“I think the Chamber is an excellent organization for supporting economic growth in our community. Whatever we face a business issue, I can immediately think of another Chamber member who I know I can talk to and get help navigating that challenge.”

The company wanted to get the expansion done before celebrating the 50th anniversary and will probably hold events to mark the milestone in 2024, Croce said.

"Diverse business news, d"