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Local leader named top 50 economic developer nationwide

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From an outside perspective, Bryan Daniels is an ordinary, 50-year-old father. Daniels wears jeans, athletic wear from his collegiate alma mater and socks with graphic print. His hair is graying, and a patch is sparse where a baseball cap may rest on the weekends.

He, his friends and colleagues participate in work-time and time-off banter. Underneath the everyday jokes and relationships, those acquainted with Daniels understand the charisma that paved the way for Blount County's international mark in industry.

Under the lofted ceilings of the Blount Partnership Visitor Center on South Washington Street, Daniels' office mellows in soft yellow light and low-playing, popularized melodies. From behind the cluttered desk Daniels describes as messy or on one of the leather couches that corner his office, he fostered connections that landed him recognition as a top 50 economic developer in the nation.

Since 2010, Daniels has been the CEO and President of the Blount Partnership.

Consultant Connect, a Michigan based relations group, compiles a list of top economic developers each year to acknowledge hard work and allow each recipient the opportunity to share their knowledge.

"During Bryan's tenure, Blount County has recruited over 75 new and expanding companies in the areas of research and development, corporate headquarters, manufacturing and back office support centers," managing director of Consultant Connect Carla Sones wrote in an email to The Daily Times. "The total capital investment of these companies has exceeded \$4 billion and created more than 12,000 direct new jobs with average wages above Tennessee's average."

Sones specifically lauded Daniels' part in the "\$120 million investment from iconic 150-year-old brand Smith & Wesson."

Amazon has also finished construction of two facilities and a third may soon be in the

works.

“No one person creates the success that this community has,” Daniels said. “You know, I think that recognition was a surprise to me.”

Community catalyst

“My job, my role, why I was hired, was to be ... It was to be a catalyst,” Daniels said. “That was the exact word that was used. To be a catalyst in the community to create more opportunities for folks here.”

Matt Murray, who has served on the Economic Development Board for decades and is the current chairman, said Daniels pushes for a community centered vision, even if everyone doesn't agree. Democracy aims to find a middle ground between everyone's preference.

Murray was active in the decision to hire Daniels into the Partnership 22 years ago and said Daniels' background in state-level and private development as well as engineering made him a good fit.

“You would never know this, necessarily, if you sat down and had lunch with Bryan,” Murray said. “But, you know, he is known nationally. He's known, in some sense, internationally for all of his work on economic development.”

Several spoke toward Daniels' humbleness as a leader who emphasizes teamwork. Acting alone in a place like Blount County, which Daniels says is special because of its sense of community, wouldn't have bred the same success as working together, Murray said.

Murray added that Blount County growing into a national and international economic competitor under Daniels leadership contributes to him not locking onto a narrow viewpoint, or what Daniels would call one dimensional.

Multi-dimensional motivation

“What motivates me and what (has always) sticks in my head was my upbringing in Greeneville,” Daniels said. “At that time, this was in the 70s and 80s, we were very one dimensional like Blount County use to be.”

Referring to the Aluminum Company of America - ALCOA, now split into Arconic - Daniels said most who grew up in Blount County and stayed there to work professionalized into the company.

He traced the roots of the Blount Partnership back to ALCOA.

During a time when the aluminum company was laying off workers, Daniels said the company pushed county business and government leadership to engage and diversify the economy, “so that when they have bad times, you wouldn't send shockwaves in the community,” Daniels said.

An industry headquartered in Greeneville moved locations when Daniels was in high school, which he said resulted in a longstanding ripple effect of lost wealth throughout the community.

He emphasized the importance of maintaining industries that have been in Blount County, as well as bringing in new opportunities.

“We are trying to go from cradle to grave,” Daniels said.

Every industry has a life cycle which is why Daniels said it’s important to have opportunity options. Amazon drove competitive wages up in the county for any type of worker, while Smith & Wesson headquarters will provide jobs that Blount County doesn’t currently have.

Now that new jobs have been introduced in the county, Daniels said the Partnership is shifting focus to residential development.

Family focus

The birth of his own son seven years ago reinforced the idea of creating a place where a child doesn’t have to leave family to be successful.

“There are more opportunities for him here than what I experienced,” Daniels said. “And I don’t want to ever take that away from him. I want him to grow up in a community that still waves at each other when they pass their neighbor. I still want him to live in a community that doesn’t look like everywhere U.S.A.”

Daniels left his parents’ farm in Greeneville, graduated from East Tennessee State University, moved to Middle Tennessee then settled in Blount County, which he said created some associative guilt for not being near his parents.

As an only child, Daniels said he has a responsibility to his parents, and he doesn’t want families in Blount County to experience the same guilt he has for being farther away.

Lifelong friend Lt. Col. Jody Shipley, now a commanding ER trauma nurse in the Army, has maintained brotherhood by choice with Daniels since the sixth and seventh grade. Shipley, who’s one year younger said he and Daniels hold each other accountable, “a barometer check,” Shipley called it.

In 2013, Shipley shattered his hip on an airborne jump and had a long recovery to stay in the military.

“I look up one day, and he’s pulled into the driveway,” Shipley, who recovered at Fort Bragg in North Carolina, said. “I’m sitting there post op really hurt and sitting in a wheelchair.”

“‘What are you doing here?’” Shipley had remembered asking Daniels, “because I didn’t know. And he said, ‘We’re brothers. That’s what we do.’”

Shipleigh watched Daniels firsthand grow as a husband and a father.

“Even in college, (Daniels) was very much into student leadership, student government, that was something of a very natural leadership presence and personality,” Shipleigh said, “but it’s kind of cool to see him just be a goofy dad.”

With a resume that takes several strokes on the mouse to navigate, Daniels said the greatest impact on his life was his son.

“It’s amazing how kids can refocus you, and he every day is a blessing,” Daniels said. “He every day makes me take a moment to pause, and he also helps me not take myself seriously.”

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